

The Journal of the Association for History and  
Computing,  
Vol. I, No. 1., June 1998

[Home](#)[Articles](#)[Works](#)[E-Resources](#)[P-Resources](#)[Notices](#)

---

## Hypertext and the Postmodern Pedagogy of the Enlightenment

Lewis Call

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

---

The World Wide Web makes use of a revolutionary new kind of writing known as hypertext. In hypertext, ordinary text is supplemented by electronic "links" which, when activated by the reader, access a different part of the electronic text, or often a different text altogether. Hypertext thus radically emphasizes intertextuality, i.e. the relationships between texts. The advent of hypertext has been trumpeted as a pedagogical gold mine by a number of literature instructors.[1] However, the instructional merits of hypertext have been conspicuously ignored by many other academics, including many of my colleagues in the historical profession.[2] I suspect that this is due in part to the perception that hypertext challenges some of the structures of power which are fundamental to the university. Many instructors consequently see in hypertext an implicit threat to their professorial authority. I intend to argue against this attitude by showing that hypertext can be a very valuable tool for college instructors. In 1996 I taught a course on the intellectual history of the European Enlightenment. My class met in a computer lab at the University of California, Irvine; during class meetings, students viewed lecture outlines, maps, images, and so forth on a Web page which I had written for the course. I would argue, on the basis of this teaching experience, that the World Wide Web represents an important new pedagogical resource, especially for those who teach the Enlightenment.

The presence of the World Wide Web in the classroom offers an instructor the opportunity to situate the ideas of the Enlightenment firmly within their historical context. This approach encourages students to view the concepts of the Enlightenment as historical ideas, as objects of inquiry rather than as universal truths. This strategy is meant to address one of the central problems faced by anyone who teaches the Enlightenment, namely that so many of the Enlightenment's ideas have become such a basic, fundamental part of our culture that it is often very difficult for students to understand that these ideas have a history. I will focus on two examples here, both from Descartes. Cartesian philosophy includes a concept of human subjectivity and an idea of space which have been so influential in Western culture that many students simply accept these ideas as truths. The presence of hypertext in the classroom, however, makes it harder for students to view Cartesian thought in this way. Hypertext presents students with ways of thinking about subjectivity and space which are radically different from anything Descartes ever considered; this helps students to understand that the Cartesian world view is a historical construction, not a universal truth. Hypertext thus

enables what I call a postmodern pedagogy of the Enlightenment.

At the same time as hypertext radically emphasizes the historical contingency of the Enlightenment tradition, however, it also carries with it an emancipatory project, a project of human liberation which is very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment. This could be construed as an inherent limitation to the postmodern pedagogical approach I mentioned above. But I do not believe that this limitation is fatal. Jean-François Lyotard characterizes the postmodern condition as an "incredulity towards metanarratives," i.e. a refusal to accept the grand stories of the Western intellectual tradition, including those of the Enlightenment, as universally true (xxiv). Yet we must recall that the Enlightenment was not only about metanarratives. As Robert Darnton and others have pointed out, it was also about what we might call "micronarratives." Hypertext, which frequently operates on the level of small-scale practices (or what Michel Foucault calls "the micropolitical"), may enable an emancipatory project which is purely tactical and which does not rely for its sense of legitimacy upon suspect metanarratives.

It would obviously be problematic for me to structure my discussion as a "paper" in the conventional sense. If I were to do so, I would face the danger that (as Marshall McLuhan might say) my medium could disagree with my message. I have therefore elected to present each of my main points as a hypertextual node. I offer these nodes to you in what writers of HTML refer to as an "unnumbered list," that is, a list in which the sequence of the elements is not considered to be significant. I invite my readers to investigate these nodes in whatever order they wish. In this way I hope to take what is, I admit, a very tentative step towards escaping from the linearity of my own narrative.

---

[Hypertext and the Critique of Cartesian Subjectivity](#)  
[Cyberspace versus Cartesian Space](#)  
[The Democratization of Information and the Implosion of Power](#)

---

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, George P. Landow, "Hypertext in Literary Education, Criticism and Scholarship," *Computers and the Humanities* 23 (1989): p. 173-198. See also Seth R. Katz, "Current Uses of Hypertext in Teaching Literature," *Computers and the Humanities* 30 (1996): p. 139-148.

<sup>2</sup>For an exception to this generalization, see Roy Rosenzweig and Steve Brier, "Historians and Hypertext: Is It More than Hype?," *AHA Perspectives* (March 1994): p. 3-6. The authors describe how they created and published a historical hypertext entitled *Who Built America?* Interestingly, however, even Rosenzweig and Brier seem reluctant to embrace the full possibilities of hypertext; they emphasize that in *Who Built America?* they "tried to retain some of the traditional features of a printed book" (p. 5).

[Home](#)   [Articles](#)   [Works](#)   [E-Resources](#)   [P-Resources](#)   [Notices](#)

---

**To cite this article:** Lewis Call, "Hypertext and the Postmodern Pedagogy of the Enlightenment," *The Journal of the Association of History and Computing*, vol 1, no 1 [<http://>

[mcel.pacificu.edu/history/jahc/Call/hypertext.html](http://mcel.pacificu.edu/history/jahc/Call/hypertext.html)] (June 1998).

