



Tips for Teachers

Human Hyperlinks: An Activity of Empowering the Student in the English Literature Class

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In this paper, I want to write about a class activity that simulates Web hyperlinks. In this activity, students become live "links" to whom other students in the class go to for information. I used this activity first with a senior class of English department university students to teach *The King*, a postmodern novel by Donald Barthelme. Later I applied this activity to teaching other full-length texts and a corpus of narratives, plays and collections of poetry, with great success.

The Text

To begin with, I want to quote a few lines from the beginning of *The King* to show the nature of the text this activity is based on. Naturally, the activity can be applicable to all sorts of texts. However, the textual material used for such an activity should carry in it diverse elements of interest to warrant using it. The language teachers of junior classes, for instance, can use similar texts to create human hyperlinks to explore elements such as prepositions, gerunds, participles, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, in addition to other various technical elements in the discourse of the text. Below is an excerpt from *The King*. The underlined items indicate the hyperlinks my students embodied:

GUINEVERE in London, at the palace. Sitting in a chair buttering an apple.

"I am getting sick, sore, and tired of this," she said.

"Yes, mum," said Varley.

"Good evening, fellow Englishmen," the radio said. "This is Germany calling."

"A fundamentally disagreeable voice," said Guinevere, "stale cabbage."

"The invincible voices of the Reich," said Haw-Haw, "are advancing on all fronts. Dunkirk has been completely secured. The slaughter is very great. Gawain has been reported Captured-"

"Not in a hundred million years," said Guinevere.

"Gawain will pepper their pork for them."

"The false and miscreant king, Arthur, languishes meanwhile at Dover, according to my spies. Conspicuously alone. No Guinevere. I think we may, dear country men, wonder what this means."

"This will be the bit about you mum."

"I suppose."

"And where is Launcelot? Where indeed?"

Where Guinevere is," said Haw-Haw. "The war forgot. Helm and mail laid aside, hanging from the bedpost."

"What time is it?" Guinevere asked.

"Almost ten," said Varley.

"Time for the other one. See if you can get Ezra."

Varley fiddling with the radio. (Barthelme, 1992, pp. 3-4) (The underlining is mine)

Barthelme's text, to a trained professional reader, is simple in nature, but for most it is very challenging and demanding. Like most postmodern narratives, it lacks the conventional narrative structure: plot, story, and characterization. The novel has no one story to tell; and relies heavily on references to events and characters from British and continental contemporary and ancient history and legends. In short, the text is a pot of events enmeshed with culture.

When a given text is a cauldron of tales, legends and culture, different from the culture of the reader/learner, it can be difficult to comprehend. Thus, to the students, it becomes a text that confuses and perplexes rather than engages and teaches. My focus here, is not to provide a critique of Bartheleme and Postmodern textuality; but to share in a method of teaching such similar texts whereby students themselves do the unraveling of the mystery of the text. What distinguishes this activity from other classroom presentation activities is the fact that it is inspired by the hypertext phenomenon. Hypertext is basically a screen-page of text, image or sound that includes hyperlinks to other texts, sounds or/and images that in turn include further links to further such media with further links and so on. Current research describes this Web phenomenon in terms of encouraging and enhancing collaboration (Jorn, Duin, and

Wahlstrom, 1996; Joyce, 1995), as redefining reader/text relationships (Horton, 1991; Wickliff and Tovey, 1995), and as offering paradigm shifts toward new learning spaces (Bolter, 1991; Grice, 1993). I believe these themes indicate valuable reasons for exploring the hypertext experience; and moving it from the domain of cyberspace to that of actual space in the classroom.

Procedures

1. The teacher selects the items from the text (names, events, places, terms, words) s/he believes essential to the meaning and understanding of the text.

2. The teacher assigns an item to each student in the class to research. It is also possible to assign an item to more than one student, provided the assignees do not copy each other in their research, but rather provide different forms of data on the item. Of course, students are encouraged to collect all forms of data (textual, graphic, audio and visual) from all information sources available.

3. The students are given enough time to acquaint themselves with the given tasks. Moreover, the teacher should make sure the students are actually prepared to deliver.

4. Once students are ready to present the material they prepared, the teacher can proceed to teach the scheduled text or part of it, relying this time on the "human hyperlinks" (students) in the classroom.

The Hyper-class

If we take the Barthelme excerpt above for the lecture, we notice that there are twelve potential concepts or "links." This requires a minimum of twelve students inside the class who are ready to tell us about these items in different ways and manners. Unlike conventional classroom presentations where students present their material once and rest happily ever after, the interesting part of this activity is that these student "hyperlinks" must always be alert to deliver whenever they are requested to. So when the teaching starts, the interaction among the students begins either in sequential or at random order. Some one might begin by asking about "Arthur", then the class turns to the "Arthur" student-link for information, ten minutes later the same "link" may be approached again, and the student-link has to deliver. The sequential and random options of interaction depend on the way the teacher manages this activity in the classroom. In short, as the activity requires students to navigate the simulated web-space (the class), it becomes an exercise in gathering information and then formulating solutions to the linguistic, semantic, historical, and cultural problems contained within that information.

Hyper-class Management

The management of the classroom in such an activity depends on the experience and discretion of the teacher. The teacher may choose to be in total control of the class to regulate and moderate the access to the hyperlinks in a strictly sequential order. This is to say, the teacher leads the class to explore the links in the same order they appear in the text. Thus, if student X wants to know about "Guinevere", X requests the teacher's permission to access the link. In such a situation X and all the students in the class simultaneously will have to hear or see what Guinevere-link(s) has/have to offer. Then the students move to the next link in succession until they reach the last "link" in the text. The disadvantage of controlled access to these "links" is the fear of boring the students because of possible repetition, as most likely many students in the class might require information on "Guinevere" during the course of the activity. Also the teacher's control of the activity diminishes the whole hypertext experience as it empties it of its flexibility and freedom to navigate the simulated class-space with no restrictions.

The other alternative for the teacher, then, is to leave the students freely on their own, after making sure that they have enough material related to each hyper-item. The student-hyperlinks wear tags indicative of their "links" or topics. This enables everybody in the class to locate and identify the links easily. Meanwhile, students move without restriction across the class space to any link of their choice, to negotiate, question, and learn.

In short, the "hyper" class becomes a beehive-like class where everybody assists in the production of knowledge and meaning. The "hyper" class, while in process, radically transforms learning from teacher-centered to a totally student-centered activity.

Conclusion

The simulation of the hypertext experience, if taken seriously and done well, gives the learners an exhilarating sense of empowerment as it puts them in total control of the process of teaching and learning in a highly versatile manner. After all, the class teaches the class. The ideal teacher's function during this activity is that of an observer and subtle moderator. The activity also develops learners' skills of data manipulation and combination that serve students well in various contexts. Finally, the activity creates an experience, with information and teaching, that is fluid and interactive; and introduces a mode of thinking and understanding that challenges students to think outside the box of verbal texts.

References

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