Leipzig's Social Hypertext Reader SHRIMP and the "Introduction to American Studies"

DOI 10.18422/70-02

Sebastian M. Herrmann

This article describes the ideas behind and the experiences with the experimental e-learning platform SHRIMP. Developed and deployed at American Studies Leipzig, the platform is used for the introductory Literature and Culture I seminar in the American Studies Bachelor of Arts program, and it serves as the main medium of instruction for around 80 students per year. It breaks up the linear form of the original seminar reader and instead offers students a hypertext of interconnected, short segments, enriched with social media and gamification elements, as well as a learning analytics component that invites students to take control of their own study and learning experience. It is driven by a dual assumption about digitization: that the digital age changes how students interact with text, and that digital textuality offers rich affordances beyond linear reading. Both can be harnessed to improve learning outcomes.

SHRIMP

> It is a cliché universally acknowledged that we (where "we" means, variously, the Twitter generation, the Millennial generation, participants in the Network Society) no longer read, or if we do read, we read poorly, with insufficient attention and affect. Reading, by which is meant literary reading, is said to be a "lost art" and certainly "at risk." We multitask and thus cannot sustain the kind of focus and attention required for a long, complex narrative. Our primary source of information, education, and entertainment is the screen. (Raley)

1 Rita Raley's observation, taken from the course description of her 2012 NYU seminar on Distracted Reading, holds threefold relevance for this article: The lamentation about a decline of reading capabilities has indeed become a cliché. Especially in discussions inside the humanities, the erosion of "our" (or frequently, in discussions of teaching: the students') ability to read is a well-established discursive trope, repeated again and again—in Germany at least as much as in the US.[1] Raley's phrasing of a "cliché," secondly, underscores that, irrespective of their factual accuracy, these discussions of how digitization has destroyed our ability to read 'deeply' are a discursive fixture.

2 Often coming with a generous dose of cultural pessimism, these discussions engage in a jeremiadic *Kulturkritik*, signaled not least by the first person plural address, they resonate with centuries-old observations on the presumed decline of the younger generation, and they clearly do cultural and discursive work beyond

simply naming the effects of digital text. Among other things, they pull together into one discursive shorthand a range of different phenomena—the fragmented quality of digital textuality, worries over information overflow, the challenges of screen reading, and others—all related to the current phase of an ever-ongoing modernization of reading cultures. Moreover, in their nostalgic vision of a "lost art" of (capital-R) Reading, these discussions posit a relationship between "literary reading" on the one hand and extended, focused, reading for instruction and information retrieval on the other, thus pointing to a (typically tacit) role that instruction in the text-oriented humanities traditionally plays in society: In the canon of disciplines of the modern university, teaching students literary reading was always implicitly understood as also teaching them the skills to think deeply, to extract information and to process it critically, and to self-educate: key professional skills that are useful outside of literature classrooms. Lastly, the fact that Raley offers a seminar that invites students to reflect on what it means to read suggests that one possible, perhaps particularly productive response to this perceived crisis of reading, especially in the context of higher-education, is to openly think and talk about different modes of reading and to involve the students themselves in such a discussion.

3 In this article, I will engage these matters from a particularly practical, hands-on perspective by discussing an ongoing e-learning innovation project started in 2015 at American Studies Leipzig.[2] This project, going by the name of "SHRIMP" (Social Hypertext Reader and Interactive Mapping Platform), serves to systematically explore the potential of digital textuality for higher-education instruction in the (text- and reading-oriented) humanities. It acknowledges that digital technologies have fundamentally transformed how texts are being produced, circulated, and read—in short: how the medium of text operates culturally. However, deviating from the cliché discourse that clothes these transformations in a narrative of decline, the project is focused on the opportunities offered by these transformations. It locates these opportunities primarily at two sites: one is the set of changing capabilities of students, who, we hypothesize, enter the university having already developed capabilities for navigating the complex, fragmented, overwhelming textual ecosystems they have grown up in. Some of the capabilities are manifest, some are more properly defined as dormant. As instructors, it is part of our job to understand these capabilities, to work with and help hone them where they are manifest and to support the students in developing them where they are not. The SHRIMP project, secondly, hypothesizes that, even regardless of the students' preexisting capabilities, the affordances of digital textuality are particularly suited to pedagogical uses. It accordingly seeks out ways of using these affordances to create more effective teaching and learning materials.

4 To explore these points further, I will proceed by first detailing five propositions that guide the work being done in SHRIMP. Since this is a practice-oriented article based on an ongoing project, and since SHRIMP is a teaching and not a research project, my goal will not be to provide evidence for these propositions, or to argue them, but to share them as what they are: open, often speculative hypotheses that

guide the practical decisions inside the project. In a second section, I will discuss how these hypotheses relate to the SHRIMP platform and how they have steered practical design decisions in its implementation. In a final section, I will assess the experiences of users, both in terms of how implementing and using the platform has changed teaching and in terms of student feedback. The goal of this article is twofold: to describe and share what we have done so far, and to start a broader conversation on how e-learning can help advance those skill sets that are crucial to the text-based humanities but that are often taught only implicitly—skills that students are expected to pick up on the side along with the more narrow academic expertise of the respective discipline.

Five Hypotheses on E-Learning and the Humanities

5 The original founding of SHRIMP in 2015, as well as the following, ongoing project phases, are guided by the project group's view on teaching, on e-learning, and on the social role of the humanities and of humanities instruction. I will use the following pages to characterize this view through five hypotheses. These (partly speculative) hypotheses regard both the potential of e-learning and the role the reading- and text-oriented humanities play in this particular moment, the second decade of the 2000s, in this particular institutional and social context, the German university.

We are under-utilizing e-learning

6 Judging from conversations with colleagues and students, the humanities currently do not utilize e-learning in ways that fully realize this technology's potential. E-learning is usually limited to electronic downloads of readings, typically offered as PDF files, often scanned versions of analog originals, that the students can read either on their laptop screens, on tablets, or on e-reader devices. Students indeed often ask for digital texts so that they do not have to spend money on their reading material. Apart from these downloads, some classes also use online discussion boards, but the discussions there are often detached from the reading, and, unless participation is enforced, students rarely engage in meaningful conversations there.

7 In part, this has to do with the kind of work humanities classes—and, particularly so, literature classes—presumably are all about: reading, thinking, and writing. While the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) might more easily use e-learning interfaces to practice and test standardized knowledge (for example using multiple choice formats) or to offer simulations of experiments, the humanities typically find it much harder to come up with quantifiable interaction patterns that lend themselves to being turned into e-learning interfaces. In fact, not least for historical reasons having to do with how we think about data and literature, scholars in the humanities typically envision their own academic work as defined by qualities that are inherently incompatible with the quantifying thrust of data practices. This makes it hard to even imagine useful e-learning environments for the humanities, hence the tendency to digitize

humanities instruction only to the point where readings are offered as digital downloads.

8 However, the standard file format in these exchanges, PDF not only entrenches the position of the humanities as a holdout in the digital age. It can even be seen as a metaphor for the humanities' resistance to the digital: The format's main advantage over other file formats is its layout stability. It preserves the original look of analog paper. In other words, PDF is an attempt to transfer a paper-bound practice to the digital realm with as little change as possible. While this may be desirable in some cases, it also combines the worst of both worlds: Offering the students PDF files eliminates the most productive affordances of paper readings, all of which are bound to the materiality of the medium, and, apart from portability, it offers none of the affordances of digital text. While this may have been acceptable in the early days of e-learning, in today's "E-Learning 2.0" (Mayrberger 310), it fails to deliver on the possibilities of new web technologies, such as communication, participation, collaboration and social networking among users/students. I will return to these possibilities in the section on the SHRIMP platform below.

We are (also) teaching implicit skills

9 In the case of Leipzig's introductory Literature and Culture I seminar, the professed main learning goal is for students to acquire basic skills in American Studies: to be able to discuss a (pop-)cultural text analytically, to identify devices the text uses, and to interpret the text in regard to its politics of race, class, and gender. As part of a compulsory module in the first semester, this course is meant to introduce students, in very basic terms, to how Americanists think and talk about cultural artifacts. At the same time, the seminar is also meant to teach a number of other skills that are not explicitly spelled out in the syllabus. These skills reside somewhere between basic study skills, the 'rounded-personality' soft skills traditionally associated with a liberal arts education, and the intellectual toolkit required for a broad range of mid- to high-level jobs in contemporary knowledge societies (Newfield 30). Most programs in the humanities tend to teach such skills as a 'shadow curriculum' over the entire program's length, and that Leipzig's BA in American Studies simply exemplifies this more general rule.

10 In the case of the Literature and Culture I seminar, five important skills from this shadow curriculum are:

- active reading and annotation—including the ability to self-regulate the depth of engagement, which often means reading large quantities of text superficially to dive into individual passages with greater, more focused attention,
- critical reading and critical thinking—including the ability to form new and to modulate existing knowledge based on the readings,
- comparative reading—the ability to synthesize different resources on the same topic,
- communicating the findings of reading,

- reflecting on and regulating one's own knowledge acquisition.

11 As crucial as these skills are both for the academic success of the students and for their professional careers later in life, they are not spelled out as major learning goals in the curriculum—a situation that is paradigmatic for how the humanities—at least at this time in Germany—tend to operate. Deriving their institutional legitimacy from the academic content they engage (American literature and culture, German literature, philosophy, etc.), these disciplines typically have an ambivalent relationship to those skills that will be most relevant for the professional life of many students, who often end up choosing career paths outside of the academy.[3] Historically, the humanities' ability to teach these skills has been a key factor in their function of preparing students for elite social positions. That they typically do so in passing, tacitly, and thus cloak the transmission of (some) monetizable professional skills in a lofty language of *Bildung*, may well speak to how the perpetuation of elite status works in German (academic) culture.

12 Notably, because these skills are also crucial study skills, students need to acquire them at a particularly precarious moment in their course of study. Beginning with the first semester, a student's ability to read critically, to deal with conflicting sources on a topic, to read actively and take notes, and to communicate their findings, will be a key factor in deciding their academic success. Yet for many students, particularly first-generation academics, the first semester also is a period of turmoil and adaptation, which makes it all the more important to teach these implicit skills of the humanities curriculum early and effectively.

We should train to associate, not to know

13 The third hypothesis informing SHRIMP is that disciplinary knowledge and disciplinary thinking in the humanities are typically matters more of conditioned associations and less of factual knowledge. This is, of course, not a new observation. Discussions of American Studies pedagogy have used terms such as a 'cognitive style' (Mechling) or a 'habit of mind' (Golub) to describe these patterns of thinking that are characteristic of any given humanities discipline, thus suggesting that the primary purpose of teaching is to help the students internalize such disciplinary habits and routines. Even as they are necessarily backed up by subject-matter knowledge, it is in the patterns of association between particulars that a discipline's characteristic qualities reside. To give one very basic example from the seminar: One of the aspects that marks the author of this text as an Americanist (and as a member of a particular subgroup within this academic community) is the fact that he cannot help but think of 'race' when seeing Will Smith's character in *The Pursuit of Happyness* paint his apartment white, or of ideology when listening to the character's thoughts about the relationship between economic success and happiness. Accordingly, an important part of introducing students to American Studies, of teaching them to become Americanists, consists in helping them make similar connections.

14 Currently, textbooks used in American Studies explain these kinds of conceptual associations, they offer exemplary readings of cultural artifacts, or they offer

histories of the theories that drive these associations. To a considerable extent, then, knowledge here is imparted not for its own sake but under the assumption that reading about critical concepts will allow students to use them, and to use them in the ‘proper’ contexts. In other words, for many textbooks, the explanation of concepts (and their history) primarily serves as a vehicle to convey the proper disciplinary webs of association. Yet, by way of their own strictly linear structure, these textbooks do relatively little to encourage students to explore and practice these associations in all their plurality and density: Their linear structure is ill-fitted to convey complex associative networks.[4] To put this hypothesis differently: introductory, ‘disciplining’ seminars in the humanities will typically want students to develop a network of associations that is, structurally speaking, much closer to a hypertext than to a linear textbook.

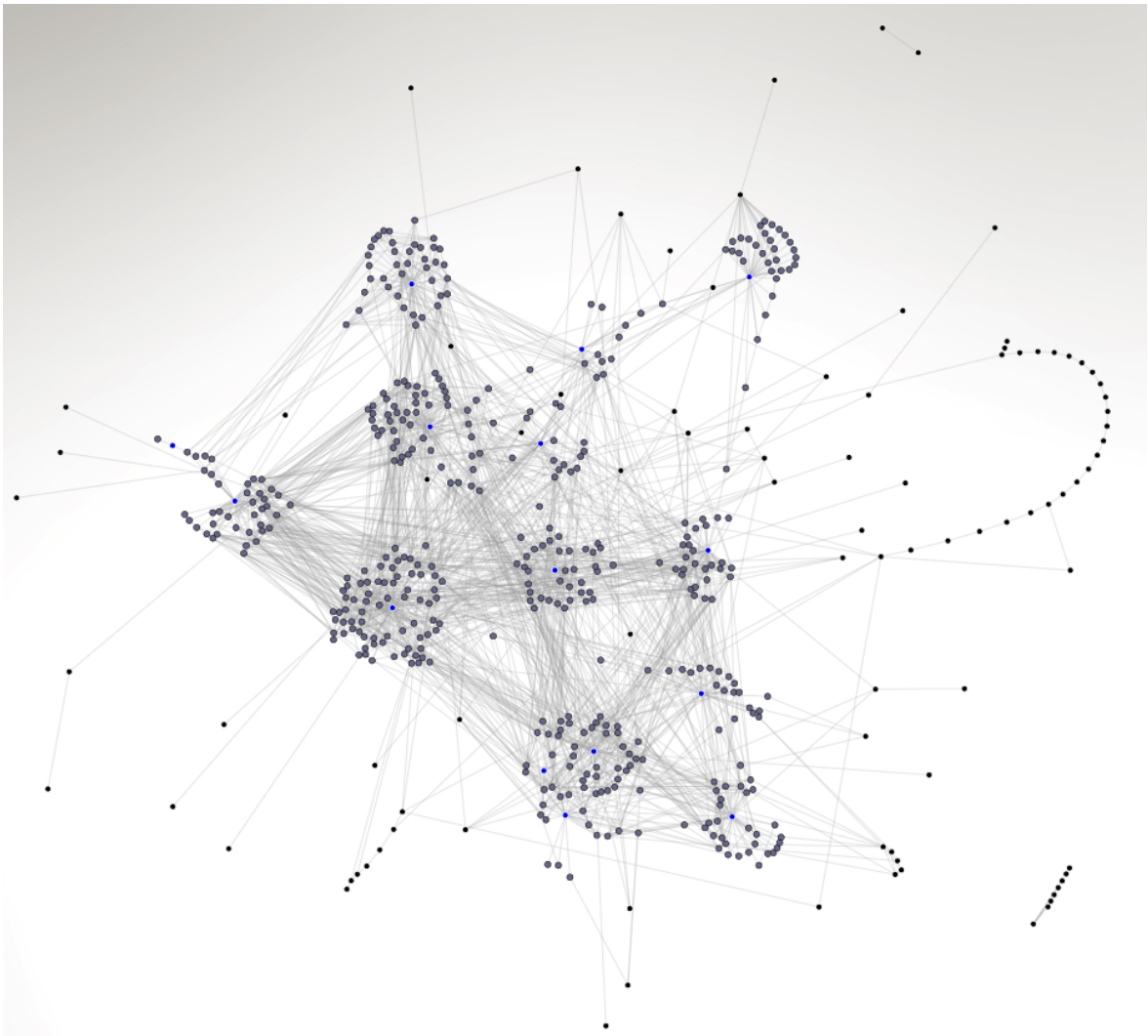

Fig.1: A web of associations: the SHRIMP cards visualized as ‘knowledge graph’[5]

Digital textuality can be the better text

15 Compared to paper (and compared to PDF files) digital textuality does offer a number of advantages that are particularly poignant in this context and that all go beyond the mere portability of digital information. These advantages can be grouped around the keywords of hypertextuality and social media.

16

Most internet users have more than once experienced the lure of hypertextual association in the form of a ‘Wikipedia rabbit hole’: setting out to read about one specific topic, one quickly ends up browsing entirely non-pertinent articles on topics vaguely related to the original research question but only two or three hyperlinks away. While this phenomenon certainly bolsters allegations of ‘distracted reading,’ it also testifies to the remarkably active, interest-driven reading processes hypertexts are able to trigger. In the case of hypertextuality, distraction and interest-driven readerly activity are two sides of the same coin.

17 Similarly, as problematic as the ‘outrage economy’ of many social media platforms is, it powerfully testifies to the ability of social media interfaces to trigger textual activity. Being able to express affect simply by clicking a like button, or to develop this affect in more detail vis-à-vis other users through a comment function, invites users to connect a reading to their own social contexts. The interfaces and interaction patterns of social media, likes, comments, up- and downvotes, etc. are engineered to attract and retain a user’s attention and activity. It is hard not to see this as a didactic opportunity.

18 Perhaps most importantly, for many incoming students, these modes of interacting with digital text build on existing literacies. As much as students may also need to learn to read long complex texts, they often already have a remarkable ability to superficially browse vast landscapes of interconnected texts. Building on these preexisting literacies and interaction patterns can then be particularly beneficial for students who have no previous (high school) training in reading ‘properly’ and who accordingly have a particularly steep learning curve in their first semesters of higher education.

E-Learning can be like training wheels

19 Especially for students at the beginning of their studies, the distinct affordances of digital textuality alone may not be enough. While digital tools facilitate engaging forms of interaction, such as more active, interest-driven reading, students often need additional guidance and motivation to help make use of what they are being offered. Indeed, research shows that students often find it difficult to transfer their digital skills to an academic setting (cf. Schulmeister 25). As accustomed as they are to using highly dynamic interfaces to read, navigate, or spread textual information, they often need to hone their skills so that these can become productive (and rewarding) for academic work. Moreover, e-learning typically shifts some of the instructor’s traditional responsibilities to the students (cf. Kerres 36). Faced with more opportunities for interaction, students need to take more control of their own learning process: they need to monitor their progress, prioritize learning strategies and motivate themselves to actually make use of the possibilities offered by a richer interface. In this context, e-learning can provide supplementary forms of motivation, for example in the form of gamification elements, and it can actively help learners reflect on their own reading and learning behavior.

20

A digital reader platform's affordances and supplementary incentives, we hypothesize, can thus work together to help students develop intellectual routines —of critical reading, of annotating, of discussing their reading, of note-taking, and so on—until these skills and routines become rewarding in themselves. Ideally, e-learning in this sense works like the training wheels on a children's bicycle: Encouraging practical and intellectual routines so that learners find it easier to adopt some of these routines and profit from them even when working with more traditional texts/media later on in their studies.

The SHRIMP Platform: Toward 'Social Hypertext' as a Teaching Medium

21 Based on these hypotheses, the SHRIMP project seeks to utilize e-learning in the humanities by actively seeking out the specific affordances of digital textuality, and by complementing these with additional motivational features. The result is a new medium, called social hypertext in project parlance: a remedialized version of the reading materials, broken down into fragments that are connected by numerous links and that afford many new forms of interaction. I will use the following pages to describe the resulting features and interaction patterns in more detail, explaining individual design decisions whenever necessary.

Fragmentation

22 The first step in creating a social hypertext seminar reader consists in breaking up the text into individual semantic units, each only a few paragraphs in length. These units, called cards in the platform's interface, are then connected using hyperlinks, and tagged with a set of content keywords in order to create yet another nonlinear way of browsing the material. One set of links connects the cards in the original sequence, thus retaining the linear reading path for those students who prefer linear reading or who do not (yet) dare to explore a topic's wider connections. The platform gives access to this linear path through forward/backward buttons and by way of a linear sequence of dots, each representing one card. These dots turn green whenever a card is displayed for an extended time, giving immediate feedback on the (approximate) amount of reading already done.

23 In addition to being a necessary step in order to keep the readings manageable on a screen, breaking up the text into individual cards, pedagogically meaningful semantic units, already proved to be a highly instructive step in rethinking the seminar content, an aspect I will return to in more detail below under "Rethinking the Seminar Reader."

SHRIMP Hyperlinks

24 SHRIMP hyperlinks are a custom implementation that significantly differs from traditional hyperlinks: Where traditional hyperlinks connect a passage to an entire page, these improved links have the ability to connect passages to passages; a more precise form of referencing that creates a meaningful connection between

short sequences of text—one phrase on one card, and one on another. As a direct consequence of that, SHRIMP links are bidirectional. The landing area of a link also links back to the passage that the link originates from. Moreover, SHRIMP links can also be stacked, allowing for the same passage to link many different places in the seminar reader. Most importantly, SHRIMP links come with a comment that explains the relationship between the two pieces of text the link connects. These comments can also be set to different values depending on whether the link is seen from its originating segment or from its destination.

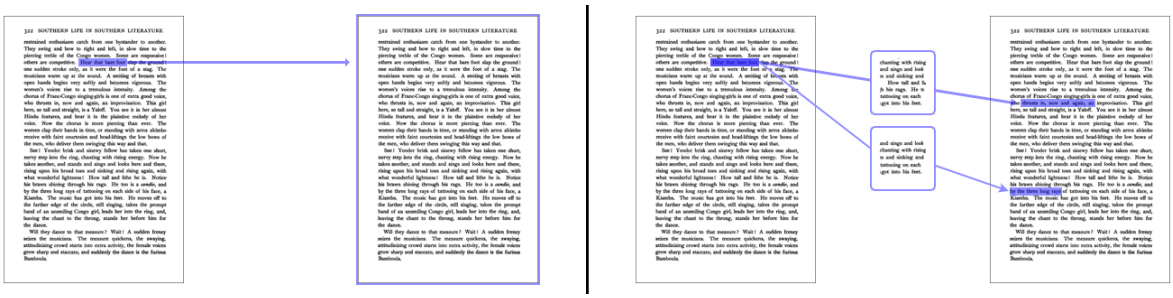

Fig 2: Normal hyperlinks and SHRIMP's improved hyperlinks

25 These additional features are crucial for building a pedagogically useful hypertext: If, in line with hypothesis three above, we should strive to teach associations, being able to explain the connection between different aspects of the reading (with links often crossing the boundaries of individual seminar sessions) is crucial. Bidirectional, commented links also allow for two different forms of pedagogical guidance, each addressing (or interpellating) a different type of learner: Whenever a link points to material that is part of a later session, the link's comment can explain that this is a concept the seminar will discuss in more depth later in the semester. Bold and ambitious students can then follow this link and read more. Conversely, when seen from the landing zone, the link's comment will remind students that they already know the concept under discussion from an earlier session, something that will help students to anchor new knowledge in already familiar concepts.

Annotation

26 In order to further practice routines of active, critical reading, the platform contains several interface elements that allow users to annotate the text as they read it. A notepad is permanently visible next to the reading and invites users to take notes, and each card offers rich annotation features: Simply by marking up a piece of text, students can either highlight this passage for future reference, or they can highlight it and add a private comment only they can see. Later in the semester (see section "Gamification and Analytics" below), they can also use the annotation feature to anonymously propose passages for discussion in the upcoming session or to answer reading questions. Annotated passages can be viewed in a synopsis view, grouped by which session the card belongs to, and students are encouraged to bring a printout of these to class for discussion. Cards can also be marked as favorites for later retrieval, the coarsest form of annotation and somewhat reminiscent of dog-earing a page of a book.

Social Interaction

27 In addition to these hypertext and annotation features, students are also able to publicly comment on any passage of text on any card. Other than discussions offered by traditional e-learning platforms, these are directly tied to the reading and thus serve to further activate the reading in the seminar group's social context—with a markedly low threshold for participation thanks to the seamless integration into the reading itself. All cards, links, and comments can also be 'liked' in order to steer other students to these materials and to publicly express appreciation. Again, the idea is that these interaction patterns will help students activate the seminar reading in ways that are deeply familiar to them and well-practiced in their everyday use of social media.

Gamification and Analytics

28 Building on the tight integration of platform and reading, and in keeping with the fifth hypothesis on additional forms of motivation, SHRIMP uses simple gamification elements to increase the users' emotional investment in the platform: Using the platform, students can earn and collect badges for different forms of interaction (for reaching a certain number of annotations, comments, etc., or for logging on late at night or early in the morning, e.g.). Additionally, individual features (a dictionary lookup function, proposing passages for discussion, multiple notepads, etc.) are only activated as a reward for a given number of interactions. These gamification elements add another level of motivation to studying, one that is decidedly not about earning a good grade but about a playful intensity of studying and learning.

29 Moreover, all of these interactions generate rich metadata on how students use the platform, how they engage the material offered, how much they have read, and how their learning develops over the course of a single usage session or over the entire semester. As of the project's third phase, which focused on learning analytics, these sets of metadata are automatically analyzed for two distinct purposes: On the one hand, they allow the platform to associate most students with one of four different 'learning preference types' (ambitious annotators, cooperative communicators, individual explorers, or conservative readers) and to offer gamified learning challenges tailored to the respective student's learning preferences. The platform, on the other hand, provides students with statistics on how their own interaction with the seminar reader develops: how they are using SHRIMP to do their readings both in relation to their previous usage and in relation to the rest of the cohort. These statistics, along with short explanatory texts, are designed to help students reflect on their own learning and to take control of their learning strategies, intensity, and progress (see section "E-Learning can be like training wheels" above; on learning analytics generally, see Gasevic, Siemens, and Rosé; for a brief overview over the history and current state of efforts at "educational data mining," see Baker and Inventado).

Experiences: Does it Work?

30 SHRIMP is an ongoing learning and teaching experiment, and the project team emphatically embraces this status, using the platform as a testbed to keep trying out how technology can improve learning and teaching in the text-based, reading-centered humanities. Accordingly, all findings at this point are tentative and subject to revision, but there are some preliminary results. They speak of how the use of social hypertext has started to change the seminar reader, of how the role of instruction in the classroom changes accordingly, and of how students interact with the readings.

Rethinking the Seminar Reader

31 Using SHRIMP, and taking seriously the goal of remediatizing the existing seminar reader from paper to social hypertext, has massively impacted the material itself and the instructors' views on it. The process of segmentation, the cutting apart of the existing readings into individual cards and the process of identifying phrases for hyperlinks, both done collaboratively by instructors and student assistants, necessitated a critical rethinking of the material and also helped better understand how the material worked in the first place. Indeed, adding links to the seminar reader that were reflective of the instructors' own associations has brought these associations to the fore in new, poignant ways, and automated, algorithmic visualizations of the resulting structures of these relationships have highlighted topical priorities that may have been implicit in instruction but that now take on a more explicit form.

32 Together with the comments and discussions by students, tutors and instructors, the didactic explanations directly attached to links fundamentally shifted emphases in the textual work the seminar reader does. What once was nothing but core readings that the students were supposed to process without much further guidance in preparation of a discussion in class now is a more complex and varied body of material: Measured by word counts, the original content now forms only about seventy-one percent of the seminar reader as it is used today. The remaining twenty-nine percent are explanations of how different parts of the reader relate to each other, a development that is reflective of the third hypothesis above: in the Literature and Culture I seminar we are now indeed teaching associations, the relationship between concepts, almost as much as we are teaching content.

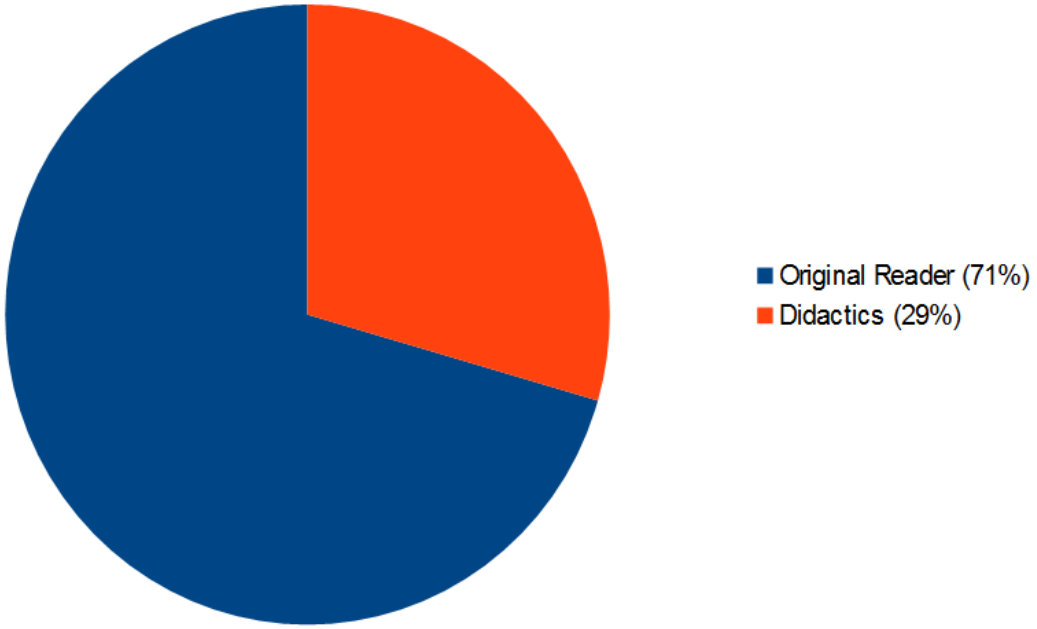

Fig. 3: Original seminar reader content vs. explanation and pedagogical instruction

33 Zooming out even further and taking into account also the students' own annotations and their own reading summaries as captured on the notepads, the emphasis has shifted further away from the main text towards the meta- and intertext. Looking at a representative snapshot about half way through the winter term of 2018–19, one can see that at this point only forty-two percent of SHRIMP's dynamic textual universe consisted of the original material.[6] The larger part of it are the link explanations, as described above, as well as comments and discussions, annotations, and the content of the students' online notepads.

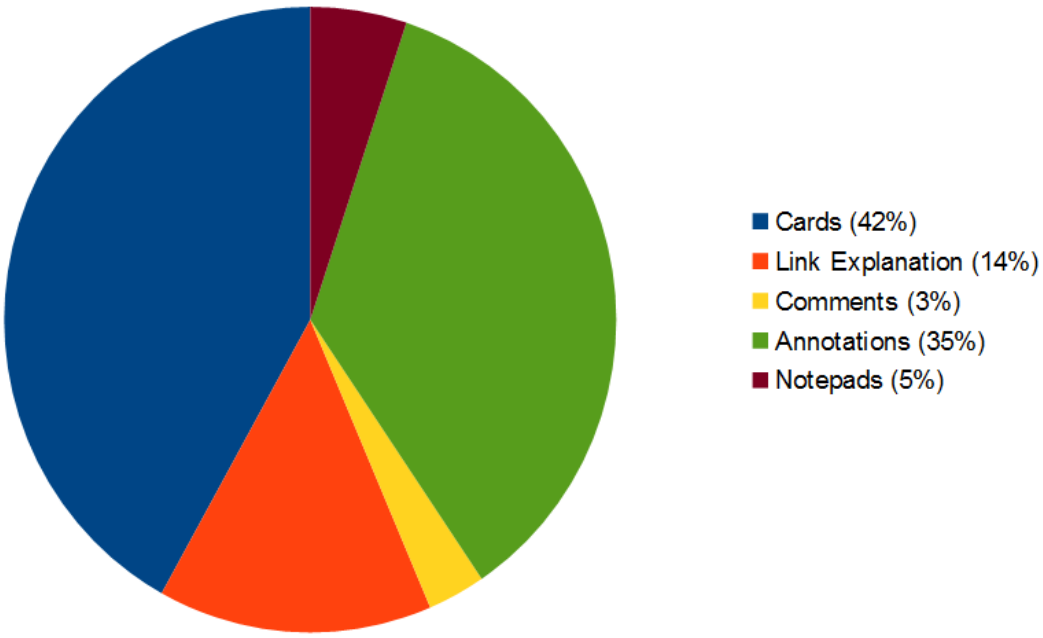

Fig 4: Breakdown of the SHRIMP universe in December 2018 (word count per category)

34 The shifted emphasis, away from the original content and toward its meta-reflection in links and comments is also visible in the distribution of likes. Only

slightly over forty percent of all likes are used for cards with original reading material. Around thirty percent of likes are given to link explanations or comments in discussions, respectively. These numbers suggest that students not only engage with all of these materials, but that they appreciate all three to roughly the same extent as helpful for their learning.

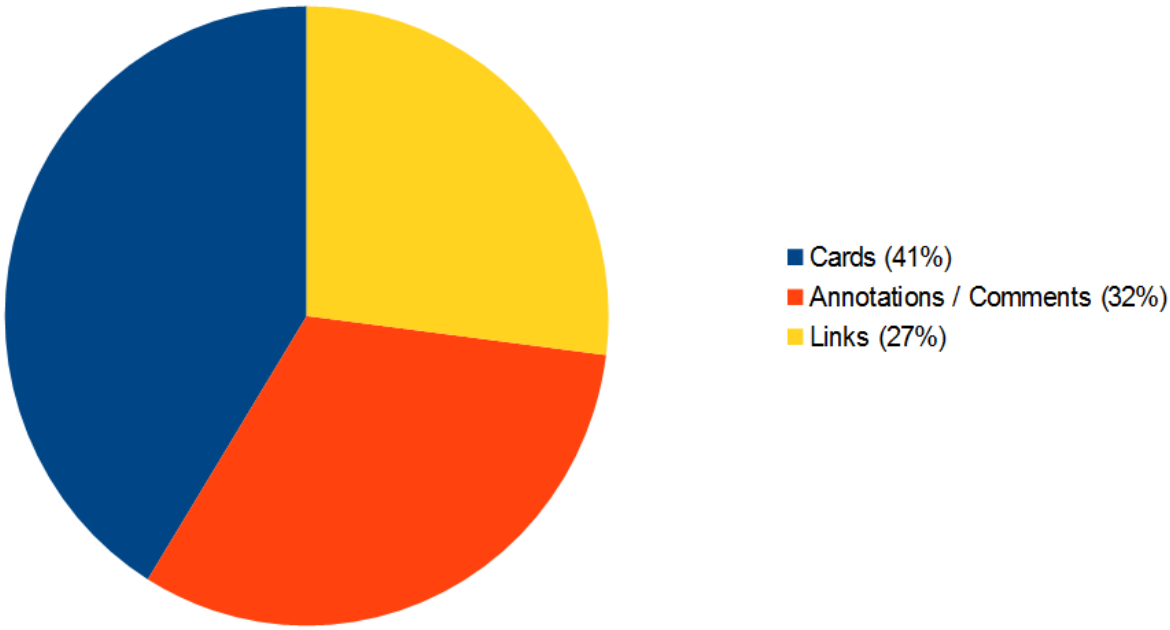

Fig. 5: Distribution of Likes

Classroom Dynamics

35 Using the platform has also changed interaction in the classroom: Comments and “proposed for discussion” annotations now create new inroads into the seminar discussion that are more narrowly tailored to the students’ needs. More fundamentally, using a social hypertext reader has also transformed the function of the seminar discussion in the students’ learning process. Their preparatory reading now already contains much more information on how concepts relate, specifically on how concepts from any given week relate to what has been discussed so far. Moreover, links, likes, and comments now visibly emphasize those parts of the reading that are particularly pertinent. Most importantly, perhaps, the commented links and the online discussions increasingly remake the seminar reader into a new, continuously evolving, hybrid text that is increasingly tailored specifically to the Literature and Culture I curriculum, reducing the amount of transfer that needs to be done in face-to-face interactions. All these factors relieve the seminar discussion of some of the functions it had had so far, such as securing basic comprehension, connecting the individual sessions, accentuating individual parts of the reading, or connecting the readings to the overall module. One of the ongoing challenges in fully utilizing the platform lies in adapting the face-to-face seminar time accordingly.

Student Voices

36 After each semester, we collected student feedback on the platform either as a simple questionnaire or, for some of the SHRIMP project phases, in the form of qualitative interviews with focus groups of students. It is, of course, difficult to reliably assess learning outcomes with regard to the soft learning goals of the ‘shadow curriculum’ outlined above: motivation, critical reading and thinking, the ability to reflect on one’s own knowledge and learning process, etc. The interviews give at least anecdotal evidence of this approach’s overall success.

37 Students explicitly praised the platform as a substantial improvement compared to existing e-learning systems, such as Moodle. They applauded the learning analytics’ ability to improve their motivation, both by giving them information on how they are doing relative to other users and by giving feedback on how much they still need to do. Students also welcomed the feeling of community the platform imparted, not least perhaps by way of its social media features. Some voices, however, were more critical, insisting that one did not need additional motivation and that a more sober form of interacting with the readings was preferable. In the 2018–19 cohort, one student opted out of the digital text entirely, printing PDF versions of the readings on paper and bringing those to class. This was, however, an exception.

38 Still, there are some intriguing ambivalences around other aspects of the platform. In an earlier iteration of the seminar (2017–18), students who only needed a small number of interactions to earn the next badge were sent an email to encourage them to perform these interactions now. Asked about these encouragement e-mails in the final evaluation, students characterized them as unnecessary and even annoying. Usage data collected during this period, however, shows increased activity after the emails were sent, a correlation that suggests that the direct messages did entice the students to go online and do work that ended up earning them badges.

39 Similarly, usage metadata suggests that the students often open hyperlinks only so far as to read the hyperlink comment and to see where the link would point them. Rather than following the link, however, and giving in to distraction and curiosity, they close the link popup and return to their original reading. This is in line with results from the interviews that suggest that the students appreciate the links (as also documented by the distribution of likes, see section “Rethinking the Seminar Reader” above) but are also afraid to get lost in the hypertext universe, or to read less efficiently if they follow their interests rather than sticking to the material that is assigned for the upcoming session. As much as the hyperlinks thus seem to succeed in suggesting connectivity, in inviting students to ponder how things relate, the students so far only rarely, selectively use them to allow themselves to get ‘distracted’ and to engage in truly nonlinear reading.

40 So far, using and refining the platform, then, underscores the potential of social hypertext for humanities instruction: With its focus on the relationship between concepts, this medium better models the kind of knowledge we want to convey. The rich affordances of truly digital text, rather than the PDF format’s attempt to model paper on screen, successfully activate the students, who read more actively

than they did before. Having a dynamic, expandable seminar reader that evolves every year, by way of new links, new cards, or new user comments and discussions, also helps the instructors to keep fine-tuning the seminar. However, considerable work remains to be done to fully understand and harness the potential of this medium, not least in terms of the classroom interactions it allows, and in terms of striking the right balance between intrusive and helpful forms of encouragement.

Conclusion

41 The SHRIMP experiment, continuously running since 2015 in different developmental phases and now entering its fifth iteration, is an ongoing attempt to realize the potential of e-learning and (social) hypertextuality for learning and instruction in the text- and reading-oriented humanities. It proceeds from the assumption that one of the (at times tacit) functions of humanities instruction always was and continues to be practicing forms of literacy, and to do so not for its own sake, *l'art pour l'art*, but to prepare students for the professional life and social functions they will take on later in life. As the medium of text changes, and as the cultural uses of textuality change, teaching in the humanities necessarily also changes. In the resulting new curriculum, teaching students deep, focused reading of long texts, the mode of reading that is presumably in crisis, has its place. But so does the kind of (inter-) active, distracted, nonlinear reading that we find on hypertext platforms such as Wikipedia or on social media. As our experiments with SHRIMP so far have shown, especially for students in their first few semesters, and especially for students from non-academic backgrounds, using these modes of reading can significantly improve the learning experience.

Notes

[1] Raley cites as examples for this crisis discourse a 2009 *LA Times* article by David L. Ulin and a study on *Reading at Risk*, commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts and published in 2004, among others. For a more recent discussion, cf. Johnson, who also mentions an online tool designed to help cope with the trend using Web 2.0 technology—an approach that resonates with the SHRIMP project. For a longue-durée discussion of the concern over information overload, see Ann Blair's particularly accessible article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. For a recent incarnation of the discourse in Germany, cf. the dpa interview of Martin Körte by Petra Kaminsky.

[2] The project report "SHRIMP Analytics: Dokumentation 1. Projektphase" is available online. Another article on the project will be published in *Blickpunkt Hochschuldidaktik* as part of the proceedings of the 2019 conference of the Deutsche Verband für Hochschuldidaktik. For details on both (German-language) publications, please refer to the project webpage.

[3] The debate seems to be particularly fraught in the German university. During the Bologna Process in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a lot of legitimate, often nuanced criticism of and concern over the neoliberalization and corporatization of higher education attached to a far less nuanced rejection of 'employability' as a goal in higher education. The resulting aversion against the term, often contrasted against an ideal of pure *Bildung*, arguably continues to hamper debates about how a humanities education can and should prepare students for social and professional roles.

[4] For a helpful discussion of the difference between the kind of nonlinearity a hypertext offers and the nonlinearity that is inherent to all texts, see Aarseth (2).

[5] The image shows a force-graph visualization of links (lines) and cards (dots) in the seminar reader. The individual content cards cluster around their respective sessions (blue dots), but the visualization also shows how some cards are pulled closer toward other clusters. Cards that end up in the middle of the force graph tend to hold relevance for a particularly large number of different contexts.

[6] Users are automatically deleted after several weeks of inactivity, and their notepads are deleted along with them. Comments are reviewed by a tutor at the end of the semester and those that are promising for future iterations of the seminar—either because they contain helpful additional content for coming cohorts or because they promise to spark debate in the future—are kept. Accordingly, the total volume of the seminar reader tends to grow over the course of a semester, and to shrink in the weeks after as more and more users get scraped from the platform. The above numbers and graphs were compiled in early December 2018.

Works Cited

Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997. Print.

Baker, Ryan Shaun, and Paul Salvador Inventado. "Educational Data Mining and Learning Analytics." *Learning Analytics*. New York: Springer, 2014. 61–75. Print.

Blair, Ann. "Information Overload, Then and Now." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 28 Nov. 2010. Web. 29 July 2019.

Gasevic, Dragan, George Siemens, and Carolyn Penstein Rosé. "Guest Editorial: Special Section on Learning Analytics." *IEEE Transactions on Learning Technologies* 1 (2017): 3–5. Print.

Golub, Adam. "Teaching American Studies as a Habit of Mind." *Encyclopedia of American Studies Online Forum 3*. Ed. Simon Bronner. 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2020.

Johnson, Steven. "The Fall, and Rise, of Reading." *Chronicle of Higher Education*. 21 Apr. 2019. Web. 29 July 2019.

Kaminsky, Petra. “Wir tun unserem Gehirn keinen Gefallen: Interview mit dem Hirnforscher Martin Körte über die Folgen der digitalen Datenflut auf den Menschen.” *Weser Kurier* 22 July 2019. Web. 23 Dec. 2020.

Kerres, Michael. *Mediendidaktik: Konzeption und Entwicklung digitaler Lernangebote*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018. Print.

Mayrberger, Kerstin. “Web 2.0 in der Hochschule – Überlegungen zu einer (akademischen) Medienbildung für „E-Learning 2.0“.” *Jahrbuch Medienpädagogik 8: Medienkompetenz und Web 2.0*. Ed. Bardo Herzig et al. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010. 309-28. Web. 29 July 2019.

Mechling, Jay. “You Can’t Teach Folklore.” *Working Papers of the Ohio State University Center for Folklore Studies* 2.3 (2011): n. pag. Web. 13 Apr. 2020.

Newfield, Christopher. “New Roles for Academia? The American University and the Knowledge Economy.” *Knowledge Landscapes North America*. Ed. Christian Kloeckner, Simone Knewitz, and Sabine Sielke. Heidelberg: Winter, 2016. 23–43. Print.

The Pursuit of Happyness. Dir. Gabriele Muccino. 2006. Film.

Raley, Rita. “Engl 252: Distracted Reading (Fall 2012).” *Dept. of English, NYU.* 8 Aug. 2012: Web. 21 Feb. 2017.

Schulmeister, Rolf. “Gibt es eine Net Generation? Widerlegung einer Mystifizierung.” *DeLFI 2008: Die 6. e-Learning Fachtagung Informatik*. Ed. Silke Seehusen, Ulrike Lucke, and Stefan Fischer. Bonn: Gesellschaft für Informatik e.V., 2008. PDF. 23 Dec. 2020

“Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America.” National Endowment for the Arts, Research Division Report #46. June 2004. PDF. 23 Dec. 2020.

Ulin, David L. “The Lost Art of Reading.” *Los Angeles Times* 9 Aug. 2009. Web. 23 Dec. 2020.

Suggested Citation

Herrmann, Sebastian M.. “Leipzig’s Social Hypertext Reader SHRIMP and the ‘Introduction to American Studies’.” *American Studies Journal* 70 (2020). Web. 27 Sep. 2021. DOI 10.18422/70-02.