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Classroom

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## Wrenching Things Awry: From “Explication de texte” to Cybertext in the College Literature Classroom

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*Abstract: As literature instructors face classrooms full of digital natives (Prensky 2001), we must interrogate the methods used to teach traditional literary analysis and evaluate whether they may be enhanced or even supplanted by using digital technologies to supplement traditional print-based assignments. Our collaborative paper details an experiment in an upper-division literature class to analyze and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional literature class assignment to “explicate the meaning of a poem” by having students create parallel versions—one a traditional, print-based essay and the other a multimedia presentation using Microsoft PhotoStory 3. In this paper, the instructor (Koster) will delineate the purpose and requirement of the assignment; a majority of the students completing the assignment (Blumenschine, Folden, Hill, Mahan, Sigmon, Smith, Stone, Wasson) will contribute their analyses of composing in these different modalities; and Koster will draw preliminary conclusions based on the class’s overall results in completing the assignment. We argue that while the traditional print-based text allows closer attention to literary language and form, multi-media texts allow students to examine the nuances of tone, diction, and imagery in richer and more imaginative ways by choosing visual and auditory reinforcement of their interpretative scripts. In addition, we argue that the addition of the students’ own voices (as narrators) allows them to develop and portray an authorial ethos in ways the traditional “student writing to teacher” print essay does not. Thus, while both forms of the assignment have great value for students of literature, the multimodal text allows more opportunities to demonstrate synthetic skills and to facilitate deep learning (Marton & Saljo 1976). We recommend that students in literary analysis classes be given the opportunity to explore the possibilities both kinds of assignments offer for learning. Materials from the assignment, including samples of student print and digital work, will be available for review at <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/scholarly/ubiquitous.htm>.*

Keywords: Cybertext, Literature, Analysis, Pedagogy, Digital Natives, Deep Learning, Ethos, Multi-Media

**S**IVA VAIDHYANATHAN NOTED in a September 2008 commentary in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that millennial students bring a range of attitudes towards technology as well as a complementary range of skills to the college classroom, and that we can’t assume all students are as technology-savvy as Marc Prensky and others have claimed. Vaidhyathan argued, “Every class has a handful of people with amazing skills and a large number who can’t deal with computers at all. A few lack mobile phones. Many can’t afford any gizmos and resent assignments that demand digital work. Many use Facebook and MySpace because they are easy and fun, not because they are powerful (which, of course, they are not). And almost none know how to program or even code text with Hyper-

text Markup Language (HTML). Only a handful come to college with a sense of how the Internet fundamentally differs from the other major media platforms in daily life. College students in America are not as “digital” as we might wish to pretend. And even at elite universities, many are not rich enough. All this mystical talk about a generational shift and all the claims that kids won’t read books are just not true. Our students read books when books work for them (and when I tell them to). And they all (I mean all) tell me that they prefer the technology of the bound book to the PDF or Web page. What kids, like the rest of us, don’t like is the price of books” (Vaidhyathan).

The college literature classroom is often regarded as one of the bastions of traditionalism, a place where



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bound books and print texts are valorized at the expense of new media. But such a stance—if it is truth and not outdated stereotype—merits re-examination in the digital age. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin point out that “No medium today...seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more that it works in isolation from other social and economic forces. What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (15). And the medium of presentation is not the only element that is new in literary studies; the students are different as well. Marc Prensky has pointed out what most of us have already conceded, more or less: “Today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors. These differences go far further and deeper than most educators suspect or realize” (2001). Because millennial students come from such different backgrounds and cultures than even the students of a generation ago, we cannot assume that they will make the connections or master the skills required for competent literary analysis in the same manner as they did in the past. As literature instructors who face classrooms full of Prensky’s ‘digital natives,’ we must interrogate the traditional methods we use to teach literary analysis and evaluate whether they may be enhanced or even supplanted by using digital technologies to supplement traditional text-based assignments.

One of the best resources in such an investigation is our students, for it is their knowledge and abilities we seek to enrich by designing multimedia assignments and pouring the old wine of literary analysis into the new glasses of technology. George Landow argued in *Hypertext 3.0* that encouraging the use of digital media in the classroom may encourage critical thinking and thus promote more engaged learning for both students and teachers: “Since the essence of hypertext lies in its making connections, it provides an efficient means of accustoming students to making connections among materials they encounter” (278-79). Such critical thinking, of course, is at the heart of literary analysis and deserves examination. This collaborative paper details an experiment in an upper-division literature class to analyze and evaluate the impact of technology on a traditional literature class assignment to “explicate the meaning of a poem” by having students create parallel versions—one a traditional, print-based essay and the other a multimedia presentation using Microsoft Photo Story 3. In this paper, the instructor (Koster) delineates the purpose and requirement of the assignment; a majority of the students completing the assignment (Blumenschine, Folden, Hill, Mahan, Sigmund, Smith, Stone, Wasson) contribute their analyses

of composing in these different modalities; and all the authors collectively draw conclusions based on their analysis of the assignment.

## The Assignment

The eleven students in WRIT 510, Cyber-Rhetoric, a topics class in the Department of English at Winthrop University in Fall 2008, were self-selected into the class. One (Folden) was a second-year graduate student; the rest were advanced undergraduates in English, Mass Communications, Political Science, and Psychology. This assignment was given about halfway through the semester, when students had already read some literary theory about digital rhetoric and had created and evaluated multimedia texts such as web pages. For this assignment, they were asked to use the freeware program Microsoft Photo Story 3 for their digital creation, since it was available in the campus computer labs and could be downloaded by the students for their personal use. Several students supplemented the assignment by using audio editing programs such as Audacity and graphic editing programs such as Photoshop, also available in the campus laboratories.

In the assignment (<http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/WRIT510/Assignments/poetry.htm>), students were asked to choose one of seven sonnets: John Donne’s Holy Sonnet 7, “At the round earth’s imagined corners, blow;” John Milton’s “On the Late Massacre in Piedmont;” John Keats’ “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer;” Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “If I should learn, in some quite casual way;” Robert Frost’s “The Silken Tent;” Richard Wilbur’s “Praise in Summer;” or Rita Dove’s “Sonnet in Primary Colors.” They were first asked to write a traditional *explication de texte*, in which they analyzed the meanings and relationships of the language of the poem, along with such formal elements as rhyme scheme, figurative language, meter, and diction. This is a common assignment for literature students and was one with which most had at least some experience in previous literature classes. Next, they were asked to explicate the same poem using Photo Story 3, this time adding narration, imagery, music, and transitions to convey their understanding of the poem. Finally, they were asked to analyze the similarities and differences between their two versions, with an eye to understanding what those comparisons might teach them about the future of literary study. They received peer reviews of their explications in class, as well as revising both versions and their final analyses before the work was graded. Students were invited to participate in the subsequent analysis presented here, and eight of the 11 enrolled students chose to do so. The discussions of their explications that follow are drawn both from their original submissions and subsequent revisions as they

had the opportunity to reflect on their work over the semester. The discussion presents both the advantages and disadvantages of analyzing texts using Photo Story 3 as the students saw them, and then reflects on the implications of what they learned.

### Advantages

One of the first advantages students discovered was that of being able to read the poem out loud, reinforcing the listener's awareness of literary features through the creator's delivery of the material. William Folden, a master's degree candidate in English, noted that "The narration by itself can be helpful in many small ways, like providing proper pronunciation of unfamiliar words ('demesne,' for example, in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"). When combined with the imagery, it emphasizes features like enjambment, which someone who has not read much poetry might miss. The images can tie words together that may be in separate lines of the poem, or break up lines that actually present separate events or images. Similarly, adding music to the background can emphasize rhythm and tone, enhancing the reading. These opportunities, if used to their fullest, turn a reading of the poem itself into a type of explication, giving the audience a deeper understanding of the poem as seen through the presenter's eyes."

Kevin Stone, a junior English major, also noted how audio allowed him to enrich his digital explication of "The Silken Tent" by Robert Frost. "Taking the explication into the digital realm allowed me to put tone and emphasis on certain words, phrases, and even the entire poem itself that would simply not be possible with a traditional textual format. For example, I used mostly pictures of tents set against serene backdrops to show my take on the tone of the poem. I also used music from the PlayStation 2 video game *Shadow of the Colossus* to set a mood for the interpretation.... The human voice can change tone and pitch to highlight and emphasize certain aspects of any reading. With Photo Story, I could actually emphasize words and phrases that I believed important."

Junior Political Science major Eric Hill concurred with Folden and Stone. "The digital medium provided me with a different microscope, i.e., the ability to look at certain specific parts of the poem with greater detail and accuracy. While preparing the digital poetry explication of Millay's "If I Should Learn," I found I could concentrate on more abstract aspects of the poem, such as symbolism, allusion, and metaphor. Specifically, the poem presented life and death as opposing elements, only to show that the two were not necessarily opposing but exist instead as complementary, with death reminding the

speaker of the temporary nature of life. This knowledge expressed itself in the speaker's ability to 'watch the station lights rush by / With a more careful interest on my face' (lines 11-12). The visual essence of the digital medium used for this project allowed these abstract elements to be shown rather than talked about, and this became a powerful tool. Making all of the pictures black and white was one way to show the constant dichotomy of life and death present in the poem," he observed. "Consider the metaphor in Millay's poem of the subway train, which is not only the environment of the speaker and setting of the poem but also life itself, busily hurrying on its way from point to point. Showing a subway train makes it more obvious to the audience that the subway is more than itself; the bustling activity of the train stands in contrast to the somber nature of the poem, making its true purpose as a symbol all the more clear. The impact of these elements is more readily apparent to the audience through the digital medium."

Christopher Smith, a senior English major whose interest is in narrative games, noted that carefully choosing visual images for the multimedia presentation can reinforce the writer's intentions in ways the traditional written text does not allow, and demonstrated this by using screen captures from popular games to illustrate his Photo Story. He noted, "Instead of altering the literary criticism to fit the medium, I took advantage of the strengths of the medium to reinforce the ideas that had been presented in Milton's "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont." *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, a video game for the Nintendo Wii, was chosen for its genre; since it is a fighting game, I was able to capture images of characters in conflict. The elegy by Milton has direct references and images to armed conflict, and during the time he wrote, close range weapons or bows might well have been used. Fighting games rely on this style of combat, and taking advantage of *Brawl's* multiplayer environment, I was able to control the entire scene to take photographs that would visually fit the context of my explication. For example I took the "slaughtered saints" from line 1 of Milton's sonnet and framed a photo with four angelic characters lying on a mountaintop where the massacre took place. When the poem describes "Mother and infant rolling down the rocks" I chose a large, intimidating character standing uphill from the female and child characters. Certain characters came to represent ideas or characters within the text. Milton's "saints" were typically represented by an angelic character. The Piedmontese attackers were represented as brutish cartoon characters. This establishes the Huguenots as victims, while the attackers were more intimidating and unattractive."

Junior English major Sara Jane Blumenschine noted additional rhetorical ramifications of the visual choices the multimedia explication afforded her. “The Photo Story medium introduced creative freedoms and alternate ways to convey information,” she wrote. “One of the purposes of Wilbur’s “Praise in Summer” is to change the reader’s perspective, and allow him to view nature as ‘fresh and strange.’ To reinforce this message, I chose intriguing and inspiring photography of nature to synthesize with each line of the poem. For example, to accompany the line ‘To a praiseful eye, should it not be enough of fresh and strange/ That trees grow green,’ I chose a photograph of a woman’s eye with the image of green trees reflected in her pupil. I selected the puzzling artwork for aesthetic appeal, but most importantly to stimulate the viewer to think more critically about the topics and help the themes linger in his mind. I also enjoyed the ability to manipulate the photos. To convey the poem’s theme of man’s perspective distorting nature, I inverted and distorted images. For the line ‘And then I wondered why this mad instead/ perverts our praise to uncreation, why/ such savour’s in this wrenching things awry,’ I chose a conventional photograph of a tree, immediately followed by the same image but instead inverted and distorted. This reinforced the themes in a way a written explication could never accomplish.”

Megan Wasson, writing from the perspective of a senior Mass Communications major focusing on broadcast media, noted other advantages of the digital explication from her field’s viewpoint. “Black and white pictures tend to have a subdued effect on the viewer. In written text colorful letters are often frowned on because they look unprofessional, but in a digital medium they can have great impact,” she argued. “To me the written explication was like an American résumé, black and white and no nonsense, while the Photo Story one was more like a French résumé, bold and creative. Photo Story allows more room for creative modifications to the work and less strict MLA formatting than you get with written assignments. With programs like Photo Story, people can illustrate and give life to that which is normally a static medium.”

Finally, students discovered that the traditional arrangement of the explication (what Wasson called “MLA formatting”) could be subverted in the digital medium to excellent effect. Folden pointed out that “My text explication, like most, went through the poem line by line, addressing facets of the poem in the order the reader would reach them. While this is efficient, it’s not particularly interesting. In my Photo Story, I found it easier to emphasize things in an order that seemed most interesting to me, and create connections between parts of the poem that are not necessarily adjacent to each other.” Other students

agreed that the ability to “wrench things awry,” in Wilbur’s words, was one of the most valuable elements of the digital explication.

## Problems

The students’ analyses also uncovered a series of technical, literary, and rhetorical problems in converting traditional literary explications into digital media, and reflected on the significance of these drawbacks. Some of these were related to cyberphobia; for instance, senior English major Randall Mahan frankly admitted that “the digital explication took nearly all of my fears and insecurities and threw them in my face. Technology and I have a very long, very deep hatred of each other. The assignment brought me to a place where I had absolutely no experience whatsoever.” Senior English major Samantha Sigmon noted that the very notion that a multimedia text could somehow be the equivalent of a written text was difficult for her: “I am bookish, and I do not like technology changing the way I research and present information.” But all the students in the class were able to work through this first level of difficulties to achieve effective results.

The real problems came in trying to create multimedia explications that were as wide-ranging as the traditional written texts allowed. Folden noted that his multimedia text lacked depth and dimensionality compared to the traditional assignment, mostly because of choices he made as a writer to appeal to a watching/listening, rather than to a reading, audience. “I do not feel that my digital explication provides the same breadth and depth of coverage that my text explication does. The breadth is not there because I felt that a presentation that stuck to one aspect of the poem (in this case, the way the form and content work together to create a stronger whole) would be easier to follow and more likely to retain the audience’s attention. I also did not want to spend too much time talking about any one piece of supporting argument, as I felt that too much time sitting on the same slide, talking about the same thing, might bore the audience. It also seemed harder to explain complex concepts vocally, for some reason; I am so used to creating explanations in written form that it comes naturally at this point, while talking them out often seemed too complicated. This problem, however, might be resolved through practice and repeated use of the format.”

Wasson also noted that the audience might resist having interpretations forced upon them through the creator’s choice of imagery, music, and vocal emphasis. “In the written text, someone can read it at his or her own pace and add their own voice to the piece and visualize it how they see it. It can lead to more misunderstandings, but possibly more interest,

simply because some people do not like to be told how to view things, and prefer to visualize things for themselves.” Such drawbacks, of course, are endemic to literary analysis, but the multimedia task forced these students to face that issue directly in their work.

Mahan also noted the impact of visual choices in his analysis of the Millay sonnet, writing that “I had to think very carefully in pictures rather than words as I am accustomed to doing for an assignment. After creating different versions of the digital explication, it became frighteningly clear to me that the entire meaning of the poem could be changed depending on what autumn tree I used in the project. In the written explication I could simply say ‘an autumn tree’ and the reader would do the rest of the work, but now I had the control over exactly what is seen, and that power is quite frankly scary because it puts a lot more emphasis on the author and leaves far more room for criticism than in a written work.” Of course, attention to connotation and denotation is central to a written explication as well, but moving into the digital realm seemed to intensify a number of the students’ awareness of the nuances of language in presenting an interpretation.

Beyond simply what is seen and heard in a digital explication lay more complex issues, the students discovered. Sigmon noted a series of underlying problems with the visual appeal of her creation in her analysis of Frost’s sonnet, something that is not a factor in a black-and-white typed text presented in MLA format. “With the Photo Story portion of the project, I could not even be sure of my formatting. Not only could I not be sure that I was properly executing a poetry explication, I could not be sure that it looked right at all. And if I had not worked on my actual paper beforehand or if the Photo Story had been the only analysis I were to do, I may have spent more time worrying about the ‘look’ of the project instead of the content. Since these projects can be presented in front of the class, students may focus on making them appealing to their peers at the expense of real analysis. It is a very real possibility that students would focus on the decorative aspects of the project instead of focusing on the literature, which might defeat the purpose of the assignment. I know that traditional methods of analysis often lead to deeper understanding of the texts and don’t want to lose that for the sake of illustrations and sounds.”

## Conclusions

While students in the class largely agreed that the traditional print-based *explication de texte* allows closer attention to literary language and form, they also determined that multi-media texts allowed them to examine the nuances of tone, diction, and imagery

in richer and more imaginative ways by choosing visual and auditory reinforcement of their interpretative scripts. As Smith noted, “However the medium of the presentation expands our ability to communicate ideas, the ideas themselves are still purely traditional criticism. I think this is an important distinction for rhetoricians and scholars interested in how cyber-rhetoric will change our standards of evaluation. Just because we have changed the medium does not render the strategies of an old exercise invalid. The multimedia capabilities of technology should reinforce the academic concepts we accept, allowing us to express ideas in far more than just words.”

In addition, incorporating the students’ own voices (as narrators) allowed them to develop and portray an authorial ethos in ways the traditional “student writing to teacher” print essay does not. Mahan noted that “this assignment also caused me to look at poetry not as a simple analyst, but as a true audience, listening to the poem for its beauty, its immediate meaning.” Wasson concurred, adding “Digital explications will not replace written criticism by any means, but will simply provide another medium for people to work with and will invite new and creative ways to illustrate poetry. It allows poems to be brought more easily into the new technology age, where most people are hands on and want to get *into* things, not just read poetry and other works.”

From the instructor’s point of view, while both forms of the assignment had great value for students of literature, the multimodal text seemed to allow additional opportunities to demonstrate synthetic skills and to facilitate deep learning (Marton & Säljö 1976), perhaps because the newness of the task and tools made students more aware of the literary and rhetorical implications of what they were doing when they broke these poems down. As Blumenschine noted in her explication, “Traditional written explications allow one to delve into every detail of the poem, but lack the aesthetic appeal of art and music, as well as their ability to reinforce the themes in the mind of the reader. Conversely, while the Photo Story medium imposes limitations, especially on the amount of text one can use, it also allows one to embroider new layers of stimulus and meaning over each word and thought.”

In conclusion, the nine of us recommend that students in literary analysis classes be given the opportunity to explore the possibilities both kinds of assignments offer for learning. To cite Folden’s conclusion, “The Photo Story explication and the text based explication can complement and enhance each other, filling in gaps in each others’ strengths. There is no reason that the two have to be seen as either/or options, especially when one is just starting out using Photo Story. A paper to be turned in, combined with a Photo Story composition for class presentation,

seems like the best of both worlds, and serves as a great way for one to approach the transition from the old form to the new.”

student Photo Stories discussed in this paper are available at <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/scholarly/ubiquitous.htm>. All rights are reserved individually and collectively by the authors.

## Notes

Materials for the class are available at <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/writ510.htm>. Copies of the

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I am a medievalist and poet who teaches literature classes in both traditional and multimedia formats and a variety of writing courses that incorporate digital learning. I received my Ph.D. from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1985 and have published widely in medieval studies, composition and rhetoric, and poetry, as well as working as a technical writing consultant with organizations such as Bell Labs and the BOC group. Currently I serve as department Web coordinator and am a member of my University’s E-Tech team, charged with finding and evaluating cutting-edge technologies appropriate for our classrooms.

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