The WWW as Curricular Method in the Digital Humanities

Tatjana Chorney *(Tatjana.Chorney@SMU.ca)*
Saint Mary's University

The National Panel Report released by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002), calls for a "dramatic reorganization of undergraduate education" to address the challenges faced by higher education in a time of transformation from an industrial to a knowledge-based society (vii). The report states that "education practices invented when education served only the few are increasingly disconnected from the needs of contemporary students"(viii) and the demands of citizens of a diverse and interconnected world.

The Report recommends an invigorated and practical liberal education offering knowledge that all students, regardless of backgrounds, fields, or chosen higher education institutions, should acquire. The college student of the twenty-first century needs to become an "intentional learner" who can thrive in a complex world, and who can adapt to new environments, integrate knowledge from different sources, and transform information into knowledge and knowledge into judgment and action (xi.). The Report urges an "end to the traditional, artificial distinctions between liberal and practical education" and advocates a kind of instruction and learning that looks beyond the classroom to the world's major questions" (xii).

The changing nature of colleges and universities and the reconstruction of education it calls for is in great part conditioned by what Douglas Kellner calls the "Great Transformation," powered by one of the most dramatic technological revolutions in history (2003, 51). The revisioning of higher education is increasingly seen in correlation with the development of digital technologies, which are changing not only traditional models of work, leisure and communication, but also the nature of knowledge itself, as well as models of acquiring and processing information cognitively. In the Report it is asserted that the "intellectual and practical skills that students need are extensive, sophisticated and expanding with the explosion of new technologies" (xi). Like the AACU Report, Kellner too argues that traditional and specialized aspects of education need to be overcome in order to develop alternative pedagogies and multiple "literacies" to meet the challenges of an interconnected global society. The study of interrelationships, connectivity, transfer, and integration, leading to the development of critical judgment, is proposed as the basis of the new liberal curriculum in all disciplines of the humanities.

The five key concepts for the new curriculum are in fact not so much concepts as they are markers of cognitive processes. As such, the reform of higher education is to take place primarily in terms of methodology of teaching. Given that "hypertext is a mental process, as well as a digital tool" (Gilster, 137), and the WWW is "an embodiment of human knowledge"(W3C), exploring the relationships between cognition and technology in the context of the new humanities and pedagogy can be useful. I would like to suggest that the digital media offer a useful concrete, but also a cognitive tool for teaching the five processes that are to be the core of the new humanities. This claim has theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it calls for becoming more aware how the computer is altering our ways of engaging with specific disciplinary questions cognitively and methodologically (McCarty, 1). My concerns in this paper, however, have to do with the practical applications of the impact of digital media on cognition within the area of the humanities. Practically, the claim calls for explicit instruction within the context of each discipline in the methods of organization and manipulability that underlie the presentation of material on the WWW.

The main vehicle of the digital media, the WWW, in its nature embodies, illustrates and enables through its functioning all four of the processes suggested as the basis for the new liberal curriculum--interrelationships, connectivity, transfer, and integration. By their very nature "the new media technologies externalize and objectify reasoning" (Manovich, 59). The WWW resists attempts at standard systematization, and demonstrates the co-existence of and interrelationships between multiple and apparently contradictory perspectives on a single issue. One GOOGLE keyword search will retrieve hundreds of documents linked by one single term, but applied variously in different contexts, emphasizing the importance and nature of connectivity, transfer and integration.

In relation to a given subject of inquiry or task, the non-linearity in the presentation of material and ideas on the WWW encourages "intentional" involvement on the part of learners, as there is no longer one "solution" or a single "interpretation," but a variety, all situated within their own context and knowledge. In order to find solutions to given questions or problems, learners have to engage in a process of discovering connections among apparently disparate materials and contexts, then find ways of transferring and integrating parts of materials into a new context. The WWW also offers alternative models of grouping materials, such as scaffolding, and it promotes the idea that conceptual knowledge cannot be separated from the contexts in which it is represented (Wiles and Littlejohn, 2003; Campbell, 2004; Cole, 2000; Carr, 1998;). The ready availability of various information on the WWW turns research and interpretation not so much into an exercise that depends upon finding information, but one that strongly emphasizes cognitive operations depending on critical thinking: classification of it

(finding meaningful interrelationships) and making use of it (transferring it) by arranging it meaningfully in a give context (integrating it). Scholarship and instruction in the humanities has always relied on these processes; however, with computer connectivity and the speed with which these processes happen, the WWW amplifies them, enables them "physically" and "on-demand" and thus makes them more explicitly and self-consciously "teachable" than before.

In addition, because the WWW offers multiple presentations of information, it illustrates that knowledge and heuristics are not absolute, but situated within various communities of knowing. Conceptually there is no "closure" or "ending" online, but rather a constant process of evaluation of materials (Rhodes and Sawday, 12) that are open to revisions, additions and remodeling. Becoming aware of the implications the nature of the WWW has for understanding what constitutes knowledge, argument, opinion, analysis and interpretation, leads to the development of critical discernment, evaluative capacity and judgment.

While traditional "mass education tended to see life in a linear fashion based on print models and developed pedagogies which broke experience into discrete moments and behavioral bits," a new critical pedagogy of the digital humanities could produce skills that "enable individuals to better navigate the multiple realm and challenges of contemporary life" (Kellner, 9). Making the WWW, its capabilities and operating functions explicit models of intentional learning can help educators in the digital humanities illustrate how knowledge in the humanities is positively affected by the digital medium, and how the new pedagogy leads to learning as an active, social process bound up with experience connected with wider socio-political paradigms of change.

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