

Professionalization in a Digital Age

Digital Pedagogy: Taming the Palantíri

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Palantíri are not crystal balls to foresee the future. The elves in *The Lord of the Rings* originally made these seeing-stones to observe the world at a distance, after which Sauron corrupted some of them. By throwing Saruman's palantír down from the wizard's Tower of Orthanc, Wormtongue unwittingly led the hobbit Peregrin to fall briefly under Sauron's spell. Yet this proved to be a lucky turn-of-events, distracting Sauron from Frodo's quest. One present-day palantír is a workstation running Skype, an Internet-based telephone technology (cf. OED, "skip," v., 3.a), with a Web-cam.

This forum discusses how digital advances are reshaping how we train new scholars. My remit is digital pedagogy, having taught a fully-online credit course in reading English poetry, 2001-04, and having edited a book collection on "Teaching Literature and Language Online" for MLA's Options in Teaching series. To these I brought experience in digital text analysis, database development, and corpus linguistics, all digital palantíri-taming disciplines.

We know the misuses of digital technology. They include identity theft, plagiarism, copyright infringement, and the proliferation of hate literature, images, and software. A specifically intellectual failing afflicts the encoding imagination, unbridled: witness the hacker visionaries in Joseph Weizenbaum's *Computer Power and Human Reason*, or the mad geneticist of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*.

Digital pedagogy addresses these and other issues and has been successfully evolving for decades. The Sloan Consortium reports that nearly 3.5 million US students took "at least one online course during the fall 2006 term," an almost ten-percent increase over the 2005 statistics. Online teaching gives our Ph.D.s valuable job opportunities, as does information technology generally, both inside and outside academe. Online courses meet the needs of those who cannot get to a physical classroom regularly because they work, care for others, or are personally bed-ridden or disabled. Undergraduates today, born-digital since the early 1990s, dominate the 53-million active Facebook population and are persistently online. A student's gender, sexual orientation, race, colour, appearance, and age, often apparent in a classroom, can be invisible online.

Graduate programs should engage students on which pedagogical guidelines properly inform our profession's teaching, research, and digital imagination.

We should devote 75 percent of e-course workload to online teacher-student interaction. Using email, discussion boards, skype, chatrooms, or social utilities, teachers and students will come to know one another's minds better than in a physical room. Second,

we should protect personal student information in digital media: let no student be identifiable in any digital course-work that somehow goes public. Third, we should educate graduate students to apply their literary and linguistic knowledge to the mind-technologies of IT. As a man who tethered Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and English poetry to the service of political revolution said, “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed ...”
