

ITAC Joint Proposal

The Texas TEI Audiotext Project

Coleman Hutchison, Brian Bremen, John Rumrich
Department of English, The College of Liberal Arts
Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services (LAITS)
The Division of Instructional Innovation and Assessment (DIIA)

The problem faced by teachers of literature is how to make the works accessible to our students without diluting or changing the powerful language they employ. Often, this is done by reading difficult texts aloud in class: but more precious time can be used for discussion if these texts can be properly received outside of the classroom. How can we help students access challenging, often-taught books in a way that is useful, enjoyable, and effective for the largest number of learners possible?

The Texas TEI Audiotext Project is designed to preserve the virtues of the printed book while supplementing them with the multimedia power of digital technology—power that addresses individualized deficiencies in the reception of literary texts through the merely printed word. While it is worthy to simply digitize and archive canonical works, we aim to reinvent how students interact with these texts through a promising innovative interface that combines original text, multiple voice recitation via digital audio, expert annotation, and other supportive materials in a single, replicable application.

This project builds on the work of John Rumrich, Olin Bjork, and Shea Suski, whose excellent Audiotext of books 1, 2, and 9 of John Milton's "Paradise Lost" <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/miltonpl/> has become a standard course material in several UT English courses and has found a large, international audience outside of Texas. It was the winner of the 2006 IITAP Silver Award for Resource Development. Our project adapts Rumrich, Bjork, and Suski's design to create a re-useable shell Audiotext component around Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass that incorporates and synchronizes text, annotations, and oral performances of the poem in a Flash/Flex interface, designed to TEI standards of The Text Encoding Initiative (TEI). Since 1994, the TEI Guidelines have been widely used by libraries, museums, publishers, and individual scholars to present texts for online research, teaching, and preservation, chiefly in the humanities, social sciences and linguistics. As a result, any text that is encoded in TEI could eventually adapt the Audiotext application and production process to deliver an interactive audio/reading experience easily and efficiently. There are many such texts already available in an open source basis. The application can be further customized with only minor adjustments to the visual design and underlying code.

The essential experience of the Texas TEI Audiotext recreates the experience of reading a book out loud. Following the convention, the Audiotext opens to a

visual facsimile representation of the original print copy book. Then, the student can select text and multiple voices to hear the text read aloud while they read. During audio playback, our pages will turn automatically, largely alleviating the interruption of page-turning, but also encouraging students to think about how line- and page-breaking might affect meaning. Our Audiotext will utilize a dynamic pointer to indicate the line currently being played and to mark scholarly annotated words and phrases. In annotation mode, the Audiotext allows students to read commentary notes, provided by the faculty, without unduly disrupting the reading experience. Both textual and visual commentary material can be accommodated within the same interface, providing a rich context for the targeted text. Without proper annotation, students have a difficult time situating the poem in relation to their existing body of knowledge.

In this iteration, our Audiotext can accommodate the presence of competing voices in the poem. This feature is particularly important in poetry and other dramatic texts meant to be read aloud. Students can then select a variety of voices, or a “master cut” of voices selected by scholars highly familiar with the work. Indeed, this innovation allows users to choose among all the available vocal tracks “on the fly.” That is, users are able to compare and contrast the single lines read by very different readers performers of the same poem in gender, age, and regional dialect. Through this process of “mixing and remixing” the audio tracks, the students can discover stark differences in pronunciation, inflection, and pacing—differences, that is, in interpretation. As such, the Audiotext facilitates active interaction with both the visual and the aural elements of a selected work of classic literature.

Beyond Whitman and Milton, the Texas TEI Audiotext aims to bring into conversation the history of the book and the developing field of information technology. In future iterations, instructors might use the Audiotext in concert with the resources of the Ransom Center to build a Digital Reading Library of classic American Literature. It could be used to study collected audiotexts with transcriptions for ethnographic study (if the transcriptions are held to TEI standards). As such, the project will complement initiatives in Bibliography and Textual Studies, a field in which UT is already a strong player.

The immediate on-campus audience for such an Audiotext is very large. Leaves of Grass, and particularly “Song of Myself,” is taught at every level of the English major and in graduate English courses. (Professors Barrish, Berry, Carton, Cox, Cvetkovich, Graham, Kruppa, and Limon teach the poem in E316K, “Masterworks of American Literature,” and Professors Carton, Friedman, Graham, Hutchison, Kruppa, Lesser, Slatin, and Winship teach the poem in the E337/338 American Literature survey courses.) Thus, we anticipate that our prototype Texas TEI Audiotext, could be used by several thousand UT students per year. We hope to complete and test a beta version of the Audiotext during the 2008-09 academic year.

An ITAC Grant would allow us to add functionality to the Audiotext and innovate significantly on our current design, and insure accessibility and portability.

- 1) First and foremost, we would use ITAC funds to bring the Audiotext into other UT classrooms. By publicizing the availability of and rationale for the Audiotext, we could increase significantly the campus wide-use for this project, starting with Linguistics.
- 2) We hope to expand the current project to include all twelve poems in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Although "Song of Myself" is the best known of those poems, and the one targeted for production via our current resources, it is hardly the only one that commands readers' interest. Of particular note are the much-taught prose preface and the poem that would become "I Sing the Body Electric."
- 3) Walt Whitman was, in the words of an important textual and hypertextual editor, "a poet given to compulsive self-revision." We propose to add to our Audiotext a program that would allow students to track the resulting revisions, additions, and deletions in the many versions of this classic text. This added functionality will render intelligible the process and fluidity of great literary works.
- 4) Finally, ITAC funds would allow us to make the Audiotext fully accessible to all users, and to clean and annotate the code in such a way that it can be made open source, through a service such as UTForge.

With these innovations in mind, we request the following allocations:

- 1) \$5,000 for cross-departmental faculty presentations and support.
- 2) \$30,000 for audio, design, and programming staff support (i.e., 2000 hours @ \$15/hour)
- 3) \$25,000 for accessibility consultation and programming.

Total Request of \$60,000