CORNERSTONE Past Issues

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By Victor Judge

In Garland Hall's microcomputer laboratory, where English Professor Jay Clayton and 15 freshmen are discussing the hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl* by feminist and gender theorist Shelley Jackson, the room becomes the setting for a postmodern literary salon. The students skillfully draw correlations between Mary Shelley's literary portrait of Victor Frankenstein's monster and the title character from Frank Baum's book *The Patchwork Girl of Oz.* As they explore the books' variations on the themes of fragmentation and dispersal of identity, Clayton asks them to consider why the medical term "suturing" is an appropriate metaphor for the act of writing on-line. When one freshman discerns the relationship between hypertext and sewing, another asks if the pun on "text" and "textile" is related to the current movement in feminism that revalues such arts as quilting that traditionally stereotyped and segregated

women from men.

A visitor to Room 117 would be impressed not only by the depth of the students' perceptions and their ability to interweave ideas from the disciplines of literary theory, history, medicine, and computer science, but also by the lack of traditional sounds associated with an English class. The responses to Clayton's questions aren't punctuated by the rustling pages of paperback novels, the intermittent squeak from yellow highlighters underlining passages, or the scrawling of notes across legal pads. Instead one hears typing from keyboards and the clicking of mouses as the students open Netscape 4.5 and navigate their way to the Web site for their class -- English 115W: Reading and Writing On-line.

When Clayton asks Kelly Deel to defend her answer to a question, she doesn't refer her peers to a page number in a textbook; the freshman economics major from Joplin, Missouri, suggests the class members click on a hypertext link as she begins reading from the text or "lexia" that appears on their monitors.

These freshmen listening to Deel's defense have been participants in a successful experiment conducted this past spring. By enrolling in Vanderbilt's first course in reading and writing on-line, they satisfied the A&S requirement of completing a freshman seminar before qualifying for sophomore standing, but they also tested a new service that Academic Computing and Information Services (ACIS) will provide this fall for all undergraduates and classes taught in the University's curricula -- free Web space, or *VU Space*.

"We're the first generation of Vanderbilt students to read and compose in hypertext," observes Kush Shah who collaborated with the other freshmen writers and created two literary Web sites for their seminar. Because the young authors are on the verge of turning 21 years old, they first designed *Virtually 21,* a collection of their writings from the first-person

Known as the "Design Team" for English 115, Eddison Lin, Michael Buendia, Mike Glass, and Sylvia Aparicio shared responsibilities for designing the graphics and determining the hyperlinks for the Virtually 21 and Arcadia Web sites.
Photo by Peyton Hoge

perspective on five subjects they considered important -- technology, alcohol, family, sex, and culture. And based on their intensive study and research of Tom Stoppard's 1993 drama about chaos theory, they developed *Arcadia,* a series of critical essays on fractals, interrelated algorithms, and non-Aristotelian geometry. The students primarily decided to take the course in hypertext because they wanted to learn how to create their own Web pages -- a task they accomplished as early as the second class meeting when they presented themselves to the world through cyberspace. As participants in this experimental course, they also explored hypertext as the emerging literature of the World Wide Web by reading hypertext fiction, investigating the ways hypertext challenges the established notions of literary form, and debating the effects of electronic writing on research, editing, critical theory, and literacy.

"People who write hypertexts are interested in the ways in which we are connected with computers and the Internet and how entry into an information order affects our identities," explains Clayton. "We become hybrid beings formed by our natural subjectivity and this artificial, virtual world -- so people who use the computer become linked to the electronic device in the same way the Patchwork Girl and Frankenstein's monster are linked by several parts of other beings." Cyberspace, contends Clayton, is not destroying but

transforming and supplementing book culture. "With hypertext as an alternative model, we now see that books are not the only way to receive information. While studying the history of printed technology, I have discovered that no mode of information has ever been lost; each mode becomes supplemented. Oral poetry was not eradicated by the printing press; movies did not destroy the novel as was once believed, and photography did not bring an end to realistic painting."

Reflecting upon his own freshman year at Yale, Clayton never anticipated that computer technology would be an integral part of his scholarship and teaching. "The most pressing demand on my attention as an undergraduate and as a graduate student at the University of Virginia was wrapping my mind around the alien discourse of literary theory; all the accepted notions of what constituted a text and how meaning arose were challenged by the poststructuralists who encouraged us to see that a text has no fixed boundary."

Clayton's interest in technology, however, is a natural extension of his studies in literary theory. "Computer technology is the literary theory of the '90s because hyperlinks also challenge the integrity, autonomy, and boundaries of an individual text -- the associative character of hypertext may be the technological realization of a literary vision that was present in the early twentieth century in the style of James Joyce or Virginia Woolf."

Whether he is teaching a freshman seminar or a class on the nineteenth-century English novel, Clayton, who serves as the director of graduate studies for the English department, integrates computer technology into his teaching. His students are required to submit all their papers as attachment files to e-mail messages.

"When I announced at the beginning of the semester that I would refuse to accept any essays on paper, the seniors had a panic attack, but the freshmen were less intimidated by the requirement," says Clayton, for

whom this experiment in grading proved to be a much more interactive way of evaluating a student's work. "I open the attachment files, write comments and make recommendations for revisions, highlight all my remarks in red, and return the assignments instantaneously by e-mail."

Although the use of computer technology is prevalent in composition instruction throughout American higher education, Clayton says that Vanderbilt is on the cutting edge of this movement as a result of the foresight of Mark Wollaeger, director of the college writing program. Wollaeger has incorporated computer technology into all the English classes taught by teaching assistants and has made the technology available to every professor in A&S whose courses are coded by the letter "W" -- the designation for classes that meet the writing requirement for undergraduates. Via technology, students can participate in brainstorming modules for assignments, serve as peer editors, and revise according to suggestions from their professors and peers.

Having taught Vanderbilt's premiere course in hypertext, Clayton states that the most immediate benefit from the seminar has been the enthusiasm of the freshmen. "For the first time in teaching a 'W' course in my 11 years at Vanderbilt, I have found students whose predominant interests are in mathematics and science to be as excited and as engaged with the literature as students in the humanities. They've written autobiographical narratives and analytical arguments for the *Virtually 21* site, and for the *Arcadia* project they've researched historical figures from the English poets Lord Byron and Thomas Peacock to Ada Lovelace and Charles Babbage, precursors of the modern computer," explains Clayton, "but the course also has provided a model for understanding the importance of revision. Whether writing a five-page linear essay or a gloss for the Web sites, they

understand that writers have to prepare their compositions for different audiences in different rhetorical occasions -- a single lexia could be revised four times before being posted on the Web."

A possible consequence of writing on-line that Clayton intends to research involves the effects of hypertext on a student's attention span. "Does the temptation to read and write brief snippets encourage the shortening of a student's attention span -- a phenomenon we have already witnessed in our society because of television culture? Will hypertext as a method of thinking and writing that is becoming increasingly prominent respond to an existing shortened attention span?" he asks. Until research addresses these questions, Clayton believes that universities must continue to offer opportunities for training students in longer compositional projects.

Five minutes before the freshman seminar concludes, Clayton asks the class to contemplate how everyone is like the Patchwork Girl -- how each individual's identity is quilted from multiple influences and voices, and how a person is really a collaboration of experiences.

"Frankenstein's monster, Patchwork Girl, and hypertext are assembled from body parts stitched together," he reminds the class. "If literature is a body of text, can we then extrapolate that our physical bodies also are texts or vehicles for writing?"

The inquisitive look on Dustin Laverick's countenance changes to a grin when Clayton suggests the student consider the writing on his pullover shirt -- "Seaside Abercrombie."

"What message are you conveying with that brand name?" asks Clayton.

Before Laverick can respond, his peers realize the implications of Clayton's question and begin interjecting comments about hair colors, tattoos, and other ways the human body could be considered a text.

As they log off their computers, Clayton tells them

they'll resume this dialogue next class, but Luxmi Rajanayagam decides that's not soon enough for her question. Pulling her backpack over her shoulder, she tells Clayton, "I'll send you an e-mail."

Learn more about Vanderbilt's premiere course in hypertext and the collaborative writing projects, *Virtually 21* and *Arcadia*, by visiting Professor Jay Clayton's Web site at http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/english/Clayton/