MyDante: An Online Environment for Contemplative and Collaborative Reading

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Abstract

This paper explores the tensions between individual and collaborative aspects of reading in the context of MyDante, a digital environment for the study of Dante’s Divine Comedy. We provide a view into the long-standing pedagogical experiment we have undertaken to integrate the MyDante site into an undergraduate philosophy course. The site and its usage in the course have gone through several iterations, raising many questions along the way about how the site can best improve the students’ learning experience. In this paper, we highlight some of these questions, present findings from focus groups with students who have used the site, and explore how awareness of these issues can itself enhance the effectiveness of the site for teaching and learning. We consider the implications of these findings for the development of two new projects: first, a public version of the MyDante site, and secondly, a new tool called Ellipsis, which is a customizable version of the software underlying MyDante. We find some resonances with larger questions about digital reading environments and the act of reading.

“It’s probably natural, here in the 21st century, to fret over the future of literature – to worry that, in an era in which everyone wants everything to be social and interactive, serious reading will be impossible. Yet books are curious objects: their strength is to be both intensely private and intensely social – and marginalia is a natural bridge between these two states. It might end up serving equally well as a bridge between online and literary culture, between focus and distraction: a point of contact that could improve both without hurting either. Digital technology, rather than destroying the tradition of marginalia, could actually help us return it to its gloriously social 18th-century roots.”

–Sam Anderson, New York Times Magazine

Introduction

Today, in what can be seen as a transitional time and space for reading practices, readers are defining new ways of interacting with texts using new media, from collaborative online bookmarking sites to digital annotation tools for e-readers and more. In a recent New York Times Magazine piece, critic Sam Anderson discusses the seeming contradictions between the personal and social natures of the act of reading, and explores the ways that digital technology can mediate between these two different ways of interacting with texts. Anderson’s ideas resonate deeply with our MyDante project, which is a digital environment developed at Georgetown University for the study of Dante’s Divine Comedy. In many respects, MyDante was designed with the goal of creating a space for the mediation of personal and social reading practices, an interaction that is part of what we will define as contemplative reading—a method of reading, inspired by the metaphor of the medieval illuminated manuscript, that is both personal and socially collaborative. We propose that exploring the capacity of online reading environments to encourage contemplative reading represents an important approach to understanding how new media can redefine the way we interact with texts. Like Anderson, we do not consider social reading and personal reflection on a text to be mutually exclusive; rather, we propose that, in the appropriate context, these can and should be complementary facets of the reading process. A reading environment can foster individual immersion, developing the reader’s connection to the text; by connecting that reader to a reality that is shared by other readers, it can also strengthen his or her sense of a communal worldview of human culture. We believe that MyDante
What follows is a view into the longstanding pedagogical experiment we have undertaken to integrate the MyDante site into an undergraduate philosophy course. The site and its usage in the course have gone through several iterations, raising many questions along the way about how the site can best improve the students’ learning experience and encourage contemplative reading strategies and practices. In this paper, we highlight some of these questions and explore how awareness of these issues can itself enhance the effectiveness of the site for teaching and learning. After an overview of the project background and context, we describe the findings from focus groups and surveys about how students used the MyDante site. We then present some lessons learned from this process and possible implications for future development.

Figure 1. The MyDante homepage (dante.georgetown.edu)

Project Background and Goals

The MyDante project began in 2000 with the primary aim of providing students with a contemplative space in which to engage with Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy*, specifically within the context of the undergraduate philosophy class Dante and the Christian Imagination at Georgetown University. Rather than prioritizing reading and research, as many of the existing online versions of the *Comedy* did, the MyDante project was designed from the beginning to enable students to understand the text through their interaction with it, their reflection on it, and their engagement with their peers around it. Inspired by the model of the medieval illuminated manuscript, we wanted students to see the text of Dante’s poem as a palimpsest, as a place where their ideas and their writing could share the same space as the poem—where they could engage with and rethink the poem by connecting annotations, images, and sounds to the text, just as medieval monks might have done through marginalia and illuminations. As a technology of contemplation, the medieval manuscript was embedded in the communal structures of monastic living, so that a monk would share the fruits of his individual study of a text with other members of the community. Similarly, we hoped that MyDante could help students to benefit from one another’s reflections on the text.

As Anderson describes, marginalia in a context such as that of MyDante can facilitate both the personal, reflective aspect of reading and its collaborative, social nature. We created and continue to develop a variety of tools, such as an annotation tool, a journaling tool, and a multimedia editor, to encourage students to interact with the poem and to share their ideas with others. MyDante was designed to encourage deeply personal reflection while at the same time fostering scholarly collaboration focused on the text.

The contemplative reading method

While Anderson refers generally to “serious reading,” what we wanted to encourage in particular was an approach that we call
"contemplative reading." In the context of Dante’s Comedy, practicing contemplative reading requires the reader to accept Dante’s invitation to join a shared journey. To read the poem contemplatively, the reader must recognize three levels of meaning simultaneously at work in Dante’s text: the literal level of comprehension of the narrative, the metaphorical level of allegorical meaning, and the reflective level of dialogue between the poet and reader.

As explained in the MyDante site’s guide to contemplative reading practice:

In order to understand Dante’s poetic metaphors, each reader must participate in them personally and in a way which is genuinely contemplative. This contemplative reading goes beyond the literal meaning, and even beyond the traditional allegorical or interpreted meaning, to apply every possibility of meaning contained in the text to the reader’s own life and identity.

In further detail, this method of reading asks students to reflect on the following questions at each level of interpretation. (These questions are presented in the site materials and are also discussed in class.)

- At the first level—the literal level—these questions cover basic information about the poem’s characters and events, and can be summarized by the question “Who is Dante the Pilgrim?”
- At the second level—the metaphorical level—the questions refer to choices made by Dante the Poet, and how Dante the Poet is both the same as and different from Dante the Pilgrim. For example, in Inferno XXVI, we ask: “Why does the poet choose to have the pilgrim meet Ulysses? Why here? Why are we given this story of the end of Ulysses’ life, when the story of the Trojan horse is much more famous? In other words, how does the poet consciously construct Ulysses as metaphor?” These questions can be generally represented by the question “Who is Dante the poet? What is he trying so hard to tell me?”
- At the third level—the reflective level—there is a kind of dialogue between poet and reader. In the context of this dialogue, the reader must ask “Who am I?” Ultimately, the reader recognizes him- or herself in Dante’s journey, making this truly the “journey of our life,” as Dante writes in the first line of his poem (nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita).

The MyDante site was designed to encourage contemplative reading in a number of ways. Students can annotate the text of the poem, which helps them to work through the first two levels of interpretation, both individually and collaboratively. Personal journals, where students practice moving among the three interpretive levels, are integrated directly into the site. The site includes a diverse collection of images, including not only illustrations of Dante’s poem but also other works of art that resonate thematically with the poem. These images can help spark students’ reflections. Students can place images from the site’s image gallery within the text, as well as finding or creating additional images and placing them in the text. Commentary by the professor helps to guide students in interpretation at the three different levels. In the fall of 2009, we introduced multimedia projects, asking students to assemble images, video, and music into reflective journal entries. In the fall of 2011, we added a series of scaffolded multimedia assignments that ask students to work more gradually with individual multimedia elements before taking on the larger-scale multimedia project.

Contemplative reading and multimedia technology

The marriage of multimedia technology and the practice of contemplative reading led to the following specific goals for MyDante. We have already described the first two:
To encourage imaginative connective thinking by presenting multimedia elements such as images, videos, and music in juxtaposition with Dante’s text, and to inspire students to add their own multimedia materials to the text.

Through the contemplative reading method presented on the site, to foster a sense of personal responsibility for each student with respect to his or her relationship to Dante’s text.

The final two goals involve enhancing the collaborative aspects of MyDante and expanding the reach of the project to include public use on a separate version of the site.

- Through the collaborative nature of the site, to develop a communal dialogue among reflective readers outside of the classroom. This community could extend to anyone interested in reading Dante’s work as part of a larger social group.
- Finally, a longer-term goal emerged: to develop a flexible version of the software underlying MyDante that could be customized for any text. This tool, currently in development, is called Ellipsis; to learn more about Ellipsis, see the box below.

### Ellipsis

Throughout its history, the MyDante project has had a number of technical incarnations. In its development, we have always strived to create a site that offers the greatest possible flexibility in how its various functions can be used for instruction. As much as possible, we wanted the site to become a place where an instructor could create compelling interactions with the poem and with readers.

The current MyDante website is implemented in a web application framework called Ruby on Rails. The Ruby programming language is particularly well suited to a programming strategy called “Domain Specific Languages.” In this strategy, a layer of code is written to translate simple, declarative statements into the actual application code. This custom “language,” which may be applicable only to the current problem domain, collapses the conceptual distance between the description of a problem and its execution. We feel that this approach is particularly powerful for the design of educational interfaces. It offers the potential to allow non-programmers to shape users’ interactions for certain purposes—for example, to create interactions that facilitate deeper reading and analysis of texts. While there are a great many “plug-and-play” tools available to instructors via the web, most share the limitation that they were designed for only a handful of uses and cannot be easily customized to other purposes. While code “mashups,” combining functions and content from different web sources, are becoming more ubiquitous and easier to implement, they often become just one more discrete piece of functionality in an instructor’s toolkit, rather than allowing an instructor to build an immersive environment entirely customized for the idiosyncratic needs of a particular text and/or a particular pedagogy applied to that text.

We are currently building this more flexible type of web application to design environments for teaching and learning. We call it “Ellipsis.” Its purpose is to make texts in various media into centers of scholarly activity on the web. Ellipsis could be used in a wide variety of pedagogical contexts; possible uses could include peer review of student writing, annotation of film clips, and collaboration among students at different institutions. By giving instructors and instructional technologists a tool for easily crafting interactions, we hope to create an instructional culture where the design of interactivity is another tool for expressing both the instructor’s intent and the students’ evolving understanding of a work. To learn more about Ellipsis, watch this video.

### Creating a reflective community outside the classroom

Our goal of developing a community of readers stemmed from several factors: first, the logistical reason that face-to-face class meetings do not allow for sufficient discussion and representation of all students’ voices. Second, we hoped that collaborative features developed for use in the Georgetown course would help us create a public community of readers outside of the course context, whose members would not meet face-to-face. Third, as discussed above, we wanted to explore the possibilities of using online environments to guide a reading process that could be at once communal and reflective.

Each year, the MyDante site has continued to play an integral part in the undergraduate philosophy course at Georgetown, and we are exploring partnerships with other institutions. In early 2011, we piloted a collaborative project with Regis High School in New York, where a small group of students used the site in an advanced English class. We hope to establish similar partnerships with other institutions in the future.

We are developing a public version of the site that is open to anyone. Readers will not only be able to use the site for individual study, but will also be able to interact with other readers of Dante through the site. We aim to support a virtual community of Dante readers by bringing together scholars, students, teachers, and independent readers from across the world. As part of the process of developing a diverse virtual community, we decided to examine the nature of the interaction among the students who use the site at Georgetown, in order to inform our design of structures that will encourage interaction among the members of the public site.
Furthermore, we believe that the conceptual foundation of MyDante holds great potential for the study of a wide range of texts. For example, a project is currently in development using Ellipsis to design an environment for the scholarly study of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, a text that differs significantly from the *Divine Comedy* in form. Although based on the framework of MyDante, the Proust Project environment is very different in appearance and structure – for example, interpretive multimedia animations will be a significant element of the Proust environment. With both projects, we hope to show that the technologies and reading practices we have developed and modeled over the years are transferable to a wide range of texts and learning experiences.

### Analysis: Student Learning With MyDante

#### Course context

MyDante is primarily used in Philosophy 276: Dante and the Christian Imagination, an undergraduate course taught at Georgetown University. The course, which enrolls about twenty-five students each fall, focuses on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Students may read the text of the poem either in hard copy or electronically on the site. Students are required to keep online journals that include “required” entries responding to specific prompts as well as “free” entries on topics of their choosing. Beginning in the fall of 2011, students were required to incorporate images and music into some of their journal entries. Other contributions on the site, such as annotations, discussion board posts, and the placement of images and music within the text, count toward students’ class participation grades. Journal entries can either be designated as “private” (visible only to the author, instructor, and teaching assistant) or published so that all members of the class workspace can view them.

The site includes videos that introduce conceptual material, such as [this video](#) that orients the viewer to Dante’s worldview. In recent years, we have recorded lectures delivered during class sessions using the lecture capture software Camtasia Relay. In addition to making these recordings available to students to review or catch up on missed classes, we have created independent modules both by excerpting audio clips from the recordings and by combining audio clips with related images. (For example, we developed a [video and resource page](#) that highlights a painting by Masaccio.) Some of these modules specifically address the concept of contemplative reading or model the use of that approach. Students are assigned to view these modules before class meetings. Thus, discussions can begin at a higher level because students have already covered the introductory material on their own, and more class time can be devoted to interactive discussion than to lecture.

#### How students use the site

We regularly gather information through mid-semester and end-of-semester surveys about how students use the site. After the fall of 2010, we decided to explore students’ experiences with the site in more detail by conducting focus groups. In addition to asking for their opinions about various features of the site in order to improve technical support resources, we wanted to gauge students’ overall conceptions of the site. The findings from these surveys and focus groups will not only help us to refine certain technical and design aspects of the current MyDante site, but will also inform the way the site is integrated into the course structure. Furthermore, as we continue to work on the public MyDante site and Ellipsis, our understanding of how students use the current MyDante site will play a key role in our development and design process.

The interpretation of data from the surveys and focus groups requires caution. With an enrollment of fewer than thirty students each semester, the class does not allow for a large sample size, and the participation rate in both the surveys and the focus groups (which were open to the entire class, but optional) is always less than 100%. Of the 27 students enrolled in the course in the fall of 2010, 23 students completed the mid-semester survey, and 12 completed the end-of-semester survey; 7 students participated in focus groups. Furthermore, it is difficult to draw conclusions about certain website features or assignments by looking across class years because of the number of additional variables – changing assignments, varying class dynamics, differing backgrounds of students, etc.

We have nonetheless found these results to be useful in a number of ways. For example, hearing directly from students about how they use the site has been informative. End-of-semester evaluations and focus groups can surface questions or problems that students may be reluctant to voice during the semester. We also find that students often offer interesting suggestions for future site developments.

Our findings from the surveys and the focus groups included the following:

- **Students developed a variety of methods for using the site to interact with the poem, demonstrating idiosyncratic reading preferences and habits.**
  
  For example, one student reported that she would first read a section of the poem in the hard copy text, then read the alternate translation online, finding this “double reading” process a useful way to compare translations. Another student would read the text on the MyDante site while listening to the Italian recording available on the site. Other students preferred to read the hard copy of the text exclusively, later transferring selected handwritten notes to the site as digital annotations. One student voiced a strong preference for “old-fashioned book reading for true engagement with a text,” rather than reading on the website.

- **Students valued the way the site encouraged individual reflection.**

  As one student put it: “I actually liked the site because it was so personal.” When asked in the end-of-semester survey whether they would continue to use the site after the class ended, 50% of respondents said that they planned to continue to return to the site for personal reasons. In the focus groups, one student elaborated: “I may choose to access the website as a means of personal reflection.”
• **Journaling helped students engage with the poem.**
  When asked which components of the class were most helpful in understanding and practicing contemplative reading, one student wrote: “Journals were the most helpful as they provided a space in which to clarify our understanding of the material.” In response to the statement “Doing the journal entries helped me to refine and develop my own understanding of the poem” on the mid-semester survey, 61% of respondents selected “strongly agree” and 35% selected “somewhat agree;” in response to the same statement on the end-of-semester survey, 75% of respondents selected “strongly agree,” with another 25% selecting “somewhat agree.”

• **Some students expressed the desire for more interaction with peers on the site.**
  One student said, “I like the idea of a more collaborative space. [I would say the site is] primarily being used as an individual space, but it could have been used as a more collaborative space.” Another student voiced a similar opinion: “Upon reflection I think that it does a good job for me as an individual using it, with making journal entries and annotations, but as a collaborative effort it could be made better.” Another student wrote: “I would like to see students encouraged more to use the discussion board feature. It often felt to me as though discussions were being alluded to in the annotations, but students very rarely took advantage of the discussion board to actually delve into their questions.” In the end-of-semester survey, only one respondent found the discussion board to be “very useful,” and no students reported finding it “extremely useful.” The respondents were uneven in their ratings of how useful they found “reading annotations by other students” (On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 corresponding to “not useful at all” and 5 corresponding to “extremely useful,” the responses were as follows: 1: 25%, 2: 8%, 3: 33%, 4: 33%, and 5: 0%).

• **Some students felt uncomfortable initiating interactions or seemed unsure how to do so.**
  A number of students echoed this sentiment. For example: “Some way to encourage discussion over annotation would be neat. I did find it intellectually stimulating to see the differences in thought.” According to another student: “If there were more people commenting on the discussion board, I think I would have been more inclined. I don’t like being the first to post.”

• **The site provided a useful way to migrate certain activities online, freeing up class time for discussions or more advanced treatment of the material.**
  Students wanted more of this—moving some discussions from class time into the discussion board space and building on online discussions during class time. According to one student: “Sometimes in class the discussion would’ve been better had it been on the site.” Another student wrote: “I’d be interested, especially if there are spots generating a lot of interest, to hear the professor comment on those discussions, either in class or online.” Although anecdotal, these findings represent in many ways the tension inherent to an environment such as MyDante. How can the site meet the needs of individualized, personal reflection while simultaneously encouraging productive collaboration and interaction? While there is no easy or definitive answer to this question, the student responses helped to raise our awareness of a number of the factors that play into this balance between the individual and collaborative aspects of the site.

**Lessons learned**

• **Groups of students differ; online interaction cannot be taken for granted.**
  In the fall of 2009, the students in the MyDante course eagerly took to the site’s online discussion board. For example, after only four class sessions, a student’s 1,250-word post entitled “Why the Catholic Cosmos?” had elicited more than 1,700 words of comments by five classmates. Posting to the discussion board was voluntary, although all work on the site contributed in a general way to students’ participation grades. The discussion board was introduced in a similar way to the students in the fall of 2010; however, it was almost never used, despite several reminders from the professor and teaching assistant. It is impossible to identify the exact reasons for this difference, and the possible factors are many – for example, the fall 2009 students might have been more accustomed to using discussion boards in other classes, or they might have known each other better and thus felt more comfortable interacting online – but the important lesson for us was that this type of interaction cannot be taken for granted.

• **Demonstrating features in class and providing support materials online is not sufficient to inspire students to use these features.**
  Even though students were passively familiar with certain features of the site and recognized their potential usefulness or found them interesting in the abstract, they did not always take the initiative to try these features or to incorporate these aspects of the site into their reading. For example, many students noted in the surveys or focus groups that the discussion board had not been used much and wished that it had been more active. These comments prove that students were aware of the discussion board and saw value in its potential as an interactive space. However, individually they failed to initiate (or even respond to) posts – what one student termed “a collective action problem.” Similarly, a feature that allows students to add their own images was little utilized until a series of participation grades. The discussion board was introduced in a similar way to the students in the fall of 2010; however, it was almost never used, despite several reminders from the professor and teaching assistant. It is impossible to identify the exact reasons for this difference, and the possible factors are many – for example, the fall 2009 students might have been more accustomed to using discussion boards in other classes, or they might have known each other better and thus felt more comfortable interacting online – but the important lesson for us was that this type of interaction cannot be taken for granted.

• **Incentives for online participation should be presented; otherwise, students may fall into traditional individual reading habits.**
  Several students noted that they didn’t see the point of making digital annotations rather than, or in addition to, making pen-and-paper notes in their hard copies of the text. Making these annotations easier to search and sort would have made this process more appealing and feel less like “busywork,” as one student in a focus group described his or her perception of annotations. Additionally, while it was possible for students to respond to one another’s annotations on the discussion board, in practice this feature was not used frequently. A more robust notification system would have made this option more prominent on the site and helped to integrate it into students’ reading practices, even when they were progressing through the text at varying paces.

• **Students want structured guidelines for site participation.**
  As one student pointed out in the end-of-course survey, “the mandatory nature of the [journal entries] versus the other optional tools made [them] more useful.” In the focus group, one student commented: “I’ve had to do structured class discussions for other classes, and think it could have more prominent place on MyDante site. I think it’s hard for students to opt in to a discussion, and I like the
freedom, but when given the choice, students are going to do other [work]. Maybe prompted discussions on [the] website would be good.”

We hypothesize that requiring a certain number of posts, and scaffolding these posts with specific prompts early in the semester, will help students develop the habit of posting, which will likely result in participation on the site becoming more integrated with their reading process.

- Although the site was useful in shifting certain activities outside of class time, this could have been done even more.
  Students liked the fact that some material was available to preview (or review) outside of class time, elevating the level of class discussions. They suggested that some tangential class discussions could be moved to the discussion board so as to make better use of class time. More explicit connections between class discussions and work done by the students on the site would have further encouraged contributions, and therefore interaction, on the site.

Current and future development

In the fall of 2011, we implemented several changes to the structure of the course assignments. Early in the semester, each student was required to post an image and to write a short journal entry about the image’s resonance with the poem (the image could not be a literal depiction of the Commedia). Students were required to post on the discussion board before and after viewing assigned films outside of class. Each student was assigned one or two cantos to annotate and illuminate, by adding images or music. Finally, students were required to include images and/or music in a journal entry preceding the multimedia journal assignment, as a way to scaffold the larger-scale multimedia assignment.

Preliminary feedback from students on these new assignments, via in-class remarks and in a brief mid-semester survey, seems positive. In many cases, the student work so far seems to demonstrate a high degree of engagement with the text and with the process of contemplative reading. Images and annotations posted by students on the site have enhanced some of the class discussions. Scaffolding the multimedia assignments seems to have helped the students to become more comfortable in practicing contemplative reading through reflection with multimedia elements. Further evaluation of the new assignment structure will take place following the completion of the semester.
Our analysis of the focus groups and survey data will continue to inform our integration of the MyDante site into future iterations of Philosophy 276. We will also need to consider carefully the implications of these findings for the public version of MyDante and for the Proust Project, as well as for future applications of the MyDante methodology, as these contexts present further challenges for fostering and sustaining collaborative reading communities.

We plan to develop a notification system to alert students (via email and/or dashboard announcements within the site) when someone has commented on their posts or when someone has commented on the same passage of text. Even within the framework of the course, where students were following the same reading syllabus, students often missed one another’s posts because they were reading at different paces. We hope that making students aware of responses to their posts will encourage additional dialogue and collaboration.

**Public site and Ellipsis**

Users of the public MyDante site, who will represent a wide range of goals and backgrounds, will be separated both by time and distance without face-to-face contact (in most cases). Users of the site may be independent scholars and researchers who are unaffiliated with any formal program of study. We must consider what kinds of structures might encourage their sustained participation on the site, though we want to avoid imposing too many constraints.

Ellipsis offers incredible flexibility for the customization of workspaces; however, this means that careful consideration must be given to the consistency of structures designed to encourage collaboration. The hallmark of Ellipsis is the relative ease with which faculty members can customize environments for teaching and learning. However, rather than presenting an array of choices that could be overwhelming, we want to guide faculty toward structures that will help them achieve particular teaching goals. Awareness of some of the questions raised by MyDante will help inform this design process.

While some of the lessons we learned pertain directly to the classroom context, such as students’ desire for more structured requirements...
for posting, these lessons may still be relevant for the public site. For example, while we would hardly be able to require independent users of the public site to post a certain number of times, we might find a way to offer intermittent reminders about posting. Or we might explore whether a site moderator should comment on users’ posts, and assess whether receiving such feedback would inspire users to post more frequently.

Some version of the notification system we are developing for the class site will prove even more crucial for the public site as readers will certainly be progressing through a text at widely varying rates. Similarly, students may use Ellipsis to share comments on different texts or to collaborate across courses or institutions, and would no doubt benefit from a notification system as well.

Conclusion

MyDante strikes a delicate balance between individual and collaborative reading experiences. This tension is not unique to this project, however; nor is it as recent as the advent of digital technology. As critic Sam Anderson points out in his New York Times piece, books themselves are “both intensely private and intensely social.” He describes the pleasure of sharing marginalia with other readers through physical copies of books, and then explores the possibility of a digital tool that would allow readers to share marginalia, with its “social thrill of shared immersion,” in what he calls “an endless virtual book club” that would include not only friends and classmates but also historical authors and other notable figures. He writes: “This, it seems to me, would be something like a readerly utopia. It could even (if we want to get all grand and optimistic) turn out to be a Gutenberg-style revolution – not for writing, this time, but for reading.”

MyDante encourages readers to practice what we have called contemplative reading by engaging in a personal dialogue with Dante. Our hope is that by doing so within the context of a virtual community, readers will be able to experience what Anderson calls the “social thrill of shared immersion.” As our longstanding experiment with MyDante has progressed, our methods of integrating pedagogy and technology have continued to evolve.

We see this project as having great value beyond Dante and Proust. The technology’s extensibility and transferability are two of its greatest assets. More importantly, however, we hope that this project and future iterations will show not only what is possible with the technology and framework we have created but also the value of developing a deliberate, contemplative reading practice in relation to digital texts. We believe that these methods can be applied to a wide range of reading contexts, bringing us all closer, if not to “readerly utopia,” then at least to an experience of a dialogical community of reflection on the shared experience of human living. This is, we hope, the message and the value of the project to the Digital Humanities.

Bibliography


Notes

2. The authors would like to thank the students who graciously shared their work and opinions. The authors also gratefully acknowledge the valuable contributions of Leanne McWatters, Susannah Nadler, Yong Lee, and John Ladd.
4. Many students responded quite creatively to this assignment. For example, one student used his digital story project to reflect on the influence of contemporary society and how his teachings relate today through music, art, and other images. Another student composed an original piece of music to depict the first canto of the poem: https://commons.georgetown.edu/blogs
The Proust Project represents a collaboration with Andrew Sobanet and Susanna Lee of the Department of French at Georgetown University.


Ibid.

Ibid.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

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