

Designing Shakespeare: Creating a teaching support network and case studies for teaching theatre history and Shakespeare in performance

Final Report

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Project Summary

In December 2002, as the result of a large AHRB funded project, I made freely available, through the Performing Arts Data Service, a substantial database of information about contemporary Shakespearean Design. This database includes information about over 1000 professional productions of Shakespeare from 1960-2000, it makes available over 3500 production photographs, as well as 3D models of theatres and interviews with designers. The subject specific activity which this project proposed was to help colleagues make use of this material in the classroom by creating a series of teaching packages which demonstrated the changing attitudes and theatre practices over the 40 year period under review. The primary activity of the project, therefore, was to host two workshops with colleagues to try to develop ways of using the archive in teaching. The primary outcome of the project was envisioned as a support website that encouraged debate and discussion as well as offering concrete advice. The motivation behind the project was to work with colleagues to develop the most useful possible packages of information rather than imposing models or teaching approaches on them.

Account of the two workshops hosted

As laid out in the original project plan two workshops were held at Royal Holloway at the beginning of the project. The first, held on 31st January 2003, was aimed at drawing together colleagues who were interested in the Contemporary Audio Visual History of Performance. The second workshop, held on 18th February 2003 invited colleagues who wanted to examine Shakespeare in Performance across history. The two one day events considered the implications of the increasing availability of audio visual material for the study of performance in terms of changing teaching practices. Each of these days combined demonstrations with a round table discussion and a curriculum development workshop. The aim of these days was to instigate an ongoing discussion about the integration of digital materials in the curriculum.

Contemporary Audio Visual History of Performance - 31st January 2003

This day was divided into two thematic sections. The first half was focused on new kinds of resources available to teach traditional forms of theatre. The second half of the day was designed to look at new kinds of performance that digital technology has inspired. The workshop began with the participants outlining their own research interests and their reasons for participating in the workshop. The backgrounds and interests of the group were quite varied so it was determined that the discussion should try to tackle a range of general issues rather than focusing too specifically on the interests of particular participants.

In the morning I began with a demonstration of *The Cambridge King Lear CD-ROM: Text and Performance Archive* and showed how this resource might be used in teaching. I pointed out that this resource followed traditional research patterns but made primary

research more widely available. I indicated that the process of creating the CD had caused me to question traditional assumptions about what should be studied in theatre history research and teaching. I pointed out the strengths of the CD format, the fact that it is coherent and contained. But I also noted the drawbacks, the fact that the CD was quickly out of date and did not offer the kind of accessibility that the web could.

I then went on to demonstrate the Designing Shakespeare project, which is freely available on the web. I pointed out that this resource focuses on audio-visual means of recording and therefore studying theatre history. I drew attention to the advantages of this new project in that it creates new forms of research and teaching materials through the use of video interviews and VRML models of the theatres most often used for Shakespeare. I suggested that the result of this has been a shift in focus which has enabled lecturers and students to look in class at elements of the process of theatre making as well as the products of that creative endeavour.

The discussion instigated carried on through the lunch break. After lunch the participants were given some time to work on the computer to trial the two resources described in the morning. The discussion following this period of hands on experience was much more concrete than the initial open-ended debate. Specific points were raised about how the resource could be improved. The participants also gave a general assessment of the usefulness of such resources in their own teaching and research. It was generally agreed that if models could be put forward which showed how this kind of resource might be incorporated into teaching it would be a very useful service for the community as a whole.

Following the tea break Barry Smith from Nottingham Trent University demonstrated his work with the Live Art Archive. He raised the issue of copyright and how much this restricted making performance materials available on the web. Professor Smith went on to show how the cataloguing system used in his next project, the National Review of Live Art, had become more sophisticated. The final project he demonstrated, the Digital Performance Archive, showed again a more advanced system of archiving the work of performance artists. In this case the individual records are often linked to the homepages of the individual artists who themselves are able to mount audio or video of their own work. The organic nature of the web and its ever-expanding reach were clearly demonstrated through these three projects.

Professor Smith went on to open up a general discussion on the subject of how we might be able to access the many videos in the Nottingham Trent collection without actually visiting. Copyright hurdles but also technical hurdles were discussed. It was suggested that in the future new possibilities might be made available for the transmission of materials that are of specialist interest, such as pay per view services or telephone broadband services. The day ended with a very wide reaching discussion which addressed the role that archives, like the ones demonstrated, play in creating new canons. The issue of the falseness of the division between academic and technician in this realm was also discussed. The blurring of lines was also discussed in terms of the division between the public and the private sector in terms of making these materials available and profiting from them. The general consensus at the end of the day was that there were some serious issues at stake that were not being taken seriously by the institutional powers. It was generally felt that performing arts departments and the skills required by lecturers in performing arts departments were going to have to change significantly in the future.

Shakespeare in Performance across history - 18th February 2003

The second of the two workshops was more narrowly defined yet still the conversation covered a wide range of topics. The day was again split between demonstrations and hands on work with the available resources. As a result, the debate flowed back and forth from the specific to the general in a productive and engaging way.

The day began again with a demonstration of my two projects, *The Cambridge King Lear CD-ROM* and the Designing Shakespeare. On this occasion I focused more specifically on what had been included in these projects and how it was designed to work rather than raising the issue immediately of how such projects can help redefine the canon.

Chris Dyer then demonstrated his work which tries to simulate both the theatre spaces but also the theatrical methods of production in a virtual space. He pointed out the advantages of working with the computer as a means of freeing up creativity. As Departments are increasingly becoming worried about funds and liability virtual technology allow the students to enter a wider range of theatres to practice their craft uninhibited. Mr. Dyer discussed how the computer was useful both in terms of allowing non-visually literate students make a visual statement but also in terms of the ways in which non-textually literate students could use the visual to communicate their ideas with computers. He concluded with a demonstration of his Open Stages software which allows students to interrogate the spaces and equipment themselves, using all the practical elements and mechanics of putting a production on the stage.

Before the lunch break the participants were asked to think about the workshop task that they would work on in the afternoon. Three topics were presented a) Character and Representation, b) Politics and the Performance of Place and c) Audience, Actor and Space and the participants were asked to choose one to focus on when thinking about how they might use digital resources that focus on the visual in their teaching. Again a lively discussion continued throughout the lunch break.

Following the lunch break Tim Child, CEO of Televisual, a software company that specialises in creating avatars for television and the web, demonstrated a scene that his company had created from *As You Like It* acted on the Globe stage. This performance had been created through image capture of the full movements of real actors. As a result, it was possible to watch the performance from any angle, unlike most virtual reconstructions. He went on to discuss the process of creating this short scene from the play. Finally, he showed how avatars had been created that could respond to voice recognition in real time, thereby making it possible to include such avatars in live performance.

This presentation opened up a discussion of how digital technology might change the practices of theatre and the job of an actor. There was a debate about whether simulations were designed to replace or to enhance an understanding of the live experience. The conversation then moved on to how students could use these resources as tools of interrogation in their studies. It was suggested that by archiving their own work students could address the editorial issues that had been raised.

The participants were then encouraged to take time to look at the resources themselves with an eye to thinking about how they might be used in teaching based around one of the three themes presented. Again responses raised a number of specific issues. One participant said that the Designing Shakespeare resource would be more useful if it contained more information about the act and scene of the play illustrated in the images. I pointed out that we had thought about adding this feature but the time constraints did not allow it. There was a positive response to the VRML models and the video interviews that were seen to add real value to the other materials which are more readily available from other sources.

The conversation concluded with a debate about how academics might engage in this kind of research themselves. Again the issue of copyright was raised and discussed as the major hurdle in the field of performing arts. This combined with technical hurdles and limitations, in many departments meant that the participants generally agreed that they could see that this was the way forward but could not see how such changes would reach their departments in the near future.

Assessment of the outcome of the workshops

The two workshops proved extremely illuminating on a number of fronts. On both days participants were much more interested in discussing the overarching issues of how their department might move in this direction at a technical level and a legal level than they were in thinking about specific teaching materials they might want to use in class. While the demonstrations were seen to be very valuable, on the whole the workshops seem to succeed more as a forum for debate and discussion of the ramifications of the availability of new technologies for the discipline than they were in discussing particulars. This was due in a large part to the fact that the days were set up with wide reaching debate as a primary aim. The surprise, however, was that this element dominated discussion almost entirely. The examples presented were used as evidence in the debate of larger issues or discussed with reference to very specific details.

The expected outcome, therefore, was not reached. While a number of suggestions about refinements of the current resource emerged, on neither occasion was it possible to obtain any real guidance about how the Designing Shakespeare resource could be used to create new packages of information that could be remodelled for teaching. The one exception to this was the work that was done in preparation for the day at Royal Holloway with Dr. Helen Nicholson and Dr. Jonathan Holmes. These two lecturers helped to devise the thematic categories that were presented as part of the workshop task. While specific responses to this task were not forthcoming, the format offered was an indication of a way in which subsets of the data might usefully be collected. I determined from these two days that lecturers are, in general, not at the stage of choosing which digital resources to include in their teaching but rather are at the stage of assessing the value of digital resources in education. There is a great deal of concern about the impact of these newly available resources which stems less from the quality and nature of the resources themselves but from the institutional and infrastructural hurdles lecturers see in their own institutions. The workshops were valuable in that they allowed for some of these issues to be raised. They did, however, point out that there is a great deal of work to be done before digital materials can be usefully adopted in many higher education institutions.

Re-assessment of the project plan in light of the workshops

The two workshops pointed to the fact that many lecturers feel they lack training and an understanding of the issues at stake in digital resource creation. While intellectually they can see the advantages of this sort of resource they do not have the time or the skills to reconceptualise their teaching practices. As a result, it seemed necessary to reassess the outcomes of the project plan. The Designing Shakespeare web support site, it seemed, must first and foremost give some basic guidelines in terms of the use of this resource. The aims and focus of the support website were, therefore, modified from a discussion of practice to a more basic level of information about searching the database and saving resources for re-use. The subsets of the data, I realised, I would have to create myself, given that the workshops had not developed any clear guidelines for use. This approach, seemingly presenting exempla's I had created, goes against the collaborative aims of the initial project plan, however, it seemed the most appropriate approach given the feedback from the community.

In order not to abandon the principle of allowing the community to participate in the process of creating collections, a new outcome was added to the project. I realised from comments made at the workshops that the participants found the currently available digital applications restrictive in terms of drawing together existing digital materials. In particular the linear nature of programs such as Powerpoint were seen to be inappropriate for the kinds of teaching conducted in most performing arts departments. As a result, an experiment was added to the outcomes of the project to determine if it would be possible to develop a digital application that was flexible. Nicholas Watton, a Flash Developer, who has also taught acting for a number of years in Higher Education, was hired to develop a prototype for an application that would facilitate the collation and reuse of digital materials in class. The remit for this new aspect of the project was to create something that was flexible yet very simple to use.

Revision of aims

The initial aims of the project were quite specific and narrow in that the outcomes were aimed at only making the Designing Shakespeare more user friendly for teachers in higher education. As a result of the two workshops I became aware of the lack of preparation in the community for such a specific task. I also found a great desire to discuss, debate and question the future direction of teaching and learning using digital resources.

As a result, the project has shifted its aims to a more general task of giving some practical guidance about using digital resources on the web using the Designing Shakespeare archive as an example. This project has maintained the initially proposed outcome of a support website but has changed the focus of that site to make it a more general resource about the repurposing of web materials for teaching. Three examples of collections from the archive and how they might be used in teaching will still feature but the primary focus of the project has shifted on to how these examples might show the practical steps involved in creating teaching resources.

In addition to the website a new outcome in the form of a digital application was added to the project. The aim of this new outcome was to develop a means by which individual lecturers might create and store personalised collections of digital materials that they might want to use in class. It is the intention of the project to make this new application, once completed, freely available to the higher education community for general use.

The re-assessment of the aims of this LTSN project coincided with my appointment on secondment to the post of Project Officer for C & IT for the English Subject Centre at Royal Holloway. Indirectly this secondment might be seen as another outcome of this project in that it was as a result of the two workshop days that I realised the great need to help colleagues reassess their teaching with digital technology in mind.

Work undertaken by the Research Assistant

The Research Assistant, Katie Lewis, was responsible for planning and scheduling the two workshop days. This included catering arrangements, room booking and making all arrangements on the day. She also took notes during the workshops and wrote up the transcripts of the day.

Ms. Lewis' second task was to research the currently available resources for teaching Shakespeare using the web. This research will feed into the creation of the support website.

Work undertaken by the Flash Designer

The Flash Designer, Nicholas Watton, attended several meetings to determine the requirements of the digital application requested. His input was in terms of determining the educational objectives of the resource as well as its technical exclusion. He was asked to create a free standing prototype which allowed for the combination of video and still images that was easy to use and flexible. He produced a very commendable prototype to these specifications.

Support Website Design

The website is still in the development stages but its scale and purpose have expanded dramatically. The site has been taken on as part of the English Subject Centre's IT strategy and will therefore be maintained and developed in response to user testing and input from both the English and Drama communities.

The aim of the site will be to present three quite simple resources based around the themes outlined in the second workshop day:

a) Character and Representation – looking at transgendered casting in Shakespearean production b) Politics and Performance of Place – looking at a range of productions of Lear set in different periods c) Audience, Actor and Space – looking at four performances at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre.

These resources will be made generally available for use by in teaching by both communities and will invite comment from users. Each of these resources will also have attached to it a ‘recipe card’ to show how it was created. In other words, a step by step analysis of the creation of each resources will be made available in order to provided guidance to lecturers who would like to make digital resources of their own using existing materials. A glossary of basic terms and operations, such as saving remote images onto the local hard drive, will also be included.

Therefore the support website has grown from presenting a few isolated examples to presenting a process of creation. This resource combined with an open debate about the wider issues at stake that involves both the English and Drama communities will hopefully provide a significant service to teaching in Higher Education in this area.

Conclusions

The Royal Holloway PALATINE Development Award has resulted in a number of unexpected outcomes. The first was the fact that the members of the community who attended these events expressed a great deal of concern about the implementation of digital technology in the classroom. They seem to be much less prepared to change their methods of teaching than anticipated and wanted very much to open a discussion about the long term implications that such teaching initiatives might have both professionally and personally. Concern was expressed about training but also about institutional hurdles and workloads, all of which it was felt might get in the way of making major shifts in teaching practice in the near future.

What became apparent was the fact that lecturers need much more help than simply pointing them in the direction of digital resources and collecting subsets for use in teaching. Rather what seems to be desired was a much broader discussion and an engagement with the practices of making these kinds of resources. Therefore it became apparent that what was desirable was not a one day event but a programme where it would be possible to link individual academics to technical expertise in order to help these individuals reconceptualise their teaching practices. This new remit far outstripped the scope of a six month project and so some reassessment of the proposed aims and outcomes was necessary. I decided that a support site must begin with elementary instructions about accessing and saving selected resources from the Designing Shakespeare archive. In addition I determined it would desirable to try to develop a digital application that would allow for the collation and reuse of appropriate material in the classroom. Therefore the project was redefined in a way that did not change the outcomes radically but it did change the expected level of technical expertise of its users. It also changed the nature of the project in that it became the initial research and development phase of a much larger and more long term project.

This project has had a profound impact on me both personally and professionally insofar as it has encouraged me to join the LTSN myself. I have taken up a one year secondment with the English Subject Centre in order to be able to pursue the larger project as I now envision it and therefore to work more closely with academics to develop specific teaching packages for learning. Already in my new post with the ESC I have instigated a project which will aim to embed digital resources in the curriculum. In the first instance I am working with colleagues involved in teaching on the Shakespeare MA programmes at Royal Holloway and Kings College London, the ESC’s two host institutions. The next proposed project of this kind will focus on creating materials for the expanded joint honours English/Drama programme at Royal Holloway. This undertaking aims to embed digital resources into specific programmes locally while at the same time instigating a discussion nationally about the use of digital resources in teaching English and Drama. My position in the English Subject Centre will hopefully lead to greater collaboration between PALATINE and the ESC. This connection will be virtual, in that the support site for Designing Shakespeare will be jointly funded and will incorporate a discussion board which trials the idea of combining two disciplines. It will also be a live and personal connection in that a meeting has already been set up between PALATINE co-director

Dr. Kate Newey and myself at the ESC’s International conference in July. The aim of this meeting will be to discuss further areas of collaboration between the two centres and the two disciplines. At this conference I will both discuss my work on this project in a formal paper and will distribute the postcard advertising the new support site in the conference pack.

Therefore in addition to the concrete outcomes of this project a process has been instigated which may well have an impact on PALATINE and the English Subject Centre for the future. The need I perceive to open a discussion about the long term ramifications of the shift towards an increased dependence on digital resources will hopefully be served to some degree by the larger project I have mapped out. I also hope to address the very real concerns expressed in the workshops regarding training and appropriate support, with the expanded remit of the support website and the development of a new digital teaching application for teaching. It is my hope that if successful the model I am trying to establish might influence other LTSN Centres and thereby make a real contribution to Higher Education in the UK.