FY04 Innovations in Teaching with Technology Awards: Streaming Shakespeare

Proposal Title: Streaming Shakespeare

Investigators: M. Gilbert

Org Unit: College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Department(s): English

Funding Awarded: $12,293

For my undergraduate Shakespeare course, 8:72/49:72, I have created a series of CDs which allow me to show contrasting versions of short scenes from Shakespeare's plays. What results is a fast and flexible way of working with a range of interpretations of Shakespeare's plays. So, for example, the CDs on A Midsummer Night's Dream allow us to see five different approaches to the play, ranging from the 1935 Hollywood version to the 1969 version filmed by Peter Hall to the BBC version of 1981 to the 1996 film (based on a 1994 production by the Royal Shakespeare Company) to the 1999 Hollywood film. The clips are usually short (from 30 seconds to 2 minutes), although there are some running as much as 5 minutes. Because the digitized clips are used in a classroom situation, the presentation is consistent with the "fair use" guidelines.

Why create the CDs?

I've been teaching Shakespeare at The University of Iowa since 1969, and in those three-plus decades my basic aims have remained consistent: to help students learn how to read a difficult text with precision and imagination and to encourage students to see how each play presents a range of interpretative possibilities. Part of the background which informs my teaching is a long--and delightful--experience with many theatrical productions of Shakespeare. Most of the plays that I teach I've seen in at least five different productions and so my sense of just how many choices actors and directors can make has grown out of this experience.

By using video, I have been able to offer students something of the rich variety of production experience that has been so important to me, especially since there has been almost an explosion of interesting films based on Shakespeare in the past 15 years. The use of multiple versions of a short scene allows me to work both deeply (how much can we see in a single version?) and broadly (how many different versions can we see?). As soon as students see multiple versions, they immediately perceive the problems of interpretation, and return to the written text with specifically focused questions.
Where do we go from here?

At this point, I have material from 12 plays on CDs. But that material is available to students only when they are in the classroom, and, given time constraints, we might be able to watch 3-4 clips at most, and often just 2, during a 50-minute class period, if we still want to have time for discussion. So I want to make my material more widely accessible. The purchase of a video server by the University means that the clips can now be stored on the server, and accessed as streaming video through a WebCT course, which is password-protected, and open only to students in my Shakespeare class. Last year, thanks to a small grant from CLAS, I was able to hire an undergraduate assistant who put clips from four plays on the server. This process, involving working both with my CDs and with the first version of the digitizing process (I used Avid when I got started, and now would work with Final Cut Pro), is time-consuming. At first, the work is very slow, but as someone gets used to working back and forth between the finished clips and the first version, the work can speed up. As far as I know, there is no "batch" process currently available.

So what I would hope for is a half-time graduate assistant who could do the following:

1. Put all the remaining plays on the server.
2. In the process, redo clips that were originally digitized from fairly old videos. I'm thinking particularly of the library copies of the BBC productions of the history plays, all of which were quite worn when I did the work in 1998. The library has since purchased new copies of the BBC productions.
3. Add clips from videos not available when I made the CDs.

Students in my undergraduate Shakespeare course, as well as any other Shakespeare courses that would like access to the clips, would be able to see as many clips as they wanted, at a time that was convenient, and from any computer that had access to the Web. They could watch a clip more than once; they could prepare for class by watching and thinking about a series of clips; they could even use the clips as "texts" for papers. The English department teaches anywhere from 3 to 5 Shakespeare courses each semester, as well as one in the summer, so there's a continuing and large potential audience.

Teaching assistants in the General Education Literature Program (I am the program’s director) often borrow the CDs from me; frequently they feel worried about teaching Shakespeare to non-majors in a required course, but they report that the video clips help stimulate discussion. Having the clips on the server would first allow the teaching assistants to preview them easily, and to decide how many they wanted to use. A TA could then check with me about adding a particular section of 8G:1 to my WebCT course so that those students would also be able to watch the clips. In this sense, the
potential audience is extremely large, since we teach close to 4000 students each year in General Education Literature courses.

Whether we’re looking at courses just for English major or at Gen. Ed. Lit. courses, the improvement in accessibility is obvious. And the more accessible this material is, the more use students can make of it, whether to prepare for a class discussion, to write about Shakespeare, or even to create video clips of their own, supporting their own approaches to a play.

What resources will you need?
Funding for a half-time graduate assistant to put video clips on the server (to be available as “streaming” video) and to update/add to the existing clips.

Rough estimate of costs
7 months (mid-January through mid-August), at $1561/month comes to $10927. The figure is the current COGS wage for a 50% fiscal year appointment.

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