

## **Douglas Lanier (University of New Hampshire)**

I'll start my reflection on leading a Shakespeare Association seminar by saying that I found it a very rewarding experience. It was interesting to discuss the range of current work in the field that our seminar received, and particularly fruitful to find ways of forging connections between projects that can seem at first glance unrelated to one another. If there's one key skill that a seminar leader will need to draw on, it's his or her ability to find common questions, issues, and areas of inquiry among the seminarians. That, and timing in the seminar itself. In the case of my seminar, "Mediatizing Shakespeare," the topic was intentionally rather open-ended, in order to encourage discussion among folks working in Shakespeare and film, Shakespeare and visual culture, Shakespeare and adaptation, Shakespeare and contemporary political economy, and the like. In my opening letter (appended), I sought to accomplish several goals. First, since it's easy for those who are SAA veterans to forget that the seminar format is somewhat unusual for an academic conference, I thought it necessary briefly to explain the format and schedule. Second, I wanted to define the key term in the title—"mediatizing"—so that participants would have the problematic it names in mind as they thought about shaping their seminar projects. Third, it seemed useful to assign two relatively short articles that would give overviews of some of the issues I hoped seminar papers might engage; I also hoped that these articles might give us a shared vocabulary and raise a few provocative questions for us to discuss at our meeting. (A couple of younger participants told me afterward that they were grateful to have the assigned readings. Myself, I think it's important to keep that constituency in mind as you're planning the seminar.)

Once I collected contact information for the group, I staged the tasks by asking for something roughly each month. In early November, I asked for paragraph-long descriptions of each participant's area of interest as related to the seminar topic. By early December, I asked for a short précis of what each participant would be writing on, and I also asked for at least two articles or books that the participant found generally useful in thinking about the relationship between his or her proposed paper and the seminar's topic. (I assembled these suggestions into a general bibliography for the group within a week of receiving them all.) In late January, the papers were due to each member of the group. After receiving all the papers, I paired up participants with each other, and I asked each participant to write a two-page constructive response to his or her partner, with a copy to me.

It's important to be firm about all the deadlines, and I found that sending out reminders a week before each of the deadlines was a good way of stressing the importance of being prompt. I'll add too that it's helpful to include a line in your introductory letter about how SAA guidelines prohibit listing in the program those who miss the seminar paper deadline. This works well with focusing participants' attention at the proper time.

The seminar meeting itself requires the leader to come up with multiple areas of connection between the essays and to keep strict time. I instructed participants that for the seminar they would be asked to summarize in two minutes the key argument of their essay, and I asked each respondent to supply a statement or extended question intended to provoke discussion of the essay at hand in the context of our general topic. To prompt the group to engage in dialogue, I grouped the essays into sub-sets of three or four where there seemed to be strong areas of shared interest, and as I called on each participant, I improvised a two-sentence preamble that suggested

a potential link between the last topic under discussion and the new one. It's crucially important to keep timing in mind. Each participant attends the seminar with the expectation that his or her essay will get its moment in the sun, so it's important not to let the conversation dwell on one or two essays at the expense of others, dazzling those essays might be. To prevent there being timing problems, I worked out times and sequencing for each essay (3:40-3:50 was devoted to Smith, 3:50-4:00 was devoted to Jones, etc.), and I kept to this throughout the meeting, even at one point cutting short a lively conversation. (Keep in mind that a lively conversation is likely to be continued after the seminar proper is over with.) With a little flexibility, it was still possible to give each essay its full due and to keep the conversation lively and moving forward. The new smaller sizes for SAA seminars help immensely with the time-keeping issue—I felt that this year everyone got a much better chance of having a healthy discussion of their work. After attrition, we ended up with 12 participants, which seemed an ideal number.

### Letter 1

Dear Colleague,

It's a great pleasure to welcome you to the 2008 Shakespeare Association of America seminar on "Mediatizing Shakespeare." I'm very pleased that you've chosen to participate in the seminar.

By way of background: "mediatization," the central concern of our seminar, refers to several cultural processes at once. Mediatization includes processes of adaptation by which Shakespeare's texts and performances of them are transposed or translated (choosing an appropriate verb is fraught!) into contemporary media forms, particularly visual, electronic and digital mass media. Part of our seminar, then, will concern processes of reformatting and remediation and their implications for both the meaning of specific plays and the larger cultural phenomenon of "Shakespeare." However, mediatization concerns not only new forms for Shakespeare, but also new agents in the production of Shakespeare, new audiences and dynamics of reception, new ideological and political functions for Shakespeare, new models for commercial and cultural viability, and new forms of cross-cultural contact. Mediatization also involves the ways that new media complicate and confound earlier models of Shakespeare's cultural authority. And it raises the issue of Shakespeare's relationship to large-scale institutions which are themselves also increasingly mediatized, corporations, schools, and governments prime among them. My hope is that we will have papers on a wide range of issues concerning Shakespeare's interactions with the "mediasphere," ranging from case studies of revealing examples to broad discussions of Shakespeare and media theory.

To give our seminar some focus, I suggest that we all read two passages that will give us a common vocabulary and a place to begin our collective discussion. Those two passages are:

the first two chapters of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT, 1999), pp. 21-84.

William Uricchio's "Historicizing Media in Transition," in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, eds. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge: MIT, 2003), pp. 23-38.

If you have difficulties getting copies of these texts, please let me know. As you can see from the

schedule below, I will also be assembling a more extensive bibliography culled from suggestions made by seminar participants.

Our schedule is as follows:

**Within 10 days of receipt of this letter:** please confirm that you have received this letter, that you are still intending to participate in the seminar, and that your contact information is correct. My intention is to distribute information and papers by e-mail, so please double-check your e-mail address to make sure it's accurate. (If you wish to receive seminar correspondence and essays in paper form, I'm happy to accommodate your preference, but please let me know.) I will distribute a corrected list of participants to us all as soon as I've heard from everyone.

**3 December 2007:** Please send me the title and a short abstract of your proposed paper (in Word format). The abstract should be no longer than 200-300 words. Include a tentative thesis (or hypothesis to be tested), make clear your methodological approach and the principal works you intend to examine, and offer some sense of where the paper's argument might go. Once I've received the abstracts I will distribute them to the group so that we can collectively see the emerging shape of the seminar. Also, by that date please send me the names of a few articles or books (no more than three, please) that you found helpful in thinking about the topic of our seminar or your essay. I'll assemble these into a bibliography and distribute it to all seminar members by mid-December.

**28 January 2008:** Please send your seminar essay, in Word format, to me and the other seminar participants. **Please keep your final essay to no longer than 3000 words.** Seminar members need to be able to read and reread your work, so a shorter, tighter essay is much preferable to a longer piece that has many details, multiple examples, or elaborated contexts. If you anticipate missing this crucial deadline, please let me know. You should know that SAA mandates that I let the conference organizers know who has completed their papers by no later than 1 February 2008; that is to say, if I receive your paper after 28 January, your name will not appear on the conference program. Within a week of receiving essays, I will assign you an essay to which you should write a brief response.

**25 February 2008:** Please send your response (no more than 600 words) to me and to the author of your assigned paper, in Word format. It would be most helpful if you concentrated your response on the broad issues raised in your assigned paper rather than concentrating on critiquing close specifics of the argument. The response should, in other words, offer the author some commentary on his or her paper while also attending to the larger conversation we'll be having in the seminar about Shakespeare and mediatization. I'll have more to say about this as this deadline comes closer. On this date, I will also ask you to send me an abstract of your completed paper (in Word format, no more than 300 words). If you wish just to use the abstract you submitted in December, that's fine, but let me know. I will be duplicating the abstracts for distribution to auditors.

**13-15 March 2008:** The convention itself. To anticipate a question you may have, I do not yet know on which afternoon our seminar will be scheduled. If you have suggestions about how I might make this seminar fully rewarding for you or the group, please let me know. I very much look forward to working with all of you.

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## **Tanya Pollard (CUNY) and Tania Demetriou (York University)**

We had a good experience with the seminar, which we tried to focus on shared questions relevant to the seminar's topic, rather than on individual papers per se. In preparing for discussion, we asked each participants both to write a specific response to another essay (in pairs that we assigned), and to generate 3 general questions for discussion about a separate set of 3 papers (which we also assigned). We felt that this bifurcated assignment allowed participants to receive both individual and more general attention to their papers in advance, freeing up the actual conversation for discussion of particular subtopics and especially for a focus on a common intellectual agenda, with an eye to the broader scholarly issues at stake in the seminar at large. We made sure that everyone received direct questions in the cluster discussions, but that these discussions also remained general enough to be relevant to other participants and auditors, and we kept these focused discussions relatively short in order to ensure enough time for general discussion at the end. We think this approach worked well; everyone spoke, no-one monopolized, and people seemed happy with the feedback they received as well as with the discussion's overall cohesiveness.

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## **Bill Germano (Cooper Union)**

So what to advise?

Encourage seminar leaders to meet with their seminars beforehand. This is the smartest thing I did.

Make room for smaller topics, which can attract people with focused interests and enthusiasms.

Avoid two-tier citizenship among seminar registrants (everyone will know that the chaired professor is different from the graduate student, but that distinction should be exploited in lectures, not the seminar format).

Make room for auditors -- and make them an active part of the seminar experience. (Since seminar leaders don't "edit out" seminar registrants we're already committed to one kind of inclusiveness. We can do more.) Be sure there are enough handouts.

Encourage every seminar leader to think pedagogically, Find a way to get the message out—especially to young SAA members—that the seminar is a safe place to get feedback on serious work in progress, but not on lapidary, already in proofs, work.

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## **John Baxter (Dalhousie University) and Jonathan Goossen (Ambrose University College)**

Our main correspondence with the group as a whole took shape mainly in two letters: an introductory letter (October 26) welcoming people to the seminar, reminding them of the broad outlines of the topic, and setting out a work schedule; and a second letter (February 25) inviting

further items for discussion in the seminar and organizing written responses to each paper. We had a lively session, with the participants more than ready to tackle the questions we had proposed and to bring forward questions we hadn't thought of. And as is frequently the case with an SAA seminar, it ended with a strong sense of even more questions not yet addressed or not addressed fully enough. It's hard to say whether this feeling attests to success or failure or a bit of both.

Our special guest outsider was Richard Janko, the Gerald F. Else Distinguished Professor of Classical Studies at Michigan, and he was an enthusiastic and welcome addition to our group. It seemed important in our case [for a seminar on "Aristotle, Jonson, and Shakespeare"] to have available the perspective of a classicist—one of the leaders, moreover, in recent attempts to reconstruct Aristotle's theory of comedy. We drew on his expertise once or twice, but on the whole he participated as a regular member of the seminar, writing a paper, responding to another, and taking his turn in the conversation queue. Everything depends, of course, on the exact nature of the seminar topic, but from our point of view this sort of opportunity for inter-disciplinary comparisons was particularly successful, even exhilarating.

Our method of assigning one respondent to each paper is a strategy that has quite often been used at SAA seminars, and it works—to a point—though it tends to foster one-on-one conversation. Since our group produced papers that could quite easily have been organized into three or four sub-groups, we did wonder if we might have provoked even better results by forming sub-groups of three or four members and requiring each participant to produce three responses rather than one. Your seminarians make not be grateful to have this sort of extra labor laid on, but the reward could well be a richer and more wide-ranging set of discussions. If we do it again, we're likely to give this method a try.

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### **Elizabeth Hanson (Queen's University)**

I elected to keep things simple. I only had one invited participant (Jim Siemon) in part because the topic of the seminar is quite new—not something that has seen much critical engagement and I really wanted to find out what kind of approaches scholars could bring to it. I was rewarded in having a seminar in which every paper but one spoke directly to the topic. (The one began on topic but then the writer took it in a somewhat different direction.) In the fall, in addition to abstracts I requested suggestions for a bibliography. Members of the seminar contributed very diverse titles, and again I was impressed by the integrity of the final list, despite the diversity of materials.

With respect to deadlines, I made the required work for the seminar only the writing of the papers. I assigned written response obligations, with each member of the seminar responding to two papers in subgroups of my devising. But I was anxious that these should be written closer to the time of the actual seminar so that the engagement would be fresh in seminarians' minds. So I stressed that the obligation was a moral rather than an institutional one. Everyone wrote thoughtful responses (including the member who couldn't attend for medical reasons): 100% compliance.

The papers themselves spoke to each other in fascinating and complicated ways. I had proposed the topic in a very experimental frame of mind, naming an issue that as far as I knew hadn't really been addressed in Shakespeare studies. I came away with a very strong sense that the issue was real and profitable to think about. I have to say though, that in view of the many connections that I saw among the papers, I felt that I got less help at the seminar table than I would have liked, in making those connections. This could have had to do with our timing, in the morning session on the Thursday. People may not have hit their stride.

The papers were very fresh and exploratory. As a result, the takeaway will not be an edited collection. The shoots were very young and green—except in the case of the senior scholars who had contributed work from well-advanced book projects. Personally, I got a great deal out of leading the seminar, coming away with a new lens through which to consider a wide range of plays.

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### **Robin Farabaugh (University of Maryland Baltimore County) and Katherine Rowe (Bryn Mawr College)**

The following discussion summarizes some of the insights gleaned from testing several online workspaces for SAA exchanges. We used these websites for pre-conference posting of essays, collaborative writing, and discussion, in two workshops: “ShakespeareWiki: A New Internet Tool for Teaching,” San Diego 2007 and “Shakespeare 2.0” Chicago 2010.

#### **Summary**

##### Advantages to using an editable website (such as Googledocs, Moodle, or a wiki)

- Simplifies communication, scheduling, access to readings, etc.
- Provides a far more collaborative experience, for those writing papers as well as for those participating in workshops, than email and hardcopy;
- Frontloads the work, shifting main labor forward about a month, to Jan/Feb;
- Discussions build on each other and advance further;
- Better use of face-to-face time at the SAA meeting.

##### Challenges

- Minor setup/admin labor required by organizer;
- Ramp-up period as users of varying technical ability get comfortable with the tools;
- Frontloads the work, shifting main labor forward about a month, to Jan/Feb;
- Helpful to establish guidelines for collaboration (how fully collaborative should the final product be?), for citation, for identifying authors.

#### **What is an editable website?**

Most editable websites permit uploading of files, including video and audio files as well as word documents and pdfs. These files can be accessed, and in the case of word files, downloaded and commented upon easily. Files with comments can then be uploaded back to the website as well as sent by email to specific users. Papers can also be pasted into the site, eliminating the need to

download. Workshop and seminar leaders can establish pages for comments on audio and video files, and for comments from readers both in and out of the seminar/workshop registrants. Some websites (Googlegroups, Moodle) include listservs or mailing lists for easy communication with participants.

### **Reasons to use an editable website**

- *More sustained discussion.* These features mean that exchanges in the seminar/workshop can begin far earlier and continue, if the participants wish, past the end of the annual meeting. Access to a single online site means that the work of the group is readily accessible to all.
- *Higher quality of feedback.* In our experience, having contributions to the seminar fully available to all participants well before the meeting made for better feedback, increased dialogue, and deeper consideration of the ideas presented. Likely outcomes of shared and earlier posting include: further evolution of thought, greater examination of data and reasoning, richer contributions of evidence and connections to other research.
- *Better sharing of practical solutions and resources.* As the seminar/workshop dialog evolves, participants raise questions and model a process of inquiry. As this happens, pedagogical applications are likely to appear more readily. Links to useful resources and primary material flourished in this medium: video clips, audio clips, websites including wonderful examples, such as the Quarto site. For some workshops and seminars, the process of developing ideas and materials in this way could be considered a regular part of a final product.
- *A clear record of labor.* Posted material offers a record of the seminar/workshop for later citation and reference.

### **Changes in the process of paper exchange**

Using these tools, we found we needed to re-think the process of paper exchange. Our schedule front-loaded the usual paper exchanges and turned out to be light (with a focus on core questions) in the month before the SAA meeting. Participants loved this.

#### *Timeline:*

October: we posted shared readings.

December: participants named topics of interest.

January: a rough draft phase (research queries, preliminary research exchanges) due early in the month, followed by a period of collective commentary and feedback through the end of the month. This replaced the usual exchange of “finished” work in January or February (to be commented on individually and at the meeting).

February: writers refined their final essays.

March: we used this month to gather a collective list of governing questions. This focus required little time commitment but the intellectual payoff was high. It is an efficient way to identify pressing issues for future work.

## **Transforming the face-to-face meeting**

It makes a significant difference to come into an SAA meeting with a) a shared agenda of really pressing questions and b) the work of commenting/feedback on individual essays already completed. In our experience, a conversation prepared for in this way tends to be free flowing, genuinely deliberative, and substantive.

*Recommendations:* sequence the shared questions to make an agenda for the two-hour conversation that everyone can follow. Circulate this agenda to auditors as well as participants, along with the seminar/workshop abstracts. This ensures free-flowing but focused conversations. This makes it easy for auditors to follow/participate and increases the intellectual payoff for all very substantially.

### **The challenges in detail:**

- Front-loading the schedule could burden participants just as the fall semester is at its most intense;
- Some writers/participants are unused to having their work in progress before so many eyes at once; indeed many of these sites are, in theory, open to the public and should be password-protected if the group desires. Organizers should open a dialog to address these concerns on the website, or via email. Within the workshop/seminar clear rules of etiquette can help, though in our experience a short collective conversation was all that was needed;
- Using a website entails some organizer labor to set-up and maintain. The quality of the instructions users receive impacts their success significantly, as does the ability of the organizer (or others in the seminar) to troubleshoot. Problems and confusion do arise. Some few older users may have difficulties with new platforms and software; all users may groan at having to learn a new procedure. An organizer using such sites for the first time will need to keep her eyes on shared goals and accept a certain amount of technical overhead.

As organizers who have tried this, we found the benefits of sharing everyone's work in progress many and exciting. For us they were worth the effort of set-up and maintenance.

## **Comparing three common platforms: GoogleDocs and GoogleGroups, Wikis, Blackboard and Moodle**

1. GoogleDocs and GoogleGroups are free, Web-based environments for collaboration, editing, and storing files.

*Advantages:* Both platforms are widely used and have decent help documentation. GoogleDocs supports a variety of text documents and a simple editing interface. Sites can be restricted and it is relatively easy to create documents and share them with others. It allows real-time collaborative editing, which can be an uncanny experience (text changing before your eyes). GoogleGroups has more limited collaboration functions (post documents, modest shared editing, a listserv), but it allows you to post video as well as text files. GoogleDocs only supports word processing, spreadsheets, and presentations.



*Disadvantages:* Besides the use constraints described in the above paragraph, all Google workspaces seem subject to periodic glitches that can take time to unravel. Indeed, our SAA 2010 Workshop had so many access issues with Googlegroups that we switched to the Wiki discussed below half way through our process.

2. A wiki is a website that lets you create and edit interlinked web pages using a simple template on your web browser.

*Example:* the Shakespeare Wiki used for the SAA Workshop “Shakespeare 2.0” in 2010:

[http://thunder.biosci.umbc.edu/shakespeare/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://thunder.biosci.umbc.edu/shakespeare/index.php/Main_Page)

*Advantages:* To our mind, Wikis offer the most flexible and easiest uses among the platforms available for SAA seminars and workshops. They have a simple architecture: each wiki can be configured as the users choose (using categories and structures suited to the topic at hand). Wikis support a wide variety of files (audio, video, still image, Text/Word). Normally they require the use of a simple code for editing and formatting, but most can be customized (as ours is) using an icon editor familiar to most users. Wikis also keep track of versions of your work – allowing you to see how revisions evolve. The chief benefit and pleasure of using our customized wiki, and any wiki, is watching the structure and organization grow according to the users’ conception of how the materials and procedures of the seminar or workshop relate to each other. Because wikis are easy to use, they encourage users to share materials readily.

*Disadvantages:* Wikis, like all websites, require some instruction, support, and troubleshooting, as indicated above. For example, we found the icon editor and the MediaWiki platform we used needed some upgrading to be consistent with new browsers. There are wikis available through a number of commercial sites for varying fees; these sites offer technical support, resolving upgrade issues.

*Note:* wikis come in a variety of flavors. Wikis available in Blackboard and Moodle (see below) are less flexible than, say, MediaWiki.

3. Blackboard and Moodle are the two dominant websites supporting academic courses. Most IS departments will happily mount a “course” for a SAA seminar and “enroll” seminar participants by assigning user IDs and passwords.

*Advantages:* Both Blackboard and Moodle offer simple wikis, listservs, discussion groups, and document posting spaces that can support audio and visual files as well as hyperlinks, text files, and pdfs. They do not need regular upgrades and you can go to your usual tech support folks for troubleshooting. Most faculty are at least somewhat familiar with one or the other platform, reducing the time and energy involved with ramping up.

*Disadvantages:* Neither environment offers a robust collaborative workspace for larger documents. Files must be downloaded, edited, and uploaded. Neither is public, if that is an interest of the seminar. Neither keeps archives of revisions. Blackboard also depends upon a predetermined and highly articulated architecture. We find that Blackboard thus offers a less flexible platform, one that requires considerable navigation to locate and use designated area within the site. Exchange and dialog are inhibited by difficulty of use; Blackboard simply does not, in our experience, facilitate collaboration. Moodle is more flexible, however, and can offer a

freer architecture for users. It is not, in our view, as open and flexible as a wiki, though it offers a free and superior platform to Blackboard.

## **Conclusion**

Consider carefully what each of these sites has to offer, what you wish to accomplish and how. The architecture of any site will shape the results of the dialog you pursue there. Being aware of this and choosing carefully will make the difference in the sites' utility.

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## **Roze Hentschell (Colorado State University)**

I had three invited participants attend the seminar and none of them wanted to write a paper. So what I had them do was lead a cohort of three participants each. They began with general observations of the papers as a group and then directed questions to each them, ensuring that everyone had a chance to speak (something that was very important to me). While this could have been clunky and contrived, it actually worked really well. I had a couple of very quiet folks, so this got their voices heard. Another thing I did this year: Met for drinks the night before the seminar. This worked wonders in breaking the ice and was quite a good time.

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## **Vimala C. Pasupathi (Hofstra University) and Rory Loughnane (Syracuse University)**

One thing I think that worked well for us was devising questions and issues to discuss at the seminar meeting that any member of the seminar could respond to. Although we divided our group into sets for ease of commenting, we opted not to keep everybody in these sets beyond the response phase so as to enable more organic discussions when we met face to face; this method ensured that people didn't feel their work only mattered in short segments and encouraged everybody to read all the papers well, not just the few they were asked to write responses to prior to meeting. We also had a respondent who aimed to ensure inclusive discussions and helped us keep the conversation moving in productive directions throughout the 2 hour period.