21 Network Discussions for Teaching Western Civilization

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Background

If literacy is, as Charles Schuster (1990) has said, "the power to be able to make oneself heard and felt, to signify . . . the way in which we make ourselves meaningful not only to others but through others to ourselves" (227), then literacy is not simply a matter of learning to read and write. It is, in fact, a complex process of communication that cuts across all disciplines in the academy and, as such, should be a primary focus of all courses, not just those which focus on rhetoric and composition. Collaboration between disciplines, especially between members of English departments and members of departments where the teaching of composition has not traditionally been a focus, should be fostered and encouraged in an attempt to spark innovation, creativity, and flexibility as well as to improve productivity and assessable outcomes. Our Western Civilization project is an attempt at such cross-curricular broadening of scope. We have designed a course that uses computers to support the concepts of collaborative learning and writing to learn, methods by which our students can, using technology already available on campus, develop literacy skills. We used three technological "tools" to help us implement our writing across the curriculum ideas: networked discussion sessions, e-mail, and Internet access. Before we focus on goals, we need to discuss at least two institutional barriers to setting up and implementing communication-across-the-curriculum projects such as ours: students' limited access to technology and the relatively inflexible structure of community colleges.

Studies indicate that the use of technology has far-reaching social implications, the impact of which is apparent at public institutions, particularly community colleges, whose students are typically technologically disenfranchised (Forman 1994, 133). The community college is the only place where many

disadvantaged students can access the current technologies. The political, socioeconomic, and cultural implications of this are enormous: we are witnessing the development of a "war between the 'techno/crats' and the 'techno/peasants'" (Selfe 1990, 97). And as professionals committed to the mission of the community college, we must foster, across the curriculum, student access to the technologies they will need to compete in the marketplace of the 21st century.

Such a project requires college-wide commitment to writing across the curriculum with appropriate funding that provides both time and access to equipment. In community colleges, which claim to be teaching institutions, the structure of the college itself often works against creative pedagogy, including such systemic problems as the fifteen-hour credit load for teachers, and the fact that there is no release time and no reward for creative effort since most community colleges do not have rank systems.

Because community college teachers often find themselves arguing for student access and facing heavy teaching loads, we have come to the conclusion that the most important ingredient in collaborative teaching efforts is the commitment on the part of the faculty.

The Plan: Goals and Methods

We had a number of goals in mind when we first started our projects. Our first goal was to incorporate more writing into the syllabus, and we designed the networked discussion sessions to facilitate this. Since many students come to a community college with limited writing backgrounds, we wanted to give them more writing experience in a content area to help them understand, synthesize, and analyze issues, topics, and information in a collaborative learning mode. We assumed that the more writing was encouraged and mentored by faculty in non-composition disciplines, the more students would make the transition from their writing classes to their other courses. More experience with writing using computers would alleviate the two major obstacles for disadvantaged students: their lack of experience with the modes of academic discourse and their unfamiliarity with technology.

Our second goal was to give students the benefit of having the opportunity to try out their ideas in writing before they are asked to write formally on a topic. Collaborative, networked discussions on the computer would minimize the punitive aspect of grading and provide constructive criticism prior to the submission of a final paper and/or exams. Most important, we wanted students to use writing to learn about the concepts they were studying in class and clarify issues before they found themselves in academic trouble. To achieve this goal, we developed twelve discussion sessions for the students to use as a study group, one for each unit studied. These consisted of writing exercises loaded into the

network using software (Norton Textra Connect)[1] that allowed students to discuss the topics asynchronously in groups. The class was randomly broken into discussion groups, each group working together for the entire semester, building a sense of collaboration in their learning experience. Questions we designed for each topic help students to focus on key ideas, concepts, individuals, and events with a goal toward seeing these in a historical, cultural perspective. We used the discussion function of the software in two ways. Before the semester began, we loaded fairly formal essay questions for students to think about and write about with members of their groups. We might, for example, define a topic and then ask them to do something like this:

> Based on the readings in McKay, the handouts, and class discussion, choose two examples of scapegoating from two different centuries and discuss the following in a minimum of 350 words (to count your words, click on Utilities, then statistics):
> - The perceived external threats to the society
> - The perceived internal divisions of the society
> - The social reaction to the real or perceived threats
> - Why specific individuals and groups were chosen as scapegoats

We reminded students to cite their sources using MLA form and to generate a Works Cited page to practice these skills for formal writing. Then each week we would send out, through the messaging system (much like e-mail) that is built into the software, more conversational, informal, chatty kinds of questions that helped them synthesize each week's lectures into their thinking/writing about the topic. These weekly messages encouraged a kind of informal, conversational tone, freeing students to question and challenge each other and their professors. A sample from the same unit follows:

> FROM: dan schultz and maryanne felter TO: CLASS 9/22/95, 1:57 pm
> OK, gang—things SHOULD be falling into place for you about now. . . . In the meantime, here are some more things to think about—and write about if you have the chance.
> 3. Who benefited from the witchcraft crazes? Otherwise phrased: who had what kinds of vested interests in keeping what going? think Greece, think medieval Europe, think Salem.
> 4. Why do you suppose Schultzie went off on the little tangent about 1960s America?—any parallels you can draw from that time period that might help you pull this all together.

The discussion sessions trained students to use the sources they were assigned in class—handouts, textbook, films, and class lectures—to formulate their ideas about the various topics. They learned to read sources carefully to respond to the questions, to use the sources to support their theses, and to document the sources correctly. Their collaborative writing discussions prepared them for the six exams (three each semester) that had also been loaded onto the network. The culmination of these efforts was the transference of the accumu-

lated knowledge and skills into a final research paper. Deadlines for work could be controlled by shutting the system off when the deadline passed. Completion of assignments was the students' responsibility, focusing on the skills necessary for successful school-to-work transition.

We also developed twelve mini-lessons in writing strategies as backup instructions available on the network, including reading and writing strategies as well as test-taking and studying hints. Eleven bibliographies on works of literature corresponding to the historical topics were also included. These lessons reinforced instruction given within the English department and supported in skills centers and writing labs. Writing strategies as applied to the particular discipline provided models for students to follow as they worked their way through their own ideas on various topics. Each mini-lesson explained the particular kind of writing, took students through the process, gave a sample of what that process could produce, and then explained the strengths and weaknesses of the sample. The mini-lessons used the course content to show the process. So the lesson on developing details, for example, discussed the idea of development and showed various methods of generating ideas, such as brainstorming:

> For example, if you were writing an essay about witchcraft as scapegoating, you might make a list like this:
> - Salem witchcraft trials/ neighbors fighting, inexplicable natural phenomena
> - Dreyfus/ set up to protect army
> - McCarthy/ blame it all on communists
> - Socrates/ daring to speak the truth no one wants to hear, etc.

This was followed by an explanation on how to develop ideas further. We then supplied students with a model paragraph, parts of which are reprinted here:

> For example, if we were writing up the paragraph on the Salem witchcraft trials, we might come up with something like this:
>
> In 1692, the town of Salem experienced a wave of accusations of witchcraft and the resulting trial and execution of 21 people (McKay 484). At the time, the residents were sure that they were doing God's work in ferreting out Satan's helpers and saving their community from the devil. . . . Historians have different ideas of why the witchcraft craze happened, including theories about ergot and porphyria that caused people to hallucinate (Watson 119). But whatever sparked the initial accusations, many believe that the witchcraft trials were an example of scapegoating. When farmers couldn't explain strange occurrences such as the death of cattle or the failure of crops, the accusation of witchcraft became a convenient explanation for an inexplicable phenomena. It was much easier to blame someone who was consorting with the devil rather than try to find some natural cause that they probably couldn't have found anyhow (Watson 121). When neighbors, holding longtime grudges about property boundaries and ownership, wanted redress, what better way to "stick it to" the other person than accuse him of witchcraft (Watson 124)? . . . Because witchcraft was a supernatural phenomenon

> and not subject to the laws of reason and close scrutiny, it provided an almost foolproof method of "getting even" or explaining what could not be explained. Who could contest it when there were "eyewitnesses" who could accuse the witches?

After the paragraph and the Works Cited, we highlighted for students what we wanted them to see about the paragraph:

> Notice a few things about this paragraph:
> - it uses two examples: property questions and inexplicable natural phenomena
> - it offers alternative explanations that historians have given for the witchcraft
> - it connects the idea of witchcraft with the historical period
> - it explains how the accusations were connected with the idea of scapegoating
> - it gives enough background from McKay to show that you have done that reading as well
> - it uses in-text citations to show Dr. Schultz where the ideas came from, proving to him that you have done your work in reading sources, listening to lectures
> - length: it is not that long necessarily means good, but it takes more than two sentences to explain an idea such as the one explained above. Take your time to explain. Don't try to just get it done quickly.

Near the end of the spring semester, we administered a student survey in order to ascertain the number of students using these backup instructions. The survey indicated that students used many of them. Of the nineteen students completing the course, eleven used "study guide exam #1," seven used "reading exams carefully," "documenting sources," and "bibliographies," and five selected "prep for exams 2 and 3," "basics about essays," and "comparison/contrast essays." One student responded, "I printed them all out at the beginning of the semester and reprinted them as updated. The info contained in most items benefits not only Wes Civ but other courses as well." Apparently, this aspect of the program was relatively successful in assisting students with the mechanics of writing assignments. And the student who printed them all off at the start of the semester did what we had hoped all of the students would do: use the background information for support all semester, not only in this class but in other classes as well.

Our third goal was to encourage a team-centered approach to learning. The technology facilitated this. Lab facilities tend to be open and accessible to students at most times of the day and evening, and networking allows students to join the study group on their own time, increasing flexibility in terms of participation. At community colleges, study groups are commonplace but usually restricted to day/time/place. With the network, the teacher and/or designated students within the groups could control topics and keep groups on task. The networked discussions fostered collaboration, a mentoring among students ("I

do not see where Socrates fits into all of this."), helped them develop critical thinking skills (writing about the spread of AIDS: "I understand that when the first people came over here and exposed the Native Americans to smallpox they didn't realize what was going on. But what about in the late seventies and early eighties when gay men left and right dragged their feet until it was too late. . . . I'm not saying our government purposely committed genocide but looking back now they didn't do everything they could have to prevent it."), and gave them practice in synthesizing sources and using proper documentation. The technology also facilitated collaboration with the professor. This alleviated the problem of student schedules that often conflict with office hours, as well as constraints of the typical community college student—jobs, family, external situations. Messages could be sent daily and responded to immediately.

Another goal, consistent with the content of the course, was to encourage cross-cultural exchange and a multicultural perspective. Giving students access to e-mail and Internet accounts (including Netscape, Lynx, and Gopher) not only facilitated research but also broadened their perspectives about what information is accessible for a variety of learning purposes outside the specific classroom context. We encouraged students to join listservs to gain access to a multicultural perspective on the topics, at the same time expanding their ideas and reinforcing writing skills. We also encouraged their use of Internet research, including a Web-research project as one of several take-home exam options. Such Internet connection increased student access to scholars, journals, and other students in other countries interested in similar problems and issues. Student participation in these various discussions was encouraged via reward of in-class credit, making it an integral part of the students' final grade. We considered ourselves relatively successful in this. Research papers included topics on Cheyenne Indians, the Sikhs, Tamerlane, Haiti, voodoo, Duvalier, female genital mutilation, Chiang Kai-Shek, and Vietnam. Much of the information students found on these topics came through research on the Internet.

The Reality

We worked out all of these ideas over the summer, and they sounded great. But come fall, we found some obstacles to their implementation. Those problems we had anticipated did not materialize, while others caught us unprepared. One anticipated difficulty was time taken away from instruction. However, class time spent on teaching the use of e-mail and network software amounted, surprisingly, to not more than two class days, and the students generally responded positively. Asked to rank order (1=high, 4=low) which items they found most useful, 41 percent of the students indicated "access to Netscape for research" was extremely useful; 35 percent said they would use Netscape more often. One stated further, "If there was more access to Netscape besides the library, I

would use it more." Eight students out of nineteen responded they would use e-mail more, one going so far as to say, "I only kept [this course] because of the e-mail account, but now I enjoy the great learning experience I have acquired."

Initially, we feared that technological problems inherent in the computer systems—viruses, network difficulties, crashing systems, failure to observe appropriate precautions in saving materials—might create student and faculty frustration. However, we found that the failure was not rooted in the computer system itself; rather, it stemmed from the students' unwillingness to utilize the system, especially the discussion questions. In fact, when asked to rank which items were least helpful and why (questions 7 and 8), the overwhelming choice was the discussion component. In general, students disliked these questions because of the extra time commitment they required: "it was too much of a hassle"; "there were too many essays [that] needed to be done." We found that it was an issue of time or their perception that the networked sessions were not user-friendly that seemed to be the problem; it was not the concept per se to which they objected. Hence, responses to question 8 ("If you used discussion on connect, do you believe it has helped you succeed on exams?") were generally favorable. For example, one student indicated such questions were helpful not only for exams but also with the research paper. Another noted, "Yes . . . if you are not on the right track, another student or Dr. Schultz will help you. So when the test comes, you already know the info." Students who utilized discussion and e-mail to discuss items with their instructor (question 13) found them very useful. Similarly, their response to using e-mail/connect with their discussion group was extremely positive.

Although we have made a vast array of technological tools available, we find students lacked motivation. Despite doubling the number of in-class lab instruction days and having additional lab hours scheduled for their use, only a handful of students became involved. For example, in the fall 1995, of the twenty-eight students who remained for the entire semester, for each discussion question required there was an average of twenty-one responses. In the spring, there were only six responses for the nineteen students who finished the class. Perhaps the combination of too many options and too little structure was overwhelming for our students. During the second semester, we were remiss in specifying deadline dates for the discussion questions; hence, there could be no cut-off dates. When students were asked to evaluate themselves as students, of nine options, the third largest response was "procrastinator." In the final three weeks of the semester, we were inundated with student responses to discussion questions. So our lack of structure did play a major role in students' lack of response early on. What we found, not surprisingly, was that the good students took their work seriously and got right down to it; weaker and average students put it all off until the end. As teachers, we may also have overestimated students' interest in technologies, their commitment to the course and its require-

ments, and their trust in our knowledge that this could help them overcome the burdens of synthesizing materials and not simply add to their workload.

Perhaps the most devastating statistic came when comparing withdrawal from the four classes in Western Civilization over a two-year period. Course content had not changed significantly from the academic years 1994–95 to 1995–96 except for the addition of the technological component in the second year. During the fall of 1994, there were 5 Withdrawals, representing 13 percent of the enrolled students. During the spring 1995 semester, there were 8 Ws, or 26 percent of the students withdrawing. During the fall of 1995, there were 14 Ws, or 29 percent of the class. For spring 1996, there were 16 Ws, or 46 percent of the students withdrawing. High drop-out rates are often part of the community college experience, and we suspected that the time and job constraints of community college students were problems limiting their participation. Our suspicions were confirmed by our institution's Middle States Report citing the students' need to work and their family responsibilities (1994 MSPR, 167–74) as reasons for withdrawing.

There may have been other forces at work. The student survey confirmed that homework is often not required on the high school level; anything that must be done outside of class will probably not be done. When asked if they felt "intimidated by the computer element of the course," the respondents were about evenly divided. The "yes" respondents said there was "too much out of class commitment," outnumbering the second largest by an almost two-to-one margin. Lack of time was the main response. Such problems could be alleviated, as several students noted, by scheduling more in-class time in the lab. Of those who responded to the research paper issue, two were positive about it ("I like to write and it gives me a chance to become acquainted with a topic of interest."), but a plurality were against it either because they don't like to write or because it took too long to do. Perhaps there was resistance to the idea because, as one student stated succinctly, "In other [introductory] courses, a term paper was not required."

Whereas the writing and the technology components created minor problems for our students, the most significant obstacle was getting students to use the technology to write in a non-English/non-"writing" course ("This is a history course, not a writing course."). Recent research has revealed a significant increase in the use of information technology in courses, especially at the community college level ("Technology Use," 1996, 2). Faculty are using technology to enhance their curricula, and more and more students are coming to expect such a component in their courses, especially as they become more commonplace at the secondary level. Connecting technology to writing assignments is a natural link; our student sample was not put off by a "writing intensive" course label if a writing lab experience were a scheduled part of the program for which they received credit (four vs. three credit hours). Some sample responses: "An

hour in the lab with discussion due dates would be a tremendous help. Four credits is a big incentive also"; "This is the way you have a scheduled time to work on assignments and you don't have to stress over whether you're going to get everything done." These kinds of comments indicate that the expectation to go above and beyond class time is outside the realm of community college students' experience. The students come to class unprepared, and they admit it. The implicit expectation is that they will be "given" information rather than be held accountable for their own learning. And they want to have time scheduled into their classes for the writing work they need to do. But if given the time and when shown how the technology can facilitate writing-to-learn activities, students generally recognize both the importance of and the benefits of such a program. A number of students who experienced past difficulty with writing and who used the network on a regular basis demonstrated an improved ability to synthesize materials and to communicate their newly gained knowledge effectively. One student, for example, who had previously failed Freshman Composition and repeated it only to get a D, subsequently earned a well-deserved B+ in this class.

Conclusions

Given our limited experience with this collaborative model, it appears that if writing across the curriculum and technology are to be effective, there is a need for a "carrot-and-stick" approach. Students must come to see writing as an integral part of the learning process, be rewarded for taking courses that develop their writing skills (Writing Intensive designations, extra credit for courses that have a writing lab component, for example). We are fairly certain that our high drop-out rate in Western Civ stems not from the use of technology but from time constraints coupled with student expectations that they will not be required to write in non-composition courses. Hence, a commitment to writing to learn on the part of the faculty and the institution is essential. We suspect that many people across the disciplines would gladly include more writing in their courses if they were given some guidance in establishing goals for their disciplines, given some help in constructing effective writing-to-learn activities, and given some support by the institution to have the time and the facilities to work on projects such as this one. Faculty workshops on the WAC process, coupled with institutional support in the form of grants, equipment, course scheduling, time easements, establishment of teams/courses/collaborators may prove ways of encouraging such experimentation. Such items are essential if the program is to be effective, especially given the time commitment entailed in planning unit topics; writing the discussion questions, bibliographies, and exam questions; and establishing deadlines and the like. Given our experience, initial faculty

reaction has been one of suspicion and concern, given the realities of student enrollment, job security, the restrictive wording of union contracts, and departmental in-fighting. Hence the imperative for a nonthreatening technical and institutional environment under which such innovations could be encouraged. With the increasing interest in and use of information technology on the part of students and faculty come financial, technological, and pedagogical challenges—replacing hard- and software, training, and improving the infrastructure to facilitate its use. All this questioning of methods and results is not an admission of failure but rather an exploration of what the education process is all about, that good teachers are perpetual students. It must be utilized by all segments of the academy if its full potential is to be realized.

Note

We used for this project Norton Textra Connect, a "networked writing environment," as the editors call it. It is an interactive, collaborative word-processing program that can be run through DOS or through Windows and is compatible with major word processing programs such as WordPerfect and Word for Windows. It can be used with Novell, NFS, LANTASTIC, OS/2, Vines, and PATHWORKS networks. Students need only buy the access number so that they are licensed to enter the program on the network; it is free for the institution that installs it. The price (as of summer 1996) is modest for students: approximately $30.00 allows them access to the software which includes a word processor with an online handbook, a collaborative discussion facility, and an internal e-mail system. Further information is available through W. W. Norton.

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