# Going Beyond Etexts

Description

Etexts are the new frontier. Or at least they were. Educators, and everyone else for that matter, have started to notice that electronic textbooks, or etexts, do everything paper ones do. How innovative.

What can a student do with an etext that they can't with a physical copy? The highlighting tool in an electronic textbook is almost exactly like highlighting a physical copy. Making notes, which are then tagged as little pinpoints you have to click on to read, isn't much different than taking notes in a notebook, which a lot of students do with etexts anyway. So, where's the progressive leap? While electronic textbooks reduce costs and paper use, which is fantastic for students (when they're allowed by the professor) and the environment, they don't really seem to be making the strides that people said they would.
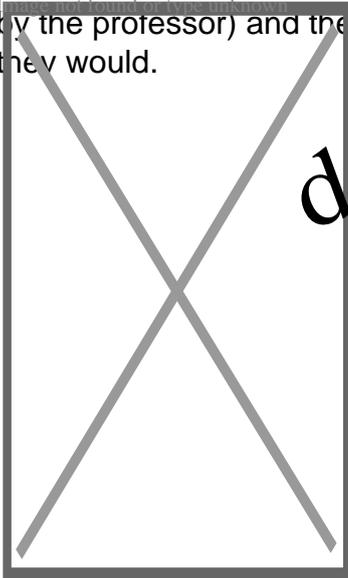
Professor MacInnes, an English professor at Albion College, saw that

these etexts weren't very different from paper ones. He figured that if we were going to move away from paper, why not do more? That's why he came up with his app for analyzing Shakespearean sonnets (http://www.touch-text.com/SonnetApp). The intention was to do everything you can do with a paper copy, and then a plethora of things that you can't.

Once you log into the app using your name and the course you're enrolled in, you're shown the poem, perfectly sized to fit a smartphone screen. You can also access the app from other devices, such as a laptop or tablet because of the script used. The app is Web based, available to both Apple and Android users. You can then annotate the poem, your notes showing up beneath the text, similar to annotating and writing notes on a print out of a sonnet. But you can also look at notes made by other students in the class, which adds a level of collaboration while you're reading and puzzling out the poem. This goes beyond classroom discussion that typically happens after everyone has read the poem individually, hopefully having figured it out on their own. Looking at the thoughts of others can

help you figure some things out on your own and notice details you might not have before.

    More collaboration from peers. That's pretty cool, but couldn't students meet in study groups to do that? Besides the unlikelihood of students being able to organize a study group that works with everyone's schedule, putting a bunch of people who don't know what they're doing doesn't magically yield understanding of Shakespeare. Order doesn't just spring from chaos unaided. Some additional structure and prompting, like that provided by an instructor in a classroom setting, is needed.

    Did someone ask for structure? To provide this, the app also prompts the reader to look at certain words or phrases, providing a definition from the Oxford English Dictionary. The definitions provided through the Oxford English Dictionary are more applicable to the possible interpretations of the selection, because of their context, than just any dictionary would be, making comprehension a little easier. The app then asks the user questions regarding the interpretation of the selection, the reader is prompted to see which way the word is being best used and how they think that affects the reading of the poem. Interactive! Paper can't do that. A professor can use prompts and questions in class to help students read the poems but the interactivity of the app can help the student do it on their own time
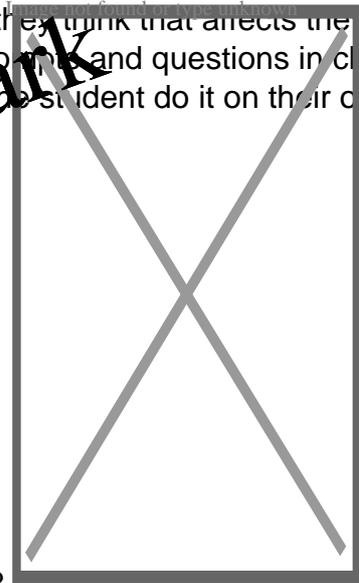
outside of class reading. Starting to see why the app beats paper?

    The app is also designed so that it acts as one cohesive HTML file, so the user doesn't have to wait for the app and its features to load. Some of these features include audio of the poem being read aloud, so that the user can hear the meter and nuances of the sonnet that may be lost if it's simply read instead of spoken. There are also embedded videos, hardwired into the app, of the sonnet being performed, again so that the reader can hear the poem and perhaps glean new aspects and intentions of the sonnet that can be heard when it is performed properly.

The whole goal of the app is to ask questions that the instructor, MacInnes in this case, wants to ask and have the students answer and respond in a collaborative way. It's a way to show how innovative learning technologies can be, beyond an over glorified etext which isn't much more than a simple PDF with a highlighting tool. If paper copies are going to be left behind, their successors should do more.

Screenshot sonnet performance

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- English

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