

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 5 / NUMBER 1 • SEPTEMBER 2000



The Third Dimension in Teaching: The Decameron Web and Beyond

GRANTS AND PEDAGOGY

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Many faculty applying for research grants find that funding agencies require that the research have a pedagogical component. One of the best examples of how faculty have responded to this challenge is the Decameron Web Project (www.brown.edu/Research/Decameron/), directed by Prof. Massimo Riva and Michael Hemment, under the sponsorship of the NEH. The Sheridan Center asked them to provide an example of how grant funding can produce innovative research and teaching projects. This article was originally presented by Michael Hemment at a recent conference in Rome.

It is not unreasonable these days to imagine a student enrolled in a virtual college, taking virtual courses, with virtual professors, from virtually anywhere in the world. By the end of the year 2000, it has been estimated that 97 percent of all American universities will rely on some form of distance learning¹, and that the number of college students enrolled in online courses will reach 2.2 million by 20022. Already, instructional technologies such as course webpages, student online discussion forums, and virtual language labs are bringing a new dimension of excitement and interactivity to teaching and learning. But for these technologies to be optimally effective, providing students with abundant data and answers to "frequently asked questions" are not enough. They must also motivate students to analyze, to browse, and to search the text and secondary sources from a variety of critical perspectives. They must offer an intuitive interface that easily directs users to bibliographic references, book reviews, and other online resources. And they must offer a means of gracefully integrating the web site into the traditional course curriculum.

In creating the [Decameron Web](http://www.brown.edu/Research/Decameron/) at Brown University, we are utilizing a number of applications and features with these concerns in mind. These include the development of

an advanced SGML-encoded text search, a vast array of online secondary materials, an [electronic syllabus](#), and a [pedagogy module](#).

The intended beneficiaries of the project are college and high school teachers and students, but independent readers and scholars interested in Boccaccio's works or related areas of interest will also benefit from it, regardless of their geographic location or institutional affiliation. Hopefully, the site will eventually serve as a gateway to a virtual community of teachers and students of Boccaccio's works who are engaged in a variety of didactic and scholarly pursuits and as a forum for discussions of their pedagogical and critical perspectives.

The Decameron Web began in 1995 as a series of hyperlinked Brown student essays in a "storyspace" environment. Eventually these documents were migrated to the web in HTML format under the direction of Italian Studies Professor Massimo Riva and Michael Papio, a graduate student (now Associate Professor at Holy Cross College), as a resource for their Decameron course. It has since evolved to a forum where students can contribute directly to designing and building the web of information that they themselves create. The encyclopedic information generated in this collaborative effort becomes the "collective memory" of the course and is thus available to subsequent generations of students and teachers who elaborate and expand upon it further. In other words, as opposed to many forms of instruction which are rather "static" in nature, the Decameron web is in a constant state of regeneration, metamorphosing itself in new directions.

The multidisciplinary nature of the Decameron Web, combined with its coherent design and architecture, stimulates a great variety of research interests and pedagogical approaches, all critically focused on the study of one great book, its cultural context and its legacy. For example, in past semesters, Brown biology students interested in the black plague of 1348, the framing event of the Decameron, were able to couple their scientific curiosity with a broader cultural, historical and symbolic comprehension of the disease as a literary topic. Art history students, likewise, were drawn to the study of the Decameron as a source for visualization. They were able to focus critically on the exegetic role of images in the study of a literary text.

Over the past four years, we have integrated the Decameron Web into our Boccaccio course at Brown in a variety of ways.

Using the site's Chat Room, students, from the very first week of class, are able to use the Web to explore the Decameron, prepare for class discussions, and exchange information among themselves or with their instructors.

Students also collaborate by producing short interpretive papers, article abstracts, or whatever best suits their interest, for addition to the web. These submissions can also include audio and visual components. For example, a film student might submit images from cinematic adaptations of the Decameron. A music student might contribute an audio sample of 14th-century ballads and dances referred to in the text. And an art history

student might submit images derived from the Boccaccio-inspired iconographical tradition. Additionally, each student is required to develop a broader end-of-term project. Last year, we had contributions spanning a broad range of subjects: "Boccaccio's Naples," a student film depicting the brigata, and a rather curious essay entitled "Meats and Spices in the Decameron."

Typically, students work together in small teams investigating ways in which to link their work to that of their classmates around common topics. Once completed, outstanding projects from each class are selected for addition to the web site. Each project is carefully evaluated and revised by our editorial board for content, bibliographic references, grammar/spelling, and HTML encoding.

To facilitate the addition of these documents to the site, all of our Boccaccio students are asked to submit their work in traditional hard copy as well as in HTML format on diskette. To this end, each student is required to learn a simple HTML tutorial and follow an encoding template presented on the site itself. Training our students in basic HTML (a process that on average takes less than three hours), enables us to standardize the text encoding process and to efficiently create "web-ready" documents that can be easily added to the site.

The prospect of having their research projects published online — rather than the all-too-common scenario of being corrected, returned, and forgotten in a desk drawer — has acted as a powerful incentive for our students. Since the implementation of the web site in our course, we have seen the quality of undergraduate work increase dramatically both from a critical thinking and research perspective...and we are not alone.

Professor Dennis Looney of the University of Pittsburgh first integrated Dante web sites into his course syllabus about three years ago. In his survey course on medieval literature, undergraduates were asked to explore a web site dedicated to Dante and present the equivalent of a book report. Looney contends that rather than substituting traditional research activities, the Internet has played a "complementary" role in his course, even helping to introduce the Comedy to non-literature majors. "Dante is exciting enough without the Internet" he told me, "now it is even more so."

The notion that students enjoy the "Net" has also been the experience of Professor Wayne Storey at Fordham University. Storey's undergraduate students have utilized online bibliographic materials in the past and last spring online research activities were included in one of his graduate Dante courses. However, Storey approaches online research with a healthy dose of caution, noting the dangers of unassisted web "surfing": "Undergraduates are impressionable, or can be, and tend to see everything that is written on the screen as the gospel truth. Part of my role is to make them question what they read on the Internet, because I've always found that they don't question enough, whether it is printed or electronic matter." Another challenge of web-based learning, according to Storey, is the need to "streamline" what students look at, so that they don't go too far a field when browsing online.

One of our attempts at "streamlining" web content for Brown students using the Decameron Web has been to create an [electronic course syllabus](#). In addition to allowing students to access most course reading assignments directly from campus computers or their dorm rooms, putting the syllabus online has also allowed us to keep it consistently updated (and we no longer encounter the common excuse of students losing their reading assignments the second week of class). An unexpectedly positive side effect of the electronic syllabus has been to promote further critical reading. When students click on a hyperlinked article contained in the online syllabus, they are literally transported into a matrix of literary criticism, "caught" in our Decameron web, and so tend to venture beyond the required reading to explore related critical articles contained in the site.

All of the web-based information we provide is intended not merely to offer data and answers questions, but to encourage students to analyze, to browse, and to search the text and secondary sources from a variety of interdisciplinary and methodological perspectives. At the same time, it will, when completed, actively direct users to an even greater collection of traditional resources through detailed bibliographic notes, library references, and book reviews.

Another unique feature of the Decameron Web is the recent development of a [Detailed Text Search](#). Using Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML), we have encoded each character and location in the Boccaccio's text with a series of searchable attributes. Characters are defined in terms of their age, sex, origin, estate, role, religion, marital status, condition (ill, imprisoned, deceased), and disguise; places are encoded to reflect their geographic location (city, region, country) and type (bridge, castle, church, etc.). One of our greatest challenges has been to design an HTML interface that was comprehensive in terms of search options, but not aesthetically confusing to the user. After repeated attempts, we settled on a design solution that divided the search into three principle categories: "[Characters](#)," "[Geographic Locations](#)," and "[Single and Multiple Words](#)." Within each of these subcategories, users may easily define their search by either 1.) simply typing in the name of the character or place they are looking for, 2.) customizing their search by selecting attributes from pull-down menus, or 3.) viewing the results of our pre-searched lists.

Our next step in the development of the Detailed Search page is to rigorously test its functionality and design in our spring 2000 Boccaccio course and with the assistance of our Advisor Board members. When completed, we hope that the SGML-encoded prototype will include a comparative sample of several translations of one or more novellas, with lexical and critical annotations and structural links to various sections of the Decameron Web as a whole. All of our SGML-encoded source texts, structured bibliographies and glossaries will enable precise and complex searches.

A popular feature among students in the past has been our electronic Newsgroup, which permits users of the Decameron Web to post messages which could be of interest to others who visit the site. It functions like a kind of "bulletin board," where scholars and students may leave and read messages at their own convenience. Additionally, we have reserved a

space on the site for real-time discussions. Virtual get-togethers are scheduled and publicized in advance so that groups of students may exchange opinions and questions among themselves regardless of their geographic locations. We occasionally invite guest professors to host the conversation, share their thoughts and answer questions in this open forum.

The "[Motif Code Index](#)", another Decameron Web feature, has been particularly useful for student research. Michael Papio and Donald McGrady (University of Virginia) have compiled together a list of motif codes for as many of Boccaccio's tales as possible, making it easy for anyone to locate and study the development and elaboration of plots or plot elements (known as "motifs") throughout the folklore tradition.

Finally, one of our primary objectives this year is the creation of a [pedagogy module](#) that will provide instructors with supplementary teaching materials, including a compilation of syllabi, exams, class project ideas, and essay questions. There will also be a teacher's forum, where innovative pedagogical approaches to Boccaccio's works can be openly shared and discussed, and student guides to essay writing, Internet research, copyright concerns, and classroom presentations. Each semester, we will encourage Boccaccio teachers and students from the U.S and abroad to submit nominations for "the best" Boccaccio student essay, which will eventually be published on the site.

If properly implemented, we believe that the Internet can help students and teachers to perform more effectively by becoming actively engaged in the classroom educational process. Student content contributions, professor-guided online discussions groups, and improved access to a variety of traditional and new research tools, bring a new dimension to the study of Boccaccio and his works. It is a challenge for all of us, and our students, to actively seek ways to maximize the effectiveness of this new educational medium, and to inspire an open collaborative community of learners who will contribute their own unique didactic and interpretive perspectives. It is the effectiveness of this collaborative effort that will ultimately determine Boccaccio's success on the web.

The Decameron Web would like to recognize the efforts of the Scholarly Technology Group (www.stg.brown.edu), whose technical expertise was essential in the development and implementation of the bilingual [Detailed Text Search pages](#), the [SGML encoding of the online text](#), and the digitization of the new [English translation](#) by J. M. Rigg. Particular thanks to Elli Mylonas and Giovanna Roz for their dedication to the project.