Guy Bennett: 2006 TLC Technology Grant Report

Report:

Hyperliterature Wiki

I received a technology grant to set up and manage a wiki for a course that I taught in Fall 2006. The class - "Hyperliterature" - focused on electronic literary works featuring hypertext and/or hypermedia technologies. The use of a wiki seemed desirable for a number of reasons, not least among them the fact that, unlike the term papers I generally assign, the wiki would not disappear at the end of the semester, and thus the student work would not be lost; it would remain on-line and consultable by the school community and the public, and could be expanded in future classes I teach. It also seemed to me that the students might be excited about exploring this relatively new technology, and could be stimulated by the opportunity to do scholarly work collaboratively. Finally, a wiki seemed an appropriate forum for the discussion of the digital, web-based literature we were studying.

After discussing the project with Sue, Matt, Heather, and Kathleen, I opted to adopt the Mediawiki software (the same one used by Wikipedia). Matt downloaded and installed the software for me, and I created a suitable structure for it; learning to do so was easy, using the "Help" and FAQ pages that came with the software. I presented the wiki project to my students on the first day of class, and gave a demonstration the week before the first of my two assignments was due. In both cases, I asked students to contribute as much or as little as they liked to any of a number of pages, provided they reached the required word count. There were a few snags - a couple of students had problems adding their contributions, and in one case a page disappeared - but these were easy to resolve. For the most part students had no trouble inputting their information and formatting it correctly.
They seemed to enjoy the wiki project and welcomed the challenge that it represented. As one student wrote, "I like it very much as opposed to writing two lengthy papers on one particular subject. The ability to write about numerous topics without a specific minimum allows a student to convey important points and perspectives more effectively because the student no longer has to fill up pages with quotes and weak arguments simply to make the minimum." They, too, had to learn the editing language in order to input and format their contributions, but they found this to be not too difficult and worth the trouble. The same student commented that "the ability to create a page with hypertext functions is exciting and interesting because it makes reading easier and the student has a sense of control since they decide where to place hyperlinks."

All in all, I was impressed with their work (it was a small but good group of students), and am pleased with the way the wiki turned out. It is, like all wikis I suppose, a work in progress, and I look forward to returning to it in future classes. From my point of view, it was a good alternative to the term papers I would have otherwise assigned chiefly because, as I mentioned above, future students, as well as the public, will be able to profit from it. Though I feel that a wiki as an assignment is worthwhile, it does have a couple of drawbacks: since most of us are not used to collaborating with one another on writing projects, contributions may well appear as autonomous additions to compilation-type pages rather than truly collaboratively written texts, as was the case with some of the entries in the Hyperliterature wiki. A wiki is also more work than traditional papers.
for the teacher, since in addition to being read and commented on it needs to be formatted beforehand, managed during assignments, and "cleaned up" (i.e. reformatted and edited for errors and continuity as necessary) afterwards, and you need to have some experience working with the software to be able to do these things. These are relatively minor complaints, however, and I will definitely return to the Hyperliterature wiki in the future.

Visit Guy Bennett’s Hyperliterature Wiki: wikis.otis.edu/hyperlit/ [no longer available]

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