

# E-Learning and Literary Studies: Towards a New Culture of Teaching?

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## Abstract

The introduction of digital technologies into the learning processes has meant the creation of new educational spaces that, when they take place in the Internet and are founded in non-presence and asynchrony, are known as VLE (Virtual Learning Environments). VLE constitute new pedagogic realities that must answer to the users' needs, their educational purposes, the curricula with which they work and, specifically, the formative needs for the people that integrate them. But the key to define "virtual" in terms of human experience and not in terms of technological hardware is the concept of "presence" which is crucial in our pedagogical model and our way of being comparative literature lecturers in a virtual university.

E-learning is probably nothing more than a manifestation of e-living. Perhaps circumstances are giving us the opportunity to use the coincidence between the appearance of e-learning as a tool and the need to modify our traditional model of education. After all, learning is learning whether it has an extra 'e' or not and so VLE are only as good or as bad as the ways they are used. Thus, the revolutionary point of their use would not be the technological aspect. We will show the example of a completely virtual university, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), where the learning process takes place in a virtual campus and we will focus on a specific subject: "Comparative literature".

We firmly believe that e-learning is an excellent opportunity for a real improvement of quality if these multimedia technologies lead us to a more humanized teaching process. The possibility to use complex systems in a virtual campus allows and stimulates exchange and collaboration, with remarkable effects in the students' success and satisfaction. Good e-learning results are reached when there's a good e-teaching method behind.

## **Introduction: The irruption of digital technologies in the learning process**

The introduction of digital technologies in the learning process has meant the creation of new educational spaces which, when they take place through Internet and are characterized by non-presence and asynchrony, are known as VLE (Virtual Learning Environments). We know that technologies are tools capable of building a learning frame but it is necessary to endow them with contents and humanity. E-learning is probably nothing more than a manifestation of e-living. Perhaps circumstances are giving us the opportunity to use the coincidence between the appearance of e-learning as a tool and the need to modify our traditional model of education, at least at the university. At all events, we must insist on the fact that the main revolution is not found in the prefix e (because quite often a traditional monodirectional learning has been hidden under the appearance of technological sophistication). Different voices have warned of the sterility of a technological environment that does not have any pedagogical specificity (different from the traditional models). After all, learning is learning whether it has an extra 'e' or not and so VLE are only as good or as bad as the ways they are used. Thus, the revolutionary point of their use is not the technological aspect but whether they really offer different and perhaps new ways of teaching.

What seems interesting is to rethink the concept of learning in modern societies and to take into account that we have more and more digitally literate students, who are, of course, using the Internet as a source of resources to be explored. The European Plan of action "eLearning 2001" defines electronic learning as the use of multimedia technologies and of the Internet to improve the quality of learning. However, we firmly believe that e-learning is an excellent opportunity for a real improvement of quality if these multimedia technologies lead us to a more humanized teaching process. The possibility to use complex systems on a virtual campus allows and stimulates exchange and collaboration, with remarkable effects in the students' success and satisfaction. So the aim of my words will be to show how good e-learning results are achieved when there's a good e-teaching method behind them. To do that, we will show the example of a completely virtual university, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (U. O. C.), where the learning process takes place on a virtual campus and we will focus on one specific subject: that of comparative literature. If there were – and there still are – some risks, I hope that we'll be able to see that, finally, the key to define "virtual" in terms of human experience and not in terms of technological hardware is the concept of "presence" (Varis, 2000), which is crucial in our pedagogical model and our way of teaching comparative literature at a virtual university.

## **Universitat Oberta de Catalunya: the first virtual university in the world**

In 1995, the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (U. O. C.) was conceived as the first completely virtual university in the world. In consequence, we needed to consider if it was necessary to redefine the idea of teaching, learning and studying. Our virtual campus works asynchronously and serves the community of students and teachers. Even in this heterogeneous and disturbing medium, the ultimate purpose must still be to teach and to learn. Therefore, when the environment is not the 'classroom' anymore, but the virtuality of a computer screen, the methodological approach is crucial and demands a prior reflection. The cultural and social changes that the Internet has provoked and the information society in which we are living now compel us to reflect on the premises on which education and its assessment methods have always been based and to consider other ways and different possibilities in tune with the new era. In the context of the excess of information that surrounds us, we firmly believe that a lecturer's duty cannot anymore be the transmission of knowledge, but rather a contribution to the generation of this knowledge and the provision of the necessary intellectual tools that will allow students to be able to think critically.

We're now celebrating the first 10 years of the U. O. C. and, of course, there has been an evolution during this time because more technologies have been developed and have become commonplace in our everyday lives. In all these years, there has also been an important feedback between students and lecturers and this has obviously contributed to find our best way to teach literature or literary studies (literary theory, comparative literature, etc) in these circumstances, which have so often been considered hostile for these areas of knowledge. This is why I would like in this paper to focus on the challenging experience of teaching literature through the net.

## **Universal Literary Topics**

Taking as an example the course 'Universal literary topics', I'll try to show the way in which we have organized this course taking as a starting point a series of texts connected by the fact that they deal with some of the basic topics of universal literature. There is a hypertext material now contained also in a CD, which combines linear reading with sequential or fragmentary reading inherent to hypertext, as well as video or audio resources organized around the topics of "desire", "journey", "identity/otherness". What we offer are interpretations and readings of some key literary works through a double intertextual route. That is to say in a genetical and analogical way that relates different literary, pictorial or cinematographic texts.

During the process, our intention was to analyse the text from a double perspective, both towards the present and the future but, at the same time, within a paradigm formed by other texts that precede and influence it. The course intends then to contribute to a transversal reading of universal literature in a virtual environment of learning, and at the same time it provides guidelines to students for a practical exercise of comparative literature. It also suggests reading itineraries which cross periods and literary traditions that are far from each other in time and space. Following intertextual connections that guide us within the hypertextual corpus, some of the reading routes are described as randomized and subjective and they show the broadcast and the articulation of such a topic in the literary tradition. Students, after familiarizing themselves with the texts presented in the materials and with the navigating tools offered by the materials, have to select some other topics and to build up their own (hyper)textual corpus which will constitute their final project. And there is always a constant dialogue between the teacher and the students so that, although we are a distance university – or without distances, as our motto has it – the concepts of presence and accompaniment of the students are fundamental. This is what provides a true added value to the teaching and studying of literature at the U. O. C. and it ensures our success.

Our task in the day by day work as virtual lecturers combines electronic didactic materials, on-line resources, digital libraries, web-sites of reference, virtual exhibitions, etc. and a virtual workshop that is very much appreciated by the students. This workshop is a web that allows them to compare their exercises with those of their peers and to benefit from their corrections too. It is necessary to seriously consider that on-line teaching using these digital resources implies becoming detached from acquired habits and transforming the discourse of communicative techniques. The fluidity of hypertext obliged us to rethink one of the main preoccupations of a writer: the possibility to exert control over the way a reader reads. Indeed the author-lecturer's creative act requires, on the part of the user-student, an interpretative act and also intends the students to wander around the text. Hypertext shows a new form of 'textuality' based on the capacity of 'penetration' of a text marked with all the links that open doors to new horizons. In hypertexts, any illusion of control vanishes: seduction is the only motivation we wanted to lead towards a hypertextual wandering. Moreover, the ways of testing the "validity" of a literary analysis have been deeply modified because we can develop our speech according to a logic that is no longer linear and deductive, but rather open and relational. So, we must react to the transfer of knowledge by accompanying students in their process of intellectual maturation, contributing to the virtual blackboard or inciting the debate in the virtual forum, correcting exercises in a very personalized way, answering doubts, considering new questions, etc. After all, it is a holistic and beneficial task for the students, since it obliges them to read, to compare, to listen to their colleagues, as well as to the lecturer, to deeply participate in the course (which is not usual in packed classrooms as the 100

students per class that I have at the traditional University of Barcelona), to organize their ideas in a logical form and to present them coherently. In other words: to organize and build their learning process in a radically subjective way, using their own initiative and capacities. This use of philology has been defined as much more attentive to the subject that has to interpret than to the text that has to be interpreted and to its objective historical reality. It is more focused on the person that is learning than on the lecturer, which is completely different from a traditional university model.

## The history of an experiment

We started to design the course in 2001, just at the time when we were trying to see if the students at the U. O. C., students who had passed a selection process which at that time was called a 'pilot course', were capable of dealing substantially with their new environment through its own language: that of hypertext. This was the challenge, but at the same time we had to consider whether we, the teachers, were prepared for our role of imparting contents in the specific circumstances of a digital environment. We were thus not only talking about a campus that allowed interaction with, and tutoring and monitoring of, students but we were also facing the risk of replacing our linear discourse with a fragmented discourse which the students would approach in ways that we could not control. What does all this mean? Well, in lectures to my students at the traditional University of Barcelona, I control the situation to the extent that the discourse is linear and is delivered in a linear way. That is to say, for the students to understand what is to come, I have first to explain other things in order to maintain a narrative coherence that has to be complete to allow information transfer to be effective. It was now not simply a question of having webs or other virtual spaces to complement my teaching act in the lecture hall, nor of producing paper materials such as manuals on a particular topic plus activities for distance students. No. This time we had to make a double leap into the unknown to see if we could be replaced or at least transported to the opaque limbo of a hypertext. This challenged us to check whether we could do it, that is to say if we knew how to "disorganise" our academic discourse which was on the face of it so "organised". Obviously we used this peculiar textual form that hypertext imposes on the works that we read and interpret, a form that at first appears fragmentary. Fragmentary, because to practise the art of screen writing or a certain topographical script necessarily takes us to a certain spatial arrangement of the contents. This is not discursively linear in the sense that the discourse is broken down into items, the words, which constitute blocks of text linked through contents, but also fragmentary from the point of view of accessibility of the texts, since only text extracts have been selected and not whole works. One of the students, Jakub Pytka, asked us why we

had presented extracts instead of offering the complete works, and I can assure you that it was not a question of authors' rights since they were ancient texts whose rights were now public property. I have thus to confess that we acted inversely to the way which, according to Chateaubriand, the moralist Joseph Joubert did things. When he read, he ripped out the pages that he didn't like and in this way he collected a personal library made of stripped volumes. A collection of fragments, then, which is the consequence of a certain teaching strategy, but which also reflects changes in the mentality and perception of the reality that affects reading and writing as well as cultural production as a whole. I suppose that we found support in the principle enunciated by Seamus Heaney in a poem from *Electric Light* which is significantly entitled 'The Fragment'. The last lines go like this:

*"Since when", he asked,  
"Are the first and the last line of any poem  
Where the poem begins and ends?"*

And I do not know if we succeeded in our attempt, but the fact is that there were three different proposals for the use of hypertext or for the diverse presentation of information. The difference, far from being seen as a lack of structure, was upheld even in the face of contrary recommendations from technicians and experts. As a sign of the diversity of proposed adaptations to the aims of the course, the main one was to promote critical perspectives which reconstruct the history of literature according to deeply personal routes and canons. And to achieve this we had to forge a close alliance between the two methodologies employed for the purpose: the principle of intertextuality (in the production of the materials) and the conversational interaction in the forum debates. In fact the course aimed to invert the conventional relationship between the author-critics on the one hand and the literary text on the other by transforming the former into the agents of an exploration that passed freely from one work to another, discerning their own thematic thread. The hypertext form of the materials corresponds, then, to this type of discontinuous reading that moves from one work to another without a pre-established thread instead of the reading of each text in its entirety. In this way, the three blocks into which the material is divided represent three personal anthologies of extracts – literary or otherwise – selected for their intertextual relationship with an initial text that is particularly typical of the topic that each author has chosen and with comments based on this relationship. The essential feature of these materials is the presentation of texts and comments, selected in line with very general themes and in hypertext format. In other words, they are series of readings that are not sequential – one text after another – but rather intertextual – one text within another. Those of us who have worked on its design have thought about the new ways of reading that the Internet and digitalisation have created, where texts are now not self-enclosed but open up an infinite set of rewritings and interpretations. At the same time the readers or students are much more free to follow their own itinerary, moving from one text to

another according to intertextual associations that are suggested by their experience and intuition. In these we find coexisting three examples of intertextual routes that are relatively arbitrary and personal to the extent that, as we have already mentioned, the objective of the course is that each student does the same at the end of the course by constructing a textual corpus which will constitute the final project.

The course is to be seen as an example of reading and a particular literary hermeneutics in which three teachers, who here act as “model readers”, offer our reading itineraries through the vast corpus of the world’s literature based around three specific themes: travel, desire and identity/otherness. Subsequently, when the students have surfed and discussed, reasoned and argued over these three themes and the debates that they generate, we ask them to do the same as we have done and produce their own hypertext of readings. Let us look at the presentation of the course in the virtual classroom, which contains a whole declaration of principles:

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the course ‘Universal Literary Topics’. On Saturday 8th, from 1 to 2 pm and from 2 to 3 pm, in the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting, lecture room number 8, we will see each other for the first meeting when we will be able to exchange opinions regarding the work ahead. I will attempt to explain how the course is structured and what kind of participation I expect from you. However, what I would like to do straightaway is to make clear that this course is conceived for you to be the main characters. By this I mean that the syllabus and contents have not been decided beforehand; rather they will be constructed and selected in line with your particular comments and reflections concerning the materials which the course involves. The forum and debate spaces are intended for you to freely put forward your opinions and for you to participate constantly by conversing with each other, while the set tasks will merely serve as occasional compulsory checks. From now on, I am at your disposal for any clarifications or the resolution of any doubts. I am convinced that the journey that we are about to make through the world’s literature will be an enriching adventure for all of us.”

Raffaele Pinto 23/02/2004.

## Travel, desire and identity/otherness

In the theme which I developed, the idea of travel led me to the image of the Western traveller *par excellence*, Ulysses. The eponymous *Odyssey* includes a text which serves as a base camp and where Ulysses appears confined in hell, burning in a tongue of flame beside Diomedes. The *Odyssey* allowed me to make a leap to canto XXVI of the *Inferno* in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, but passing via Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which

provided the opportunity for an exercise in the ideological reading that Dante makes of it, with his clear underlying political stance. But the journey did not end here, for I also took a trip through the medieval romance so that, in the end, I could transfer my discourse to a more theoretical reflection on the concept of “borrowing” and “adaptation”. In a final twist, this brings us once again to a practical application and to the reading and decoding of iconographical discourse by analysing the diverse interpretations that are to be found in miniatures and certain modern and recent paintings which illustrate the passage where Dante condemns Ulysses to the flames.

What, then, did I want to show? First of all I wanted to show that writing implies initiating a dense and complex skein of references and allusions, thus making written works into networks of interlaced textual paths. In the same way, reading always implies associations, and in order to understand we must interpret and achieve a profound reading of a text. At times, this process can sometimes depend on interesting and attractive detective work, where we pull the threads to unravel the complex and therefore fascinating skein of relations among texts, which is known as intertextuality. At bottom, the striking similarities between hypertext and text that we find in poststructuralism and the constant citation that “texts refer to other texts endlessly” are especially pertinent in this sort of teaching approach, because it is in hypertextuality that intertextuality recovers its ideal form of existence to the extent that the formal properties of an educational hypertext encourage the readers-students to reach their own conclusions regarding the contents. From an intellectual point of view the students become more active and therefore also interactive. (I know that using the word ‘interactive’, I am risking the use of a term whose content has become diminished and banal because we associate it with almost impossible mechanical actions while what we should really do is to recover the sense found in Crawford’s *The Art of Interactive Design*: interaction takes place when there is the triple action of listening, thinking and speaking, something which on occasion we forget.). Active and interactive, then, also to the extent that the students feel encouraged to make conjectures, compare opinions and consult sources easily and directly, to meditate on the proposed itineraries, to search through them, even perhaps to spot possible textual continuations. In a word, to read afresh.

So what does the hypertext format give me? Apart from all the points that I have mentioned, I have to begin by admitting that what I felt most keenly was fear. I was frightened that I did not control my students’ access to the discourse and to the order that I set down looking for it to become intelligible. Fear too at not knowing how to give a lecture on the basis of interruptions, fragmentation, discontinuity, and thus condemn the hypertextual arrangement of my discourse to be seen as lacking coherence. Fear, obviously, of making the students feel totally lost so that they would be unable to achieve the goals which as a teacher I had set. In my face-to-



face teaching, where I use semi-virtual techniques, we can meet the goals, but this experiment was completely different. In short, what I experimented with was the fear and the disarray of making truly ours the critical discourse that we apply to literary works, where the reader's perception is radically different from that of the students. These latter will expect to achieve enlightenment in a course without knowing how big it is, how many pages there are, how much there is left to read, where they are unable to see where to glean the knowledge that they are expected to find, and therefore whether there are also missing parts of the course which will appear in the final exam. I think that basically the fear is understandable to the extent that this initiative was in fact a new way to teach literature. An experiment, obviously, whose success depends exclusively on the students' acceptance of the method that has inspired it. Bear in mind that our fear, the fear that I have evoked, is only the worst part of the panic that is aroused by materials like these, with nothing on paper and when it hardly makes sense to print out the screens or links for the students. Fear, I admit, which paradoxically grows with the passing of time and whose consequences are truly difficult to justify. Later we will talk about this in terms of figures, but by now perhaps you would like to hear how I tried to overcome my fear. Well, I did it by designing diagrams, conceptual maps and hierarchies within the links and pages so as to organise as far as possible, not to say 'direct', the discourse that I wanted to get across. At the same time, I tried to make the maximum use of the potentialities of the environment to complement my expertise as a teacher and the persuasive force of my oral discourse with audiovisual information which almost forces an interpretation. In the conventional classroom I can start with an introduction and then read the text, making brief parentheses for clarification, which I then sum up at the end. Yet, here they got the original text or the Catalan translation, with the possibility of a recital/interpretation by Vittorio Gassman; they could follow the text on their screens, with explanatory links, illustrations, complementary webs, additional references, etc.

However, the procedure which I adopted was not the same as that of my colleagues. Professor Raffaele Pinto wanted to bring out the intertextuality in a fundamentally physical way, with juxtaposed texts, with texts that referred to other texts from a viewpoint that was strictly textual, or rather genetic. He wanted to explore desire by diving into the moral roots of the liberty of the individual, immanent and lay roots which arose from an experience which was at the heart of the inspiration of medieval literature. Subversive at its most intimate moral centre, desire is the psychological principle that casts doubt on the value and authority of the laws imposed on the individual from outside. Professor Pinto understands modernity as a culture of the autonomy of the subject, who thinks, expresses himself and acts according to a project of self-realisation in the world. This is why he points out that Boccaccio's *Decameron* is the first literary text where this new mentality is manifest in the narrative as a principle of self-determination of the novel's characters. In his hypertext, Pinto brings out the extent to which Boccaccio investigates the moral and

ideological conditions that allow the individual to become free from the servitude imposed by the social, religious and political orders in the rigid feudal system, as well as to see the world as a field of possibilities, the realisation of which depends on just two factors: one's will and one's intelligence. So in order to talk about desire, he selected the preface from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a text which, in its dense brevity, explicitly sets out a synthesis of the significance that desire had come to acquire in medieval literature and of the modern values, which, starting with Boccaccio, would have a cultural horizon that was lay and secularised. Pinto draws from him a whole series of textual associations which allow him to survey the appearance of troubadour poetry in Romance languages and to establish textual links to Catalan and Spanish poetry of the XVth and XVIth centuries.

For the third topic, Joan Elies Adell shows how identity is born out of the disturbing encounter with otherness, and the extent to which the other has been utilised to construct the sense of self, the sense of centrality of the world itself. In effect, historically the construction of the I has used the other as a way, as a means. This is the reason why this "other" has always been seen as exotic, peripheral, distant, marginal, and for this very reason could not have a central position or speak. The other has been a central figure in the formation of modernity, a modernity which at the same time demonstrates the impossibility of reducing the world to one unique point of view. The other is the object of the Western subject, constructed by the latter, as an object of science, of anthropology, of Eurocentric reasoning. Thus, it is when the other refuses to be simply an object (of desire and of power) but rather insists on the fact that it is also a historical subject that the problem arises. This situation becomes even more complicated when this historical subject, deprived of speech, responds in the same language, in the language of the West, which is the language of its culture, of its literary tradition. Joan Elies Adell's extremely exploratory hypertext forces the students to re-think Western history starting from the role that the other has assumed. This act of revision takes literary shape here through a reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. With the background of postcolonial literatures, the aim is to get across the function of imperialism as a political and ideological system. If we look back, if we re-read, from the colonised people's viewpoint, the way in which culture and history have been shaped, we can see the existence of different ways to explain the world and our part in it. Thus, postcolonial literature and theory are here shown to be an invitation to re-think, but also to move through the inherited languages, including the unmistakable sign of otherness, the mark of the cultural particularity of place and time: the sign of historicity. To this end his hypertext analyses the first chapter of the book and weaves a dense network of links that annotate, interrupt and relate the text to others (in other literary genres: poetry, essays, etc., and also cinematographic). Instead of serving as buoys in the midst of the navigation, they tend to generate a loss, which is revealed as necessary and inevitable in the reading process and in literary criticism.

## **The rules of this particular game**

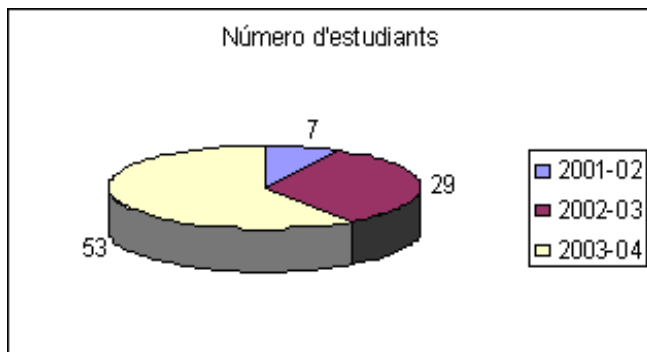
So far we have covered the course materials, but we have to look more deeply at the idea that the web and the CD<sup>1</sup> are not everything. There are also the tools that are common to all courses at the U. O. C. There is the study plan, which is available to the students from the beginning of the course. This provides a clear temporal order for the contents and arranges them in a calendar of tasks and guided readings. There are also the virtual spaces of the noticeboard, forum and debate, as well as the link to documents and resources, the connection to the virtual library, etc.

The course is arranged around three activities for continuous assessment and a final project, as well as participation in the debates. Continuous assessment implies an interchange of exercises and corrections between student and teacher, and this allows the students who take part in it and who pass to omit the final exam and receive the same final mark as the average of those for continuous assessment. Obviously, if they want to opt for a higher mark, they can always sit the final exam, which is compulsory for those who do not participate in the continuous assessment or who do not complete it. As for contents, the first task is for the students to describe their view of the structure of the materials and the consequences that this has for their studies: familiarisation with the articulation criteria, main texts, secondary texts, reading list, the search function in hypertext. In tasks 2, 3 and 4 they have to produce a reflection based on each of the three themes related to the paradigm of modernity in literature. Finally, they have to present a justification of the selected themes and this takes the form of the final project. Each one of these tasks is accompanied by a series of conversations in the forum in which the contents are gradually separated out. There is a debate about four basic issues: first, the course materials, and then each of the three thematic blocks and their critical evaluations in relation to them. At the same time there appears a whole range of satellite topics which are keenly taken up by the students: for instance, the relationship between language and identity, between gender and language, the subject, the role of women in history and in literature, anorexia, and so on. Finally, there is a collective debate on the choice of a critical category, and the justifications and anthologies proposed by all of those taking part, as well as a verification of the presence of the theme chosen in the course materials or of close or relatable categories.

## **The results**

I should begin by saying that this course has only been offered for three consecutive years. The course has always been given by the same teacher, who is also the

author of part of the hypertext, and that I myself, as coordinator of the course and the hypertext material only intervene in responding to students in the forum concerning the course materials, that is to say in the first phase of the course, which according to the study plan corresponds to the first two, or at most three, weeks. Having said this, another basic fact is that the growth of students taking the course is exponential, going from 7 to 29 and then to 53 in these first three years. We have to compare this growth considering that for an optative subject there's an average of 15 to 20 students per class and from 5 to 10 in the first semester.



This extraordinary increase, which has not been observed in any of the other subjects in the degree, would seem to indicate the level of success attained. The level which is not only seen quantitatively in the percentage of good results but also qualitatively in the feeling of satisfaction expressed by the students who have done the course, as well as their sense of having worked well, with great intensity, and very beneficially, and have shown a high degree of reliance on, and positive gleanings from, the classroom debates.

Even so, we will see that it has not been easy. And this is so, paradoxically, because our initial warnings in the first semester that the course was offered were greeted with enthusiasm and understanding by the students. They understood perfectly well the reasoning behind the 'shape' of their literature manual and they were relatively happy with it, although they expressed their view that their knowledge was slight when faced with a hypertext that seemed so rich. Let us have a look at some of their impressions. We can observe that the students saw the approach as innovative:

"&As far as I can see, the material is fascinating, although it looks difficult. I've read Laura Borràs's introduction, "Re-reading as a liberating act", and her point of view strikes me as very interesting. I had never considered this approach but I find it extremely appropriate and it opens new ways for me to relate to literature. M. Àngels Monte Ochoa de Aspuru, "Diversos", 14/03/2002.

"I am truly overwhelmed by the quantity and quality of the material in the course hypertext; it brings me face to face with own ignorance and in fact with myself

because it's incredible how many things there are that I haven't read. To be quite frank, after going backwards and forwards along the many possible connections, it was difficult to find anything that I had ever read. Just as well that we can turn to the saying *ars longa, vita brevis*, in other words there are masses of written works to be read in just one lifetime. Perhaps this is enough to calm us down if, as Laura Borràs says in her introduction, re-reading is the supreme liberating act which allows us multiple journeys into literature; we cannot lose sight of the fact that literary tradition is made up not only of reading material, but also of the interpretations of others & I just want to make the point that literature and its history – of which the course materials are a wonderful example – are a set of texts connected by intertextuality, that is to say the relationship among the texts, but there is also interreceptivity, the relationship among the different readings, between the reading of these texts and the texts that went before &” Miquel Àngel Arasa Favà, 15/03/2002.

“You feel foolish and aware how small you are when faced with the infinite transversal lines – vertical, horizontal and oblique – in the material, which a quick glance hardly takes in. It is a mixed feeling: on the one hand, you feel hurt by the reminder, which you consider unnecessary, of your limitations; on the other hand, grateful because you see that you are invited, with a large dose of freedom, to initiate the creative task of designing one of your small possible canons, some original but inevitably miniscule thematic collection, or even to plunge into the moving search and discovery of intertextual connections & express the wish to share the bliss and joy deriving from the quality of the contents of the course web.” Josep Maria Àlvarez 15/03/2002.

“We are faced with an excellent material which expresses an original idea. And it does this through a wide range of readings which, above all, bear the cultural and literary imprint of their authors. Material whose structure, in my opinion, corresponds to a rather loose interpretation of intertextuality and which in fact is quite close to the functioning of our brains, which undoubtedly work through the association of ideas, sometimes very subtle ones, derived from our existential background & With this premise, taking part in our journey might be a fascinating adventure, an adventure that leads us to open the bottle of our readings and our most hidden knowledge, to appreciate passages, authors and concepts and see how far we are capable of reaching. And at this point where, despite the putative tolerance of the rules of the game, the course for the moment still arouses in me a certain sadness. Miquel Àngel assures us that he is overwhelmed by the quantity of material and he feels that he is faced with what he calls his own ignorance. Something similar happens in my case, and this makes me ask myself: is my intellectual baggage sufficient to construct an attractive trajectory, to create a canon of intertexts in which the analogies appear to have a minimal coherence? I'm afraid of losing the intention into a puerile dead-end or a maze where each text is a

wall shut off by my own ignorance. These are some of the doubts which strike me but they coexist alongside the curiosity and interest that the course arouses in me.” Josep Maria Roquer 16/03/2002.

“We have here some very good material. At last we are doing a subject truly from within, exploiting the possibilities offered by digital technologies. The hypertext format allows one to go much deeper and more rapidly with regard to informational and relational possibilities. However, I’m afraid to lose my way in this sea of texts and images & From the prior consideration that the possibility of a transversal reading is undoubtedly a fascinating adventure, I feel at the same time that this methodology also runs the risk of an excessive fragmentation of the readings & My state of mind at the beginning of the course and when faced with the materials is one of total insecurity; everything that I don’t know suddenly appears before me, and with the possibility that it will grow bigger and bigger. I appreciate perfectly and I share wholeheartedly Roquer’s ‘certain sadness’, and I also feel overwhelmed like Miquel Àngel and foolish like Àlvarez. I also have my doubts about whether my intellectual baggage is enough as the starting point for the preparation of my own text corpus & I must also say that I very much like the treatment given to the non-literary materials related to the texts, especially the pictorial ones. I have spent quite a time nosing through them. Many thanks.” M. Àngels Monte 17/03/2002.

“I think that the course texts and materials have been put together in an attractive and practical fashion: the resources that compare literatures and the intertextual focus of the literary endeavour will be very useful to show us, in an interrelated way, the aspects that coincide in different literatures. & this relationship & will allow us to set up a suitable space because we will develop as literary readers in a creative way, teaching ourselves strategies of observation and appraisal.” Joana Alba Cercós 17/03/2002.

“The production of the materials is surprising in its complexity and its contents. At the same time it is very attractive to see the possibility of relating concepts and ideas between one place and another, so that you can attain different views, treatments and analyses of the texts.” Martí Ninou Serra 19/03/2002.

These feelings of anxiety, of shortcomings, of being overwhelmed, contrast with the excellent results that the group achieved; they were of an extraordinary quality. You can get an idea of the very high quality of the debate among the participants if I tell you – though you must keep it a secret – that several of us teachers were hooked on the contributions and following them on a daily basis created addiction. However, these reflections from the pilot course contrast significantly with the lack of sensitivity towards the materials demonstrated by the second set of students. To begin with there was an initial moment of perplexity over a manual that was not a book, but a web. They could download the web onto their hard disks, but they refused to do this and asked for the course on a CD. Subsequently, their attitude

changed when they had seen the learning possibilities of a teaching approach based on the students' self-determination in relation to the route and the contents. Let's look at this through some of their comments.

1. Complete perplexity over the lack of materials. It seems that a web on its own was not synonymous with materials.

"Dear fellow students: I'm another one who has not received any materials for this course. I have sent a message to the office but I still haven't got an answer. Have you others received any type of print material?" Cristina Gallego Jiménez, 27/02/2003.

2. Mystery that stems from the physical structure of the material, of the medium.

"Although it is very interesting, this course is somewhat mysterious". Laia Morral Plans 27/02/2003

3. There were also students who looked beyond the form:

"The approach to the course strikes me as very interesting and I believe that together we can make real discoveries." Josep Maria Agustí Julià 04/03/2003.

4. In the light of the bewilderment, authentically textual versions of the materials began to appear:

"Given the lack of a print version of the contents, I have tried to make one, at least of the journey part, although of course I have not included either the images or the links." Lúdia Jiménez Comas 05/03/2003.

5. Three weeks into the semester panic takes hold:

"I urgently need help. I can see that people are making contributions and I still haven't received the CD, nor have I been able to download the material that we have to read. Can anyone tell me what I'm supposed to do?" Teresa Alsina Batí 11/03/2003.

Notice the response to the cry for help!

"I have still not received the CD and neither have I downloaded the course material. (I started but it took for ever.) What I recommend is that you work with the material on line or, even better, print it out. You don't need to do it all at once; begin with the journey, then the desire, etc&as and when you need it. I suppose that you already know, but just in case, I remind you that the course material in web format (which I think has the same contents as the CD we're waiting for) can be found in the documents space within the classroom." Marta Bordas 11/03/2003.

6. And when the CD finally arrived, it became clear that it was not what they had expected. I suppose they thought that the CD would be something like a book, not

that it was just a physical support for the web. However, this also showed up their limited technical skills.

"At last I've received the CD but now I have the problem (like many of you) that I can't install it. I will try to do what Glòria suggests, to see if I finally can consult the materials. I have printed out the journey but it is not the same. As soon as possible I will make my personal evaluation of the materials, I mean the first task. I can't wait to see these materials which, from what I have read, are very interesting." Teresa Alsina Batí 16/03/2003.

In effect, comprehension comes when they understand that 'it is not the same' because there is a complete correlation between what we provide and what we demand. It is not a question of us forcing them to the difficult task of surfing to find academic contents with a view to study and memorisation, which is probably where most of the worries and fears come from. Instead we have provided them with academic material in web or CD format so that they explore it, discuss it, comment on it, learn things from it and, at the end of the semester, produce their own material.

Finally, I will present the total rejection of the material format which came from the third – and for the moment last – group of students. This caused a delay in the functioning of the course as can be seen in the collective postponement which they were granted of the deadline of the first task.

"Friends, I see that many of you have so far not sent in your first task. I imagine that this is due to the intensity of the debate generated by the format of the materials, which is of great interest for the high level of your contributions, and all this is difficult to cover in a limited time. I therefore consider it appropriate to postpone by a few days the handing in of the first task. I will accept your contributions until 8pm next Wednesday. In parallel, we will continue with the ongoing discussion on the first block, related to the theme of desire." Raffaele Pinto 13/03/2004.

The initial confusion:

"I chose this subject because I thought it might be very interesting. What I didn't realise was that all the material is in hypertext format, and the truth is that I'm afraid that it will tire me. To get home and open a book is not the same thing as to be stuck the whole time in front of the computer. Well, I hope everything goes OK. " Fina Roldán Cobo 02/03/2004.

"It's the first time that I've seen a course in which hypertext is used. I find this materials format very interesting because each of us can choose the link which seems most attractive in order to go deeper into the text and relate to other information. One might say that it's like a realisation of the associative organisation of our memory. This does not mean that I agree with using materials of this type because, although you can choose the path you want to follow, the paths are limited. By contrast, when we read a book, our memory and imagination are unlimited and



we can relate to any ideas that we want.” Teresa Alsina Butí 03/03/2004.

“I will see how I get on with the hypertext material, since I’ve already had to drop out of one course because of it. I’m sorry but it upsets me. I prefer a system with books where I can make my own notes undisturbed and not go backwards and forwards making notes from the screen. In spite of all this, I will make the attempt.” Àngela Murillo 03/03/2004.

“In this course, I am surprised at the type of material that we have to use but I still can’t give my opinion about it because I haven’t really delved into it. I admit though that my first thought was to print out the lot.” Rosa Maria Navarro Fernández 06/03/2004.

However, something was beginning to change:

“I was quite surprised that all of the material related to the course was in digital format. Perhaps this is because I’m technologically a bit old-fashioned, or perhaps it is because I have a great passion for the traditional format on paper. So, full of scepticism and reservations, I started to wander virtually through the course content, and, in doing so, I discovered that the format was not all that bad. It is obvious that hypertext has many interesting aspects. To move around the CD is like taking a walk, a trip that is interesting because of the topics of this course, a trip where you are constantly on new paths, paths that take you forwards and backwards as if you were walking through a maze. It has its pleasant side, but in spite of that I recognise that for a reader accustomed to conventional linear reading, it will be a problem, as one constantly gets lost among the words. Perhaps it’s all just a question of getting used to it, of stopping to see as unknown and strange a way of learning that seems interesting. And this topic really could turn out to be interesting because the CD is of a very high quality. I can only talk about its strengths: visually attractive, filled with things that could help us in our research – I’ve even found fragments from Francis Ford Coppola’s clever film *Apocalypse Now*, which, as you know, takes as its model Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Definitely an interesting find.” Oriol Grau i Mas 07/03/2004.

“My first impression when I saw the material was that I felt a bit uncomfortable not having a printed version and not being accustomed to a format with a sea of fragmented contents. It was certainly my lack of experience that caused this sense of disorientation – I didn’t know what order to follow or whether it was the right one. On the other hand, if there is no paper version, it is also a way of saving ink and paper. I suppose it’s a matter of getting used to it.” Rosa Teixidor 08/03/2004.

The initial contact results in rejection and, in consequence, the defence of books and paper. We also find thoughts about the contradiction between studying at a virtual university and rejecting materials that are in line with the times. This perhaps is evidence that some of our students choose the U. O. C. because it is a distance

university rather than due to the conviction of the value of its media, but this is also surprising.

"I am one of those who prefer the paper format (although it's odd for a U. O. C. student to say this.) I like the contact with paper; I like to underline with those fluorescent marker pens in various colours and make my own notes in pencil. However, I appreciate that the subject requires something more than the linear format that a book allows. The most serious problem for me, though, is not the question of one medium or another. For me the real problem is that you might get lost among all these hypertext windows that we can open. We know where to start but we don't know what our destination is or whether it's the right one, whether we have left something behind or whether we still have to go further." [So not everything was pessimistic.] "Take heart, this is the future." Gerard Cortès 03/03/2004.

"I have been reading your contributions and I really agree with most of you. The advantages of the electronic format are already well known to us: sound, image, unlimited copies, free edition of a text, links to the Internet, etc. However, reading from a computer screen is exhausting and hinders concentration. Long texts need to be in the traditional format of book or print. As a fellow student has said, it is odd to say this at the U. O. C., which is virtual par excellence, but I feel that reading from the screen is physically very tiring – your eyes, your body posture. And clearly, there's nothing like a book." Ana Luisa Campo 03/03/2004.

"I'm sorry to have to say that I prefer paper. I spend all day in an office facing a computer. Now I have to repeat the headaches and the bad posture when I get home in order to study at the U. O. C. . Personally, I don't think it will ever be possible to replace a paper book with one in electronic format. I'm another one who uses the basic techniques of pencil notes in the margins, underlining, circling, etc. Up to now most of the courses that I have studied have supplemented the paper version with an electronic edition – for me this option is ideal – and those that use only the electronic format are tiring and heavy, and I believe that in the end the student does not perform as well. " Fina Roldán 03/03/2004.

"I see that most of you are in favour of the traditional book. I completely agree. I have been wandering through this great hypertext maze and, to tell the truth, it involves a great physical and mental effort. So many windows are confusing. However, I feel that if we could only get used to it, the electronic format has many advantages. The main one is that it reduces paper consumption, and it works easily and quickly. With a book, for example, if it had an appendix, we would have to find the corresponding page, but here this doesn't happen – you just click and the window opens automatically. For better or for worse, technological innovations force a reconsideration of traditional methods & The Internet is another broadcasting medium, much broader than paper, but it doesn't imply the disappearance of existing media, just as the cinema didn't kill off the theatre and

television didn't do away with the cinema. I have never done a course where the material had such an articulate structure, although it seems very functional because it is so well organised. I have to confess, though, that I chose to print it out to have it in the way I like. As I said before: I prefer the paper format, I can't help it!" Monserrat Llombart 04/03/2004.

"Up to now – in my experience at the U. O. C. – the web or the CD have been used as material complementary to the basic information contained in the print materials. This system – that of the CD – does not, I believe, aid the reading since, as we all know, the paper format is much easier and more convenient to read. This fact implies greater fatigue, more breaks to have a rest and consequently more interruptions of the close reading of a text. Personally, I believe that a paper version of the material would help us a great deal. On the one hand, I find that the material contained in the CD is excellent. It has been put together carefully and in good taste, and everything is there – maps, diagrams, photos, etc. I believe that the CD authors have done a good job. Anyway, if my initial view of the study materials is not very positive, I hope that this changes during the course. Perhaps the fact that I am not used to studying with a CD leads to this negative view; only time will tell." Albert Domènech 06/03/2004.

Slowly there began to appear defenders of paper and books who nevertheless started to be sensitive to the specific features of the medium and we now see messages that attempt to find a compromise between the two media.

"Although I am convinced and in agreement with the view so far that paper is easier on the eyes than the screen, even though the latter has advantages & just imagine the notes that would be necessary if you transferred the hypertext to paper. Notes of notes, and so on." Rubén García 03/03/2004.

"From the start, I personally had reservations about the hypertext format due to the fear of not being able to cover all the information that it provides. However, as I have got into the material, investigating the different windows and links & it is like an adventure – I have to admit that I have been completely seduced. And I have only covered a small part. I feel that the advantages of this system are remarkable. Like David, I believe that the transversality makes the course even more interesting, facilitating the task of relating one text to another, of relating works and authors, etc. All this, bearing in mind that although I use virtual communication, I still write letters, and I believe that there is nothing like reading a good book, and that a screen will never have the charm of some old yellowed pages. I hope that we enjoy this hypertext adventure." Alex Ogier 03/03/2004

"I feel that the course materials in web format (not just hypertext) have advantages and disadvantages in comparison to the book format. The first clear disadvantage of the web format is the need to read on the screen, making us dependent on a relatively unmovable device, with a landscape format for long texts, where the book

has a portrait format, and the impossibility of making notes or marking and underlining the text. This disadvantage is compensated for in the case of ephemeral information, where one moment's reading has no subsequent use; here the web format is preferable to a permanent material such as paper. Although this ephemeral nature is not a typical feature, the web format is also superior to paper when the contents are subject to revisions and changes for whatever reason. In the case of the course materials, the book format would be better because of the permanent nature of the contents. The main advantage of the web format is the possibility that is called hypertext. In most cases, the significance of this neologism is limited to links between words and related information. The relation can be of different levels, such as the following: One: Dependent information, equivalent to a book's footnotes. It is the only sort of hypertext that I've come across in the materials, and it is applied in two ways. Two: Superposition of the explanatory note or the opening of a new window. (By the way, if you forget to close it after consulting it, it stays underneath and if you try to use a new link, you get tired of waiting because the information is sent to the same window, and since this is underneath, you don't see it until you realise what's happening or when you think the system has got blocked.) Three: Jumping to another text and leaving the previous one. This leads to erratic reading. Luckily, the course materials have not used this tactic and have preferred to organise reading in branched menus. Another clear advantage of the web format is the availability of search devices, since the text is digital, and this is also true of word processors and browsers. These search devices allow simple searches (like those of Word, Explorer or the materials) and also sophisticated searches using word fragments, wild cards, logical operators, etc. In the case of search devices dealing with limited texts, the most sophisticated use that I have experienced is that of converting all the words into base forms, so that all verb forms are equivalent, the same as the forms of nouns and adjectives, (gender, number, prefixation, suffixation, diminutive, comparative, etc.) In the case of the materials, the search device is of the least sophisticated type of all those I have described. This is perhaps not so important for the type of simple searches that I suppose we will have to make on our texts from mixed sources and the didactic presentations. In the search device of the materials, I see a special advantage: it gives you at once all the documents that contain the search expression. However, I would criticise it because you yourself have to find the expression within the document, and you have to do this with the browser's editor if you don't want to get lost in a long text. Given everything that I have said, I think that I would have preferred the texts on paper. So much so that, for my reading, I have converted them to Word and printed them out. As for the research work, I will go back to the web materials in order to get the maximum benefit of each format." Xavier Rebull 04/03/2004.

"There's nothing like paper. Take my word for it, reading a book, even if it is only a part or a page, sitting in front of the computer is not the same as sitting on the sofa or lying down in bed, with the freedom of movement that the computer denies us,

because who has read a book that you can't put down without changing your posture while you read? Everybody does so. You make yourself as comfortable as you like or that the situation (of the book) allows. On the other hand, I also recall that we are in a virtual university, and society is changing, so the way to teach and the materials used in education also have to change". [However, although it seems that she is convinced, notice that the reasoning is poor and implausible.] "I'm telling you, in this case it seems to me appropriate given that you don't have to go forwards and backwards between pages; instead the screens solve this problem for you". [In the end, it seems that the only advantage is of an ecological nature or because of questions of space.] "On the other hand, we must be ecological. This is also positive because there is a considerable saving in paper. Imagine the amount of paper needed to print the materials for this course. So, for those of us who are studying, for the moment a few trees have been reprieved. To be practical, we also have to think about space, since all we need is a computer and a little place for the CD. Books take up space, and there comes a time when there's none left. Don't you find that's true? ". Monserrat Jou 04/03/2004.

"(&) Regarding hypertext, I also believe that it is a wonderful system to extend and complement the information contained in a work." [But very soon we get the resounding confirmation.] "Personally, I have printed out a large part of the links to give myself an overall idea of what the CD contains. Perhaps this is not the best way, because in the future if we have to print out all the hypertexts, the house won't be big enough to store all the paper, and hypertext, which is designed to save paper, will have the opposite effect. Perhaps one should only print out what is really interesting and leave the rest on the CD. Hypertext is like a great library at your fingertips." Carles Amengual 06/03/2004.

Although it is difficult to believe, there were a few positive initial reactions, even though the wording expresses shock, confrontation and, above all, moderation.

"It is the first time that I happen upon a hypertext for my studies. But for the moment it strikes me as brilliant. Although the organisation and the system of links that take you to more links might seem disturbing, " [Here we come to the true reason why the materials are not totally rejected.] "I find that the horizontal invasion of my desk that I used to cause when I was studying is now reduced to my PC and not much more: papers, set books, one or two reference titles. Previously it was: the set text, the text supplements, the sheets with the recommended reading list, the manual or encyclopedia to look up terms. Whew! For me the defining description would be that the occupation is at an end. For the moment, delighted; but we will see how I manage when I get stuck in. I might start climbing up the walls &" Monserrat Poveda 02/03/2004.

"I have been surfing the course web and I find that the material is simply pleasant and enlightening. I think that in a subject like this one the idea of transversality with

different texts is fantastic. How many times when we were reading a book have our thoughts turned to another? Well, here I find very sensible the links to other literary works that can illustrate a particular topic. It is not a question of whether the windows that open annoy you or not; it is rather than they simply take us deeper into the matter. I think that it is good material, although I will undoubtedly notice that something or other is missing, but the important thing is that it is instructive and, above all, user-friendly. And it strikes me as being just that. I can't imagine this course in paper format. Well, I can imagine it, but with notes in the margin telling us to consult a web page or a book. In courses like this one I am completely in favour of hypertext materials. At least this is my feeling at the moment and I hope that it stays that way. We will continue to discover things, of course." David Font 03/03/2004.

"I would like to say that I like these materials in hypertext format. Even so, the first time that I was faced with similar materials – I am thinking about Medieval literature, which presented all the texts like this – I felt a bit nervous. I had the impression that I was missing something, that I hadn't read everything. Subsequently, I learnt to read right through without interruptions (without opening windows) and get the gist of the thing. The second reading served to go deeper, to take notes & In the end I found it fantastic: I had a lot of information available to me. So, the materials of "Universal literary topics" has neither surprised nor worried me. I feel that one notes the clear imprint of Laura Borràs. I have already done a couple of courses with Laura, and one of the things that she has made me familiar with is the virtual workshop, a space where we find the reading list, the supplementary links and the students' projects. Highly stimulating!" Assumpta Grabolosa 04/03/2004.

We note that, as well as the opinions of the other students, the open dialogue in the forum also clarifies standpoints.

After reading Xavier Rebull's message, I believe that there is one word which eliminates pros and contras: Complementariness. By this I mean that we have to benefit from the two possible formats, digital and paper. One can complement the other. We must break down barriers.. " Monserrat Llombart 04/03/2004.

"Well, you're right: lots of complementariness. As a matter of fact, it's fantastic for me to have the basic course material on a CD – it saves my back. This does not mean that I don't print out parts so that I can make notes, etc. Nor does it mean that paper is forgotten for ever more. My notes, diagrams and summaries are still to be found on my desk. I find just one problem, if we want to call it that: the hypertext format. It's a one-way format. The authors produce it so that we can follow it but not work on it. Let me explain. I don't mean the text or the contents; I mean underlining, adding notes, etc." [Gradually, then, they accept them and start to see new possibilities, and want to realise more potential aspects.] "Like a PDF, where you can mark, underline, circle and insert notes. I am not sure whether such a format would complicate things further – perhaps it would. But if we have to study with it,

perhaps we would have to be able to really make it our study notebook.” Monserrat Poveda 04/03/2004.

“It is clear that it is easier to read a page from top to bottom than to immerse yourself in hypertext, which is more complex and for me, perhaps because of this, more rich. Links are like closed doors; they arouse my curiosity as to what lies behind them and I can’t resist opening them. Material that makes me inquisitive strikes me as wonderful. It is true that in the beginning I have a certain sensation of confusion, but once I passed through the first stage of discovery, I have continued to find reference points in the material itself (index, menus, conclusions) which help me not to lose my way and allow me to wander without worrying. This material requires a new effort to get into it; we will have to find or invent strategies, (for example, one fellow student reads it through without stopping at any links and opens them during a second reading.) Anyway, I also think that it is a very stimulating way to present the course and, as other students have said, the contents are very good and attractive. I think that the disadvantages that have been mentioned so far are easily overcome. The only point that I find a bit tedious is the thing about re-reading.” Maria Serrahima 07/03/2004.

“After reading the many contributions, what has surprised me most is the rejection that the format of the course material has provoked. And the surprise comes from what for me is the contradiction of studying at a virtual university, but not accepting what that entails, which includes, among other things, that the material is also in a different format. By this I don’t want to appear to be the great defender of hypertext because in fact my first reaction when I saw the CD and started to surf it was one of anxiety. Anxiety because I got lost and I was faced with a heap of material which I didn’t know how to handle and which overwhelmed me. Even now I’m not sure that I know how to handle it, and perhaps it will get the better of me, but as it says quite rightly in the presentation, we only have to know how to connect the pieces as we surf. And this is what we have to get more and more used to, even though, like most of us, I still prefer materials and books in paper format. I agree that hypertext places movement restrictions on one’s studies, but I do not agree with what some have said: that an educational text has to mark out a specific route while an informal text has to allow freedom. I believe that literary texts are the highest expression of what authors wanted to say, whether or not we like what they say or the way they say it. By contrast, an educational text cannot stake out a route; it has to lead us to a goal, that of knowledge, but leaving us free to get there by different routes. And that is what the format of this course material allows us to do. We can go straight ahead, or we can use the many links that are provided to make stops on the way in order to dig deeper.” Teia Bastons 07/03/2004

“I suppose that the fact that the materials are in a still new format enriches the forum with opinions of all sorts. Personally, my wander through the course materials made me curious. (&) I understand that it is easier to use papers,

scribbling on them, making them your own, but we must appreciate the great possibilities that hypertext offers. As readers, we're free to decide how far we want to go in the hypertext journey that we have to undertake. In effect, in certain courses at the U. O. C. hypertext offers us a learning that is more agile, more pleasant and more interactive. At the moment I recall, like Assumpta, the materials of Medieval Catalan Literature. We have to consider that those made available to us pages and pages of different books without having them on our desks and we can consult them one by one. And it allows us to do this while we weave our own way and it makes clear that literature is a living discipline. I will finish with one last point: this course is also special with respect to its contents. Because to study world literature starting from desire, travel and identity/otherness rather than chronologically or starting from the most renowned authors – which is what traditionally happens – is truly innovative. And interesting. And I feel that the formula of transversal study is a fine way to refer to themes and present them because it often stimulates the students and spurs them on to broaden their knowledge. And for me this is authentic learning." Rosa Clarena 08/03/2004.

"Let me finish by saying that I find it courageous to present a subject (and even more so a Literature, a concept that we always associate with books) in this format. I feel that it would have been half-baked if the CD had just been of supplementary material. Personally, I have no problem with the visual fatigue that the screen is supposed to cause or the fact that I can't read in bed, as someone mentioned. For me these arguments are not very serious. The truth is that I work for hours in front of a screen and I have never studied lying in bed or on the sofa. As for the contents, I feel that the authors of the CD have produced a presentation that is ordered, pleasant and, as someone has said, quickly arouses your curiosity. For all these reasons I feel that we should get stuck in and see how it goes." Joan Piqué 08/03/2004.

And with the euphoria of those who up to now had been reticent, confirmations started to arrive:

In my presentation I was not too positive about studying with the format we've been given, and after the first week I would like to confirm this. I am speaking absolutely personally, and I have total respect for those like Núria who are enthusiastic about the CD. My sincere congratulations. By contrast, for me, it is tedious to get home after a long day at work, to sit down facing the computer and not be sure where to begin. (Open and close windows, go from one side to another, nowhere convenient to take notes, difficulty to concentrate in the short study time that I have.) It would be easier for me to have it on paper like other courses, and use the CD to refer to supplementary material and as a means of researching information and/or to accede to interesting web pages, as many of you have said. As a matter of fact, I have started to devote more time to the other subject that I am enrolled for. After reading your views, it is difficult for me to add anything new, especially after the



contribution from Àngels Gayetano and the pros and contras set out by Xavier Rebull, with which I agree one hundred per cent. The CD is all right; I grant you that it is well organised, but I don't see it as the only material. And rather than ending up printing it out, I would prefer to have it on paper to start with and not waste paper and ink. I'm sorry; I'm afraid that more than one contribution is like a hankie with tears." Àngela Murillo 07/03/2004.

"After reading my fellow students' contributions and after a look at the CD which contains the course material, I have to align myself with those who are more or less against the materials being exclusively in this format. I have had the opportunity to study two courses with CD materials (the two medieval literature ones), but in both cases it was a matter of material that was supplementary to the basic course, which was on paper. I feel that it would have been more appropriate to provide the basic material in paper format. The other, as a fellow student as said, could present a sort of text that was longer and denser, providing all sorts of complementary material – links, illustrations, diagrams, etc. – in digital format. For me the computer represents my connection with the university, with the class as we might put it, but I still can't see it as my study tool. Apart from visual fatigue and the difficulty to concentrate, I have to make the most of any brief period for my studies, making notes and revising, and at many of these moments I don't have the computer. I have to say that I find the material on the CD well produced and very suitable and, although I have printed out a lot of the contents – basically the ones that I feel should have been provided on paper – I do not rule out a change of opinion during the course." Marta Puiggarí 07/03/2004.

But let us not think that all is lost. In the end, there are some changes in their attitude.

I admit that before I delved into the study of the CD, I had my doubts about this new study method. Like many of you, I felt that it was suitable only as a complement to the print material. Now, after having gone a bit deeper, I am delighted with what I have seen, the quality of the images, the very original way to present the course, the links, as well as the freedom that hypertext gives you to create your own itinerary." Rosa Maria Navarro 08/03/2004.

And the final compensation arrived after months of intensive work. I made 12 long contributions and articles were needed with further readings on the theme in an attempt to move them on from the low-key debate about paper or screen where they had got stuck. I tried to get them to see that what was needed was a reflection over the two choices: the form as a function of the type of content and the cognitive experience that we wanted to engender. The teacher also made 6 contributions in the same vein.

Subject: Materials  
Date: 13:50:45 01/03/2004  
From: Raffaele Pinto  
To: World Literature Noticeboard

Friends,

As you know from your study plan, the first week's task is "Opinions on the structure of the course", which implies that you familiarise yourselves with the criteria underlying the arrangement of the material (main texts, secondary texts, reading lists, etc) and with the function of 'research'. You have until 2 March, which is the deadline for handing it in. Since we are dealing with a hypertext in the strict sense of the term (since it is not possible to transfer it to paper), it is very likely that some of you will find the reading uncomfortable. Not because of the medium (a screen instead of a book), but because of the presence of windows, which interrupt the page you are reading and take you to another page, which in its turn is interrupted by other windows, and so on indefinitely. Just as one of you pointed out last Saturday, the sensation of discomfort arises from the fact that there are no beginnings and endings either in the literary texts themselves or in the comments upon them, which refer to each other in an apparently random way. In order to avoid the impact of this format being too traumatic, we might start our conversation in the forum by commenting on this new way of reading which the course proposes. I expect comments that freely express difficulties, discomfort and even criticism of the arrangement of the materials. Above all, do not forget to mention the inconveniences, however personal they seem – there will certainly be fellow students who share them.

Friendly greetings

Ciao! Raffaele Pinto

Subject:

Date: 16:53:11 05/03/2004

From: Raffaele Pinto

To: World Literature Noticeboard

Friends,

I am reading with great interest your contributions to the forum. As well as indicating interest and a sense of responsibility in relation to the subject, they include suggestions which will certainly be taken up in future editions of the materials. (&) I also remind you that I am at your disposal for any individual consultation – you can use my private mailbox.

Ciao! Raffaele Pinto

Subject: Fragmentation of the texts

Date: 12:32:10 07/03/2004

From: Raffaele Pinto

To: World Literature Noticeboard

Attachments: Jameson.doc

Friends,

I am intervening in your interesting discussion (in which, unfortunately, half of you have still not participated) in order to focus on one aspect of the hypertext format of the CD which I feel is especially worthy of consideration – leaving aside the legitimate complaints about the inconvenience of the screen in comparison to paper. (&) I dealt with this topic in an article that reproduced a contribution to a symposium on literature and new technologies which took place at the U. O. C. last year. I am attaching it so that those of you who want to go deeper into the topic will find some useful arguments. The article was intended for publication on paper, so you can print it out.

Ciao! Raffaele Pinto

Subject: more fuel to the flames

Date: 01:39:29 10/03/2004

From: Raffaele Pinto

To: World Literature Noticeboard

Attachments: Joan\_Elias1.doc Laura1.doc

Friends,

Laura's contribution broadens our debate considerably. It invites us to reflect on our post-modern situation as 'Gutenberg orphans', if you will forgive the expression. The problems that Laura brings up, are not just related to the contents of the materials, but in fact represent an invisible thread running through all of them, and in a way reconstruct a unity where it seemed that there was just a casual coincidence of topics. I believe, in fact, that this leitmotiv will keep turning up throughout our critical journey. And I trust that Laura, with her valuable contributions of ideas, also wants to join us on our voyage. For all of us, it will be an unexpected luxury. For your dossier on new technologies, I am attaching two theoretical papers, one from Laura and one from Joan Elies Adell, author of the block of materials on identity/otherness.

Ciao! Raffaele Pinto

Subject: First assessment task

Date: 16:27:39 10/03/2004

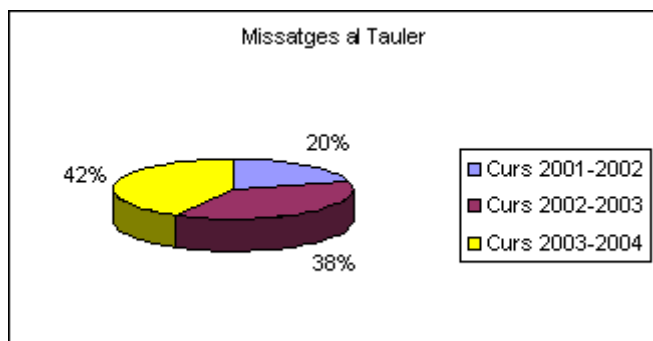
From: Raffaele Pinto

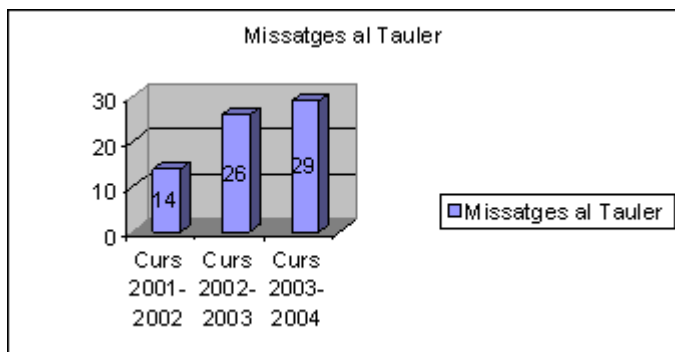
To: World Literature Noticeboard

(&) In fact, I congratulate all of you on the high level of participation and for the quality of your reflections, which will certainly help us (Laura, Joan Elies and me) to improve the materials, which are an experiment in a new way of teaching literature. An experiment whose success depends exclusively on your acceptance of the approach that inspired it.

After this first week (or two) of familiarisation with the structure of the materials, now it is time to get down to the contents, beginning with the block that deals with the topic desire. My intention is that you contribute to the forum with the same spontaneity and freedom that you have shown so far. The forum should serve for you to think aloud and not feel afraid to put into words your reactions to what you are reading, the texts and the commentaries, both of them being the object of your critical and aesthetic appraisal. Finally, I think that I am interpreting the feeling of all of us who are taking part in this beautiful adventure when I ask Laura to keep up the 'counter-attack' whenever she feels like it. Having got used to enjoying her point of view (without doubt the view that most sees the subject from the inside), we would miss her lucidity if she wasn't there. Ciao! Raffaele Pinto

Number of messages to the noticeboard





Some final assessments.

"My main assessment of the course is that it has taught me to read from a more general, more transversal and more critical perspective. I have learnt to read a work not on its own, isolated from the world of literature, but rather by fitting it into the whole. It is a critical and generalist view that is highly enriching. At the same time, this view is personal, fitting in to our own history of reading and literature. What Raffaele calls 'for me'. I have really enjoyed the approach to the subject, which avoids both passive reading and lectures from teacher to student, and makes you think. Because the information itself is always there in one place or another. What is needed is precisely this capacity to think critically. As for the approach, I have found the use of hypertext very suitable, especially in this type of university. However, I suppose that the web could continue to grow. The debates have struck me as very interesting, and you feel motivated when you know that they are being closely followed. In sum, it has all been very positive and enriching." M. Alba Serra 13/06/2004.

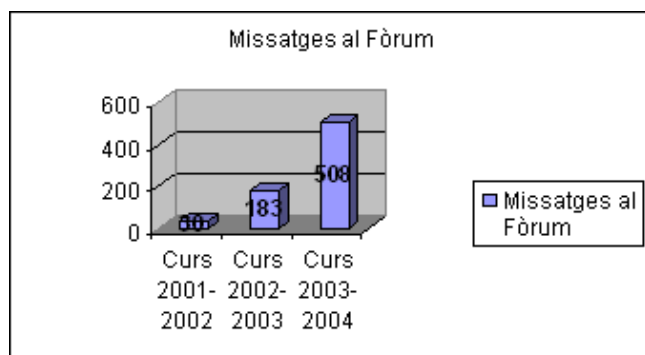
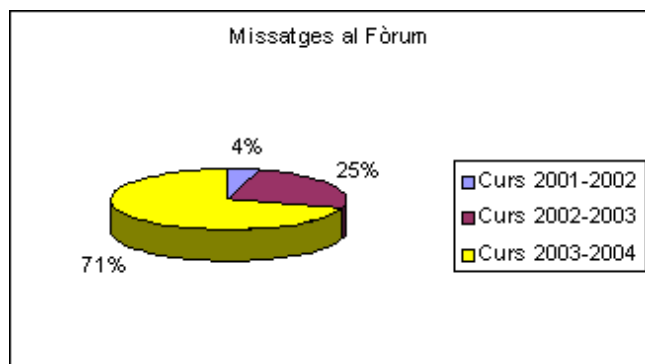
"The aim of the course was to promote critical perspectives in order better to understand the works that were set before us, and in my opinion it has been quite positive. The text readings sent by Raffaele, the personal consultation of books, internet searches and the CD material have all helped me to understand the authors and their place in history. The aspect of modernity in the texts. To tell the truth, I would have liked to be able to go deeper in the works. But participation in the continuous assessment has encouraged me to read the Divine Comedy and the *Decameron*, and I feel that this is a great achievement. Analysing the works and looking at them critically has motivated me to understand them and to continue working on them. I think that the teaching approach is quite coherent. The first task on intertextuality helped us to begin to familiarise ourselves with the contents and feel at home with the materials. My participation in the forum has been rather poor because I have been busy, but as a student I am very pleased with the individual treatment. I feel that there has been recognition that I had little time to devote to the

course, and this has motivated me to continue with it. I feel that it would be very interesting if the course could deal with classics or works that the students had read previously (as happened in the last assessment task) and relate these to the works included in the course. This would involve the student more and help to analyse the contents in other areas and to compare them." [And lastly a bit of advertising!] "That's all, I thank you all and I'd like to tell you that on 15th and 16th of July at 9pm in the Beckett Workshop I will perform a monologue that I have written, my first work as a director. You're all invited. Big hug." Rosa Teixidor Castellà 13/06/2004.

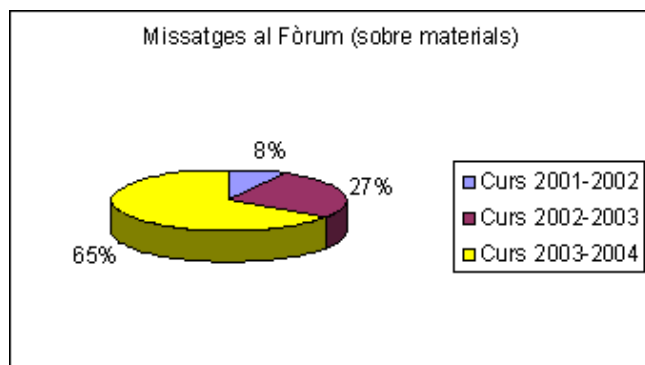
"I would not like to take my leave of all of you without some brief reflections. Right from the beginning, I felt that the goal that this course aimed at was that each of us, after a first reading guided by the hypertext, would come to their own reading, or re-reading, of the proposed theme. I really believe that this has been achieved. Each of us in our own way. What I mean is that all of us, through the experience of what we have read and our particular cultural interests, which obviously vary a great deal, have been able to imagine and find new paths and itineraries. I very much appreciate the contributions to the forum because this has made the course dynamic, active and participatory. Even if it was only in a small way, many of us have got involved. In a university like this one, where we in fact see each other very rarely, the contributions of our fellow students help us to 'live' the subject in a different way, and to feel part of a goal and an experience. (I also say this because I have suffered courses in which the teacher and the students made not a single appearance in the forum. In these cases, I felt completely alone and it obviously affected my dedication.) It's obvious that at times we haven't read carefully each other's messages – I include myself – and on occasion our contributions have been disconnected. We should have sent a message that week but we were all short of time and on the last minute. In spite of everything, we've kept up the pace. We have to thank Raffaele for sticking closely to the syllabus timetable. We have always felt that he was by our side & However, after reading the materials that Raffaele has given us – some have made me think a lot – I would have liked him to contribute a little to our debates. That would certainly have been interesting and useful. Well, nothing else. I've enjoyed this course a lot. I've felt comfortable and perfectly free to choose and construct my own paths, to seek and find readings and, above all, to put into practice the series of ideas that the readings have suggested to me. Have a nice summer." Assumpta Grabolosa 20/06/2004.

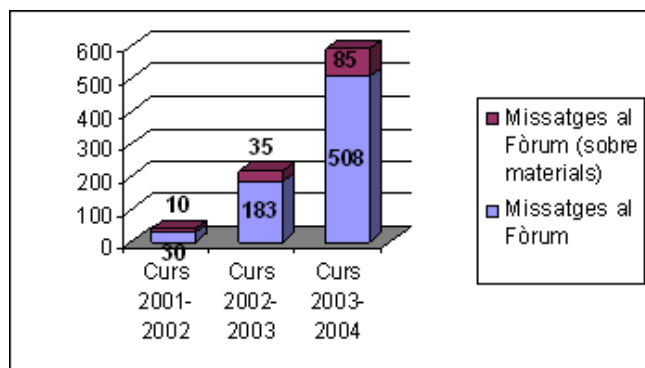
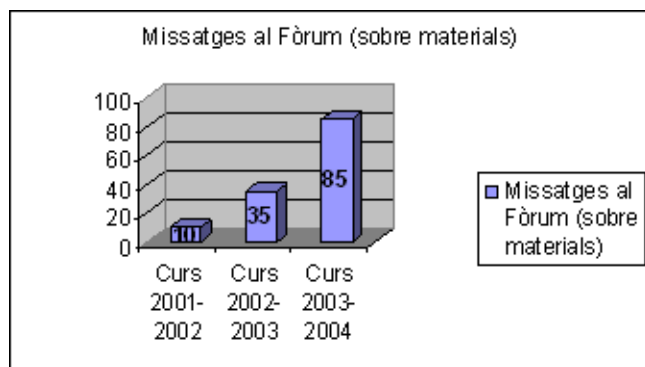
It seems that, at last, it has become clear that it is not enough with the virtual environment or even the materials that are a reservoir of contents. Practice shows us that, after the close accompaniment that they have had, the students finally understand the philosophy behind the course; they more than achieve the aims of the course, take an active part and show a very positive attitude to the subject which had caused so much mistrust at the beginning. I will now show some figures comparing the three generations of students that have taken the course to see how

much interaction there has been in the classroom, and the steady growth over the three years of the controversy regarding the materials in the body of messages to the forum.



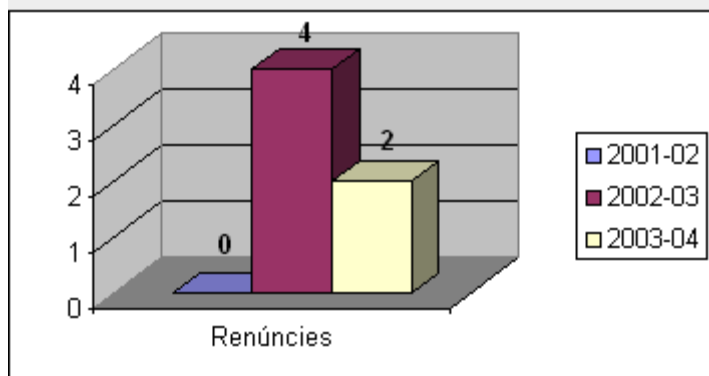
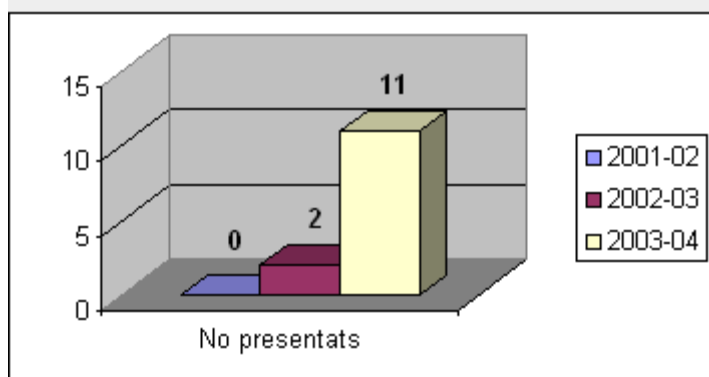
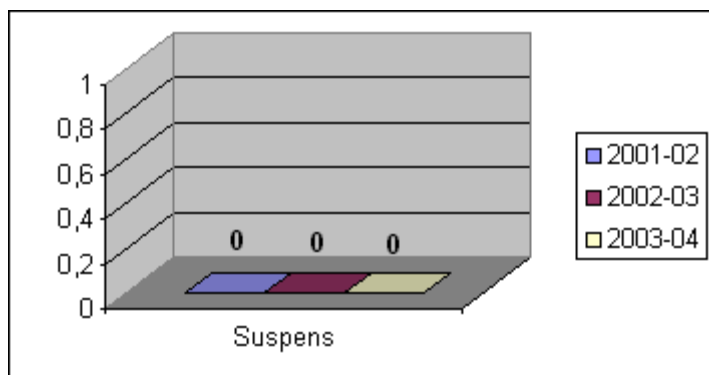
Or the number of messages whose aim is to express views about the 'form' of the course.



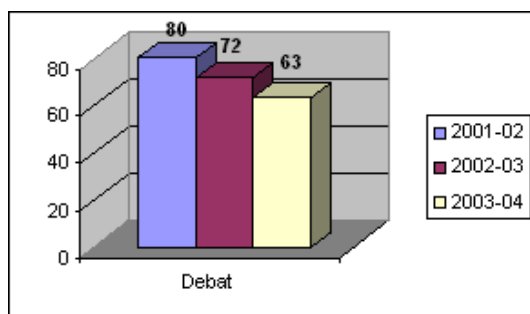
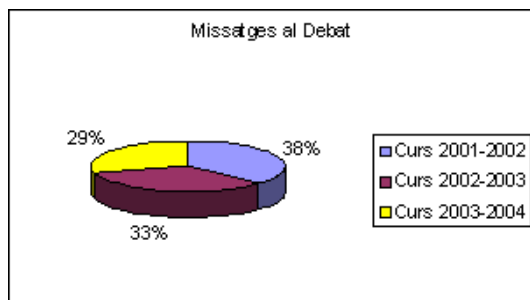
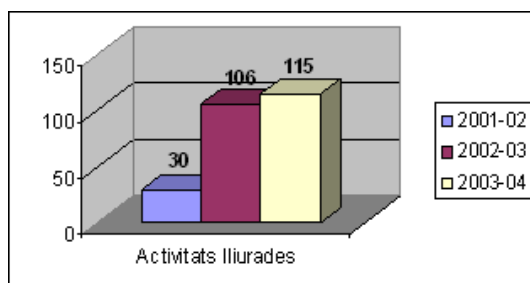
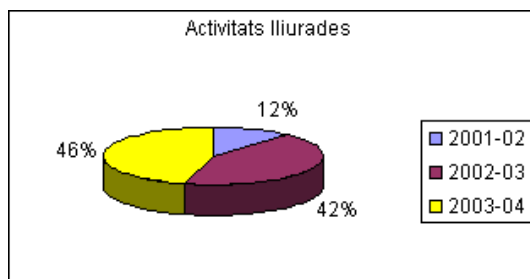


It is also significant to observe the drop-out rate and even the increasing amount of 'silence' due to the fact that some students<sup>2</sup> remain 'voyeurs' and do not participate in the dialogues with their fellow students. Regarding this point it is worth noting that the increase in the number of repeating students is always a result of dropping out during the first six weeks and not from failing the course, something which could also happen and is quite normal in all courses. All in all, this is a factor that we need to watch since, in just three semesters, the number of students who drop out or postpone and who therefore repeat the course is on the increase:

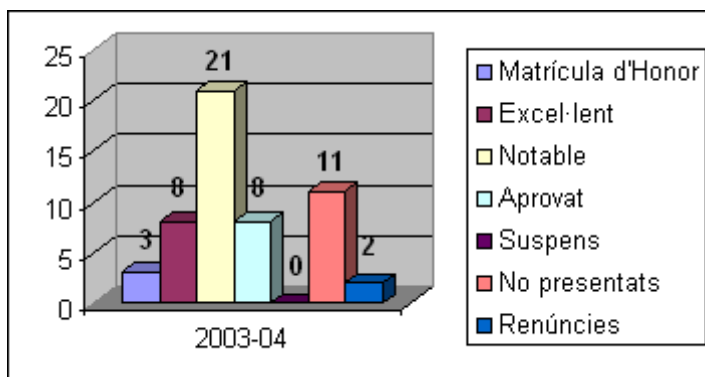
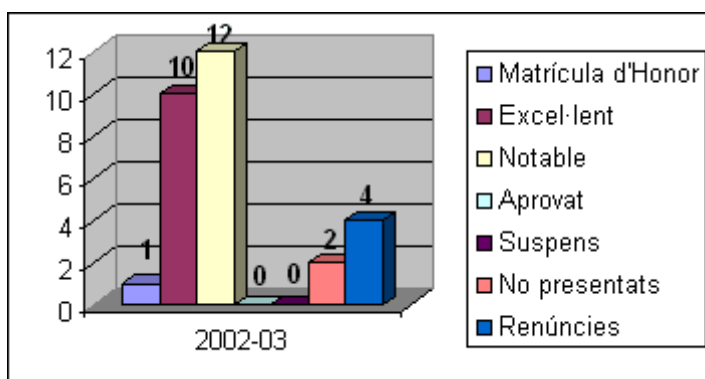
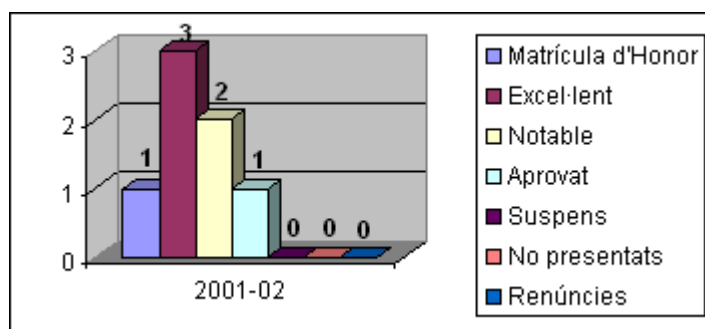




And we believe that it is not just the amount of work that puts them off (data on the number of activities):



This figure is surely also influenced by the pedagogical choices made in the course. In any case, I can assure you that the process is extremely stimulating and the results demonstrate that it is all worthwhile. Data on contributions to debates: And finally, data on the academic results:



As well as entering into and understanding the dynamics that we propose for the course, if it turns out that the students realise that the best way to carry out their own work is by using the same hypertext format and constructing their own webs, then we find that they have squared the circle. We give ourselves a medal and the satisfaction that this produces puts a few kilos on us. You can consult some of our students' work in the HERMENEIA web: some arising directly out of the course: Josep Maria Àlvarez ([work on pornography](#)), Teresa Vilà ([on adultery](#)) and M. Alba Serra ([on war](#)), and some out of their teaching: Josep Maria Roquer ([web of poetic hermeneutics](#)), Núria Casademunt ([alienation in Kafka](#)).

We would have liked to tell you about other experiments that we have carried out. For example, we took a cabaret to the university and studied it during a whole semester of the course on Comparative Literature; we could also mention the work in progress in the course Digital Literature, which will come on line next September. We intended this to be eminently practical given that there are already other degree subjects that have a historical approach to hypertext. We also wanted the students to act as literary critics of works of digital literature but the existing works would have been a challenge to the linguistic competence of most of the students. Consequently, we have designed a work of digital literature with different surfing possibilities<sup>3</sup> so that students can undertake an authentic and complete exercise of literary criticism. If we have had so many problems when the materials were simply hypertext, now that the task of exploration we are requiring is much more complex, I don't know what the degree of acceptance will be. We will have to wait and see, but in any case the challenge is there to be taken up.

## Notes

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1. This transformation in the presentation of the contents derives precisely from the reticence towards the web of all the students. Who knows whether the CD gives them the sense of 'physical possession' and therefore the possibility of controlling the information, an idea which the web does not seem to provide them.
2. The teacher has made several calls for participation from the silent ones. Quote: "However, I'm worried about the group's low level of participation. I still haven't heard anything from 32 students. Although they are not compulsory, these contributions to the forum are for me the only indication of your interest. So I hope that you will all be capable of overcoming your shyness and expressing your opinion, (like a substantial number of you do.)" Raffaele Pinto, 05/03/2004.

"I have the feeling that every time we go deeper into the topics there is a reduction in the number of people interested. By contrast, I do not want anyone to feel excluded from the discussion because the initial methodological approach, the 'for me' of the literature, entails that all of us are affected equally by the topics dealt with in the literature (and with equal rights to express an opinion)" Ráfaele Pinto 26/04/2004.

3. The *Diary of an Absence* aims to be an example of intimate personal writing through something which has been put into words but which perhaps should have remained unsaid. Arranged in the form of a diary, this narrative follows the paths of absence by delving into the pain that is caused by desire, a desire that is reflected in this particular box of raptures in the face of a separation from the loved one. To the idea of introspection arising from the exercise of spiritual reflection and the flood of torn feelings that this brings, there appears the idea of the house as a cloister, which is the scenario in which the tale in our hypertext exercise has been set. A closed space, with rooms to walk through, just as we travel different routes when we go deeper into the intimate truth of the suffering narrator. The apparently illogical ups and downs of the narrator's thoughts are metaphorically translated into the maze where the reader gets lost, this reader who has come in search of words that will lead towards the interior that tells a story of love, of the loss of love, of passion and of impossibility. The Diary is an eminently textual product, situated in a determinate visual and musical dimension, which offers the reader a pilgrimage, a journey to be undertaken. We have chosen to use technology for a goal that is aesthetic, narrative, semiotic and hermeneutic. In this regard we must point out that here you will not find a range of the most advanced media as a technological exhibition without any other purpose than the mere display of resources, but rather a group of computer-based media in the service of an aesthetic digital product. Its fundamentally hypertextual nature evokes the most secret and intimate aspect of hypertext – something that becomes still more relevant when you bear in mind the element of confession, of self-confession that is implicit in a private diary. At the same time we find a combination of the creative synergical possibilities of artistic languages like image and music which tell us of its hybrid nature. It is a multiple, complex product in that the text is annotated with the comments of a 'model' reader – in this case another teacher at the U. O. C. – who goes through it and into it in the search for meaning. The critical view of an external eye, which immerses itself in this chronicle of pain and absence, is realised in the first interpretative exercise, which invites the readers to express themselves while at the same time offering possible clues to the reading which are to be discussed. The Diary of an Absence presents five possible approaches to the text and therefore five different possible readings.

1.- First, there is the exploratory immersion in the house-scenario that it offers, through the rooms, the words acting as passwords and points of access to the different days of the text. This is a way where curiosity and the chance in our choices take us to words that act as a call that allows the hidden text to appear, the text to which they refer, to which they in fact belong because that's where they came from.

2.- Second, one can follow a numerical reading by looking in the 'treasure map' for the numbers that allow a chronological reading of the diary's pages.

3.- Bearing in mind that each diary page corresponds to one day in a month, a third reading is also possible based on the texts that have been discovered/revealed in the linear order of the calendar. We must remember, however, that the correspondence between the word selected and the day of the month to which it refers will not be visible until the content of the word has been revealed.

4.- Another possible way of reading is the one which allows us to consult the map or plan of the house and its surroundings to see which object entails an access to the text and where it is situated.

5.- Finally, the map situates in space the different lyrics that constitute this painful melody, and one can allow oneself to be taken where the music suggests, to go to the text that corresponds to the music that is evoked. Words, numbers, objects, lyrics and chance are the means for this particular journey into the darkness of the soul.

In this context, we ask ourselves: Is reading something that can be shared? Will everybody have read the same Diary if everybody's reading is necessarily different? Even one single person can read it differently on different occasions. To what extent will a linear reading of the Diary of an Absence, the reading that is most literary and least playful-exploratory, diverge from the reading that one can carry out on paper with the fragmented and random texts of the individual pages of a diary? Will the choice of music, of the landscape surroundings in which the words, objects and texts are to be found, in short, will a digital reading represent something more, an aesthetic experience different from the analogical, conventional reading of the Diary as a diary? What type of reading emerges in this changing context, with so many senses involved, with so many options for the reader? These and many other questions can only be answered by our students after they have engaged with the Diary.