

Project Year

2006

Project Team

Ronald Walters, Faculty, History Department, Krieger School of Arts & Sciences; John Astin, Faculty, Writing Seminars Department, Krieger School of Arts & Sciences; Katherine Hajar, Student, History Department, Krieger School of Arts & Sciences

Project Title

Critical Moments in Twentieth-Century American Radical Theater

Audience

Students taking the course *Critical Moments in Twentieth-Century American Radical Theater*

Pedagogical Issue

Professors Astin and Walters share a concern about the undergraduate students' relative lack of knowledge of American theater history. Most of the students, having grown up in an electronic age, are unaware of this country's rich and diverse live theatrical traditions. Therefore, it is hard for them to see the lasting influence of those traditions or to appreciate the centrality of live theater in twentieth-century American culture. Furthermore, the present political climate makes it difficult for the students to comprehend other periods in American history when positions on both the left and right were far more extreme than today—when socialism, communism, and anarchism were subjects for open debate, and when conservatives talked openly about supposed “inferior races” and about needing less democracy in the U.S.

Solution

Use digital technologies, especially the open-source courseware management platform Sakai, to fluidly integrate visual and audio materials into a new course, “Critical Moments in Twentieth-Century American Radical Theater,” cross-listed in the History Department and the Theatre Arts and Studies Program. The new version of Sakai will allow students to view and listen to relevant media outside of class. The team will make use of this functionality by asking students to arrive to weekly class meetings having looked at or listened to audio and video clips and still images.

Technologies Used

Courseware (WebCT development), Digital Audio, Digital Video, PowerPoint/Presentation

Project Abstract

Faculty from the History Department and the Theatre Arts and Studies Program propose using digital technologies, especially the Sakai courseware, to integrate visual and audio materials into a cross-listed course for the fall semester, 2006, entitled “Critical Moments in Twentieth-Century American Radical Theater.” The course will begin with the Paterson Pageant of 1913, an attempt by radicals and

intellectuals to use popular theater to establish solidarity with striking immigrant workers. From there, it will treat other moments in which writers, directors, producers, and actors used theater as a form of political protest. Among the topics are radical theater in the 1930s, the influence of German émigrés, African American writers, 1960s street theater, and the emergence of gay and feminist theater. Sakai also opens an enticing new possibility—taping student performances and posting them along with historical materials and running commentaries. We see the course as a potentially exciting one for students and innovative for combining history and an insider's understanding of theater. We also envision it as pointing the way for future partnerships between Theatre Studies and other academic programs. The latest version of Sakai has been enhanced by the addition of Project Pad, which allows instructors to edit and annotate audio, video, and still images. Our plan is to test the limits of this enhanced version of Sakai by using these multimedia tools inside and outside the classroom. We predict that Project Pad, as it exists within Sakai, will allow students to better prepare for class meetings. One of the ways we envision testing Sakai is by asking students to arrive to weekly class meetings having looked at or listened to particular audio and video clips and still images. Similar practices in art history courses, using MDID (Madison Digital Image Database) rather than the kinds of multimedia available in Sakai, have proven that students who are able to view a set of relevant images before class meetings come much better prepared to discuss those images. Normally, when multimedia and images are shown in class, students do not have easy access to the materials afterwards. The new version of Sakai will allow students to view and listen to relevant media outside of class. The program has the added advantage of allowing instructors to annotate the most useful content for students. By the conclusion of the program, we will have fully tested Sakai's capabilities to enhance a course such as this one, and created a model for future implementations of the software within a humanities context.