Chapter 5

tEXtMACHINA: Or How to Account for the Methodological Particularities of the Humanities in the E-Learning Field

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ABSTRACT

The Humanities and cultural studies in particular have traditionally been distinguished by the specialty of their scientific practices. Since the object of their analyses can be broadly considered as meaningful texts, they usually emphasize hermeneutical, qualitative and discursive analytical procedures such as reading, text-analysis, interpretation and comparison. The new media offer fresh possibilities in this field of research by permitting web-based discursive text-interpretation for a community of scientists. In this chapter, the authors focus on the e-learning environment tEXtMACHINA by exploring the question of how these methodological particularities of the Humanities can be accounted for adequately with the new technical facilities. The didactic e-learning concept of tEXtMACHINA is based on the virtual simulation of scientific practices in class. By offering a set of techniques, such options as highlighting text-passages, communication tools or the flexible

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combination of different media, which allow for the collaborative, discursive and analytical interpretation of texts, students may be able to acquire the practical and theoretical scientific competencies for their field in a blended learning setting.

INTRODUCTION

In the early days of the emerging new technology, online environments were developed predominantly for pre-structured learning-processes. The web-based e-learning tool tEXtMACHINA (http://www.textmachina.uzh.ch) discussed in this paper goes in another way. It has been designed to satisfy the need for a digital learning tool which is adequate for the field of literature. It is our opinion that the Humanities, and literary studies in particular, distinguish themselves from the natural sciences not only in their object but also in certain procedural respects. These distinctions become clearest if one takes into account the specific object with which the Humanities deal: meaningful texts. This implies that cultural studies rely to a high extent on qualitative, hermeneutical and discursive procedures that need to be considered by developers of e-learning environments.

tEXtMACHINA aims at taking into account the particularities of the Humanities by focusing on the interpretive and discursive practices in this field. The software enables its users to qualitatively analyze a given text and to discuss its interpretation online. Its open and flexible technical implementation allows for an individualized problem-based simulation of these discursive practices by offering a set of easy-to-use functions. A few concrete examples of best practice will illustrate these features.

SETTING

In 2001, when tEXtMACHINA was developed at Zurich University, we intended to address an epistemological problem that seemed not to have drawn much attention: the question of how to adequately account for the particularities of the Humanities in the e-learning field. The challenge which this starting point posed for the development of a new e-learning tool was therefore that of combining a specific and a universal approach. On the one hand, it was our aim to take into consideration the specificities of the Humanities. On the other hand, teachers had to be allowed to insert their own material. This implied that a certain universality or formality of the approach had to be reached by abstracting it from any concrete content of study. The resulting product in the end aimed at enabling a group of students to easily collaborate on a shared text-basis of their or their teacher’s choice, in an individualized and flexible use of the tool.

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