

MyDante: Contemplative Reading and Hybrid Technologies

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Abstract. The following paper describes the results of an experiment in the hybrid use of a newly developed online platform for what we are calling *contemplative reading*. First taught in face to face courses, the platform was developed to help students engage with Dante's *Divine Comedy* at multiple levels by mimicking in digital form the medieval manuscript's marginalia and reflective aspects. The analysis described below is based on the first ever MOOC implementation of the platform and decidedly humanities based model of reading, and as the results show indicate a great deal of success and deep engagement by the online students.

1 Introduction

The explosion of popular social media and the ubiquity of “personal devices” have focused critical attention on the seeming contradictions inherent in the use of digital technology to enhance human consciousness. Nowhere are these contradictions more apparent than in the tension between the personal and social natures of the act of reading: a text, particularly one of great intellectual and emotional intensity, invites us to dive headfirst into a dizzying depth of personal experience enhanced by art, and at the same time entices us into conversation in the hope of sharing with others something of the texture of the meaning we manage to bring back from that deep dive. In what follows we attempt to explore some of the ways that digital technology can mediate between these two different dynamics at work in our interaction with texts.

Georgetown University's MyDante project¹ is a digital environment developed over the past decade for the study of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and recently expanded into a MOOC and hybrid course. 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 are calling contemplative reading.² We have long since believed 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. We do not consider social reading and contemplative reading to be mutually exclusive; rather, we argue that, in

¹ <http://dante.georgetown.edu/>

² This method of “contemplative reading” was developed by Frank Ambrosio.

the appropriate reading environment, these can 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 is such an environment.

What follows will provide a view into the longstanding pedagogical experiment we have undertaken with MyDante. The site and its usage 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. While it was first used solely within an interdisciplinary course, the most recent iteration took the form of using MyDante as the basis for an Edx MOOC that enrolled over 20,000 participants. Materials and the new platform created specifically for the MOOC were then used in the face to face course, creating a hybrid learning environment. In this paper, we highlight some of the questions raised by our ongoing experiment with digital mediation of the social and personal dynamics of reading, 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 in the context of the MOOC. We then present some lessons learned from this process and possible implications for future development.

2 Project background and goals

The MyDante project began in 1999, and from the start, its primary aim was pedagogical. Rather than prioritizing academic research, as many of the existing online versions of the *Comedy* did, MyDante 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 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 a medieval monk might have done through marginalia and illuminations. We believe that marginalia in this context can facilitate both the personal and reflective aspect of reading as well as 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. In this respect, MyDante is the start of a conversation between the students and the poem, a conversation in which the students' own voices are as important to their contemplative practice as is Dante's manuscript.

3 The contemplative reading method

Beyond what might be generally referred to as “serious” or “close” reading, what we wanted primarily to encourage 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 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 answer particular questions at each level of interpretation.

- 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 – these 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 XVI*, we ask: “Why does the poet choose to have the pilgrim meet Ulysses? Why here? Why this story of the end of Ulysses’ life, when the story of the Trojan horse is much more famous?” 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. Commentary by the professor helps to guide students in interpretation at the three

different levels. In addition, multimedia projects, require students to assemble images, video, and music into reflective journal entries. Many students in both the MOOC and hybrid courses responded quite creatively to this assignment. For example, one student used his project to reflect on “Dante’s influence on 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.

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:

- Through technology, to encourage imaginative connective thinking by juxtaposing multimedia elements such as images, videos, and music 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.

- Through the collaborative nature of the site, to develop a communal dialogue among reflective readers outside of the classroom. This community would be made of 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, is currently in development, with an anticipated roll out for test runs in Fall 2016.

It was with contemplative reading and the goals stated above in mind, that we embarked on turning MyDante into a MOOC in the fall of 2014. While we felt confident that the contemplative approach we had taken would translate well to a much broader audience, we knew the scale of the learning experience would provide a unique set of challenges.

The first challenge was creating a platform that would not only be able to handle the load of tens of thousands of possible students, but would also make the contemplative and social reading experience as engaging and rich as the use of the platform in a face to face class. This meant giving students the tools and support they would need to engage at a distance, to be self- or peer-sustaining when needed, and rely on the tool itself to encourage contemplative reading from the outset. To do this, we reimagined the relationship between the reading practice and the technology, and

created different reading “modes” within the platform. Each of the modes offered a different reading experience with the poem. The modes are as follows:

- **Reading:** a simple, unadulterated mode in which the student first encounters the poem, in English, and if they desire in Italian. In this mode, we ask students to ignore for the time being the supplemental, reflective, and social aspects of reading the poem and to simply read the poem. We believe this mode replicates the first contact many have with a text but that many often ignore when reading a complex text in the context of a class.
- **Personal:** the personal mode presents the poem with an audio recording as well as the marginal images so often associated with Dante’s work, and gives students access to a sophisticated annotation tool that enables students to note their reactions to the poem as they read. As with all the tools in MyDante, the annotation tool encourages interaction in immediate relation to the poem instead of asking students to take notes elsewhere. Students are also encouraged in this mode to write longer, reflective journals.
- **Guided:** in this mode, students are given access to the poem surrounded by marginal notes and extensive supplemental materials written by the course instructors. This is the mode of Virgil, in which the student is guided through the text by the expert faculty.
- **Social:** and finally, students are asked to engage with each other at the level of collaborative, shared annotations. In the social mode, annotations take on the role of conversation with the poem and with each other. As with the annotations in the personal model, all the annotations and discussion happen in the margins of the poem.

With these four reading modes, we believe we’ve created a technology-enhanced engagement with the poem that encourages the kind of contemplative reading we discussed above. The pervasive use of images in the Personal Mode, including both illustrations of the poem and unrelated but relevant works of classical and contemporary painting and sculpture, was widely appreciated by participants as an effective stimulus for personal reflection and imaginative interpretation. The extensive pedagogical resources provided in the Guided Mode were overwhelmingly viewed as very helpful in supporting readers in mastering the technique of Contemplative Reading in relation to Dante’s poem in particular, and as many observed, with regard to the reading of literature in general. Overall, readers commented very favorably on the experience of submitting short “Journal-entry” assignments focused on the “third-level” reflective engagement questions. Participants who chose to do so were given the opportunity to receive peer feedback on their journal entries in many recorded a significant benefit derive both from feedback they receive and the experience of providing feedback for others.

The advantages of this model was visible not only in the MOOCs but also in the smaller, more personal hybrid course. The reading modes created a structure that offered students new ways to imagine themselves in the poem at each level. The hy-

brid course benefited from this deeper structure by facilitating multifaceted conversations to emerge from the different reading experiences. We believe these modes are a particularly unique aspect of this tool that demonstrates the deep, personal engagement possibilities that technology can enable.

The combination of the especially developed MyDante web platform in conjunction with the use of the EdX portal as a residence for the MOOC proved in some ways to be a mutually reinforcing combination, especially with regard to advertising, student recruitment and management, record-keeping and analytics, as well as assessment tools. On the other hand, the discussion board provided within Edx proved to impose serious restraints on social interaction within MyDante, and eventually was replaced with a custom-designed social forum within the MyDante platform.

4 Contemplative analytics

While any data about a MOOC should always be taken with a heavy dose of skepticism, we believe the large number of reflective annotations and journal entries demonstrates a particular type of engagement not seen in other MOOCs. With approximately 3,000 total active participants, we had a total of 65,804 annotations, 7,686 replies to annotations, and 10,809 journal entries. Our qualitative analysis of a sample of the annotations and journal shows that students read at all three levels described above, and many brought all three together in deeply contemplative and rigorous ways. In fact, the program of contemplative reading proved far more demanding than Edx MOOC users were normally accustomed to encounter. Users reported an average of 10 to 12 hours a week, with a number reporting substantially greater demands. Many participants reported that the Contemplative Reading approach was as satisfying a result of the MOOC experience for them as was the discovery of or enrichment of their understanding of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Currently, during the Fall 2015 semester, we are involved in a further stage of experimentation within the project: using the MOOC in the context of a hybrid interdisciplinary credit course on Dante being taught to Georgetown undergraduates. The experiment takes the form of "flipping the classroom," using the MOOC as the primary medium for both contemplative reading of Dante's text and for the delivery of pedagogical guidance to students both at the interpretive and reflective levels, which in previous iterations of the course would have taken the form of in class lecture material. Although that experiment is still unfolding and it would be premature to anticipate outcomes, one observation may be confidently made now: the focus of technological innovative in all its forms, like all pedagogical experimentation, must confront the twin tensions, first, of the individual and social with which we began this essay and second of the credentialing\skill training function of higher education with the traditional goal of character formation within the Liberal Arts tradition. Much has been here and elsewhere regarding the first tension; the "flipped classroom" is undoubtedly a more efficient means of delivering content and training skills even at the advanced level and hence seems to offer important advantages for the credentialing

function of higher education. Whether and to what extent a hybrid pedagogy can withstand and perhaps even combat the pervasive culture of student passivity (“playing it safe”) is a question which will certainly require multiple iterations of the hybrid course and progressive refinement of the questions we need to ask of ourselves and the students, as well as of the assessment techniques we employ to try to gain insight into the experience of students. Nevertheless, we are so far convinced that the hybrid course does allow us to test effectively the pedagogical hypotheses on which digitally enhanced contemplative reading approach is to literary texts is based, and that this is itself a significant value in the context of a culture which must progressively decide for itself both what the promise of digital technology is, and what the limits of that promise might be, with regard to both heightened efficiency and the consequences of that efficiency on our humanity, against the horizon of a goal of educating the whole person has long been the central concern of covenant of liberal education with society.

We feel quite strongly that an intentional, focused use of technology can create a deeper, more engaged interaction between students and difficult literary and philosophical texts. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* asks a great deal of its readers, and approaching the poem often requires thinking and reflecting at different levels. The platform we’ve developed facilitates this type of interaction, not just for Dante’s poem but for all complex texts.