

Shakespeare by Mail: An Experience in Distance Learning Using  
Electronic Mail

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For the past five years I have taught a class entitled "Acting in Shakespeare" for my undergraduate students at the senior level in our Bachelor of Fine Arts Acting program. I have never taught the class the same way twice, always trying to tailor the class to the amount and ability of the incoming students. This past fall's class was particularly large and had a good amount of men, so I decided to focus the class on preparing to perform a workshop production of \*King Lear.\* I planned for the students to approach the play through performance and analysis, hoping that the skills learned in approaching one of Shakespeare's plays would be applicable at the most basic level to other works in the canon.

My greatest concern was the research component. I believe actors who perform Shakespeare should have strong research skills so as to understand the context and the time in which the play was written, both in terms of Shakespeare's time and place, and in context of the text itself (e.g. knowing something about England around 500-600 AD for \*King Lear\*). I also believe in the "writing across the curriculum" concept, and try not only to get students to write whenever possible, but to rewrite as well. I'm a firm believer that research is not actable, but that research can lead us to clues for character traits which relate to the context of the play and which would not be immediately apparent to the modern acting student in a modern context. An example might be understanding the meaning behind Gloucester's blinding, a punishment common for crimes of lust and lechery. An actor might extrapolate from that fact and create a characterization of Gloucester which would show him to be a man used to easy living, somewhat loose in his morals and lifestyle, and so very easy to beguile.

My problem was the amount of papers I was looking forward to reading. The class had 17 students, and I planned to have two rewrites before accepting the final paper. The question was how to find the time and the resources, given other teaching and departmental production responsibilities, to do the job well. I hit upon the power of electronic communication, or e-mail, as the solution.

I had discovered e-mail about two years ago, and one of the discussion lists I joined was the SHAKSPER discussion list, edited by Hardy M. Cook and originating from the University of Toronto (the founder of the list was Ken Steele of the UofT). It occurred to me that many of these people are very interested and very competent on the subject of Shakespeare. I decided to try to set up an "electronic advising system," whereby each of my students would be matched up with an "electronic advisor." The student would then communicate via e-mail with his or her advisor, and all matters pertaining to the paper would be handled between the advisor and the student. I would receive only the final copy.

The experience ran from September to December of 1992. I call the process an "experience" rather than an "experiment" because the way in which the project was carried out had no set research methodology attached to it. The remainder of this article deals with how the experience was set up, how it ran, and what the results were.

### Setting It Up

My first step in getting the process going was to solicit help from volunteers willing to act as e-advisors. The obvious place to go was the SHAKSPER discussion list. I posted a request for advisors, and received very quickly (within a week) a number of people willing to volunteer for the experience.

Essentially, I took anyone willing to volunteer for the project. There was no set criteria for participation, and so the advisors ranged from graduate students to experienced researcher and teachers. I ended up a bit short on advisors, so I did have to double up a few people.

Once the semester started, I introduced the topic to the students and explained to them the process. The paper had to be 3-5 pages in length, and had to deal with some aspect of the character which would help in their character analysis. Each student received an e-mail account, and was given the e-mail address of their mentor. They had to submit two drafts to their e-advisor according to a schedule I set up. They could receive as much or as little help as possible. There were no restrictions beyond the due date, and advisor and student were free to set up their working process in whatever way they saw fit.

### The Process

The most difficult hurdle in getting the process going was to get the students used to using e-mail. The skill level in the class on using e-mail ranged from completely uninitiated to advanced. I held two sessions on how to use e-mail, and made sure that each student had all available documentation or access to documentation. Our system at Fredonia is very user-unfriendly, so the learning curve was high for those who had no computer experience whatsoever. Fortunately the students are all majors and know each other well, and as theatre students are quite used to working in cooperative groups, so there developed on their own a peer-to-peer help system in which inexperienced students were aided by more experienced students. The students were encouraged to send e-mail to me if they had a problem. I also set up the requirement that any communication about the paper which required my assistance had to be handled by e-mail; I would not discuss any aspect of the project during class time (I ended up breaking this rule a few times).

I set up two mailing lists, one containing the names and addresses of all the e-advisors and one with the names and addresses of the students. This way I could send out mass mailings to either or both groups when I wanted to remind them about deadlines or other pertinent information. All the e-advisors got a copy of my syllabus. I also encouraged the e-advisors to write to me if they were experiencing any problems.

The greatest difficulty during the process turned out to be getting the students up to speed on e-mail. There were several

communication problems, some as small as students thinking they had put the exact address in the "To" heading when they had left out one letter, others as large as system crashes at two different sites. Student access also became a problem. Available terminals on campus are scattered about in a rather haphazard way, and so access to a terminal can be tricky. Students who were completely computer illiterate could not translate their papers from a word processing document to an ASCII file, and so had to do most of their work directly in e-mail. None of my students own personal computers or modems, so they could not avail themselves of dial-in privileges. However, by the end of the experience all of them had successfully completed the task, although some of them did not meet the established deadlines along the way. I had to extend one deadline due to heavy production commitments within our department.

### Results and Observations

I found the results of the experience intriguing. There is no way I can quantify these results, since there were no controls on the experience and no exact record keeping for statistical analysis. I received some feedback from students and e-advisors. Any observations I make are therefore purely subjective.

Overall, I have to say that the experience was quite interesting, but needs serious refinement if I were to do it again. The weakest link in the chain is the student. The idea to include all the students in the project so as to get reaction and responses from across the board was fundamentally sound, but I think to gauge how well such a project can truly work, one has to start from a base of computer-literate students. As might be expected, those students with cases of "computo-phobia" did very poorly with the exercise, while those already possessing skills in e-mail communication did quite well. One student actively resisted the project, and did not fully complete the e-mail section of the assignment, although she did hand in her final paper. I found I had to spend too much time in some cases merely doing instruction on how to run terminals and how to access e-mail. There was a clear difference in many of the advisors' desire for more contact and communication with their student, and the student's willingness or technical ability to get that communication going. I do, however, have to give my students credit for taking part in the experience. I did make it clear to them from the outset that this was kind of an "educational experiment" on my part, and that they were the guinea pigs. After over three years with me as their advisor/teacher they are quite used to my novelties.

The final products were the greatest reward. Most of the students were already good writers, but there was a noticeable improvement in their writing, which I attribute to the one-on-one contact with the e-advisor and the fact that they did two drafts before handing in the final. In addition, as noted below by one of the advisors, the students were forced to use writing as a means of communicating their thoughts to their advisor, and so received addition and perhaps unconscious practice in writing. Beyond that, I noticed in several cases subtle stylistic changes in their writing, which I again attribute to the one-on-one contact with the e-advisor. There is perhaps a correlation between the advisor's personal stylistic approach and the final result.

This, to me, is the greatest benefit of e-mail communication and advising. Since the students had to write for the tastes and demands of someone else besides me (whom they have been writing for for the past three-plus years), their papers took on unique flavors. They were quite fun to read because each paper had a somewhat different stylistic "feel" to it. I believe it allowed the students an opportunity to expand their writing skills by meeting the requisites of another instructor and consequently they were pointed in directions of research and style which I alone never would have thought of.

Did these papers achieve their ultimate goal; i.e. research which an actor can use on the stage? Some papers did, others did not. To my knowledge, I had only one "pure" theatre person on my advisor list; the rest were mostly of a literary bent, which I think was good. It probably would take another semester to get my students to actually incorporate their research into the role, so the short answer to that question is no. I do believe, however, that the students gained a vast amount of information and new skills which they will eventually be able to apply at some point in their careers.

Not only that, they have a new method by which they may do their research - the Internet/Bitnet method and resource. As the databases and information on the "net" increases, students will be turning more and more to the computer as a way of doing thorough research. I expect I will be doing more and more of this type of learning experience, and I also expect I will be introducing it at a much earlier stage in their educational careers. Although the practical applications are still in their infancy due to system problems and interface kludges, eventually this kind of "distance learning" will allow for institutions such as mine (remote and small) to tap the energies and knowledge of the wider world. The kind of one-on-one approach to this paper is something I could never have given my students on my own. At that level, I count the experience a success and won't hesitate to try again.

#### Appendix A - Student/Advisor Reaction

The following are quotations from a request I sent out for feedback. I did not get as much feedback as I would have liked, but I present them for consideration. There were no student negative replies, and only two formal replies from students. I include only the formal replies received via e-mail.

From the Students:

"I am glad you encouraged me to get off my behind and learn something about this system. I still have a lot to learn, but at least I have a place to start from. At first I was a little confused with that whole idea and even became upset when my first draft did not go through. Luckily it was a silly mistake and I was able to fix it. Ever since then, I have been having a lot of fun. My advisor is the best. I would send her my ideas and she would help me focus on one general idea. She was always helpful and she wrote back as soon as she received my messages. I think this advisor idea was an interesting one, but I am not sure all of the students had as great of an advisor as I had. So that's what I think. I liked it. I give it two thumbs up. It was better than \*Cats\*."

"I just wanted to give you a little feedback on the computer program. I really loved it! I have come to value my friendship with (my advisor) and will be continuing our correspondence next semester. Besides that, I liked getting comments from him initially; it took the pressure off what you thought (not that I ever worry about that much!). It also made me feel like I didn't hand in the paper alone, that he was part of it. Anyway, you should continue to help us become more computer literate. I have really enjoyed it. If nothing else I got some mail once in a while."

From the Advisors:

"While I may have more to say after I get the other second draft, at this point I think that the project has worked quite well. I would have liked a little more interim discussion between the proposals and the first draft, and the first and the second. For folks who are new to the 'net, the minimum of discussion can be intimidating, and the exchanges I had with both students were certainly adequate. I think that it is an extra boon to the composition process if lots of the discussion that precedes and accompanies the writing is actually written. It gets the students into that mode of thought, provides records of what everyone says for later reference, and makes writing seem normal somehow."

"I appreciate the opportunity to participate, but I am not sure I would do it again. This is largely a recognition of my own limitations, though I believe there may also be an inherent limitation in the process.

I found it extremely difficult to comment on the papers because I didn't know how much it was fair to expect. There were some serious limitations in the papers themselves, in terms of the research level that was in evidence; but I don't know how that compares with other students in the class or with other undergraduate students in other classes, and I think to be fair and helpful, comments would have to be made with those kinds of realistic expectations in mind.

There were also limitations in terms of time: I overestimated the amount of time and energy I had to devote to this. To some extent the process resembles a kind of peer review you might undergo when submitting a paper for publication. But these students aren't peers...so there is no standard set of expectations, no commonly agreed-upon body of knowledge that we can bring to the task. There were (also) no facial clues, no tone of voice, no sense of the "person" from class discussion - nothing to help guide and modify and tailor the feedback I was trying to provide.

It was a fascinating and unsettling experience."

"Regarding comments on the whole exercise, I was looking for more interaction with the student. Perhaps something less formal than a research paper would help the student gain more confidence in e-mail. I would have found it more interesting to hear more about the production, the daily progress of her work as an actor. Such informal discussion might be just the thing to get the student writing about drama and using e-mail. Once the bugs were worked out and the communication flowing back and forth, the research paper could then be sent, now in the context of ongoing

communication."

#### Appendix B - Topics of Research Papers

The production of the play in workshop necessitated the doubling and tripling of some roles. This is why there are two or three papers on the same character. The titles are actually small abstracts of the papers written by myself.

"Is Goneril Possessed by the Devil?: A look into demonology and the character of Goneril"

"Edmund: Machiavel, Opportunist, Adventurer."

"Goneril and her Struggle for Power"

"Cordelia: Every Inch A Lady"

"The Influence of Parental Power, Pride and Punishment on the Character of Regan"

"Cordelia's Defiance"

"Goneril: Woman, Man, or Monster?"

"Albany as a Man of Insight and Action"

"Gloucester: A Failed Family Man"

"Does the Fool Possess a Physical Defect?"

"Edgar: Is There Comic Relief in the Role?"

"A Comparison of Elizabethan England and Anglo-Saxon England in Approaching Edgar."

"Cornwall as Ego-Maniac"

"Regan's Lust for Power"

"Kent: Blunt and Simple Servant"

#### Appendix C - Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my warmest appreciation and professional regard for the following people who took part in this experience as e-advisors. The role was completely voluntary, and these people should be counted as pioneers in the field of distance learning and the development of computer technology in higher education. All of the names on this list are members of the SHAKSPER discussion list (SHAKSPER@utoronto.Bitnet). I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the editor of SHAKSPER, Prof. Hardy M. Cook, for his cooperation in letting me use the list to garner volunteers, and for his personal participation in the project.

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