

Using Web Materials to Supplement Tutorials on Critical Theory

In 1998 Joe Boulter of Somerville College, Oxford set up a website to provide supplementary materials for Critical Theory tutorials. This article describes his reasons for setting up the site, the limitations on his work, the materials he provided, and the advantages of, and problems with, using Web material for teaching and learning which he has identified.

Between 1996 and 1998, while studying for a D.Phil. in English Literature at the University of Oxford, I worked as an external tutor for several Oxford colleges, teaching Twentieth-Century English Literature, and Critical Theory. While teaching Theory to first year undergraduates, I found that none was reaching a satisfactory level of understanding.

Following discussion with the students, I identified three basic obstacles to their understanding:

- *Lack of guidance.* Oxford English undergraduates learn through a combination of tutorials, teaching, and their own reading. Tutorials are a forum for discussing what they have already learnt, and lectures are neither compulsory nor specifically targeted at course requirements. As a result, students often receive no initial guidance on which books to read and which issues to address when working on a particular subject.
- *Difficulty in locating and accessing useful materials.* Materials for Theory in Oxford are split between college libraries, departmental libraries, and the Bodleian, and within these libraries they are split again under headings such as literature, philosophy, linguistics and sociology. The computer catalogue for library holdings in Oxford is inefficient and incomplete. As a result, students often find it difficult to make use of materials which their tutors have recommended.
- *The intimidating nature of the subject.* Most Theory is very complicated, highly-specialised, and cross-disciplinary. Undergraduates studying Theory often become caught in a loop in which their lack of understanding and lack of confidence reinforce each other. Two representative comments I received were 'it's a total mystery to me', and (a student from the US), 'it is kicking my ass'.

I decided that I needed to find some way of giving the students more initial guidance in studying Theory, and more confidence in thinking critically about it.

Before opting for the Web, I considered other means of providing guidance through supplementary materials. Firstly, I considered holding an extra weekly seminar, at which I could introduce topics before students prepared them for tutorials. There were three problems with this: I could not guarantee that students would attend. Second,

I would not get paid for the extra teaching. Third, a seminar would not provide the students with reliable materials which they could access repeatedly, whenever they needed them.

I also considered extending my paper reading lists to include annotations, suggested lines of enquiry, and past exam questions. I also decided against this. First, because these inclusions would have made my already intimidatingly long reading lists ('oh', and 'scary', were typical comments), longer and more intimidating. Secondly, because my own knowledge of Theory was still developing, and I wanted my guidance to change with my learning. Thirdly, because I wanted to provide the students with something which felt new, and to present the materials in a way which would encourage them, rather than put them off. A longer paper reading list would have seemed boring and prescriptive, whereas I hoped that the website would seem like an interesting optional extra.

I believed that the Web would give me greater control over my supplementary materials, and would enable me to present the materials in a fresh way which would encourage students to engage with the subject. There were a number of other reasons for choosing the Web:

- By using hyperlinks between pages on individual topics, I could integrate the materials, in order to make them more user-friendly and make the subject seem more coherent as a whole.
- Materials on the Web could be accessed worldwide by anyone who found them useful.
- As well as allowing external students to use my materials, the Web would give my own students access to external materials. This would allow them to explore Theory on their own, and encourage them to see it as a living, changing discipline.
- I wanted to find out whether or not using the Web to supplement tutorials would be effective.

Limitations on the development of the site

My development of the Critical Theory website was subject to several limitations:

- The materials had to be supplementary, not essential, and optional, not compulsory: if I restricted any of the essential teaching materials to the Web, I would not be doing the teaching the colleges expected of me.
- The limits of my own knowledge of Theory.
- The limits of my own IT knowledge: I had taught myself HTML, and how to telnet to my university Unix server account and create HTML files on it which could be accessed via the Web.
- Resource limitations: I created the website in my spare time, on a 486 in a college computer room, and provided it from my personal university server account, which has a quota of 10 MB for Web files.

My experience with the Critical Theory website is interesting partly because of these limitations on its development, since it shows the extent to which the individual teacher can use the Web for teaching without any special expertise or resources.

The materials which I provided

The major part of the materials I provided consisted of a series of pages on the following topics in Theory: Deconstruction, Feminism, Formalism, Marxism, New Historicism, Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, Saussure, and Structuralism. All the pages had identical layouts. Each page included

- A list of recommended reading, divided into 'Introductions', 'Primary texts', and 'Other possibilities'. The list included a suggested order in which to read the materials, comments on their usefulness, and, for each item, a link to its entry on my 'Bibliography' page giving its publication details and Oxford library cataloguing information.
- A list of issues which are often discussed in relation to the particular topic
- A list of questions from past Oxford exam papers.

With these pages, I aimed to provide a single stop at which a student studying a particular topic in Theory could choose which books to read, locate those books, get a feel for the ideas he or she should be thinking about when reading and planning an essay, and finally see what kind of questions he or she was likely to be asked about the topic in their exams.

I also provided an introduction to the pages, suggesting how students should use them, an account of the problems students face when studying Theory, a page capturing the principles of postmodernism in 'Nice Quotes' from famous theorists, an extensive bibliography, a link to the 'Voice of the Shuttle' Theory page (for students who wanted to find more Theory on the Web) and a link allowing students to email me.

Prose style

I felt that part of the problem with the teaching of Theory is that those who write on it, even those who write introductions to it, are writing not just for students but for colleagues, and that their consequent attempts to be authoritative make their style intimidating and alienating for students. I also felt that a disadvantage of teaching via the Web is that any materials provided via the Web are regarded as 'published', and thus liable to be purged by their writers of the very qualities of informality which encourage learner confidence and stimulate debate.

Here some of my limitations turned into advantages. The fact that I had no particular research interest in Theory and was willing to admit to a very limited knowledge of the subject freed me from the need to impress colleagues. The fact that I was providing the pages from my personal server account rather than as the representative of a university department allowed me to express personal opinions freely. As a result, I was able to write in an informal way. Using the Web helped add to the informality of the presentation, since

information provided the Web is currently seen as less authoritative than information published in other ways.

Advantages of using Web materials for teaching and learning

The work of those students who said they had consulted the website (compared with that of students I had taught in previous terms and previous years, and with that of students I taught at the same time who did not say they had consulted the website) improved in ways which suggested that the Web materials were responsible for the improvement. The students made more use of primary texts, showed more awareness of the important issues for each topic and thought more critically about each topic.

Some of my students browsed the web for Theory-related topics. Many of the materials they found were 'informal': one student e-mailed me a copy of a humorous essay on 'How to Speak and Write Postmodern', another discovered a Deleuze and Guattari newsgroup. These more personal acquaintances with Theory resulted in students becoming more confident in expressing their own ideas in essays and discussions.

Students' increased confidence with Theory was also shown in their willingness to email me between tutorials to ask about things they had found on the Web, either on my site or on other Theory sites. On my site, I recommended Nelson Goodman and Steven Pinker as optional extra reading. As a result, one student emailed me to say that he was 'currently considering Goodman's claim that knowledge is both comprehension and creation and applying it to postmodernism to show that postmodernism has created the simulacra that it talks about', another was 'slightly worried about the likely reaction of an examiner to an answer which launches the twin missiles of Tallis and Pinker at Saussure and by implication a considerable part of theory.'

As well as improving the quality of students' tutorial work, use of the Web materials appears to have improved their exam performance.



Fig. 1. Showing the menu for the Critical Theory website, and the top section of the 'Saussure' page.

The student who seemed to have made the most use of the website averaged B+ in his First Year exams, yet scored A- for his Critical Theory paper (this represents the difference between a 2.1 and a high 1st).

One of the unexpected results of putting the materials on the Web was that they were actually used worldwide, and I received email feedback from students of several other universities who said they had found the website useful. Most of the students focused on the fact that the materials had helped point them to the books they needed to read, and had helped focus their thinking. I even heard from a US 'high schooler' who said that the site gave her 'a place to think over these topics more clearly'.

I also received a few emails from teachers at Oxford and elsewhere, responding positively to the web pages. The most effective means of gauging how other teachers felt about the site was to prevent access to it, which I did accidentally for a couple of weeks earlier that year. Two teachers responded by emailing me to ask where the site was, and if I could restore it. Alan Liu also added the site to his *Voice of the Shuttle Theory* links.

Problems with using Web materials for teaching and learning

The response to the pages from those students and teachers who used them was entirely positive, with the exception of one email from an external user who informed me without any sense of irony that I had misunderstood Derrida.

The main problem with providing supplementary materials on the Web was that not all my students made use of them. In fact, less than half the students I taught in 1998 actually reported using the Critical Theory website. The primary consideration for any future development of the site would therefore not be how to improve the site, but how to encourage more students to use it.

Possible reasons why students did not use Web materials

There are three possible reasons why some of my students did not use the Critical Theory website. First, they may simply not have been interested in the subject. Second, their access to IT may have been so limited as to discourage them from using the Web. Third, their skills in using and/or familiarity with IT may have been so low as to prevent them using the Web.

Though the website was an optional part of my course, so it is reasonable to assume that it is the first set of materials a poorly motivated student would decide not to use, it is unlikely that non-use was the result of a lack of interest. Several students who did not use the website demonstrated a great deal of interest in the subject in other ways, such as the extent of their reading and the volume of their written work. Also, all the colleges for which I was teaching Critical Theory had computer rooms with access to the Web. Non-use was not, then, a question of lack of access.

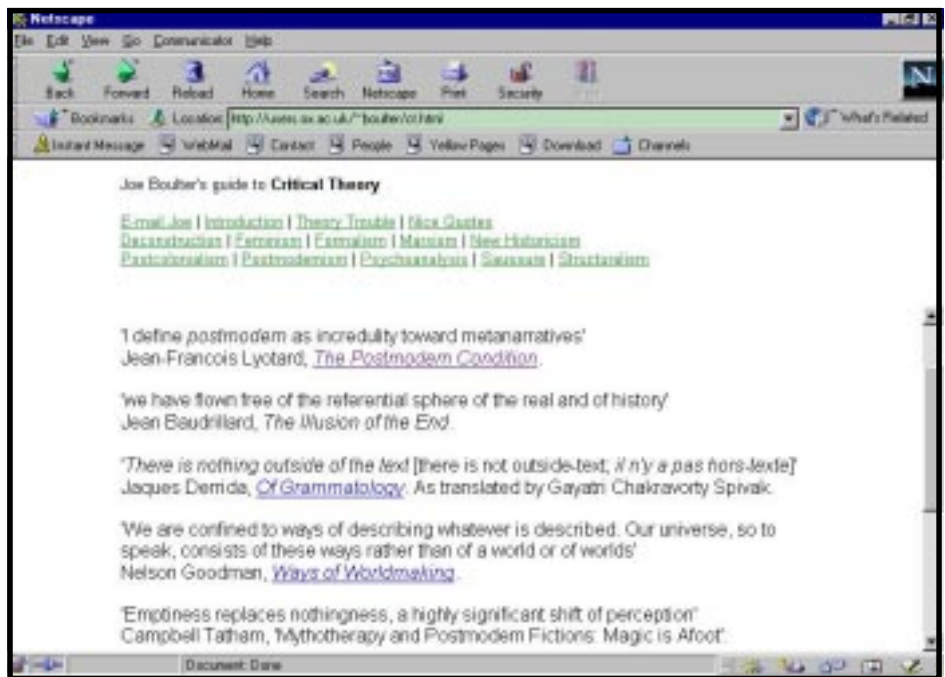


Fig.2 Showing the menu for the Critical Theory site, and part of the 'Nice Quotes' page.

The most significant difference between users and non-users was that all users had computers and Ethernet connections in their study bedrooms. This indicates that non-use was the result of limitations on (rather than a lack of) access and/or limitations on skills in using and/or familiarity with IT.

Limited access

In January 1998 I conducted a survey on behalf of Oxford University Language Centre to establish the suitability of college computer facilities for delivering language learning at a distance. I found, not surprisingly, that students who use college computers have significantly more limited access to IT than students who use their own computers. The first limitation is one of time: since college computers are not provided at a ratio of one per student, each student has only intermittent use of a college computer. The second limitation is one of environment: college computers are typically situated in computer rooms, which are treated as social places by students and are not suitable environments for academic work.

It is possible that these limitations on access to the website caused students not to use it, though there is an objection to this conclusion. The difference between accessing the Web on an intermittent basis from a crowded college computer room and accessing it when you want from your own study bedroom is analogous to the difference between accessing a single copy of a particular book from the Bodleian in a week when that book is on 50 students' reading lists, and buying the book yourself. My students were able to cope with limited access to books, so by analogy they should have been able to cope with limited access to the Web.

Familiarity with IT

Though the quality of access afforded to books by a library and the quality of access afforded to the Web by a college computer are similar, students who did not own computers used books, but did not use the website. The website was only used by those students who owned computers, and were therefore in a position analogous to

that of a student who owns all the books on a the reading list, in other words, an extremely advantaged position. Why, then, should students need to be in such an advantaged position regarding access to Web materials before they will make use of them?

The third possible reason for non-use is lack of IT skills and/or lack of familiarity with IT. Perhaps students did not use the Web materials because they lacked the skills to access the Web, and/or they were unfamiliar with the Web and this unfamiliarity discouraged them from using it.

It is unlikely that students actually lacked the skills to access the Web, since they were all able to locate books in the various Oxford libraries. To do this, they had to use OLIS, the computer catalogue which is the only means of locating most library holdings in Oxford. OLIS is accessed either via Telnet or the Web, and is considerably more difficult than using my website.

It is possible, however, that students' unfamiliarity with the Web discouraged them from using it. Though unfamiliarity with a medium does not in itself discourage people from using that medium (otherwise CD, the Web, digital TV etc. would have been commercial failures), unfamiliarity with a medium which is to be used for learning could discourage learners from using it. Each week, my students were faced with a particular learning task (orientating themselves for study of a particular topic in Critical Theory), with the options of either using methods they were familiar with, or using the Web. If they had chosen to use the Web, this would have meant learning about a new medium, before they could start the learning proper. I believe it is this need to 'learn before you learn' which discouraged students from using the website (in combination with limited access to the Web and/or lack of interest in Critical Theory).

The students who used and benefited from using my Critical Theory website were those who were already in the habit of using the Web, and using IT in general, because they had their own computers. In order to make the website a useful resource for all students, I could either wait until they all owned computers (which is unrealistic) or I could try to develop the habit of using the Web in those who do not own computers. This could be done in two ways:

- Making use of the Web a compulsory part of the course. Though it was impossible in my case, it would be reasonable for a department to devise a course with a compulsory Web component, since the Web is so easy to use. This would ensure that students develop the habit of using it.
- Providing an induction session to introduce students to the Web. I think this would miss the point: the problem is not that students can't learn how to use the Web on their own, it's that they don't. Showing them how to use it would not guarantee that they would use it.

Conclusion

I believe that university departments will soon make use of the Web a compulsory component of most courses. In the first place, students will increasingly come to university already in the habit of using IT and of using the Web, so they will expect their courses to contain Web elements. Secondly, using the Web to deliver the kind of guidance materials provided by my Critical Theory website saves paper, makes it easier to update materials, and makes it easier to integrate them, because each document exists in a single

copy in electronic form. These economic and practical advantages will make the Web an irresistible delivery method for universities.

Delivering guidance materials on the Web will also be much more effective if it is managed at a departmental level than if it is managed by individual tutors. A department is better placed to produce Web material, since it can employ people with the appropriate skills specifically for this task (though the pressure to stick to a departmental standard would preclude the kind of informal, personalised style which I believe was a valuable aspect of my own website). A department can also make the guidance materials totally appropriate to the syllabus, can change the materials whenever the syllabus changes, and has the authority to make the Web the only delivery method for the materials, thereby forcing students to acquaint themselves with the Web. At universities such as Oxford, where departments exercise much less control over course content, the lack of standardisation will make it more difficult to use the Web in this way. However, with the introduction of fees, students at all universities will begin to demand more explicitly structured courses, and the more explicitly the structure of a course is defined by a department, the easier it is to deliver parts of it in a standardised way via the Web.

When use of the Web becomes a compulsory component of courses, delivering even a simple, non-interactive set of guidance materials such as mine via the Web should have a positive effect in increasing the value of tutorial and seminar time. If guidance materials are delivered via the Web, they do not have to be provided during tutorials. Students can spend more time discussing and developing their own ideas, and tutors can spend more time interacting with students to facilitate this discussion and development of ideas. At the same time, students develop a sense of greater autonomy in their learning, because they find their own way around the guidance materials on the Web, using them in ways they find appropriate (and ideally following links to other websites on similar topics), rather than being steered through the guidance materials by the tutor (a process which is as redundant as it sounds, but which is very common when paper materials are used). As a result of this sense of greater autonomy, students who use the Web guidance materials come to tutorials with more confidence, and are more prepared to make their own contributions to the subject.

I believe, then, that it is inevitable that a significant component of most university courses will come to be delivered via the Web or an equivalent medium, and that the course components best suited to Web delivery are those which can be controlled and standardised at departmental level, such as subjects for study, reading lists, basic notes on the subjects, and sample questions (in other words, the materials I delivered on my Critical Theory website). The principal benefits of this change would be to save time and money in the delivery of these materials, to increase the value of the tutorial and the seminar by freeing up time for interaction between students and tutor, and to increase learner autonomy, promoting a more active interest in courses from students.

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