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MetaMedia Translates into Classroom Innovation

• Lee Ridgway

Harnessing technology for innovative approaches to teaching took off in the late 1980s, when desktop computers showed their potential as multimedia platforms. This emerging technology captured the imaginations of several MIT faculty in Foreign Languages and Literature, in the School of Humanities, resulting in the development of a number of experimental interactive environments to help students learn a foreign language and culture.

Before the Web, the underlying technology for multimedia environments was often specific to a project. The end product, such as a CD-ROM or video disk, required a very specific set of hardware to operate properly. It became clear that what was needed was a set of development tools that could be applied to a range of subjects, that still allowed for customization of the material, and that would be commonly available.

Which brings us to MetaMedia, a flexible teaching tool that enables faculty to enrich their classes with web-based multiple media resources. A project in the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, MetaMedia is sponsored by the d'Arbelloff Fund for Excellence in Education. The project began over three years ago, under the direction of Humanities faculty mem-

bers Peter Donaldson, Kurt Fendt, and Henry Jenkins. Each had developed technology-based, media-rich educational projects for their respective courses: Donaldson on Shakespeare, Fendt for German, and Jenkins for film.

Concept and Practice

These three conceived of MetaMedia as a framework within which faculty – even those who have not worked in multimedia before – could create an archive of materials related to a subject. Using the MetaMedia tool that's available today, faculty can create an archive that includes text, video, photos, scanned images from printed or other sources, facsimiles of documents, and sound. From this archive, faculty can put together customized collections designed to support the classroom study of the subjects they teach.

For students, the collection for a given class is there not just to view, but to reflect on, critique, modify, extend, add to, create from, publish – using any media supported by the technology. MetaMedia helps students focus on the key aspects of humanistic studies: they can compare, create relationships between, and interpret documents (in whatever medium); set new contexts for the resources; and explore new ways of learning. The idea is to engage students not just as learners but also as humanities researchers, using the same kinds of thinking, skills, and activities that they would use in scientific research.

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The structure behind MetaMedia is XML-based open metadata standards such as the Dublin Core, the Text Encoding Initiative, MPEG-7 for video and sound, and the Sharable Content Object Reference Model. These and other standards ensure that data in the archives are portable across different platforms.

As with any successful application, MetaMedia's interface is easy to use and aesthetically pleasing. It continues to be refined, based on feedback from teachers, students, and developers.

Project Snapshots

Thirteen MetaMedia curriculum projects are being used in classes or are in development, with six or seven more set to begin this summer. Highlighting a few projects can give a feel for the possibilities of MetaMedia:

- *Cultura*. Led by Professor Gilberte Furstenberg, *Cultura* began in 1997 as a way to connect MIT students taking an intermediate French class with students taking an English class at a university in Paris. *Cultura* began using MetaMedia in the fall of 2003 as a way to facilitate the forums between students. With MetaMedia, the students easily ex-

change images as well as texts. Through online discussions, they analyze, question, comment, and otherwise respond to these representations of their respective cultures at a level of involvement that might not be possible otherwise.

- *Balanchine Dance Archive*. MIT dance professor Tommy DeFrantz has built a collection around the work of choreographer George Balanchine, particularly his ballet *Agon*. The collection includes video clips, photo and silhouette images, reproductions of musical scores, the music itself, writings, and other artifacts related to Balanchine's dance. MetaMedia makes it possible to view a score with a video of the dance, use tools for a close analysis of the video, mark and tag elements of an item in the collection, and juxtapose different video clips for critical comparison.

- *American Authors Project*. For a class in American fiction, Wyn Kelley, senior lecturer in literature, created an archive of materials related to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Using various media, students correlated their reading of the novel with the people, practices, and songs of the 19-century whaling industry. This approach proved so successful that Kelley has developed the archive to cover 11 authors. She is now at work on a British Authors archive.

A Model of Collaboration

MetaMedia may bring to mind other educational technology work at MIT, and rightly so. The MetaMedia team is working with OpenCourseWare (OCW) and DSpace to strengthen digital-collection building at MIT. Discussion is under way to make OCW's extensive collection of copyright-cleared images available through MetaMedia.

Collaboration with the Open Knowledge Initiative (OKI) is ensuring that MetaMedia can connect with other learning technology services using OKI's open architecture.

Another possible connection, with SloanSpace, would provide active learning components for the Sloan School's executive education programs. Other educational institutions, museums, and archives are seeking to integrate MetaMedia into their offerings.

A Framework for Exploring

Few areas of education are untouched by developments in technology or by the current emphasis on using multimedia. MetaMedia gives humanists the framework to extend the idea of traditional text-based reading to all media. It also fosters a richer collaboration between students and teachers.

To further explore MetaMedia, go to <http://metaphor.mit.edu> ☛

Preferred Cell Phone and Pager Vendors Offer Discounts

The MIT community can now take advantage of quantity discount pricing on cell phone service and equipment. Information Services and Technology (IS&T) and Procurement have selected Nextel and Verizon Wireless as preferred cell phone vendors, based on recommendations of the MIT Cell Phone and Pager Project Team.

Discounts for cell phone service (new or existing), equipment, and accessory purchases are available for MIT departments and affiliate institutions, as well as for employees (for personal use). Depending on the vendor, students may be eligible for a discount.

For more information about the new cell phone rates, go to

<http://web.mit.edu/ist/services/telecommunications/cellphones.html>

For Frequently Asked Questions related to using cell phones, go to

<http://itinfo.mit.edu/answer?id=6831>

Policies and guidelines, linked from the cell phone home page, can help departments, labs, and centers make cost-saving decisions about equipment and service plans that will be charged to an Institute account. Also see the policies for information about converting current Institute contracts with non-preferred vendors.

If you have questions about the cell-phone program, contact Mary Bacci in Procurement at 253-5499 or <mamato@mit.edu>.

Pagers Too

For pager services, IS&T and Procurement have negotiated a reduced-rate contract with Arch Wireless. If you need a more robust nationwide pager service, the recommended vendor is Skytel. For details, see

<http://web.mit.edu/ist/services/telecommunications/pagers.html> ☛



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Managing Editor
Robyn Fizz

Writer/Editor
Lee Ridgway

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Electronic mail: <fizz@mit.edu>

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