

Learning Objects in Humanities Education

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In *Understanding Media*, Marshal McLuhan suggests that the content of any new medium, at least initially, is provided by the medium that it is in the process of supplanting. For example, the content of early writing, as in Homer's *Odyssey*, is the spoken word, and the content of early cinema was theatre or vaudeville. Developments in Web technology and the use of this technology in education also seem to follow this pattern. Exclusive concern with document appearance and presentation — characteristics inherited from the print world — have gradually given way on the Web to dynamic and multimedia formats, and to distributed organizational mechanisms. Similarly, in distance education and educational technology, the Web initially took as its content the lectures, overheads, discussions and other aspects of the traditional classroom. Many of these aspects — down to the closed classroom door, the grade book and the classroom whiteboard — have been faithfully transferred onto the Web via password-protected course management systems like *WebCT* and *Blackboard*. However, attempts to replicate the face-to-face classroom seem to be giving way to distributed systems of 'Learning Objects' that exploit the intrinsically decentralized and decomposable nature of Web-based content, and that lend themselves to both 'blended' and 'distance' learning approaches.

'Learning Objects' is a term used to describe resources that can be used, shared and reused across a wide variety of educational contexts. Such resources can include images, video, Flash animations, text and HTML documents, as well as more complex

aggregations of this content. These resources can take the form of cultural content (e.g. articles, broadcast clips, or Websites) that has been adapted for use in educational contexts. The use of the term 'object' is an intentional reference to object-oriented programming and design, which has made use of modularity, hierarchical content structures and standardized interfaces to promote the use and reuse of programming resources in software development. With Learning Objects, it is hoped that some of these advantages can accrue also to resources used in education. Like content developed through object-oriented design, these Learning Objects will hopefully benefit from the congruence of their nature with the fundamental characteristics of the Web: its distributed nature, the modular, or decomposable nature of its content, and its use of agreed upon or de facto technical standards for file formats, descriptive information, and connectivity protocols (e.g. XML, Dublin Core, http).

A wide variety of projects in which Learning Objects play a central role have been underway both in Canada and abroad. These include the recently completed, pan-Canadian *eduSource* project, which has produced infrastructure and support mechanisms that are being further utilized in the *Lionshare*, *Apollo* and the *Eisenhower National Clearinghouse* projects. Many of these large-scale projects collect resources across the humanities, social and natural sciences. Other 'repository' or Learning Object collection projects, such as *FLORE*, *MusicGrid* and *Internet Shakespeare Editions* focus specifically on language learning, and humanities subjects.

The proposed panel will critically assess the opportunities and challenges presented by a variety of LO initiatives that are provincial, national and international in scope, and that reflect the trends described above. Each panel member and project represented brings a different emphasis, representative of a different cross-section of users, relating and contributing in different ways to humanities education. Each member also brings a different background from humanities education, and the extensive experience in the use of digital content in this area. Discussion among the panelists and with the audience will focus on the issues, advantages and challenges of this approach in humanities education:

Terry Butler is the Director of Research Computing in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta, and recently completed a stint as Interim Director of Academic Technologies for Learning. Terry works closely with faculty both in the humanities and other discipline areas in the integration of computer technology in research and teaching. As lead on the *Technology Edge* project, he has researched and developed multimedia content to improve the information technology skills of liberal arts students.

Catherine Caws is an assistant professor in both the Department of French and the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Victoria. Dr. Caws conducts research in

collaborative learning in higher education, computer-assisted language learning, and computer networking, and she plays a leadership role in the *FLORE* repository of French Language Learning Objects.

Norm Friesen is currently Director of the *CanCore Metadata Initiative*, and principal investigator in the SSHRC-sponsored *learningspaces.org* project. He is also a visiting Scholar at the School of Communications at Simon Fraser University, and a member of the Canadian delegation for the ISO sub-committee on "Information Technology for Learning, Education and Training."

Scott Leslie is the Manager of the BCcampus Learning Resources Centre, a multi-disciplinary 'open content' repository. In addition, he researches course management systems, repository and eportfolio software as part of the Western Cooperative on Educational Telecommunications' Edutools.info team.

Griff Richards concerns himself with the convivial use of technology to promote the creation, management and transfer of human knowledge. Griff has a Ph.D. in Educational Technology from Concordia, and has been active in the research, development and implementation of computers in education and training for 25 years. His most recent work has been in the context of the Mellon Foundation *Lionshare Peer to Peer Learning Object Repository* project (<<http://lionshare.its.psu.edu/main/>>).

Ray Siemens is Canada Research Chair in Humanities Computing and Associate Professor of English at the University of Victoria. Director of the Digital Humanities / Humanities Computing Summer Institute, founder of Malaspina U-C's Centre for Digital Humanities Innovation, and founding editor of the electronic scholarly journal *Early Modern Literary Studies*, he is also author of many articles focusing on areas where literary studies and computational methods intersect.