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CONVERSATIONS: COMPUTER MEDIATED DIALOGUE,
MULTILOGUE, AND LEARNING

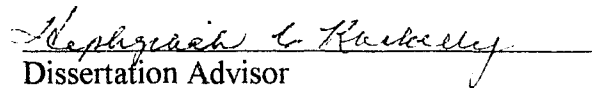
by

Beth W. Baldwin

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
1996

Approved by


Dissertation Advisor

UMI Number: 9632122

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APPROVAL PAGE

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January 31, 1996
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January 31, 1996
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BALDWIN, BETH W., Ph.D. Conversations: Computer Mediated Dialogue, Multilogue, and Learning. (1996). Directed by Dr. Hephzibah Roskelly. 232pp.

The purpose of this dissertation is to argue in favor of a "pedagogy of textual conversation," a pedagogy made possible in large part by electronic technology, by computer mediated communication. Informing the argument is a deep philosophical commitment to conversation itself as the primary mode of meaning-making in both social and personal life. Material presented in support of the main argument is drawn from current and past pedagogical and communications theory as well as from ethnographic research conducted in the fall semester of 1994 in which students in an English composition class were linked to students in an education class via a single VAX electronic conference. Actual experiences in the electronic medium are forwarded to suggest that those who engage in extensive textual conversation with one another benefit from improved rhetorical skills, understanding of course content, the ability to make connections between ideas, and a liberalization of ideological views.

But this dissertation is not meant only to argue this issue in a classical or academically authorized sense, i.e., as a monological exercise of logic and reason with its inevitable linear development and closure. It is meant also to *enact* a conversational model. Thus it is a hybrid form of writing, a fugue-like composition which, like its musical counterpart is a polyphonic (multi-vocal) composition based upon several related, but different themes enunciated by several voices or parts in turn, subjected to contrapuntal treatment, and which gradually builds up into a complex form having distinct divisions or stages marked at the end by an open-ended climax rather than a conclusion. In other words, the work as a whole is in great part the subject of itself.

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CHAPTER I
PRELUDE:
A CONVERSATION ABOUT CONVERSATION¹

We are painters on a glass canvas, visible to our subject and our peers.

Thomas T. Barker

I believe the question you posed in the *EnText* call for papers is "why aren't we talking: across hallways, departments, disciplines, across divisions of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, culture, and identity." My answer to you is succinct: because we can't. We can't, or don't, because we're suffering from the postmodern condition. Post post-structuralism, our culture has moved increasingly towards one of two poles: either a nihilistic pole around which rally those who believe that values, ethics, and morals are matters of personal taste and opinion, that words can't really mean anything at all (so why bother talking), or a fundamentalist, totalitarian pole around which dance those who deny

¹Scott Bukatman in *Terminal Identity* suggests that, in science fiction films, *special effects* are the technological products of what the narrative attempts to explain (14). It is thus, as a special effect, that this Prelude is offered -- it is the subject of itself, the object that its self attempts to textually externalize and explain through the narrative unfolding of this dissertation. The conversation, which originally took place during the months of May-July 1994, is taken from the record of electronic mail exchanges between Bob King and myself initially prompted by a call for papers issued by *EnText* for which Bob is co-editor, but eventually leading by twist and turn to an extended research collaboration. As presented here, my part of the dialogue appears in normal character; Bob's appears in italics.

the validity of any value orientation other than their own.² I think that in the academy, the former holds sway over the latter.

I'm excited, though, by the potential of electronic communication to allow us to move beyond or between these poles and begin really talking again. I think cyberspace is *the* ethical forum of our time. Granted, it's still a postmodern forum. After all, the *ethic* is merely an illusion.

Do you think we should talk more -- both about cyberspace as well as the question posed by your call for papers?

Yes, I think we should talk about the EnText question and about technology. Talk, conversations -- these are what I like about school. And what began to drive me crazy as I approached the grand project of dissertation was the imperative to endure isolation and alienation. It seems as if we in the academy give great lip service to ideas about the social construction of reality and then insist that students engage asocially in their studies. Writing about the social construction of reality is okay, but just don't go on about actually constructing a socially meaningful network or society. I think it's a shame we don't do more towards fostering social networks, conversations, and working together.

This is interesting to me, particularly in relation to e-mail since it is such a (perhaps deceptively) non-threatening form of writing; I marveled at the extent to which the fear of writing is somehow mitigated by the electronic medium. I supposed, finally, it's not really writing any more than a conversation about personal topics over a cup of coffee (or over a clothesline) is really analysis.

²According to Kim, the pressures brought to bear by these two extreme positions on civic discourse and social praxis endanger the democratic way of life (14).

Again, we're talking about the role of illusion in electronic conversation. You say that it's not "really writing" and although I might disagree, let's at least say that there's the *illusion* that it's really writing. It's the same thing I was talking about when I said that the medium creates the "illusion" of ethics and ethical space. I recently read an essay that explained how the psychotherapy environment creates a "moral space" in which one cultivates ways of seeing, meeting, and respecting "the being of each unique other, in treating his or her subjectivity as of equal value with one's own." To me, this is the environment, the illusion, of cyberspace. The machine creates for us (the illusion of) moral space where we offer to one another "free attention" or what this writer called the skill "of being able to be close to another with a kind of caring objectivity, in which those distortions of understanding, critical judgments, projections and distractions that so often get in the way of real meeting are minimized."³ Cyberspace, in functioning in just this way, is the postmodern site for ethical meeting and democratic discourse.

When I said that electronic conversation was not real writing, I think what I was trying to say was that it would not be real for academic establishmentarians (which I

³These quotes are taken from Tom Kitwood's essay "Psychotherapy, Postmodernism, and Morality," in which he reiterates the relationship between postmodernism and the deterioration of moral praxis. Reacting to the contemporary inclination to an anything-goes philosophy, he asks whether or not there is "some position that recognizes the postmodern predicament, and yet which still holds firm in some way to that respect for persons which seems to be the bedrock of morality." The two key concepts he draws from the practice of psychotherapy are those of free attention and moral space, both of which foster open communication between engaged parties by creating an ethos of 1) "complete particularism," in which each person is recognized as a unique individual rather than a stereotypical representative of something else, 2) "aprescriptive[ness]" in which no individual is subjected to an imperative "ought" and, 3) "non-propositional[ity]" where the quality of experience is unique to the occasion (4-6). It is the illusion of a similar ethos, the illusion of free attention and moral space which I believe cyberspace creates so dramatically.

consider myself not to be). For me, talking over a cup of coffee or over a clothesline is exactly what I mean by the social construction of reality. And this is exactly what our academic training would have us devalue. I take the 'construction' part of 'social construction' seriously, being an avowed constructivist. All this means is that dichotomies are out; reality/illusion, inside/outside, etc. are all problematized in a constructivist orientation in the sense that there is recognition that we ourselves have constructed the dichotomies. Sort of like this: we humans invent writing, and then writing invents us, changes us and so forth. Everything is interactive and co-creative; creating the world is not something we do by ourselves, nor is the world something we 'find' already created -- it is something that is constructed in between, in constant interactivity. So in a way constructivism implies indeterminism and also implies that everything is real (real meaning constructed). My question might be under what conditions do constructions get named illusions?

I now recall how odd an experience it is to sit in a class with people from many different academic disciplines. We all use jargon that sounds alike, but it has different meanings depending upon your area of scholarship. It may pose a problem for us since you're speaking School of Education jargon and I'm speaking English Rhetoric and Composition jargon. It's hard for me to understand, for example, how one can be a constructivist and an indeterminist at the same time. Normally, I think of the two as mutually exclusive. But, I see what you're saying; if we're being constructive in terms of mutually engaging in meaning-making, indeterminism might follow. Maybe then, I'm a constructivist-indeterminist, too. I just don't want to follow indeterminacy to an extreme, to the point where we *can't* engage in conversation, in meaning-making at all, the point that there is no point after all because nothing *can* mean anything. Why bother?

And about illusion -- don't get me wrong; I'm not glorifying illusion vs. reality. Cyberspace is real, in the sense that it exists independently of anything we may think about it. What I'm saying is that what happens in cyberspace is illusion. Just think about how easy it is to construct an ethos. And it's not just the absence of corporeality. Although I may be fat/skinny, black/white, male/female, old/young, abled/disabled and you wouldn't know it if I didn't tell you, ethos involves much more. I may choose to construct an ethos that leads you to believe that I'm a very reasonable, listening, caring, considerate, turn-taking person, when really I'm an over-bearing jerk (just for argument's sake, of course). Because the illusion of free attention is so high, you buy it; you want to buy it, so you do. We extend ourselves in willing openness to do democratic kinds of things, to carry on a conversation, but what we see when we read the text on the screen is really our own desire for a perfect interlocutor. We seduce ourselves, so to speak. Electronic conversation, especially e-mail, one-on-one, provides a mirror surface for us so that what we see is our own self/desire.⁴

⁴Jean Baudrillard's work in both *Seduction* and *The Transparency of Evil* contributes to an understanding of rhetorical relationships in cyberspace. "Telecomputer man," he claims, "offers himself the spectacle of his own brain, his own intelligence, at work. Similarly through [electronic conversation], he can offer himself the spectacle of his own phantasies, of a strictly virtual pleasure. He exorcizes both intelligence and pleasure at the interface with the machine. The Other, the interlocutor, is never really involved: the screen works much like a mirror, for the screen itself as locus of the interface is the prime concern. An interactive screen transforms the process of relating into a process of commutation between One and the Same. The secret of the interface is that the Other here is virtually the Same" (*Transparency* 94). Electronic conversation, in providing such a surface or interface, intensifies discursal intimacy because the distance between self and Other, rhetor and interlocutor, *seems* so close. It's not merely that the rhetor simulates or dissimulates her ethos, but that the interlocutor desires the ethos he creates from the text on the screen. "To seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion," Baudrillard says. "It is to be taken in by one's own illusion and move in an enchanted world. . . . And it is potentially a source of fabulous strength. For if production can only produce objects or real signs, and thereby obtain some power; seduction, by producing

Rhetorically speaking, you are seduced by the medium. You think we are having a conversation. This conversation feels really great because there's the illusion that I'm waiting right here on the other side of the screen, hanging on every word. I'm attentive. I don't interrupt you. Is this conversation to you because it's conversation in reality, or is it conversation because conversation is what you desire?

From the constructivist perspective, we'd have to be doing the conversation on a mutual basis. We'd have to be socially constructing meaning. But I wonder if we really are. Is it mutual? Perhaps we are each constructing in isolation. I am constructing you. You are constructing me. I, your ideal interlocutor, am your creation, so not Other. Illusion! This is an illusion of conversation. We are disembodied voices!

But great things can happen here, despite the illusion. It has potential for democratic praxis and consensual discourse. That's why I want to go on-line with my composition classes.

We are disembodied only if we construct ourselves with dichotomies. Rather than illusion, let's talk about illusionists, the magic show kind. The key to illusionism is for the illusionist to get the audience to buy into a dichotomy; a situation is framed such that there are only two interpretative choices. Once this is done, all the illusionist has to do is make sure that whatever needs to be hidden (the interpretation which would reveal the actual circumstances) falls somewhere outside of the dichotomous frame because if it does it will automatically be invisible.

For the audience, the key to not being tricked is not to see the sleight of hand, but rather to not buy into the dichotomous framing. By the time the sleight of hand comes

only illusions, obtains all powers, including the power to return production and reality to the fundamental illusion" (Seduction 69-70).

around the trick has already been done in effect, going through the motions is all that remains. In this way Descartes can be seen as a great illusionist: he frames situations dichotomously, and then strange things start to happen: bodies disappear; people even begin to report feeling disembodied. In other words, I would say you have been tricked. Seduced! There is no illusion here or anywhere else; there are only constructions, dichotomous or otherwise, that we either buy into or not. Once we buy in, the show begins and we take the ride, trick or treat, ready or not. I tend to think the postmodern is grounded in science, which is unfortunately usually left out of the discussion. Humanists and such, coming from time-worn constructs, tend to produce and reproduce Cartesian illusionistics, and hence we get these funny effects.

I'd like to remind you that science is, after all, grounded in the humanities, historically speaking. Obviously, one has to keep grounding one's ground. Since I got my undergraduate degree in biology, I guess you could say that I'm personally grounded in science. Sure, it made its contributions to postmodernism, but it wasn't the sole contributor. I think of Saussure who did his part vis-à-vis linguistics.⁵ Then the army of French theorists.⁶

Yes, I agree that I myself am seduced by the illusionist's trick. I participate willingly and actively. When I read a text like Baudrillard's it is in many ways a mirror game. But isn't that what reader-response theory is all about? Inserting ourselves into the

⁵By claiming that "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary" (67), Saussure inserts uncertainty into language itself.

⁶While the French theorists such as Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, and Lyotard have their differences, they can be, according to Vincent Colapietro, justifiably regarded as representing a monolithic position opposed "to the privileged status accorded the Cartesian cogito . . . and, in addition, in their debt to Ferdinand de Saussure's conception of language as a system of differences" (647).

gaps in the text that fall outside of the literal frame? And *post* structuralism, there are nothing but gaps.

You're right about having to continually ground your grounding. Thinking about it again, I would say that I have found the language that science has recently generated to be more usefully descriptive of postmodernism, more helpful in terms of making a home in it, than the language generated by humanities theorists has been. Probably just a bias, but I seem to be able to do more with scientific concepts, maybe in part because the rhetorical posture seems stilted to me. The other thing I would say is that science seems also to possess the mantle of truth, and that may also be why I associate it with grounding. Notions such as "nothing but gaps," endless deferral of meaning, etc., make me feel dizzy. In contrast, substituting scientific pattern for nothing but gaps makes me feel better. I guess I just need handles, particularly if a hand-hold is all that's available to me in my epistemological environment.

That brings me back to conversation again. Why do we spend so much time developing academic languages that hardly anyone can understand? It seems that the answer I usually get is "that's what academics do." Another answer suggests itself to me though -- arcane languages are useful for things like job protection, making emperors' clothes, etc.⁷

I just read an essay in Faigley's new book in which a student writer talks about letter writing. I immediately made her comments analogous to electronic conversation,

⁷This same position is supported (though less cynically) by John Swales, who in *Genre Analysis* points out that the language, or specific lexis, of discourse communities such as those of the academic disciplines is centrifugal rather than centripetal -- they tend to be exclusionary.

since electronic conversation is a peculiar blend of epistolary and conversational styles. Anyway, this student had been away from home for a while and communicated with family and friends a great deal through the exchange of letters. When she comes back home again, she compares communicating by letter with communicating face to face. She notes "letters were unselfconscious and utterly honest, for the time and space lag between the letters made intimacy easier. . . . [Now that I can talk to friends and family face-to-face] the barriers are back up. We're careful again, wary of the reckless revelations we once shared. The physical distances between us are less now; cautiously, we distance ourselves in spirit."⁸ Just like this student who has noticed that letter writing casts a distance in time and space that paradoxically decreases spiritual distance, I have noticed that the electronic medium creates a similar chronotopic situation. Perhaps this enables us to overcome our postmodern spiritual distance?⁹ Although we are separated by space and time in reality, we have the illusion of closeness, spiritual intimacy? And interestingly, Faigley notes that, in the essay itself, the student writer creates the illusion of a unified and knowing self. Seems like there's illusion-casting on many levels. I'm thinking out loud. Am I making sense?

Yes, you're making fantastic sense. It's just that darned word "illusion." Try this rewrite: the writer creates a unified and knowing self. Deleting "the illusion of" solves a host of modernist problems. First, it does not specify the number of selves which might

⁸Quoted in Lester Faigley's *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, 122-25.

⁹Jameson suggests that in postmodern society there has been a spatial disruption leading to "the disability of moving outside the ever-shifting subject position to achieve a positional stance from which to critique, as object, the culture in which we are immersed" (87).

otherwise be created. Second, it acknowledges the power of language; worlds, not illusionary worlds, are created. My quibble is that "the illusion of" as a locution is a machine for reinscribing modernism, including modernism's unified and knowing self.

But the observations about letters and intimacy, in relation to e-conversation and postmodern spiritual distance is beginning to make sense to me. I can see that e-conversation is linked to a particular construction of intimacy -- what I would call the romantic-pornographic construction. Playing into the visibility/voyeurism in the lighted screen which can function as a kind of one-way mirror, seeing oneself all lit up so to speak, but somehow this is for the Other who is absent but being written to. And I may want to say "fantasy" or "masturbatory fantasy" but not "illusion."

When I am the constructed self, or cyborg, Bob + automobile, I am a decidedly different person (the modernist locution). I tend to sing more, feel more powerful rushes of anger at small perturbances, etc. Seeing writing as a technology, when I am the cyborg Bob + pen and paper I am again a different construction, and so on. So yes, I can now see that the cyborg now sitting here, Bob + e-conversation, is a particular configuration, but not an illusory one. A particularly complex cyborg construction, I admit.

There may be good reasons for the apparent intimacy-through-distance and technological mediations. By "good," I mean evolutionary. Devising such tools may be the only way our species might continue to proliferate under advanced industrial conditions if, for example, AIDS is an indicator of our future under conditions of corporeal, unmediated-by-technology intimacy. So I think we should dump all "illusion" language -- we have work to do, construction work, blue-collar stuff, no illusion twaddle. Constructing ourselves as cyborgs may be a possible future.

I've begun to wonder whether or not we're trying to ex-terminate one another. I think we think the same things, but that we speak from different positions in language. Perhaps it will come down to only this: I have a very sardonic world view -- that is, I'm a cynic with a sense of humor. Perhaps you are much more a positivist than I am. Our basic world views are so deeply psychologically and experientially constructed that they cannot be undone. For me, the idea of illusion is quite comfortable. It can work well within my theoretical understanding of the world. And, to boot, when things go awry, I'm not as crushed as I might have been had I let myself believe in concrete creations. I'm working against seduction in a way.

But you'll have to explain more about the romantic-pornographic construction of intimacy in e-conversation. I think I understand romanticism quite well, the individual creating his own meaning, the self as knowing subject. But how do you mean "pornographic"? Baudrillard says that the pornographic is the hyper-real, the obscenity of something seen up close, so close that there is no longer any distance between the subject and the object.¹⁰ Is e-conversation romantic-pornographic then by virtue of the fact/illusion that we create closeness and intimacy where there is nothing but time and distance?

How redemptive or evolutionary is this new technology? You brought up the issue of AIDS. Is the implication that we can now do away with corporeal sex and have cyborg (virtual) sex instead? Perhaps redemptive for the individual, but just how far will

¹⁰Baudrillard defines pornography as a seeing "from up close what one has never seen before. . . . It is all too true, too near to be true. And it is this that is fascinating, this excess of reality, this hyperreality of things. The only phantasy in pornography, if there is one is thus not a phantasy of sex, but of the real, and its absorption into something other than the real, the hyperreal (*Seduction*, 28-29).

humanity evolve with disembodied reproduction?¹¹ Won't we suffer a fate similar to that of the Shakers? Our supply of converts to celibacy isn't inexhaustible.

Positivism? It is in the grain of my (gendered) flesh. Your raising the issue of attitude, the process of arriving at personal meaning is important -- not so much what is thought, but how. This must surely be argument's, reason's shadow, the idea that if we could just get our story straight, get it right, everything would be fine. Radical indeterminacy, it has been determined, is the correct answer! This is how spiraled and vortexed the problem of knowledge is (as something to be solved and done with). Caught in this language net, looking for a way out, does seem to ensure the net's closure. Answers and ex-terminations dovetail; but if we frame this as a problem, as the modern problem, arguing about it and so forth, then I think you get reinscription.

The rhetorical form or discursive practice we call argument is gendered male. I've just read Carol Gilligan who cites studies of gendered game-playing in which male gaming features argument as much as the game itself, and in which female gaming is usually called "game over" if argument develops. As male, I sometimes feel totally out of water. I'm no essentialist, but I do think it's more than coincidence that feminism and postmodernism sort of go together; at least it seems to me that postmodernism as potentially more than reinscription of modernism is tied to feminism. Is there a way to exchange words in some frame other than argument?

¹¹An interesting cyborg mediation between sexual corporeality and virtuality is offered by Donna Haraway in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs." Biotechnology, the cyborg marriage of life and machine, she argues, not only produces a robotic labor force, but also genetic engineering and reproductive technologies that literally make reproduction without sex a reality.

My desire to cleanse the language net of illusion talk is not something which I can cleanse myself of. What are my options? To speak with a measure of irony? The fascination with sex and porno on the part of academics seems curious and self-deceptive but also it does seem that the modern-to-postmodern move is a sex change. The popularity of male-to-female sex changes is somehow a cultural phenomenon to reckon with. Experience like one of those reputed chemical washes that occur in utero is translated into cultural terms. Some few take it very literally and in so doing become emblems -- of disfigurement and a whole host of other things.

So illusion bashing is one thing; bashing illusion bashing is another. The kinds of change that might make conversation of a different sort possible are what? Dewey would say that nothing but doing will do, and I guess I agree with that. It is one of the many reasons I am heartened and excited by our work. There is the option of saying "how about instead of arguing, I tell you how it is for me, and you tell me how it is for you."

Before I listened to you, I had a quite passive acceptance of the givenness of the screen I now sit before; I thought of it as a typewriter and had no other thoughts about typewriters. I have now entered into different terms, which in their analytic character are, I would say, positivistic. It is possible to say in my framework that the unified self which is created is an illusion; there is no reason for insisting that we have limits on what we can create. But then illusion is a creation; how do we know one when we see one? We have named a certain sort of thing illusion; how did we do that? Creation is also a creation; how did we do that? Finally, we did it like the old Taoist masters said, "along the river" (or together in e-conversation). The real mystery is that we seem to need to continue trying to figure things out!

About pornography, I was mainly thinking about pornography in terms of the play of visibility/invisibility, of one-way mirrors. I like Baudrillard's comments on pornography, the too-muchness of it all close-up. And yet, I would still want to say that invisibility is just as important as hyper-visibility. The electronic screen is lit up just like the one-way mirror in a peep-show; behind it is a person acting out the "too much" which is necessary to bridge the mediation of the one-way screen and balance the "not enough" on the other side such that a masturbatory "just right" can occur. Perhaps we're just prematurely ejaculating the future of the current Little Bo-Peep illusion of e-conversation, pointing towards the eventuality of, as you say, virtual sex.

But this is to be seduced into thinking that things have destinies apart from us. This may be why the cyborg figure may be strangely redemptive; it is a representation of a person in a machine more than it is a representation of a machine in a person. If we are forced to see ourselves as part of the machinery in an industrialized destiny, this might be a sign of hope, a novel sign in a culture used to regarding the horror of machines invading us.

About argument -- game vs. game over, masculine vs. feminine playing styles -- I think Gilligan is concerned about just that: argument as style. Masculine style deliberation is argument; that includes being loud, shaking your fists, interrupting, name-calling, and a whole host of aggressive features to which the feminine style responds by saying "game over." Silence.

But argument, as deliberation in general, as rhetoric, I would say is feminine. After all, Rhetorica is a goddess, not a god. It's the use of language to the ends of

seduction.¹² And rhetoric can either seduce using truth or by using illusion, by simulating or by dissimulating, evil or good. In any case, it's feminine. So, as far as postmodernism relates to simulation and seduction, the I agree that it's related to the feminine. But remember, I said there were two poles to postmodernism; the totalitarian pole I regard as masculine; and in very strange ways feminine, seductive openness, can itself become a totalitarian position, always resisting closure.

I too am excited about the work we're doing, but I don't get the sense that we're arguing, at least not in the masculine sense. I think we're socially constructing meaning, which may or may not require narrative strategies. I have no objection to narrative. As I said, this is how it is for me: I'm the cynic with a sense of humor; you're the positivist (in the grain of your gendered flesh). If nothing else we can balance one another.

I like Baudrillard's slant on pornography. From the perspective of the object, pornography is hyper-visible, hyperreal, and obscene. I have not before given much consideration to the invisible subject. But I think the moment that invisibility becomes part of the object game, what you have is a move toward seduction, not pornography. Seduction requires the secret, the dissimulation that pretends that something is not what it really is -- or conversely, the simulation that pretends that something is what it really is not. So while you suggest that we may be prematurely ejaculating the future of the current Little Bo-Peep illusion of e-conversation, pointing towards the eventuality of virtual sex, I see any interpretation of e-conversation as pornography permanently precluding ejaculation because the Other is absent.

I don't want to theorize and retheorize pornography, though. One always ends up talking in sexual terms. But I am more in agreement with Baudrillard -- there's no element

¹²This is precisely the point Socrates makes in *Gorgias*. Rhetoric, although neutral, can be used to simulate truth.

of invisibility in pornography, hence no seduction. What I do want to hold on to is the theory of seduction itself.

By the way, perhaps we should talk in concrete terms about collaborating our teaching this fall. I think we could use the medium to put social construction of meaning into pedagogical practice. What do you think?

Getting down to concrete talk about a collaborative course may be a matter of comparing visions. To some extent I have a greater need to focus on education. Somewhere in a muddle of reader reception, complexity, and the democratic theories is where I am situated. I'm also interested in visions of education's future. I have had the idea of collecting articles about bio-tech, AIDS, Prozac, etc., as runes to sift through to conjure up futures. How do you see the disembodied exchange as pedagogy? That is the part I'm not sure of, except again, this idea that the electronic teacher is already in existence; distance learning is likely to become more common in the future. Do you mainly see it as producing a different discourse of school? Or do you see a possibility for other sorts of things as well? Do you see academia as a disembodied space in any case?

I know that you have to focus on education in your class; I have to focus on rhetoric in mine. The nice thing about rhetoric, though, is that anything can serve as content. I'm interested in working on values deliberation, ethics, morals, etc. This feeds back to the *EnText* call for papers and my concern about the impossibility of conversation in postmodern times. It's not that I think people don't have ideas, or ethical/moral orientations, or opinions. I just don't think they express them. The lid's on the pressure cooker, screwed-down tightly over anything that might be a question of values. The thing

I find hopeful about an interdisciplinary course is that our classes can engage in disembodied conversation with one another. They'll never have to see one another, and they'll know that. Perhaps the medium will create a moral space in which free expression can take place.

What could our students learn from one another? Yours may learn from mine better deliberative skills and mine could learn from yours a deeper understanding of the institution of education. Certainly, they'll all learn something about the real world through their interaction with one another.

Between this message and the next, Bob and I ran into one another by chance at the library. Heretofore, our conversation had been completely electronic, disembodied. The experience of meeting face to face was disconcerting and occasioned further reflection on the nature of electronic conversation.

Wow! What did you think about the experience of running into one another today? I feel scattered in the flesh. Dis-associated.

Re-iteration: the text creates a unified self! Scattered in the flesh is sure to follow. Feedback loop: the real becomes pornographic; it becomes the "too much" itself. At least that's how it felt to me to see you in the flesh. It makes me think about what it would be like to see my father who died when I was eight years old. I have had so much time to construct him and reconstruct him that it would be very much too much to actually encounter him.

Just what to make of it I haven't the murkiest. The temptation of the flesh becomes the temptation of the text instead. I'll try this for now: since most corporeal

events, particularly like ours, are about chit-chat, our e-conversation has revealed the masked nature of social intercourse.

So, is it safe to assume that you see some kind of illusion powerfully at play here in cyberspace? Confronted by absence, you are constructing a me; I am constructing a you? This constructing process is then amplified or intensified by the medium. And you also construct an amplified you to interact with the amplified me (are you beginning to see this as sliding towards the point where the Other disappears? Mirror mirror!). I think this is what the medium, in its passive glory, aggressively invites.

Here, the disembodied exchange lets us splay ourselves open so that we can show to each other only what we want to; we can also see in others only what we want to see. But then, we have to re-husk the flesh for the corporeal event. The gaze plays a major role in the way we react to one another, disembodied vs. embodied.

Yes, no denying that something goes on here. Are all of our attempts to explain it, to get a handle on it, just part of a modernist/patriarchal imperative to deny the mystery and power of experience? Or maybe a creature thing -- needing to establish equilibration after disequilibrating circumstances render the familiar interpretive means inoperative? Perhaps an attitude of "basking" (just being) would be far more fruitful than one of interpretation.

This feeds back to your earlier comments about argument and attitude -- transformation needs to reach the basking level. And this is much more difficult than just banning argument.

As a writer, this must be more familiar to you. For me, this e-conversation, Bob-cyborg's penchant for creating characters more believable than any characters that exist

in the flesh is something which has only given me an inkling of what the place of fiction might be like. Our experiences are "just like fiction," labyrinthine. And what is the point of a labyrinth? It must be about getting into the details, not about getting out, not about seeing it all at once (pornography's counter figure).

So, something's going on here, but are we then proposing to enter into our interdisciplinary course knowing there are risks without necessarily knowing what those risks are? I know, I know . . . bask.

Yes Bob, I propose that we jump right into those risky waters in the company of our students even though there's no way to assess the risk before doing so. I guess we can only keep in mind, before we jump, that they are indeed risky. If cyberspace is a space of simulation, it defies rational analysis, it is beyond the true and false. We'd be wasting our time to do more than bask.

But you asked if all our attempts to interpret might not be part of a modernist/patriarchal imperative to deny the mystery and power of experience, or maybe a creature thing, to establish equilibration after disequilibrating circumstances. Can we answer that "yes" to both? Actually, what's the difference between the two choices other than the modernist/patriarchal being wants to deny being a creature? The mystery and power of experience is always decentering and we humans just can't abide that. There are those who believe that there is no experience outside of language at all -- I've been through this issue in several seminar classes. I believe (and it can be no more than belief) that there is experience outside of language and that the purpose of language is to communicate the experience -- to circumscribe rather than to describe. Must this mean I'm a mystic?

Mystical experiences, or at least experiences which fit my image of what such an experience would be, have landed somewhat outside of my range. Maybe they land when I'm sleeping. And since I gather that mysticism is, or is not, mainly on the basis of testimonials (belief), I suppose I could still qualify as a mystic. I don't know how to try mysticism, but I do have some angst about not having these experiences of knowing or what have you.

The closest thing I've had to an otherworldly or qualitatively different sort of thing was once after reading Jung talk about mysticism in a way that was connected somehow to organic evolution. I remember this feeling of being embodied, of the intense physicality of history and all such things. This was not an insensate kind of experience, obviously. It was a kind of terror, maybe akin to our thankfully much milder, though still striking, e-conversation. I suppose that since disequilibrium is a relative thing, if we experience corporeality as disequilibrating it means that we are used to spending time incorporeally. The amplification of e-conversation only makes the general and pervasive muting of corporeality so obvious that it becomes shocking.

Other than that, I have always had two bones to pick with those that maintain an "it's all in the language" position. One is that it seems so entirely self-serving for such an idea to be so prized in academia where we live lives in language. It kind of states the obvious to say that in academia there is no experience outside of language. It's as if the notion of sociology of language has fallen into the blind spot, the aporia of academia in order to preserve the higher truth of jobs and cultural preservation. The other bone is the one which has to do with figuring out what is happening exactly with children who are pre-language. I suppose they are doing body language; but once you grant that language is more than just these words, you open onto a different world.

"Oh Lord, show me things as they truly are." That is the mystic's plea. In a way it expresses the desire of my life. School, work, friends, play, religion . . . I look to all insofar as they will show me things as they truly are. While I do believe that there is experience outside of language (otherwise language serves no purpose), I will concede that there is no knowledge outside of language -- at least in terms of how we normally think of knowledge as something formal, inscribed, a kind of artifact that we can pass around to one another. The mystic's plea is one for seeing or feeling, an immersion in experience beyond language. I look to language to guide me to experience.

Perhaps this is a kind thrill-seeking behavior; I don't know. Baudrillard, for example, has observed that our culture is moving from a competitive/expressive orientation to one of vertiginous risk. The only passion we have anymore is a passion for intensification, an escalation of the stakes, a passion for ecstasy.¹³ Escalation, ecstasy, and vertigo are all elements that play powerful roles in electronic addiction. Especially for people like me who are suckers for mental risk and vertigo. I'm beginning to feel like I'm caught in the gravitational field of a black hole: on the one hand loathing postmodern nihilism, longing for reasoned romanticism (whatever that may be), and on the other, disappearing into the vertiginous ecstasy of the realer-than-real. I'm lost.

The trajectory of our conversation seems to be moving towards the bottom. Bottoming-out in the language of addiction. The point in an addict's trajectory when even she cannot deny that there is something wrong and that she should seek help. And the concept of recovery does carry with it those associations with conformity, of making people who will henceforth be able to fit in, though (getting to things as they truly are)

¹³In "Fatal Strategies," Baudrillard asserts the "our whole culture is in the process of shifting from games of competition and expression to games of risk and vertigo" (187).

the choice between fitting in and feeling awful most of the time is a choice I gather an addicted person at some point is willing to make.

This is what sometimes concerns me about theorizing: as it truly is, vertigo is not fun. As it truly is, psychotic states are not fun; depression is not fun; being ex-terminated is not fun. So I would say that for people who are addicted to thought, especially for postmodernists, recovery might just be "getting to things as they truly are." Bottoming out might be getting to the point where you discover you can no longer talk to colleagues or friends, the point at which one mentally says "that hurts."

Body talk is, I suppose, my version of mysticism. The problem with education, which aspires to get at things as they truly are, is that the body is constantly under surveillance and assault ranging from the imperative to "sit still" to the more sophisticated panopticon. Recovery in higher education may mean turning the institution into a kind of health farm where people can learn to bask. After all, people often say that higher education at its best is an attempt to undo the damage done in lower education. If you're really a cynic, though, you see that higher education really doesn't heal much of anything because it still insists on excluding mysticism through unabated language addiction. The mystical body can't be recognized in academic culture because that culture has been defined historically and formed an identity in relation to the denial of that body.

I'm going to send you a copy of the generic, departmental syllabus for the class I teach, one that is supposed to serve as a guideline. Being a radical democrat, I myself regard syllabi as acts of hostility, a poison in the form of a cordial, the swallowing of which by students serves as proof that authoritarianism has been internalized and rendered acceptable. The best experience I've had of teaching ELC381 -- the Institution of Education -- was when students never saw the syllabus or any form thereof, and

wherein I began class by taking a vote on means of governance. I can say that a qualitatively different kind of order emerged.

As we embark on a collaborative teaching experience, I'm not sure what it is I want to preserve from my prior experience. Maybe it parallels the notion of getting to things as they truly are. While I realize that the idea of democracy is riddled with contradictions when it's done in school, it is nonetheless an idea that people understand and which seems capable of producing difference. So even though the idea of empowering students through democracy is somewhat shopworn, it still seems to engage. And conversation is a huge issue for me; I am for the most part convinced that conversation/negotiation skills are the skills of the future that go along with thinking on your feet and managing messes. So the elements I include in my definition of democracy, the ideas I want to preserve, would be conversation, negotiation, participation, and as much empowerment as possible. In a way, this is my syllabus.

In regards to addiction, or cyber-addiction, I don't think I'll be sleeping in the gutter anytime soon, or losing my job, or getting arrested for driving under the influence of cyberspace. Still, I may be addicted to thought. Yes, it could lead to depression and feeling awful; but it could also lead to ecstasy and feeling terrific. Vertigo may be experienced differently for positivists and sardonic romanticists, no? I like thinking/theorizing because it makes me feel intellectually alive; but I do need to have theory connect to practice.

I think my feelings about the academic institution and its possibilities don't square with yours once we get down to the practical level of conducting a class. I no longer assume ideal students who can handle a truly democratic class without having it turn into a non-class. I have more non-negotiables.

Perhaps my last message was more about the shadow side of my addiction because, like you, there are some parts of addiction I enjoy too. This may speak to the inherent postmodernism of this medium; I think what happens is that a keyword, like "seduction," gets established and, in holographic fashion, a whole world is constructed in our conversation. The another keyword or phrase, like "things as they truly are," is introduced and, once again, that bit contains all the information necessary to construct another whole world. It strains my positivism to make each world coherent with the next. In the world of seduction, I would only ask you what text you constructed from my text. In the world of "things as they truly are," I might try to construct my own meaning more clearly.

I suggest that we exit the world of seduction as well as the world of "things as they truly are." In either case, we could enter into a very postmodern exchange, interpreting each other's interpretations to infinity and never getting to anything more than vertigo.

Leaving these worlds is okay by me, too. Is this the meaning of postmodernism after all: consciously making one's bed and then sleeping in it? I am still intrigued by introducing the concept of holography into our conversation. Since it doesn't take much in the way of material to invent whole worlds, people ought to be careful about the materials they select (academic valuation). Why education? Are we in education in the business of supplying really good building materials and/or perspectival differences through social interactions? We play on two things: the plain fun of meaning-making and the desire for unity -- chaos and control. Consciousness is suspended now between a

desire for determinacy and a desire for indeterminacy. Which fits at the pole of meaning-making and which at the pole of unity?

My first response would be to say that determination (self) and unity are somehow paradoxically dependent. Maybe we bask best in the tension between the two.

Why education, you ask? Do we have anything more authoritative than our own personal narratives to answer that? Life can be whole without education, of course -- edenically, innocently -- but education can make it more whole. For example, I could appreciate the beauty of flowers even if I didn't know anything about botany and plant physiology, but now I can appreciate with an added dimension, knowing for example that there's a very specific relationship between the anatomy of the fig and the one species of wasp that pollinates it.

Why education? When I read Lyotard's work, his narratives of the grand narratives, I found myself drawn to Hegel -- more evidence that I'm not a postmodernist. Lyotard says:

Research and the spread of learning are not justified by invoking a principle of usefulness. . . . The humanist principle that humanity rises up in dignity and freedom through knowledge is left by the wayside. German idealism has recourse to a metaprinciple that simultaneously grounds the development of learning, of society, and of the State in the realization of the "life" of a Subject, called . . . "Life of the spirit" by Hegel. In this perspective, knowledge first finds legitimacy within itself, and it is knowledge that is entitled to say what the State and what Society are. But it can only play this role by changing levels, by ceasing to be simply the positive knowledge of its referent (nature, society, the State, etc.), becoming in addition to that the knowledge of the knowledge of the referent -- that is, by becoming speculative. In the names "Life" and "Spirit" knowledge names itself.¹⁴

¹⁴In *The Post-Modern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, 34-35.

Is this perhaps the view that the universe rises to self-contemplation?

To me, the idea that knowledge does not have to refer to usefulness (idealism) is much the same as saying that the distinction between knowledge and the world is an indebted distinction (postmodernism). The distinction for me is that a true idealist would be positivistic about the idea that knowledge is knit into the world while a true postmodernist would attempt to be in a state of indeterminate basking about the idea. There is also compatibility in that adapting an idealist stance may be an important strategy or tactic in a postmodern framework; the key question is "what does the world look like and how is it experienced for the better if we take an idealist stance?" I have never had the impression that postmodernism is nihilistic, but that it leaves us at the doorstep of speculative/aesthetic/moral philosophy. If we participate in the invention and creation of the world, what kind of world is it that we would like to create? This is for me the connection with democratic deliberation as a quintessential postmodern imperative.¹⁵ Postmodernism opens the door to ethical deliberation, but we have to walk through it, enact it in our daily lives and not just in hypothetical situations like abortion and capital punishment, but in lived ones like grading practices and attendance policies.

Sometimes I feel like I must be crazy because I can't find a position, a label, with which I am comfortable for once and for all. I often liken myself to a diner in a Chinese restaurant: I'd like one from column A and one from column B. For a positivist, knowledge is knit into the world; for a postmodernist, there's a state of indeterminacy in

¹⁵Plato engages in this kind of constructivism in various dialogues. After pushing an argument to logical extremes, he concludes that while it is logical to look at the world in a particular way (therefore the world must be this particular way), it is so beautiful from this perspective that we ought to behave as if it were the case even if it may not be.

regards to knowledge. Are the two mutually exclusive? If one thinks they're not, does this amount to admitting that one is a mystic?

The problem with postmodernism, as I see it, is that while it indeed does take us to the door of speculative/aesthetic/moral philosophy, it abandons us there. Postmodern discourse bars entry, even conditional entry. In this way I can't see democratic deliberation as its quintessential imperative. Postmodernism quintessentially forecloses the possibility of deliberation. This includes real-life practices like grading and attendance policies as well as those things you call hypothetical like abortion and capital punishment (which I might point out are not in the least bit hypothetical to some folks).

I think you're right about having to avow mysticism if the aim is to avoid positivism(s). The state of basking in indeterminacy = the state of mysticism. a reformulation might be two kinds of positivism -- (1) knowledge is knit into the world; I'm certain of it, and (2) knowledge is separate from the world; I'm certain of it -- and one form of mysticism, the position from which to decide amongst various positivisms does not exist, therefore the positivist consciousness needs to be called into question and kept there.

One of the connections I make with democracy is the open avowal of indeterminacy. I think it has taken this long, 200 years or more, for the rest of our ideological formations to catch up to democracy. With the advent of chaos science, religious activism, and academic challenges to static conceptions of knowledge, the moment seems propitious for dusting off the democratic idea. It's a truly radical concept, obviously not as it is practiced as a system of representation, but as a system that claims no transcendent signifier. It is profoundly social, admitting in fact only a concept of sharing and social intelligence. It openly acknowledges the reality that really tough

deliberations such as those on abortion and capital punishment will never be positivistically settled. Its purest form is native American council: people gather, listen, talk; nothing is decided, but something is done because in the world things have to be done. There is no claim that the right thing has been done.

The reason postmodernism would appear as barring entry to moral deliberation is that what we mean by deliberation is a process by which we get to something like a right answer. It's true that postmodernism abandons us if we want an ideology that will reinstate a positivism. If we want de-liberation, postmodernism can only go so far, being about liberation or about play. The strange thing is that play is feared as irresponsible, but it is nothing of the sort.

Postmodernism as abandonment works in the sense of abandonment by the Father(s). But this is not the Fathers that are abandoning us; it is us abandoning the Fathers. The question "whose postmodernism connotes abandonment" gets the answer "patriarchal postmodernism." Among the patriarchs are many academics and religious figures. Science has invited postmodernism in a long time ago, at least as far back as Heisenberg. Academics and religion, perhaps because they share so much history in the textual prerogative and anti-mystical reason for being, seem bound and determined to bar the door.

You know, the experience of writing a dissertation is emotionally as well as intellectually taxing for me because I feel that I *must* take a position. I must be willing to accept a label and refute all others. This doesn't settle well with my person, the person it seems I really am. I have a tremendous aesthetic appreciation for so many things: living, breathing, being in the sun, walking in the woods, digging in the dirt, reading a text, watching a movie, talking with students and colleagues. I even appreciate the not so

positive things like addiction, suffering, and dying. I appreciate experience, and everything is an experience. A text is a big part because through a text I can experience thoughts I might not have discovered on my own; I can live other experiences, live vicariously. So, I tend to always find something good/useful in texts, including theory texts. I want to be a positivist about conflicting positions, if you will. Maybe an analogy: think of all the "stuff" of life as legos in a box. I dump out these legos and build a lego-ladder to get me from one place to another. Then, I take down the legos and start again. No matter what shaped ladder I build, I can always get from one place to another. Well, legos are language (words), and the way we choose to assemble our legos varies. You maintain that issues, because of indeterminacy, cannot be settled once and for all. Can we agree at least, since we work with words in straining for consensus, to think of this project in temporal terms? While we cannot settle issues diachronically, we can settle them synchronically?

I just don't see the postmodern project as one that helps the democratic, consensual process. Post-structuralism and some feminist thought are helpful insofar as they call our attention to alternative ways of doing things; they at least show us that differences exist and that we might just as well build lego ladders with spiraled shapes as with strict linear shapes. But, with postmodernism, the language games are so pervasive that they bar us from making the transition from considering alternatives to praxis. We can't make even synchronic decisions. It's the very act of discussion or conversation that's barred.

It's not a matter, for postmodernists, of having been abandoned by the Father, but of postmodernism abandoning the Mother in a race for the psycho-anthropological transgression of patricide -- killing the father in order to become him. If we build our ladder with psycho-anthropological legos, I would have to say that the phallus, as

transcendental signifier, is very much alive and well, and will continue to thrive as long as there are human beings. If we metaphorize the phallus, interpret it as the power to make meaning, "penis envy" is a condition suffered universally. Postmodernism is just the same struggle for the same signifier, but in the absence of civilizing rules; rules have been abandoned and the barbarians are at the gate. I'm reminded of wolf packs and the social order, the play-fighting and posturing in lieu of real fighting that determines a synchronic pecking order (I say synchronic because the order is subject to challenge). Postmodernism is like a wolf clan that's suddenly abandoned the rules; play fighting becomes real fighting, a bloody warfare that no individual survives unless he runs away, at which point there's no "social" at all. Again, to answer the *Entext* question, we aren't talking because we can't. To risk talking is to risk ex-termination.

Postmodern wolves? I like the image. My thoughts are filled with nuance, though. There's something I would want to develop around the issue of procedural rules vs. prescriptive rules. Game rules provide consensus on procedures but do not prescribe consensus on outcome. Play which is held in place and regulated by prescription may degenerate into serious and bloody fighting in the absence of any developed sense of process or procedure (such as democratic rules provide). Our risk in America is not that of being thrown to the wolves of postmodernism because we do have some support for democratic procedural rules, but in not being willing to take risks of further procedural empowerment. Our problem is that the lack of continued expansion of democratic play has resulted in a kind of corporatized, clean, desert-stormy, but nonetheless serious and bloody fighting that's become an accepted part of the landscape. In other words, I would want to check out with you whether your description of struggling for the signifier in the absence of civilizing rules again assumes that the car of civilization and the ethics and

prescriptive rules it supposes can be put before the horse of democratic procedural rules already in place in America and the ethics of dialogue that it supposes. Hasn't postmodernism enabled a semiotics of war? Strong democracy needs open conversation, and my assessment is that postmodernism has opened conversation, including this one, onto areas formerly closed for lack of tools.

I like the idea of defining boundaries, though, I wouldn't want to march blindly along with postmodernists who want to kill the Father only in order to become him. This would be a mistake. This is where I would say that we could register our indebtedness to them for opening conversations, and then begin to follow these conversations into other areas (like feminism) where rules give way to relationships and where the talk is not so invested in the winning of games.

Lately I've been trying to understand what's referred to as neo-pragmatism, trying to give it a place in our conversation. I've pretty much always thought of myself as pragmatic, insofar as that means something like practical. But, I don't think that's quite capturing pragmatism as a philosophical position. People like Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish have valuable insights, especially in terms of socially constructed meaning, on consensus, but I have some fundamental misgivings. There seems to be in neo-pragmatism a deep underlying metaphysical lack, a nothing at the center of this philosophy that implies the impossibility of either goodness or of evil.

Sartre talks about consciousness as a lack in the center of being, making a case that when philosophers talk about metaphysics, they are in effect talking about consciousness, which is always a lack. Metaphysicians in this way protest too much, get too excited because they are trying to fill the lack that will never be filled, trying to solve

the riddle of consciousness which must remain a riddle if it is to remain consciousness. In order for anything to change, everything must change. We need new notions of validity, certainty, etc., if we are to entertain new notions such as neo-pragmatism.

It seems like whatever we do, we have to deal with metaphysical questions. It would be great if foundationalism/antifoundationalism was pragmatically irrelevant, but it's not. At some point we have to consider whether or not people are innately good. Can we rely on goodness?

I can see the argument for consciousness as lack, especially from the perspective of humanity being a part of the universe rising to self-contemplation. That lack is *desire*, desire for truth, self-knowledge, always beyond reach of our poorly evolved brain capacities and the fragmented consciousness of the universe in all its beings.

I think it's a worthy venture to reflect on the nature of desire, lack, seduction, and the state of our poorly evolved being in relationship to the big questions such as the nature of good and evil or the meaning of life. Why is there something instead of nothing. Language may be like the convict's spoon, and we are all convicts trying to dig mile long tunnels to freedom through solid rock. Our tools, our spoons, are woefully inadequate to the task. In many ways, ways related to pragmatism and democracy, our struggling separate selves must connect in collective consciousness and effort to pursue the ever elusive, shape-shifting answer. We must de-liberate.

I am suddenly reminded of Rainer Rilke's "A Tale of Death and a Strange Postscript Thereto" in which a grave-digger tells the following story to the narrator:

"You know . . . in olden times people prayed like this --" and I spread my arms out wide, involuntarily feeling my breast expand at the gesture. "In those days God would cast himself into all these human abysses, full of despair and darkness, and only reluctantly did he return into his heavens,

which, unnoticed he drew down ever closer over the earth. But a new faith began. As it could not make men understand wherein its new God differed from their old one (for as soon as they began to praise him, men promptly recognized the one old God here too), the promulgator of the new commandment changed the manner of praying. He taught the folding of hands and declared: 'See, *thus* does our God wish to be implored, so he must be another God from the one whom heretofore you have thought to receive in your arms.' The people say this, and the gesture of open arms became a despicable and dreadful one, and later it was fastened to the cross that all might see in it a symbol of agony and death.

Now when God next looked down upon the earth, he was frightened. Besides the many folded hands, many Gothic cathedrals had been built, and so the hands and the roofs, alike steep and sharp, stretched pointing towards him like the weapons of an enemy. With God there is a different bravery. He turned back into his heavens, and when he saw that the steeples and the new prayers were growing in pursuit of him, he departed out of his domain at the other side and thus eluded the chase. He was himself astonished to find, out beyond his radiant home, a growing darkness that received him silently, and with a curious feeling he went on and on in this dusk that reminded him of the hearts of men. Then for the first time it occurred to him that the heads of men are lucid, but their hearts full of a similar darkness; and a longing came over him to dwell in the hearts of men and no longer to move through the clear, cold wakefulness of their thinking. Well, God has continued on his way. Ever denser grows the darkness around him, and the night through which he presses on has something of the fragrant warmth of fecund clods of earth. And in a little while the roots will reach out towards him with the old beautiful gesture of wide prayer. There is nothing wiser than the circle. The God who has fled from us out of the heavens, out of the earth will he come to us again. And, who knows, perhaps you yourself will some day dig free the door. . . ."¹⁶

Rilke's wonderful story dovetails with the notion that he God-human cyborg may be the best model available to us. What it seems most postmodernists have yet to realize is that God has indeed come around again, this time as an option on the postmodern menu. Where there is no ground, anything is possible, and the criteria for action (the

¹⁶From Rilke's *Stories of God*.

unavoidable selecting-out) become profoundly moral/aesthetic. Truth's loss in status brings other concerns into greater prominence.

In terms of education, this means that if the truth question is over, then we can stop trying to dig with inadequate tools. Those tools -- intense cognitive apparati that nonetheless work about as well as a spoon -- are part and parcel of what is questioned in the post-truth era. If the project changes, so must the tools. If anything changes, everything changes.

So in school, we have learned, as your metaphor suggests, to be inmates. We are the proverbial spoon-fed who get so big in management training school (a.k.a. Ph.D.) that we grab the spoon and begin tunneling for all we're worth. Not only benighted, but impertinent, we unshackle ourselves and commence digging while the merely benighted await the return of the philosopher-king like good students (but not like management-caliber students). Eventually we return, having learned yet another lesson, never minding that maybe we got thrown into the wrong metaphor.

This is exactly the reason that we need to repeat as our mantra "tell me something I don't already know" when contemplating what we do pedagogically. People, by the time we get them, know the spoon game. It is a fun and good game, but nobody teaches anyone anything about basking, for example; and basking may be a much more important survival skill in the post-truth era than spooning. This is why, if we take education as our subject matter in our interdisciplinary course, we can also get to things like God's return and the variety of proper greetings, etc. We will be operating in the post-postmodern.

There's one drawback to our musings about spoons -- if we don't have to do the spoon game anymore, if what we need is basking instead . . . you and I are unemployed!

There's no longer a need for neo-pragmatism, democracy, postmodernism, modernism, romanticism, or anything else. We can all just open up our arms and receive the *Answer*, which is, of course, that we all need one another to be One, to be coherent.

Wait a minute; certainly you have heard of contemplative literature. I'm talking about expanding the reading list and/or gradually substituting one kind of reading for another. We can still sell ourselves (thank God for that) with postmodernism, neo-pragmatism, modernism, romanticism, etc., then make a move on the inside to bring in the concept of basking. At the other end of the historical tin can and string sits Galileo, similarly contemplating unemployment (or worse . . . but not really worse since unemployment in our society does equal death, just a slower kind of death) for making moves that would shake the academy as it was then known. It's a fluid medium. We live in Galileo's utopia, except that the reign of truth has recently been seen to have run its course.

I think a usable metaphor for getting out of the holes we get into is "coming out." You seem to have this sense, that if you scratch the surface just a bit, you might find that many others are waiting for a sign that it's all right to come out, too. Sighs of relief are heard.

So, first we have to sell ourselves, make changes from the inside. I just hope that instead of staying in the hole, or coming out, we don't just spoon ourselves a bigger hole. To revise the metaphor just a bit -- we settle back in self-congratulation to lick the spoon that stirred the pot.

CHAPTER II

A PEDAGOGY OF CONVERSATION

This study is not about writing. This study is about dialogue, multilogue, and the social construction of knowledge. It is about people, students and teachers alike, engaged in what Gregory Clark has called the most basic form of cooperation: communication (1). It just so happens that this communication we are studying takes place in writing, but I will insist that writing exists as an *artifact* of the conversation, and that it is the conversation itself, the fundamental communicative act between people who are striving with common purpose to define their beliefs, to negotiate meaning, and to make practical decisions through the use of language that we should emphasize in our pedagogical practice. Thus I would say that the subject of this study is the pedagogy of textual conversation, and I will argue that traditional approaches to the teaching of writing will continue to fall short of their goals as long as conversation is allowed to function only as the background, the chaos, or the noise from which the stylized monologue as site of knowledge is inevitably expected to emerge.

It is critical for an understanding of this study, I think, to come clean about the particular "goals" of teaching writing to which I refer, especially since consensus among compositionists on this as well as many other issues finds its primary expression in oral, conversational transactions of lore. Only rarely does one find clearly articulated goals for writing programs expressed in departmental or university policies, and where they may exist, few teachers in these programs are aware of them. This is odd, indeed, especially

when one considers the fact that some sort of composition requirement exists for all incoming undergraduate students in most institutions of higher education in the United States. In light of the near universality of such a requirement, one may reasonably assume that faculty and administrators both feel that *something* of value accrues to students who know how to write well, that this value can be broadly applied across the institutional spectrum, and that since it can be so broadly applied there exists a relationship between the value of writing and the socio-cultural goals espoused in university mission statements. That this relationship has only rarely been left to anything much more concrete than inference seems remarkable, particularly when one considers the diverse theoretical backgrounds and practical competencies of those who serve as instructors in what are often the largest of academic programs at colleges and universities. Individual teachers' goals may run the gamut from something as specific as formal and technical mastery in the modes of discourse to self-expression and writing-as-therapy, any (and perhaps all at once) of the defenses for writing instruction as laid out by James A. Berlin in his history, *Rhetoric and Reality*.

Anxieties of purpose continue to be played out among leading scholars in the field. Most recently, the exchange between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae in *CCC* serves to illustrate. Published as part of an ongoing "public conversation" that began at the 1989 and 1991 *CCCC* meetings, these two articles provide a textual platform from which the authors enter the dialectical space between two conflicting positions: writing as an academic enterprise and writing as a self-expressive enterprise.

Bartholomae is a strong advocate of writing as an academic enterprise, one inescapably fraught with the power discrepancies between students and teachers. Especially in institutional settings, he says "there is no writing without teachers. . . . there is no writing done in the in the academy that is not academic writing." Because the focus

of this conversation about writing is *student writing*, he feels secure in asserting what is apparently a tautology. But, he goes on to note that "thinking of writing [in the academy] as academic writing makes us think of the page as crowded with others" and of the writing space (the classroom, the academy itself) as "a busy intertextual space" (63-64). Therefore, in the first few pages of Bartholomae's textual *turn* we see advanced the Bakhtinian notions of intertextuality and heteroglossia; the texts (the ones we read, the ones we write) are crowded with the textual contributions of others. Academic writing, like the discourse of the novel, is dialogical; specifically, the students' textual "dialogue" happens in a space that has "been defined by all the writing that has preceded [theirs]" (64). Although the academy gathers together the textual voices it deems important (the canon), dismissing others as less worthy or as less significant sources of academic knowledge, what we are invited to attend to consciously is the "conversation" that has preceded us; what we are invited to do through our writing is to join that conversation, to add our two cents worth so to speak; and if our contribution is worthy enough, perhaps someday the academy will gather our text into the fold as well. To me, Bartholomae's position on academic writing is strongly informed by social-constructionism, the theory advanced to some degree by scholars like Fish, Rorty, Lacan, Vygotsky and others who maintain that who we are and what we know have been negotiated collectively by complex life-long relationships with family, caretakers, teachers, church, community, local and national politics, and the media.

Bartholomae criticizes his fellow conversant, Peter Elbow, and those who view writing as personal and expressionistic, those who argue for "the open classroom; a *free* writing" (emphasis mine). He sees this open writing classroom in which students engage in exercises of personal expression rather than academic meaning-making as a utopian space where students are invited to conceive of themselves as "free from the past," as

transcendent agents whose language is "a common language, free from jargon and bias, free from evasion and fear" (64). Bartholomae maintains that to invite students to think of themselves thus as free agents above and beyond their own cultural mediatedness is simply to deceive them about the real, practical nature of the world, especially the academic world. This kind of free writing space, he tells us, is informed by goals best expressed in statements like "'I want to empower my students' or 'I want to give my students ownership of their work'" (65). Ultimately, such goals require students to step outside of time, to dehistoricize themselves, to dissociate themselves from their cultures and their pasts.

The goal that Bartholomae embraces, however, requires what he calls a "real" space rather than a utopian space. His goal is to "make a writer aware of the forces at play in the production of knowledge" (66) and to do so requires

a class *in* time, one that historicizes the present, including the present evoked in students' writing. Inside this linguistic present, students (with instruction -- more precisely, with lessons in critical reading) can learn to feel and see their position inside a text they did not invent and can never, at least completely, control. Inside a practice: linguistic, rhetorical, cultural, historical (65).

In his closing remarks, he makes it clear that he wants nothing to do with writing pedagogies that would perpetuate what he calls the utopian "American myth" of rugged individualism, the rough-writer on the frontiers of expression going his own way in order to find his own way. What he prefers to promote is the kind of writing environment where students can "master the figures and forms, learn to produce an elegant, convincing, even professional quality narrative" (70). I may be so bold as to say that what Bartholomae advocates are goals closer to mastering the modes than to mastering the art of having

something to say. Having something to say is here too cavalierly reduced to writing in the expressive genre which Bartholomae believes he does not *need* to teach:

I don't think I need to because I don't think I should. I find it a corrupt, if extraordinarily tempting genre. I don't want my students to celebrate what would then become the natural and inevitable details of their lives. I think the composition course should be part of the general critique of humanism. For all the talk of paradigm shifting, the composition course, as a cultural force, remains fundamentally unchanged from the 19th century. I would rather teach or preside over a critical writing, one where the critique is worked out in practice, and for lack of better terms I would call that writing, "academic writing" (70).

I would at least agree with one thing, the composition course, as a cultural force, has remained virtually unchanged since the 19th century. But, is Elbow's version significantly different? To what goals does he speak?

In his response to Bartholomae, Elbow admits to feeling a deep conflict between what he sees as the role of the writer and the role of the academic. Yes, he concedes, this conflict reflects a kind of binary thinking that is perhaps unnecessary; he would like, he says, to be convinced that one can serve both roles well and at the same time. But, still he feels forced to choose between the two, and his choice is clearly the role of the writer. At the heart of the conflict for Elbow is what he feels to be a somewhat contentious relationship between readers and writers, and his feeling that academics have come to identify more closely with, or valorize, the act of reading:

To put it bluntly, readers and writers have competing interests over who gets to control the text. It's in the interests of readers to say that the writer's intention doesn't matter or is unfindable, to say that meaning is never determinate, always fluid and sliding, to say that there is no presence or voice behind a text; and finally to kill off the author! This leaves the reader in complete control of the text (75).

This ungenerous opinion of readers more than suggests that Elbow believes meaning can be determinate, that it is not subject to negotiation, and that the site of meaning is the author; he alone exerts control of the text. What we see reflected in this position is a struggle for power, for control -- not merely for control of the text, but for control or ownership of meaning itself. But, this struggle is one-sided somehow; it's the reader who's the control freak. In Elbow's view, the writer instead of seeking control seeks understanding. In his text, the writer struggles with language, trying to use words for self-expression. But he can't do it alone; he needs readers. He needs readers, not like the academic reader, but those who are "interested in what was on [his] mind, what [he] intended to say." If the writer's struggle fails to make his intentions clear, the reader needs to extend a certain generosity of spirit and faith that the intended meaning *can* be found. "It helps to listen caringly," Elbow tells us (75). Yes, writers too care about ownership of the text, but it's the writer whose spirit is more generous. Academics, according to Elbow, deny to writers any part in discussions about the texts' meaning.

If nothing else, such a view of a text (from either the position of the writer or the reader) reduces text to an object, something over which humans can struggle for property rights. There is little concern here for the function of a text. Clearly, it is important to Elbow that his student writers be able to say, in writing, what they know, to celebrate the details of their lives. He seems to care less for the formal characteristics of any genre than he does for the writers' having something to say, thus situating his goals at odds with those of Bartholomae in practical terms. Both men have their eyes, after all, on the text itself and not the function of the text as a meaning-making tool or meaning-making artifact of any ongoing conversation. Bartholomae is more aware of the conversation, but wants students to polish their tools in specific, institutionally acceptable ways. Elbow is less concerned with the polish, and although he is aware of the conversation, he dismisses it:

In short, I should try to enact and live out in my classroom the Burkean metaphor of intellectual life as an unending conversation. This is what we academics do: carry on an unending conversation not just with colleagues but with the dead and unborn.

But the truth is . . . I don't give this dimension to my first year writing classroom. I don't push my first year students to think about what academics have written about their subject; indeed much of my behavior is a kind of invitation for them to *pretend* that no authorities have ever written about their subject before (79).

I have to ask though, is it ethical for teachers to promote such a pretense by inviting students to engage in this kind of monological writing exercise? Elbow attempts to cloud the ethical issue at hand by redefining dialogical writing itself -- ". . . I do invite monologic discourse . . . but I invite and defend dialogic discourse just as much. That is, I encourage students to situate what they write into the conversation of other members of the classroom community to whom they are writing and whom they are reading." Specifically, this re-defined dialogue is dialogue only by metaphor and it has its existence only in the "regular publication of the class magazine [that] does more for this dialogic dimension than any amount of theoretical talk." Thus, the classroom becomes the site of conversation and this conversation is well-insulated from any larger civic or scholarly, current or historic conversation in order to promote students' self-absorption and discursal solipsism (an oxymoron if ever there was one) and protect them from having to feel "personally modest and intellectually scrupulous;" as Elbow concludes this feeling goes hand-in-hand with being "at the periphery" and feeling "skeptical and distrustful" (79).

For Elbow, dialogue (conversation) is a published analog of talk; for Bartholomae, it's "theoretical talk." Notice that in neither case is it *really* talk. Ultimately, both scholars invite students to think of writing, whether as monologue or dialogue, as an object in and of itself. Bartholomae's idea of the object is a polished and institutionally acceptable form;

we can see it looming large in our memories now: the research paper, *the* academic essay. Elbow's idea of the object is less formal, less institutionally legitimate: the expressive narrative, the personal essay. For both scholars, conversation *really* takes a backseat, deserving only of lip-service (Bartholomae) or outright dismissal (Elbow). These men are arguing about what *form* of object best serves a larger goal. Elbow's goal, by inference, is self-discovery and heightened self-esteem. Bartholomae's goal is the production of academically acceptable writers.

These two goals in particular are born out again and again in traditional debates in the field of composition. On the surface, they seem to stand somewhat in opposition to one another with individualists/expressionists manning one end of the tug-of-war rope and institutionalists/formalists manning the other. But what strikes me as odd is that adherents to both positions seem to agree, at base, that the goal, which is really only the means to their different ends, is this artifact called an "essay." It is in fact this tacit assumption which in effect allows academics such as Elbow and Bartholomae to be such chummy rivals. At bottom, they are playing the same game. The presentation in *CCC* of their two essays as "conversation" is ironic: even though the editors allow other voices to respond, monologically, to the primary soliloquies of Bartholomae and Elbow, no one seems to get the picture that what really ought to be happening is a shifting of pedagogical practice from the production of monological artifacts (including those which claim to participate in metaphorical "conversations") to the production of conversation itself. To do so would mean that scholars on both sides of the great divide would necessarily have to give up old (or perhaps have to envision new) indices of validity and authority at a time when the institutional imperative to "publish or perish" has never been stronger. Despite all that Peter Elbow says he values, the fact remains that he's a well-published scholar. In other words, he's an expert text producer, and the texts he produces are institutionally acceptable

as sources of authority and sites of knowledge. The fact that he has readers and that readers regularly cite his work (for example, in my text at this precise moment) may indeed suggest that there's a good analogy with conversation to be had, but the fact also remains that this conversation is strictly carried out between academics looking for admission into the inner circle of academe through the acceptance and publication of their own monologues. Very little is going on here in terms of *true* conversation (as Bartholomae would have us believe); very little is going on here of an educative experiential nature which Dewey would insist is the only gauge of good pedagogical practice.

Philosopher and educator John Dewey may seem an odd touchstone here considering the fact that his "conversational turn" is dated by contemporary standards. However, I find much of true common sense value in his theory and a remarkable degree applicability to the issue I'm trying to address. As a matter of fact, Dewey tells us in *The Child and the Curriculum* that theoretical oppositions such as those presented here between Elbow and Bartholomae are duplicated in many pedagogical situations and can be variously generalized to terms like "discipline vs.interest" (with Bartholmae's position in this instance being an example of discipline while Elbow's would be an example of interest) and "guidance and control vs. freedom and initiative" (Bartholomae advocating the former, Elbow the latter) (9-10). A "logical" position, one like Bartholomae's, Dewey says "neglects the process and considers the outcome. It summarizes and arranges, and thus separates the achieved results from the actual steps by which they were forthcoming in the first instance" (19) while the expressive position would stand at the opposite pole showing little concern for outcome or product. Furthermore, Dewey claims as I have here that in either case there is a basic "prejudicial notion that there is some gap in kind (as distinct from degree) between the [student's] experience and the various forms of subject

matter that make up the course of study" (11). What we need to work towards is bringing to life for our students the fact that experience and the "subject" of writing, indeed of all learning, are intimately connected one to the other.

Unfortunately, texts seem to be one of our primary pedagogical tools in education and in composition especially. Students read texts that we assign and write texts in response or, in Elbowesque fashion, they write their own texts without having to give much thought to anyone else's. In any case, it's the artifact of the text itself upon which we focus our attention. "The ear, and the [text] which reflects the ear, constitute the medium which is alike for all," Dewey asserts (*The School and Society*, 33) and the hearing-mode medium is inherently a medium that requires a degree of passivity that is not natural because it fails to take into account the interactive characteristic of experience and life itself. Rather than teaching in such a medium

It is a development of experience into experience that is really wanted. And this is impossible save as just that educative medium is provided which will enable the powers and interests that have been selected as valuable to function (*The Child and the Curriculum*, 18).

At this point, we find it necessary to revisit our "mission" as teachers of composition in our universities' writing programs. Why are we engaged in this endeavor in the first place? Again, I would reiterate my claim that there must be some connection between the university's mission statement and the act of writing that warrants the near universality of composition requirements across the board. The mission of The University of North Carolina at Greensboro approved by the Board of Trustees in 1993 states: "the University fosters knowledge, intellectual skills, and the joy of reasoned inquiry in its students so that they may become thoughtful and responsible members of society."

Clearly, the Board sees citizenship and social interactivity as a central concern. While we may argue at length about precisely what might constitute a "thoughtful and responsible" citizen, my main point remains that the relationship between those who are educated and the larger society of which they are members is apparently highly valued here. So much so that it constitutes the heart of the institution's practical purpose and, therefore, the practical purpose that should inform in some way the way we teach within that institution. I would assert that we teach writing as a means of social engagement with others, as a means of learning good rhetorical skills that will enable us to judge the rhetoric of others and respond to that rhetoric responsibly, and as an intellectual tool of inquiry that will help us develop our *common sense* in community. In short, we are in the business of teaching language skills to our students because language is the living medium which gives us access to the meaning inherent in our own experiences and connects our experiences with those of others both historically and contemporaneously. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, then, Dewey remarks that

. . . it hardly needs to be said that language is primarily a social thing, a means by which we give our experiences to others and get theirs again in return. When it is taken away from its natural purpose, it is no wonder that it becomes a complex and difficult problem to teach language (*The School and Society*, 55).

It may be observed that teaching language/writing from either the perspective of Bartholomae (logical, formal) or that of Elbow (expressive) does indeed remove the use of language from its natural give-and-take communicative purpose, especially when that purpose is to be conceived in a genuine and experiential way. Neither the metaphor of conversation between historical texts and student texts nor a dialogue that takes place only in a classroom publication is genuine conversation. Dewey himself remarks that language

taught in schools "is unnatural, not growing out of the real desire to communicate vital impressions and convictions" and thus, over time, "the freedom of [students] in its use gradually disappears" (*The School and Society*, 56). Most of our students have had at least twelve years of experience in school, twelve years of experience using written language not in genuine give-and-take situations, but as *performances* or *demonstrations* of skills and knowledge. Feedback from teachers is generally limited to assessments of skills with little or no regard being given to the communication itself. Feedback from peers is virtually non-existent, and where it does exist it is generally of the same ilk as teacher assessment. The conversation, therefore, is taking the backseat in a long bus, so far from the front as a matter of fact as to disappear into obscurity. I maintain that the conversation is what needs to be taking the front seat and that, with guidance, the "skills" will naturally follow. What we need to do, then, is to see that "the language instinct is appealed to in a social way" (*The School and Society* 56).

Ultimately, the means of teaching in any discipline should be Deweyan: both experiential and social; interactive between students, teachers, family, and community; contiguous between the individual and the corporate, between formal objectives and internal desires. There should be room, in other words, for Bartholomae as well as for Elbow in regards to their differences on expressive writing vs. academic writing -- continuity between individual concerns and corporate concerns. This is a difference in degree rather than in kind. But, what it says to Bartholomae and Elbow is that this is not the whole picture; you're arguing over the flavor of the pie while you fail to address why you should have pie in the first place. Dewey is concerned with the whole pie and with the process of cooking it. The means of teaching, which recognize both social and individual needs, should reflect the goals of teaching -- providing good educative

experiences that will promote, beyond the educative moment, the development and exercise of democratic skills based on our humane assumptions that

. . . democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life[.] [That] the principle of regard for individual freedom and for decency and kindness of human relations come back in the end to a higher quality of experience on the part of a greater number than are methods of repression and coercion or force[.] [This is] the reason for our preference that we believe that mutual consultation and convictions reached through persuasion, make possible a better quality of experience than can otherwise be provided on any wide scale (34)[.]

In the long run, the goal of writing instruction (if we share a common ideological framework as citizens of a democratic nation) ought to be social and democratic, keeping in mind that we, as individuals as well as our students as individuals are part of the social, democratic fabric of life. An educative experience ought to involve us (yes, I include teachers as well as students) in communicative relationships with one another that allow an interplay of the personal and the cultural, relationships that help us learn, through action, *how* to engage in mutual consultation and public persuasion in decency and kindness, affording participatory equality and respect for all. As Berlin says in the conclusion to *Rhetoric and Reality*, "writing courses prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, for assuming their political responsibilities, whether as leaders or simply as active participants" (the corporate, social goal), while yet enabling "students to learn something about themselves, about the often-unstated assumptions on which their lives are built" (the individual goal). In the long run, the goal of our course should be to "[empower] students as it advises in ways to *experience* themselves, others, and the material conditions of their existence -- in methods of ordering and making sense of these

relationships (180, emphasis mine). Experience and relationship. I maintain that these particular goals are not *best* served by asking students to engage in the writing of the monological essay, expressive or formal. To do so in effect removes them from a direct experience of the public conversation wherein cultural and personal knowledge is transmitted, interpreted, and applied anew to contemporary situations. To do so shifts the emphasis of education from authentic learning to the production of artifacts. And I want to emphasize that I'm talking about what *best* serves the purpose; in other words, I'm not arguing that we should have students *stop* writing essays. I'm arguing, however, that the essay should no longer be the centerpiece of our composition practice. Conversation should be the centerpiece in its stead.

Of the most basic of human desires, the desire for relationship with others, informs our drive for communication. It's the communication itself, not any specific outcome of communication, that counts. Communication and conversation, as understood by the Burkean metaphor of the parlor, is the goal of human interaction, the simple need and desire to keep the talk going, *not* to arrive at final solutions. This conversational or dialogical stance toward one another, as Gregory Clark notes "is very different from the stance that most of us are taught to take when we write, one that allows us to objectify the people we address as uninformed beings we must attempt to inform with the truth" (3). Traditional composition instruction, whether of the Bartholomaic or Elbowesque variety, holds as its goals the acquisition of truth or knowledge, an insight into the real of either a personal or corporate nature that resides within the enlightened speaker/writer and which needs communicating to listeners/readers in order to have upon them some desired effect of understanding or learning. Martin Buber, too, speaks to this same kind of knowledge:

Knowledge: as he beholds what confronts him, its being is disclosed to the knower. What he beheld as present he will have to comprehend as an

object, compare with objects, assign a place in an order of objects, and describe and analyze objectively; only as an It can it be absorbed into the store of knowledge. But in the act of beholding it was no thing among things, no event among events; it was present exclusively. It is not in the law that is afterward derived for the appearance but in the appearance itself that the being communicates itself. That we think the universal is merely an unreeling of the skeinlike event that was beheld in the particular, in a confrontation. And now it is locked into the It-form of conceptual knowledge. Whoever unlocks it and beholds it again as present, fulfills the meaning of that act of knowledge as something that is actual and active between men (90-91).

Here, Buber speaks to the differences between the object as the beheld knowledge, static and locked into the It-form, and opposes that to the mutuality of beholding itself as an activity in which one subject interacts with another subject in order to *do* knowledge. It is in similar terms that I think of the essay as an object, an artifact, of static and locked-in knowledge. Dialogue, on the other hand, involves active beholding. People engage with one another in the process of discovery, of meaning-making. Rather than there being an I and an It (the text), or an Us and a Them (the canon of knowledge), there is an I and a You mutually engaging in a process of discovery. Clark says that this dialogical stance, this I and You, "transforms communicating people into coequal collaborators who cooperate in the process of negotiating meanings they can truly share, meanings that do not embody the dominance of one" (3). The dialogue itself, if we focus on this in our teaching, becomes a Deweyan educative experience wherein communicative skills are learned because they must be practiced, and wherein knowledge comes as a result of reciprocal activity between members of the community sharing discourse.

What is democracy if not a community sharing discourse -- sometimes a large community, conceived of as a nation; sometimes smaller communities such as towns, neighborhoods, a school district, a club, or even two people talking with one another at the clothesline or over a cup of coffee. In any case, it's the act of sharing as coequals that opens the communicative experience fully to all participants. While we may ordinarily

think of democracy strictly in public-political terms as a decision-making process that leads to some kind of policy or action, democracy is also at work in its most fundamental form whenever people come together to talk as equals and to share meanings. Meaning, as both knowledge and understanding, proceed from a natural process of telling stories, asking questions, elaborating points, checking understandings, challenging interpretations and assumptions, restating, and revising. People thus engaged in conversational interaction don't merely put their ideas into words. Rather they put their ideas into words, listen and respond. Together, they coordinate their conversational activities according to the social interest of interaction and maintaining relationship (Shotter 1).

A writing pedagogy based on a conversational model would focus neither on a subjective/romantic pole (as exemplified by Elbow) or on an objective/modern pole (as exemplified by Bartholomae); it would rather focus on the actual unfolding of discourse as it occurs naturally in continuous human interaction. Languaged interactivity thus replaces knowledge as a goal in and of itself. Antonio Faundez refers to this as the "becoming of dialogue" and claims that a pedagogy based on such a dialogical becomingness "put[s] forward the idea that that truth lies in the quest and not in the result, that it is a process, that knowledge is a process, and thus we should engage in it and achieve it through dialogue. . . ." (Freire and Faundez 32). Denying to our students full access to the process as goal itself results in the kind of "banking" pedagogy attacked by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, a pedagogy in which students are "taught" by being filled with knowledge by teachers who own that knowledge; students are "taught" by listening and receiving rather than by actively engaging in the *creation* of knowledge themselves. What Freire suggests instead of banking is a "problem-solving education" which "regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality" (58-71).

Process is, of course, a word us compositionists are very familiar with. Many of us, even those who remain interested primarily in the polish of the final product, acknowledge that we need to teach process-oriented courses, that we must have students become intimately engaged with the process of writing before we can expect their products to be of high quality. But, to echo the important question that Ann Berthoff asks in *The Making of Meaning*, what does it mean when we say that composing is a process?

For unless composing as a process is what we actually teach, not just what we proclaim, the idea cannot be fruitful. In many instances, the language of the new rhetoric is used when there is no correspondingly new attitude towards what we are teaching, to say nothing of how we are teaching it (68).

How we are teaching is really what's at issue here. Most often, how we teach is at odds with what we proclaim as fundamentally important because while we extol the virtues of process, the process is nevertheless seen as a means to an end, the end being the product, the essay. *How* we need to teach is anyway that lets the process remain central, that lets us acknowledge the process as an end in itself while seeing things like essays as *by-products* that spin off along the way. What counts is the conversation, the dialogue.

Shotter describes this dialogical or conversational interactivity as "diffuse, sensuous or feelingful activity, [the] unordered, hurly-burly or bustle of everyday social life" (7). The "everydayness" of such activity and its ubiquity places it squarely in a *primary* dimension, the activity-situation from which proceeds, as a natural by-product, both order and meaning (though perhaps not in the formal terms we've grown accustomed to authorizing). Compositionists have long recognized the importance of *some* chaos in the writing process, especially those who view writing in expressionistic terms, those who value, as does Elbow, *free* writing. Chaos in this model is the generative space from

which we glean the pearls we later polish into prose. Unfortunately, even the chaos of free writing or other kinds of generative writing is conceived of and practiced monologically, and, at some point in time, the chaos has to take a rather messy backseat to the polished product which is simply a more coherent (less chaotic) monologue.

Berthoff's view of the uses of chaos seem more to parallel my own because she sees it as an ongoing affair, not as something we ultimately "solve." Chaos, for Berthoff, is a natural phenomenon, one from which we naturally and continually negotiate living, thus malleable and revisable., coherences. "I consider it the the most important advance of the semester," she says, "if a student moves from [knowing *the* answer or wanting *the* answer] to [acknowledging that] `what this situation means depends on how you look at it'" (71). And she furthermore values dialogue in the classroom as a means of dealing with chaos:

... if the composition classroom is the place where dialogue is the mode of making meaning, then we will have a better chance to dramatize not only the fact that language itself changes with the meanings we make from it and that its powers are generative and developmental, but also that it is the indispensable and unsurpassable means of reaching others and forming communities with them. The ability to speak is innate, but language can only be realized in a social context. Dialogue, that is to say, is essential to the making of meaning and thus to learning to write. The chief use of chaos is that it creates the need for that dialogue (*The Making of Meaning* 72).

It remains the case, however, that a means for instituting a truly dialogical practice has not heretofore been found. As I have already pointed out, the Bartholomaic "practice" requires a metaphoric dialogue while an Elbowesque "dialogue" means making monologues public. Berthoff recommends talk and peer feedback in class in much the same way as many of us already use class discussion as a dialogical form -- first talking about issues, then talking about writing (critiquing monologues) -- along with things like

having students look at the notebooks, rough drafts, and revisions of poets and novelists because these things record a dialectical growth and development of completed works from the chaos of ideas, jotings, and/or musings. One interesting variation she proposes is the "double-entry notebook" in which

. . . on the right side reading notes, direct quotations, observational notes, fragments, lists, images -- verbal and visual -- are recorded; on the other (facing) side, notes about those notes, summaries, formulations, aphorisms, editorial suggestions, revisions, comment on comment are written. The reason for the double-entry format is that. . . the facing pages are in dialogue with one another (*The Making of Meaning* 45).

Let us say, however, that if we conceive of dialogue as something that happens to require the give and take of interpretive turns between people, then what we have in any of these cases is a simulation of dialogue, an analogy of dialogue. The double-entry notebook is actually a dialogue between the writer and herself, one that happens after a period of time ensues between the entry on the right hand side of the page and the left hand side of the page during which the writer can critically reflect upon her own personal process of meaning-making. At least in this instance the focus is on the process itself rather than on a critique of a monologue such as the kind of thing that goes on in peer review sessions. The double-entry notebook is a dialogue in which the writer plays two roles: conversationalist and respondent. And if the idea of the notebook could be taken to its ideal limit, the conversationalist, having been responded to by herself on the facing page, would then step into the role of respondent herself so that the conversation, the dialogue, would move forward in time. It is, in any event, an insular exercise even if carried to an extreme. The writer can never get outside of herself and her own interpretive framework; she never faces a challenge to her credibility or coherence.

Like Berthoff, many compositionists recognize the importance of dialogue to the composing process, to the acquisition of language skills. Unfortunately, there has just not been a great deal of real change in pedagogical practice, certainly not of the kind that would keep up with our changes in pedagogical theory. James Zebroski, in his recent book *Thinking Through Theory*, notes that nearly all current Anglo-American writing instruction continues to "[emphasize] the most unchangeable and static aspects of the communication process. The focus is on the sustained monologue; dialogue is reduced to the simple exchange of sustained monologues between sender and receiver" (179). The tacit assumption would seem to be that the polished pearl is then somehow a demonstration that we, as individuals, have digested our chaos and have assimilated it for appropriate presentation. We have made communicable knowledge that will then be consumed by our readers in a metaphorical conversation, such as the sustained monologues of Elbow and Bartholomae, in which their confusion, assent, dissent, or understanding will happen only as a mental process. Dialogue will thus be ventriloquized for the writer (her voice *thrown* into the essay) and internalized for the reader.

In monological models, the rhetorical struggle is exclusionary, proceeding dialectically from argument to argument until a single, "correct" version of knowledge congeals, until the writer reaches, if you will, the "final solution." Conversational models, however transforms the exclusionary struggle into something "continuous, non-eliminative, inclusionary, [and] multi-voiced" in which the rhetorical aim is not to reach a conclusion or to reach the final solution but to "change the agenda of argumentation," "to 'construct' new forms of social relation" (Shotter 9). And what emerges from this interaction is *both* social/public change *and* individual change. Our community changes as we, in mutuality share, re-vise, and create knowledge; we, as individuals, change as we learn through interaction new ways of being ourselves with others. On this note, the goals

of the conversational model are coterminous with those of Freire's problem-solving model because both deal with the relationship between social interactivity and constantly emerging meanings -- both deal with "revolutionary futurity" as something always coming into being between those who engage in the process. Both affirm "men as beings in the process of *becoming* -- as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (72).

A good deal of the debate for compositionists takes place as if it's understood that knowledge as a finished reality is of course the goal of pedagogy and that being knowledgeable means being able to demonstrate our knowledge proficiency in specific, limited, ways. One group champions how much knowledge can be covered with an expressive/individualistic approach and another group decries how little knowledge is actually gained thus using such an approach. In both cases, however, the only way of being a knowledgeable person is to be a "legitimately" knowledgeable person, a person who can write *some* genre of text that serves as a site of authority. W. Ross Winterowd, for example, in *Composition Theory for the Postmodern Classroom* argues for the inclusion of all essay genres as legitimate forms of knowledge, yet he still contends that "the essay is -- and . . . should be -- the central genre in composition instruction" (121). And, in reality, it's hard for us to envision different ways of being "legitimately" knowledgeable, let alone to enact different ways of being -- this is a truism applicable not only to academics but to everyone. But, for scholars specifically, it is as Shotter says, a difficulty attributable to the fact that "in fulfilling our responsibilities as competent and professional academics, we must write *systematic texts*; we risk being accounted incompetent if we do not" (25). Perhaps we ourselves, as well as our students, need the unordered exchange of conversation in order truly to envision different ways of being as

teachers. Perhaps only then can we enact change. The essay, because it is systematized and monological (regardless of genre) may only reify the *same* way of being for us all.

In the long run, this same way of being, this same legitimized notion of knowledge does not serve us well as preparation for our democratic social lives or for our lives as individuals in relationship with others simply because none of us lead insular, asocial lives. Why not promote in our classes new kinds of knowing and new ways of being that recognize the

undeniable empirical fact . . . that our daily lives are not rooted in written texts or in contemplative reflection, but in oral encounter and reciprocal speech. In other words, we live our daily social lives within an ambiance of conversation, discussion, argumentation, negotiation, criticism and justification; much of it to do with problems of intelligibility and the legitimation of claims to truth (Shotter 29).

Argumentation. Negotiation. Criticism. Justification. Problems of intelligibility and the legitimation of claims to truth. Not only are these the primary tasks of conversationalists in their everyday, hurly-burly practices, but they also constitute the content of our courses in rhetoric and writing -- our goals. The oral conversant faces the same rhetorical tasks as does the writer engaged in metaphorical conversation with a monological, textual world. If we want to teach this content, these skills, why not let the texts be *really* conversations rather than metaphorically conversations?

One criticism that may be leveled at conversational models is that the chaotic, hurly-burly nature of the exchange is, in effect, incomprehensible or incoherent in such a way that efficient learning (greatest knowledge return for time invested) suffers. Students in the conversation-based classroom may never rise from disorder, interpreted as confusion, to order, interpreted as enlightenment. I would answer this criticism by asking

that we revisit the chaos of conversation itself, perhaps best accomplished by reflecting upon our own experience of sharing with others. We will quickly have to admit that the chaotic, hurly-burly does not naturally connote incoherence and incomprehensibility. As a matter of fact, conversation tends to be more coherent and comprehensible because order naturally proceeds of its own accord since the aim of conversation is the carrying forward in time of the social relationship of the conversants. To carry this relationship forward necessarily means that they must discover and practice linguistic strategies that help them find ideological and practical common ground, strategies that help them make sense to one another. Reflecting on our own conversational experience or observing the conversation of others, we will quickly become aware of the overall coherence that develops between conversants. Shotter points out that the linguistic strategies that we practice in our daily exchanges are usually unnoticed, that it is "unknowingly [that we] construct between ourselves those orderly forms" that keep our person-world relationships afloat (35). We often speak of "audience awareness" in our teaching. We encourage our students to "think about" or to "consider" the possible reactions a reader may have to the ideas we advance in our texts or to the *ways* in which we advance them. In conversation-based classes, the audience is not merely an abstract idea about which we think or give consideration -- the audience is a living, breathing reality whose reactions we directly experience. Within the experience itself, if we intend to remain part of the social interaction, organizing principles of coherence and understanding arise as a necessity. If a certain speaker/writer, for example, has a personal opinion not held in common with her fellow speakers/writers (audience), she must nevertheless feel that she is not excluded from that audience, that she is a part of that group's reality. Through her desire to be included, she learns by what is essentially trial and error "how *to be* a responsible member of certain social groups"; conversation helps us "learn how *to do* certain things in the right

kind of way: how to perceive, think, talk, act, and to experience one's surroundings in ways that make sense to the others around one" (Shotter 46). As Kenneth Burke has noted, a writer "may have to change an audience's opinion in one respect, but he can succeed only insofar as he yields to that audience's opinions in other respects" (*A Rhetoric of Motives*, 56). In conversational models, the audience and the social group are one and the same; the changing and yielding of opinions, the polishing and perfecting of clarity, are the social/discoursal glue that binds the members in actual community.

The conversational model is an active model, while the monological model tends to promote passivity. The essay, especially the freshman essay, leads the writer to believe that a kind of passive understanding in the mind of the reader is what he's after. His essay, if successful, will merely put his thought into his readers' minds. But when conversants make a contribution to the discoursal exchange, they do so fully expecting a response whether that response be agreement, sympathy, challenge, criticism, or objection. In other words, the form of understanding that arises in dialogue or multilogue is very different in kind from the monological form, the kind of understanding required of the readers of a text who are naturally concerned with what that text is *about*. In the absence of genuine, active exchanges, the writer must face the daunting task of formulating a single linguistic framework that will function as what Shotter describes as a "structured container" for thoughts, ideas, experiences, etc. upon which the writer has imposed a transmissible order such that his meaning can be later poured out of the container in a likewise detached and lonely manner by readers (57). While there may be a great deal of mental energy and activity that goes into the reader's interpretive "pouring out" of the text, that energy is generally expended in isolation and without further input from the writer.

Gregory Clark sees the imposition of ideas into the minds of readers by writers as an eristic venture in which the primary goal is to not only assert a subjective interpretation

of reality and/or events, but to have the reader/audience assent to that interpretation as complete and absolute truth (19). The eristic exchange is therefore inherently confrontational, charging its participants with engaging in a competitive activity leading to an *end* not merely conceived of as a goal, but as a finality, a last word. But, what lies beyond the last word? Tautologically, silence, the death of the social.. Clark warns of the possibility of ensuing silences when he notes

how readily a text can stop the process of [dialogical] exchange and, consequently, collective progress toward knowledge of the truth. A text presents what is an incomplete version of the truth but presents it as an entity that, because it is palpable and permanent, seems complete and thus authoritative. Consequently, a reader can allow the text she reads to supplant her need to continue the perpetual process of constructing the truth. . . .[W]riting presents to its readers a text that not only affirms its own completeness but, because a text fixes its statement outside the social context in which it was generated, seemingly declares itself as autonomous, as removed from the modifying process of [dialogical] exchange (24-5).

At the very least, it would seem wise to me *not* to direct students in our classes on paths that lead to silence and a shutting down of inquiry by structuring our activities primarily around the production of monological writing. On the one hand, it is not possible to have the last word or to successfully deny the social mediatedness of all meanings. On the other hand, having the last word would hardly be desirable insofar as it implies also the end of the social, the end of relationship altogether because there would be, after all, no need of further relating.

That writing is *on some level* at all times a social activity is not, for me, a matter of dispute. I share with most current composition theorists the view that the public and the private are interrelated in so many complex ways that one can safely make the generalization that the public *is* the private and vice versa. While teachers like Elbow

focus *less* on the public/social sphere of composition, they nonetheless recognize the fact that an individual can never stand alone in any communicative act. The audience, as it were, is always already there. Even if we write personal journal entries that we expect no one to read but ourselves, *ourselves* becomes a functional other, a collective and generalized *we* that reads and understands. But, more and more teachers are openly recognizing the social mediatedness of knowledge, language, and the social function of writing -- the need, in fact, for others, not only insofar as they read our texts but as they also help us constitute knowledge. A good example of this recognition is the recent proliferation of group work, peer review, and collaborative projects in composition classrooms. Marilyn Cooper and Michael Holzman have recently leveled criticism at classrooms which still employ pedagogical strategies leading to the production of the "solitary author," the one who "works alone, within the privacy of his own mind" and who "see[s] ideas and goals as originating primarily within himself and directed at an unknown and largely hostile other" (4). In their opinion, good writing instruction would follow what they call an "ecological model," one that recognizes the inter-relatedness of writers with readers, of writers with their environment, of writers with their culture and the cultures of others, one that sees "that writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems" (6). Still, one notes that even Cooper and Holzman propose no radical changes to the composition classroom that aims its sight in the long run on the essay. No matter what new and different social activity or experience gets constructed in the classroom, its ultimate aim is to make the writing of the monological text more real, to help students see that monologue as situated in the social sphere. If we truly believe in writing as a social activity and if we hold as our goal the provision of a Deweyan educative experience through which our students will learn, by interaction, the rhetorical skills that will carry forward with them in time into

mature democratic interactions, why not aim for dialogical/multilogical writing, for textual conversation, making, as Shotter advocates, the disorderly processes of relationship and meaning-making "rationally visible" by describing them and subjecting them to critical reflection in order to "bring into view the character of the social negotiations, conflicts and struggles involved in the production, reproduction and transformation of our current social orders." If we truly believe that knowledge and meaning are socially constructed and, as the anti-foundationalists claim, that there is "no single, already made meaningful order to be found in our social lives," then it would seem common sense for us to "turn away from the project of attempting to understand our social lives through the imposition of monologic, theoretical systems of order, and turn to a study of the more dialogic forms of practical-moral knowledge in terms of which they are lived" (60-1).

This is precisely what I, along with my collaborator Bob King, set out to do in our own teaching practice -- to create, with the aid of electronic conferencing, a Deweyan educative experience of interactivity in which the *central focus* of the class was on the production and study of conversation rather than on the production of a monological essay. And, in doing so, we had to replace the "safe" goals of mastery, control, and static knowledge acquisition with "unsafe" (because not currently legitimized) goals of understanding and seeing connections; we had to do what Shotter said we'd have to do -- replace certainty with adequacy, with the conviction that we'd done justice to the subject we were studying (62). But, in moving into less certain territory, what also happened, through interactive practice, was a good deal of learning -- not only on the part of the students in our classes, but also on the part of ourselves as teachers, as co-learners. No other pedagogical strategy in my experience heretofore has enabled me so successfully to meet the collective goals of composition instruction: my students learned and practiced good rhetorical skills, they learned how to express themselves clearly, to advance their

positions responsibly, to engage in authentic learning activity, to treat others ethically and with due respect, to *understand* if not accept different points of view, to analyze critically the ways in which their culture and experience informed their opinions, and to see their place in a larger social forum. By practicing multilogue rather than monologue, they were able to be expressive individuals as well as responsible social participants -- to enjoy the benefits of what have in other cases been seen as conflicting, perhaps mutually exclusive, models.

It's hard to imagine doing things differently, teaching a composition class in which the primary goal is not the production of the essay. We have, after all, seen the essay as either the primary tool for learning rhetorical skills and for making knowledge or as the only way to properly demonstrate the proficient acquisition of skills/knowledge. Shotter gives an account of Samuel Beckett's characters, Estragon and Vladimir, in *Waiting for Godot* as men who have entrapped themselves in a definition of self entirely self-constructed. They are waiting for a Godot whose existence is not even certain; their waiting defines their being, how they see themselves:

They have imprisoned themselves within an account of themselves of their own devising. And *they, as the individuals they are*, prevent themselves from 'seeing' its inadequacy: not just because it is the only 'currency,' so to speak, in terms of which they can conduct their joint endeavors, but because they owe their being who they are, their identity in relation to one another, to its continued use (83).

In a similar way, the essay is the currency of composition instruction, and we, like Estragon and Vladimir, see our own identity as teachers in relation to its continued use as if there were no other way to see or to conduct our joint endeavors. In the academy, despite its current leanings toward theories of social construction and anti-

foundationalism, the production of coherent, systematic, formal monologue is still privileged. In the long run, it comes down to a matter of habitual behavior, of recognizing that "many of our motives are the products of our activities, not the other way around" (Shotter 95). I suggest that we can find new ways of defining our being as composition teachers, ways more in doing justice to the beliefs and the theories we espouse. Writing is a social activity only insofar as we are willing to see it as an artifact of the genuine social activity, the conversation of humanity. Our pedagogical strategies should be any which promote, in writing, real dialogical/multilogical activities.

CHAPTER III

TECHNOLOGY AND TEXTUAL CONVERSATION

In the preceding chapter, I argued in favor of a conversational model for the teaching of composition and rhetoric because such a model would provide an interactive educative experience that more accurately reflects the ways that we actually make and negotiate meaning in our private and public lives. While I believe that many contemporary rhetoricians and compositionists would accede to the conversational model as an ideal for teaching based upon the arguments I made, I also believe that they would quickly point out that enacting such a model would be difficult at best, if not impossible, considering the practical impediments to conducting critical analyses of conversation itself. Historically, the major obstacle has been that the object of study, as well as the means of studying that we suggest, are oral. How can one be expected to interact with colleagues in an oral, verbal mode and then return later to what was said, and how it was said, in order to then talk about the talk? Of course, it is not impossible to do so. Researchers like George and Robin Lakoff, Edward Sapir, William Labov, Barbara Johnstone, Michael Moerman and many others have taken up the study and critical analysis of conversation in great depth and have added to our understanding of human communication through their efforts. But what they have had to do for the most part is to audio-tape conversational exchanges between others, transcribe those exchanges, and then study the transcribed texts.

The difficulty this presents for practically enacting the model I suggest is significant. First of all, audio-taping and transcribing text is a time-consuming endeavor. If one were to attempt such a project within the confines of a semester-

length course, one would be able to study only the briefest of exchanges, or only small parts of larger exchanges. The overall coherence, not to mention the spontaneity of corporate dialogue, would be lost in the process of its total objectification. What may have begun as a subjective or inter-subjective experience would be turned into a clinical object of study by laying it, as it were, on the scientist's table and subjecting its anesthetized body to cold scrutiny. "Conversationality" would be lost entirely -- the living exchange made cadaverous. While the class may very well carry on oral discussions, most of what is said would be lost in thin air simply because one hasn't the luxury of time to study it all. One cannot engage in meta-conversation in any comprehensive way because one simply cannot, in regards to the whole communicative exchange, "see" what one is saying or what anyone else is saying *as* it happens. One of the benefits of writing rather than saying, after all, is that one gets to see what one says.

One might also point out that full conversational participation in oral exchanges is rarely the case. Every teacher is familiar with the young man who sits in the back row all semester and speaks only when he's spoken to directly. Every teacher knows the shy young woman who speaks softly, and rarely. And every teacher knows the student who's vocally dominant, who takes long conversational turns, and who often interrupts the turns of others. Under these circumstances, which are the rule rather than the exception, a pedagogical model based on dialogue would be a positive educational experience for only a portion of the class. Dominant and passive students at either end of the participatory continuum would have some kind of experience undoubtedly; but from either perspective, one could hardly characterize it as *interactive*. The overly vocal student doesn't hear while the quiet student doesn't speak.

Adding to these considerations are also our concerns that other important features of oral, face to face, conversation complicate the creative acts of speakers and the interpretive acts of listeners/respondents. Primarily, the features to which I refer are those associated with the visual field. Only rarely are descriptions of things like body language included in transcriptions of oral exchange. Leaning forward, wrinkling the brow, rolling the eyes, looking away from the speaker, smiling, etc., are all important visual communication signals that carry great meaning for those involved in face to face talking. None of these things can be captured on audio-tape, and capturing them for later addition to transcriptions would involve detailed critical attention on the part of an ethnographer or the "gaze" of the video-tape. Again, one of the positive characteristics of writing that makes it useful to teaching/learning is that it necessitates the subsumption of the visual into linguistically appropriate channels. Thus, a wrinkled brow in writing would look like a declarative statement that says "I don't understand;" rolling the eyes would look like "I can't believe you said that," etc.

In more important ways than body language, though, the visual field has great impact on the politics of conversation. In general, I refer here to issues such as race, gender, age, body-size, and physical handicap, etc., which bring to bear upon speakers as well as listeners socially and culturally constructed creative and interpretive constraints. The way a speaker *looks* to a listener or the way the speaker perceives her own appearance strongly effects conversational interaction such that a *hearing through* or an *interpreting through* the visual field becomes necessary. A man listening to a woman, for example, may have to *hear through* visual signals that tell him that the person speaking to him has ample breasts, a small waist, and slender legs; a woman may have to *hear through* visual messages that tell her that the man to whom she is speaking is tall and imposing. Similarly,

white teachers and students have to *hear through* the visual distractions of their colleagues' dark skin and eyes, and vice versa. All of these visual messages, even if heard only on a subconscious level, are heard profoundly; appealing as they do to cultural stereotypes, they deeply effect the way we hear what a person is trying to say or what we are trying to say in return. Full conversational participation is often compromised when a potential speaker feels self-conscious.

Time constraints, participatory irregularities, and the difficulty of accounting for visual field distractions therefore make pedagogies based primarily on oral conversation impractical for teaching/learning in contemporary institutional settings where diverse students meet one another for an hour or two several times each week for the length of a semester or a quarter. Fortunately, though, with the proliferation of computer mediated communication networks at all levels of education, reliance on traditional oral modes of conversation and conversational study is no longer necessary. With the aid of computers and telecommunications software packages such as VAX, Daedalus *Interchange*, and Norton's *Connect*, conversation can now be carried on in text, both synchronously and asynchronously, via the electronic conference and electronic mail.

Best described using the analogy of a notebook, a computer or electronic conference is established over the school's telecomputer network and can be accessed by any student to whom the conference moderator (usually the teacher) grants that privilege. Once the conference (notebook) is accessed (opened), any student can read any and/or all entries made to that conference by her peers and can respond to comments made in those entries by replying (writing her own message in the notebook). It is the exchange of messages in the computer conference that constitutes the textual conversation of the class. And, because the talk is captured as an artifact in text, it can also be made into an object for study.

As Richard Velayo explains in a recent issue of *Educational Technology*, the asynchronous computer conference provides a "medium in which individuals or groups are able to interact with each other primarily through electronic text, without the relative constraints of having to meet at a specific place and time" and, as such, it is a good alternative to traditional face to face communication (20). Certainly, there is great benefit to students and teachers alike whenever the potential for class meeting and talking can be extended in both place and time. For one thing, collaborative activity becomes a great deal easier when arranging mutually satisfactory times for meeting with others becomes less necessary. Coordinating research, brainstorming ideas, asking for clarification, sharing ideas, etc. are made easier by having readily accessible electronic space in which group members can meet at more individually convenient times. But matters of convenience aside, the computer conference is ideal for enacting a model of textual conversation because, as Velayo notes, it encourages interaction, allows responses, opinions, and confusions to be made public, fosters deliberative exchange, and encourages students to learn from one another (20). Without the limitations of oral exchange, textual conversation opens the communicative field by providing a twenty-four hour place where people can speak publicly, can be heard without interruption, where they can listen with care to others, and, if they wish, communicate in the absence of bodily self-consciousness. Although one loses the benefit of the "twenty-four hour" classroom in synchronous conversation, the other benefits still accrue.

To address the first concern advanced by those who may consider implementing a conversational model in the writing classroom, I would point out that computer-mediated dialogue is, by technical necessity, a textual affair. When students and teachers *talk* to one another on a network, they do so by typing at a

keyboard and then sending their compositions from their terminals to those of their recipients. As much as this resembles to the casual observer an act of writing as opposed to an act of talking, the conversational quality of electronic conference and e-mail exchange has been widely noted by first-time users as well as by scholars. Duranti, for example, uses the term "conversational" to describe exchanges in e-mail (65) while Wittig characterizes them as being "between speech and writing" (19). Trent Batson, who developed the first real-time interactive software for use by deaf students at Gallaudet observes that the conferenced class "is like a studio or lab yet a conversation is going on where "all participants can talk at once" and "no one can control the conversation" ("The Origins of ENFI" 103). Janet Eldred in her essay for *Critical Perspectives on Computers and Composition Instruction* claims that the value of telecomputing technology for pedagogy lies primarily in its ability to "enhance 'dialogue' involving written texts and written knowledge" in communal writing places that "alter the romantic image of the isolated writer by making both writers and their texts accessible and public" (210-11).

Michael Spitzer in his essay "Computer Conferencing: An Emerging Technology" notes that electronic telecommunication is a hybrid form that lies between print and talk. Quoting several conference users who describe the medium as "'talking in writing,' a 'panel discussion in slow motion,' and 'writing letters mailed over the telephone,'" he illustrates the surprising and thought-provoking effect excursions into the electronic conference have on new users who, "if they are thoughtful people," he says, "start to think about the nature of this new beast."

Like print, computer conferencing consists of linear text. Yet the text is less palpable and permanent than print. Like telephone conversation, computer conferencing feels conversational and temporary. Yet it creates a written record that can be retrieved at any time. . . . It is generally spontaneous and has the temporary flavor of a phone conversation, although it is most often more like a conference call than a two-party interchange. Although it disappears after it has been read, it can be recalled for review or printed out as text. It is more extemporaneous than writing, more carefully planned than speech. It takes place over time but can be read as a continuous discussion" (192-93).

My own experience with electronic conferencing and e-mail exchange bears out the observations advanced by Spitzer and others. While a student in the doctoral program at UNCG in the spring semester of 1990, I found myself in a linguistics course in which the professor required us to carry on a good deal of discussion and collaborative work in a VAXNOTES conference. Suddenly I had to learn how to *dial up*, *log on*, and *e-mail*. I had to learn how technically to negotiate regular communications with class colleagues in the conference and I had to do so from the perspective of a less-than-willing technophobe. Not only did I have to deal with the normal load of course reading and writing, but also with the extraordinary task of learning, as an old dog, new tricks. Fortunately, the staff at our university's research computing center is patient and understanding, and in short order, I learned enough to get by. As a matter of fact, by the end of the semester I was actually beginning to enjoy the bodiless and faceless class discussions that could take place anytime I wanted them to. I wasn't in class, but, paradoxically, I was -- we weren't together, but we were talking.

Four years later, having completed my academic work, I felt driven back to the electronic environment by what Bob King referred to as "the imperative for isolation" associated with the process of dissertation writing, logging on to the

Internet for more of that bodiless, faceless communion with colleagues that could happen at my convenience. It wasn't exactly a case of misery desiring company as much as it was that I missed the dialogue and camaraderie of the graduate seminar, the social act of thinking through issues with others. It was the social aspect of intellectual conversation that I sought, and having gratefully had the one prior experience, I knew where to find it.

My immediate tendency was to refer to computer mediated exchange as conversation. Somehow, the textual aspect of the communication seemed less prominent to me, even though I was typing my messages, because the level of informality and spontaneity was so high. To my initial surprise, I found even scholarly discussions peppered with anecdotes, casual syntax, colloquialisms, intimacy, and what many of us who are accustomed to reading academic prose would refer to as an unexpected laxity in regards to issues of grammar, spelling, and correctness. In other words, the written word resembled, very closely, the spoken word; as Kinkead concluded in her assessment of student electronic writing at Utah State University, there is an level of informality in this medium that "almost demands that [people] write the way they talk, breaking down the rigid rules of more formal communication" (341). In addition to the superficial characteristics of the prose itself, messages were generally brief, were written in response to previous messages or to elicit response to new issues, and were clearly couched in terms that invited further interaction. Not only, then, did the text read like talk, it also read like a conversational turn where one person took the floor in response to what someone else had said and then yielded the conversational floor to another.

While many of my fellow teachers are inclined to capitalize on the benefits of conferencing, especially of the asynchronous variety, for the purpose of distance

learning -- for example, linking two classes of composition students located on different campuses, or extending educational opportunities to handicapped students or other non-traditional students who find it difficult, if not impossible, to attend classes in fixed places at fixed times -- what struck me was the potential that electronic communication might have even to a traditional class in which the teacher wished to rely more heavily on a conversational model. And in the time since my first experience in the medium, I have used both the asynchronous as well as the "real time" conference extensively in my own classes for such purposes. In one case, my composition students were linked to a class in another discipline that met at a different time and in a different place so that students were never face to face while conferencing; the classroom was entirely virtual and the conversation was asynchronous. In the other case, students conferenced in a fully networked classroom at the same time; their conversation was synchronous. But, in both cases, the conversation itself was the focus of, the *meaning* of, our class.

Many of us are unaccustomed to thinking about the social role a computer may serve. When IBM, for example, first coined the phrase *personal computer* and its acronym, *PC*, in order to expand the market for their product into the private sector, the public image of the hard-working, intellectually active individual cloistered away late at night in his home office, face illuminated by the eerie bluish glow of the monitor while he stared with fascination at some kind of magic information only he and the inner circle of *PC* aficionados could access became the commonplace, the stereotype. And while it's true that early preoccupations with word-processing, spreadsheets, home financial management, skill-and-drill educational software, and video games fostered the idea of the computer as a personal means to private ends, current applications are becoming more social as

the technology evolves into a means to connect individuals with whole communities of speakers and thinkers. Turkle, in 1984, commented that

Hysteria, its roots in sexual repression, was the neurosis of Freud's time. Today we suffer not less but differently. Terrified of being alone, yet afraid of intimacy, we experience widespread feelings of emptiness, of disconnection, of the unreality of self. And here the computer, a companion without emotional demands, offers a compromise. You can be a loner, but never alone (307).

In terms of classroom utility, the earliest radical developments in software were made specifically for the purposes of allowing "talk." Faced with the task of teaching composition to deaf students at Gallaudet University, Trent Batson was among the first to feel acutely the need for some form of oral enhancement to help students put into practice the use of English in its natural, conversational form. Having never heard natural conversation, students whose only exposure to language had been through traditional print text or sign language had not benefited from workable models of use. "The current generation of teletype devices for the deaf (TDDs) and closed captions on television," Batson said, "have provided glimpses of the 'natural form' of English . . . English used conversationally, interactively, for real communicative purposes in daily life. But neither of these technologies . . . is easily transferred to the classroom." Thus, an immediate need for an oral conversational alternative lead Batson to develop the original ENFI software programs for computer networks in the early 1980s, programs that enabled synchronous group conversation for the first time:

To us the computer network was simply a more capable set of teletype devices. We saw that this network might be able to make English into a living thing for deaf students. People *typing* to each

other over the wires in a room full of computers could simulate a spoken conversation and thus, for the first time ever, allow deaf people to directly experience and participate in a live *group* discussion in English. Because this electronic conversation would be visible and therefore accessible to deaf people, and because this accessible flow of English would be using the natural written form of English -- not the stilted signed English deaf people generally experience -- we called this grand new experiment English Natural Form Instruction (ENFI) ("The Origins of ENFI" 98-9).

Fortunately for those of us who have consequently profited from Batson's pioneering work, the electronically networked classroom has had much broader application to pedagogy than was originally envisioned. Beyond empowering deaf students with the gift of genuine participation in traditional classroom discussions in English as enjoyed by the larger population of their hearing peers, the very act of engaging in textual conversation evoked a number of social shifts in the classroom that foreground the rhetorical nature of commonplace communicative activities to the great benefit of those of us who teach composition and rhetoric, and for whom it has been a formidable task to make the social function of written discourse transparent to, and experientially felt by learners.

In great part, this social shift by which we benefit is related to the relationship of textual conversation to the absence of those visual field or face to face disruptions I mentioned earlier. Most notably, electronic conversation is a *disembodied* conversation, and as such, naturally recuperates a more democratic, ethical exchange because it occurs in the absence of visual and aural signals that both inform and are informed by stereotypes and socio-cultural hierarchies of power such as race, gender, physical ability, and position of authority. Looping back to allusions made to Tom Kitwood's essay in the "Prelude," the disembodiedness, or lack of visual face to face exchange, is conducive to

communicative practices that cultivate the "skill of seeing, meeting and respecting the being of each unique other, in treating his or her subjectivity as of equal value with one's own." The place of this seeing, meeting, and respecting he calls "moral space," and the act of seeing, meeting, and respecting he calls "free attention" -- the skill "of being able to be close to another with a kind of caring objectivity, in which those distortions of understanding, critical judgments, projections and distractions that so often get in the way of real meeting are minimized." He goes on to emphasize that all parties in a communicative relationship must be capable of giving free attention to one another in order for a truly moral, democratic space to be created. His equation

$$\textit{free attention} + \textit{free attention} = \textit{moral space}$$

illustrates the radical potentiality of a more un-affected and un-effected discourse to create a rhetorical space in which all parties involved "take the other's subjectivity seriously, with feeling and understanding, while also being very much in contact with his or her own" (5). In electronic conversation, one is unable to get a *point of view* in a literal sense so that what one *sees* of a person is the image one constructs only from clues provided by the text. Describing these characteristics of computer telecommunications, Lockard et. al. note that

. . . all participants are essentially on the same level. Because you interact with others through your computer screen, you never see the other individuals. Rather, you interact only on the level of the ideas expressed. Unless a discussion participant chooses to reveal any of the things that are immediately apparent in face-to-face conversation, such as age, gender, or ethnicity, you will not know these things, not will you be influenced subtly by them (165).

If a textual speaker happens to say "I'm a fifty-five year old black man," then that image gets constructed in the mind of the reader and his reactions to the text's speaker will in turn be affected by the particular age, gender, or color bias that he may happen to hold. But, more often than not, writers of electronic text generally neglect any mention of such specific personal, physical details. Messages tend to be pointed and topical without reference to the physical dimension thus leaving the creation of a physical image to fit a speaker's voice entirely up to the reader. The voice, seemingly separated from its physical source, travels through virtual space unencumbered by the psychological weight of body image for either writer or reader as an androgynous, ageless, colorless, sizeless equal.

This disembodiedness had a profound effect on one of my students in particular in the fall semester of 1994. Massif (a pseudonym), a young African-American male with dark skin and a very imposing, heavy build, was not accustomed to speaking face to face in class or in other social situations without having to be self-conscious about his bodily presence. First of all, he was accustomed to having to be *heard through* his skin color -- the stereotypical and misconceived associations that some people make between race and any number of other features (intelligence, character, attitude, etc.). In addition, he had to be *heard through* his body size, the mass of his physical presence. As a matter of fact, when I first assigned my students' pseudonymous usernames by randomly pulling from the hat the preselected names of mountain ranges, Massif misinterpreted. Several weeks later, he told me he was surprised to learn that his name had been randomly chosen; he thought I gave him the pen name "Massif" because its sound resembled him -- "massive." In any case, he was my one student who most benefited from the separation of his words and thoughts from the visual field. As he said at the end of the semester, "for the first time, people are listening

to what I have to say, not because of what I look like, but because of what I actually have to say. I'm being judged by my words and not by my appearance." Without visual interferences associated with either race or body build, Massif's contribution to the conversation could be more clearly heard; *free attention*, in the medium as he experienced it, was high.

Massif was also very sensitive to the effect the disembodiedness had on his own projections, the way the visual field often brought to the interpretive task his own biases:

I was challenged in the sense that I was having to interact with people who had no faces, including no smiles or frowns, people without hands and bodies so that I might read their body language. . . . I was challenged because these people did not know me and I had to prove myself worthwhile of their interest. I did not know how they looked, how they dressed, nor was I able to hear their distinct southern drawls or haughty yankee accents; I was forced in this manner to be totally objective. They were merely words on the screen, and to these syllables strung together, compiling sentences, forming paragraphs, and complete (or incomplete) thoughts, I had to respond. I had to react free of bias, because I had nothing to base any biased responses on.

The long term effect of being able to both give and to receive free attention did, as Kitwood suggested, create a new kind of moral space. As another student, Manaslu, observed "I think we all learn[ed] how people really feel deep inside; that normally can't be seen on a person's face."

But it is not only the relationship between student interlocutors that changes in relationship to disembodied talk; the relationship between the teacher and her class is also effected. In a traditional, proscenium classroom, the hierarchy of authority is a vertical structure where the teacher is figuratively, if not literally,

above her students. Lessons, the course content, are broadcast, moving from up (the teacher) to down (the students) and in such a way that all *valid* learning (the learning that *counts*) is filtered through the teacher whose serves as a sort of Freirean bank-teller. Contemporary composition theory, positing as it does that writing and learning occur in social contexts, has prompted many teachers to try a variety of remedies for the verticality of the classroom in an attempt to make the teacher seem less the "sage on the stage" than the "guide on the side" (Schofield 581). Sitting in circles and other changes in student/teacher positions, peer review, and collaborative works are some such remedies with which most of us are familiar. But, as Batson observed about his own classroom experience, "these decentralization efforts . . . failed to make me, at least, a less dominant presence in the classroom" because "there is something about the basic communication dynamic of the traditional face-to-face classroom -- the heavy presence of the teacher -- that supports, perhaps demands, verticality" ("The Origins of Enfi" 101). This latter observation, of course, is not unique to Batson. It is the same realistic confrontation with classroom dynamics that prompts Bartholomae, in his exchange with Elbow, to suggest that such decentralizing maneuvers can, at best, only *hide* the teacher (63).

The effect of teacher-as-authority-figure has been well noted in the field, especially in terms of writers' audience. Although we encourage our students to write for "real" audiences rather than for the teacher-as-audience, we and they cannot escape the fact that the teacher really is, when all is said and done, the audience. As a matter of fact, the teacher is the audience that counts because it is the teacher who will do the evaluating. Bartholomae suggests that we can do little more than hide this reality, and rather than hide it he thinks we should simply embrace it. Elbow, on the other hand, has suggested that a re-thinking is in order:

"Teachers are not the real audience. You don't write *to* teachers, you write for them" (*Writing With Power* 220). Interestingly, writing for them instead of to them entails either a two-way pretending game in which "the student pretends to explain something to someone who doesn't understand it; the teacher pretends to be this general reader reading for enlightenment" rather than assessment (*Writing With Power* 221), or not thinking about audience at all (*Writing With Power* 225). The problems with this kind of make-believing bothered Batson:

My problem in writing classes seemed to be that during class we worked vertically but the students were expected to write horizontally; or pretend to write horizontally. In other words, Don't address me, the teacher, directly, taking into account what I know and don't know, and that I am going to grade you and all that, but pretend to be writing to some vague audience out there. . . . The class works in a jungle gym of surmisals, a let's pretend authenticity. It's a highly convoluted communication structure, yet we expect students to take it in stride and work within it ("The Origins of ENFI" 100).

Even in a system of surmisals the teacher in a writing classroom is a problematic figure that strongly effects students' conscious and unconscious attitudes about what they say and how they say it to the degree that they are concerned with evaluation.

In contrast to the proscenium environment, however, the networked environment is a more level structure as Batson discovered in 1985 when he went on-line for the first time with his students and discovered the "horizontal classroom, the classroom where horizontal is the default and vertical is hard to achieve" ("The Origins of ENFI" 101). In electronic exchange, the teacher is visually no different than her students; all are text on the screen, judged and

responded to according to what they say rather than who they are -- the teacher is just one more interactive participant in the conversation. If in the traditional classroom she is up on the stage while her students are down in the audience, the networked classroom changes the situation not so much by sitting her down too, but by inviting everyone onto the stage at once, into the communicative arena. Now, as Michael Spitzer remarks, "instead of writing for their teachers, [students] write *to one another*" (65), and this "one another" just happens to include the teacher if she also participates in the talk. Not only, then, is there a democratization among students, there is a democratization of the entire classroom community such that the *I-It* becomes, across the board, a *we*:

We did sit in a circle, each of us behind our display screens . . . but in a sense we were not actually there. The physical setting in the room, oddly enough, had little effect on how we related. . . . Our physical reality had diminished to such an extent it was as if our minds were talking directly among themselves. Social trappings, the hierarchy that defines and confines us, had diminished and quieted. . . . We had found "neutral" social space (Batson, "The Origins of ENFI" 101-02).

In my own practice, I too have discovered in computer mediated, textual, conversation a "we" -- that essential social relationship between the plural *I* and *Thou* from which meaning can be collectively negotiated, from whose platform the rhetorical process can be both enacted and observed almost simultaneously. No longer is the rhetorical set-up contrived; no more pretense that the relationship between writer, subject, and audience is an honest one. As opposed to monologue, whose audience may be merely metaphorical, dialogue and multilogue cannot exist without a real audience, and a real audience is what one gets the

moment one enters an electronic conversation. When one makes a comment, one gets a response so that the rhetorical act has authentic consequences from lateral positions such that no longer is the onus of assessment on the teacher alone; it's a public affair. When one says something *to* someone else, the other person will respond with approval, dissent, or confusion; they will affirm, encourage, ask for clarification, or disagree. Elbow says "it's a relief to put words down on paper for the sake of *results* -- not just for the sake of getting a *judgment*" (*Writing With Power* 220), and in textual conversation -- words on a screen rather than on paper -- the result one gets is further conversation, the essential human interaction that cements the communicative bond and holds people in relationship with one another. "I want you to understand me" becomes the motivation not only for speaking in the first place, but also for speaking more clearly, for sharing more details, for considering what listeners may or may not already understand, and for listening with care to how others respond.

The desire we all feel to be understood and to understand others in human relationship is not normally a desire we bring easily with us into a composition classroom where the primary mode of being understood is to write our thoughts in isolation on the page, to take it as an object outside of immediate communicative acts with others, and to turn it into an artifact -- a particular, polished point of monologue -- to be understood not by our peers in vital interaction but by the teacher as judge of our art. What we're trying to do, of course, is to make our thinking and our rhetoric visible so that we can understand and can be understood in return, but more often than not there is no one really there who cares to listen and no one we care about hearing us. But, the more immersed we are in conversation, the more likely we are to find our desires kindled. With textual conversation, the audience and our social relationship with them is real and is

almost immediately felt. But unlike oral conversation, the exchange doesn't simply disappear into thin air. Almost as soon as we enter the conversational exchange, our contribution is made "rationally-visible" because it's in text, and we can do, as Shotter recommends, critically describe our communicative acts from within the act itself; we can see, as it unfolds, the process by which the social negotiation of meaning is made, the kinds of conflicts and misunderstandings involved in the creation of meaning, and the authentic way social transformations occur (60).

In "Online Education: An Environment for Collaboration and Intellectual Amplification," Linda Harasim suggests that the potential for computer mediated education is best explored by looking a five attributes that distinguish it from more traditional pedagogical models:

1. many-to-many communication
2. place independence
3. time independence (that is, time-flexible, not atemporal)
4. text-based
5. computer-mediated interaction (42-3)

The attributes of time and place independence are, as I have mentioned, less important to us for this particular study. The remaining three, however, constitute fundamental characteristics that make textual conversation such a rich medium for teaching and learning. The fact that electronic conversation is a "many-to-many" form of communication is particularly important as it relates to the social nature of learning. With the teacher now decentered, students are re-centered both as learners and as sites of knowledge, i.e., as active participants in the meaning-making process and not merely as recipients of the course content. In the electronically conferenced classroom, everyone can talk and everyone can listen at

the same time. In *Fragments of Rationality*, Lester Faigley relates observations he made following his experience in a networked classroom in 1988. Here, he contrasts discussion in a traditional class with the textual discussion of his class working synchronously in *Interchange*:

Unlike ordinary conversation, where when one speaker concludes a turn, another speaker can take over, classroom discourse is usually tightly controlled. The teacher begins by choosing the topic, then selects which student will speak, and concludes the sequence by taking back the floor when the student finishes. These steps typically are bounded by verbal and non-verbal markers [which express evaluation or signal new topics].

The *Interchange* session begins like usual classroom discourse with the teacher asking a question of the class. But unlike a usual classroom teacher, [the teacher in an *Interchange* class] cannot recognize one student to answer his question. Because most of the class responds quickly to his question, there is no opportunity for [him] to make a conventional evaluation statement. When [he] replies to his students . . . he does not evaluate the students' responses, nor does he supply the answer, nor does he introduce a new topic. By this time he has lost control of the floor (180).

As people enter the textual conversation, either jumping right in or "listening" a while to orient themselves before responding to issues of interest, a web of meaning begins to grow as threads of both harmony and discord criss-cross one another in the dialogical space. Although everyone can talk, and can talk at once, the experience for an individual is that he gets a full turn on the floor without interruption (no one can stop you in the middle of a sentence while you type at your keyboard). He takes his turn, listens to others, gets a response, and then, if he wishes, responds to the response or moves on to other conversational tangents which arise from the same original prompt. And while the individual feels that he

has received the free attention of his classmates because they have at least given him an uninterrupted turn on the floor, his colleagues who may actually be "talking" themselves at the same time rather than "listening" are having similar experiences of the uninterrupted turn. In this manner, the dialogue unfolds in time.

Faigley notes that

While students can move back and forth in the transcript while messages are being added, most stay at the end, reading messages as they are sent and then jumping in with a contribution when a particular message provokes a response. Messages that initiate several responses I will refer to as "hot" messages (180).

Although the printed text of such exchanges may appear to be chaotic or "fragmented," especially at first, as the web grows with time one can find "identifiable lines of coherence that run through it" (Faigley 178). These lines of coherence intersect strongly at nodes associated with hot messages in such a way that the meaning of the conversation (the hot topic) gradually grows out of the noise. Here, we can loop back to Shotter who spoke of the "unordered, hurly-burly" of conversational interactivity (7) which is not exclusionary, but is "continuous, non-eliminative, inclusionary, [and] multi-voiced" (9), comparing the networked, textual conversation favorably to his description of everyday oral interactions. And, as in the oral exchange, order arises from the hurly-burly in the networked exchange -- the hot topic, the center of gravity.

Admittedly, finding oneself as a teacher suddenly decentered, is a decentering experience in itself. While many of us promote the *idea* of the democratic classroom, collaboration, social-construction of knowledge, and student-centered learning, what we've done so far in practice to achieve this end

has fallen so short of the mark that we pretty much have *not* experienced any real displacement of ourselves as center of the class, as arbiter and director of meaning. One gets the impression in reading Faigley's account of his *Interchange* class, for example, that his loss of control of the floor was a jolting experience -- one that he interpreted positively, but nevertheless a jolt. One of the things this decentering means in real experience is that you may provide your students with a prompt for conversation (a question about shared readings, a invitation to speculate on current events, etc.), but you cannot very well control the direction their conversation will take beyond the prompt. Your *topic* truly becomes the rhetorical *topos*: a place, a point of departure. Sometimes, although rarely, the hot topic that emerges will coincide with the hot topic you intended. More often, though, the group will diverge, negotiating its own center of meaning. This means that teaching in the conversational environment makes it quite difficult to promote specific ideological agendas or "right" ways of thinking if, for example, your topic involves any social, political, or cultural issues (which, of course, all topics in some way do). Once you, as site of authority and topical control, lose your place on center-stage, your own ideological position is just one more position among many. With the level of participation up, suddenly students who would not verbalize dissenting or unpopular points of view for fear of negative teacher evaluation are verbalizing their opinions with relative ease and a remarkable degree of openness. This means that the Christian fundamentalists are talking as much as dyed-in-the-wool liberals; people with deep-seated ethnic and moral biases are talking as much as those who favor diversity and choice; those who think that women belong at home in the kitchen are talking as much as those who think that "women belong in the House, as well as in the Senate." Not only are they all talking, but the teacher really isn't

able to bestow approval upon one while silencing the other because she no longer controls the floor.

I think that many of us fear that in losing control of the floor, our class discussions may disintegrate into Morton-Downeyesque shouting matches. None of us really want to see our students express open rancor for one another. Faigley shared these same concerns when he undertook his *Interchange* experiment in 1988, particularly since he used a pseudonymous networked discussion (students using pen names as in the class I taught with Massif):

I had heard reports coming from the campuses when ENFI software was being used that students often used profanity and wandered off the topic in electronic discussions. . . . I was also aware of the "flaming" phenomenon on electronic bulletin boards, where writers often express anger in hyperbolic and vituperative fashion. I thought if I would see profanity and flaming, it would come when we used pseudonyms, but it did not happen in this class (178).

For the most part, I share Faigley's experience. I have only rarely seen profanity and flaming in the networked conversation. I emphasize profanity *and* flaming, though -- the two used together to verbally attack another's point of view. I have seen profanity in electronic discourse just as often as we see it in our students' informal (and sometimes even formal) writing. What I have seen only on occasion, however, is profanity associated with any kind of name-calling or other kind of abusive verbal attack. But none of us should really fear the possibility of such expressions in our students' exchanges or worry too much about discussions that begin to take on the rancor of talk-show prose. As a matter of fact, there's a great deal that can be learned when the rhetoric slips. On the few occasions where some flaming occurred in my classes, the event turned out to be an important rhetorical

lesson for the flamer and for the rest of the class because the flamer's colleagues generally reacted to such verbal displays with censure and opprobrium. Rather than the whole conversation disintegrating into a flame war, the offending comments were either met with silence or direct remarks of disapproval. Again, I believe that this social-checking demonstrates our desire to keep the conversation going -- students themselves did not wish to elicit silence or to see silence ensue. As teachers, we need to trust the social desires of our students to act as a checks-and-balance force in regards to such rhetorical situations. One need only reflect on similar "real life" successes to see that such checks-and-balances work fairly well -- no teacher or legislature, for example, passed a law censoring from all social intercourse the expression "nigger." The reason one doesn't use this expression is not that it's censored but that it's censured -- its use brings with it so much social opprobrium that one is disgraced by its use and must suffer exclusion (silence) or direct criticism. Students who indulge in flaming and in name calling soon learn through experience that such language behaviors are pure folly. I, for one, have never had to intervene in my authority role to put the flames out.

While we have to entertain the possibility that profanity and flaming may occur in the electronic conversation, we also have to entertain the possibility that the meaning-making process that goes on can change us as much as it can change our students. In other words, we have to be willing to be vulnerable and open-minded to the same extent as are our students. Bob and I call this new ontological positioning *meta-liberality*; we have to become liberal about being liberal, harking back to the ideals that inform liberal humanism in general rather than insisting on our individual interpretations of what it means to be liberal, or conservative, or American, or open-minded, or democratic, etc. We have to accept that, in the conversational model, we cannot appropriate the authority to "mean" or to "know"

outside of the collective. Chances are that in a class of twenty students and one teacher, there will be twenty-one interpretations of meaning and knowing, none counting for more than the others *unless* an individual can assert good reason to sway more people into her interpretive camp. One of Faigley's students gets right to this point when he says that

. . . your opinions and comments come across the screen for everyone to read and interpret. . . . All comments were treated with the same respect and courtesy. All comments were based on their own merits. The students' comments were just as important as the professor's. However, this would not have been the case had the professor's comments been highlighted (182).

This means that there are no dimensions to carry the argument, the meaning, *except* for the rhetorical dimension. The ability an individual has to create a hot message, to attract hot responses, to initiate the formation of nodes of meaning, or hot topics, rests with her ability to speak well, to speak clearly, and to exercise a reasoned appeal.

But, if we are no longer able to securely advance our own ideologies in the composition classroom, we should feel very secure in our ability to provide an authentic interactive environment in which students (and ourselves) can learn a great deal about the ways that meaning and knowledge are negotiated. By making the conversation "rationally visible," the power of rhetoric can be seen as a real, living force, as something "everyday" on the one hand but profoundly important on the other. Following the hurly-burly of conversational interaction, which is at least initially a divergent activity, a period of idea linking or convergent activity ensues in which the rhetorical paths to common ground can clearly be traced and reflected upon (Harasim 56). Transcripts of textual conversation can be studied, even as

they are in the process of being produced, so that we can see the linguistic choices we make and assess the effect of those choices upon those with whom we share a social, dialogical bond. More important than advancing any individual ideology, the role of rhetoric in creating ideology can be seen, can be talked about, can be high-lighted.

I find it a curious phenomenon that relatively little has been written about what happens to people in electronic spaces. As one of the Mercury astronauts once commented about the early space program, there seemed to be more interest in describing *how* one got to space than there was in describing what it actually felt like to *be* in space. Likewise, with computer technology, there is a plethora of information about the technology itself, but relatively little that describes what it's like to be in electronic space, what happens to people who communicate via computers, or how they feel about their communication. While Faigley may feel prompted to describe the networked classroom as a utopian dream come true, I will at least say that I'm very excited by what my students and I have experienced in our electronic conversations with one another, very excited by the possibility that computer telecommunications and networks provide for those of us who are interested in conversational pedagogies. But, those of us who go into that space do so as pioneers, without having a great deal of narrative at our disposal to tell us what it's like or what to expect. My teaching collaborator and I will continue to share our experiences with others in the hope that more teachers will join us in enacting what at this time is merely an experimental model for learning. Our experiences lead us not so much to issue a call for more research as they do to call for more practice, more teachers willing to venture outside the traditional classroom where one can do little in terms of "practicing what one preaches" no matter how much we invite talk, no matter how much we try to decenter

ourselves. Such ventures, as all adventures, require a willingness to risk losing control, to risk even failure, but, as with all adventures, taking a risk promotes learning and growing. Thanks to the technological tools and the spirit of adventure I've discovered in my students, the journeys for us have been successful and rewarding.

CHAPTER IV
INTERLUDE:
MIRROR MIRROR: THEORIZING SELF AND OTHER IN
ELECTRONIC CONVERSATION

Even now, when the plot
 calls for me to turn to stone,
 the sun intervenes. Some mornings
 in summer I step outside
 and they sky opens
 and pours itself into me
 as if I were a saint
 about to die. But the plot
 calls for me to live,
 be ordinary, say nothing
 to anyone. Inside the house
 the mirrors burn when I pass.

Lisel Mueller

Responding and Transgressing

Beth, perhaps we should begin our conversation by explaining how we each got into the on-line mode. I'm still amazed by the serendipity of it all in my case -- meeting you again for what turned out to be the third time, reconnected by a third party, and then getting on-line to share conversation via electronic mail.¹ Retrospectively though, I would say that I was moving towards going on-line

¹Bob alludes to our past acquaintance with one another in a seminar we both attended in the summer of 1991. Months later, we met again briefly to discuss issues in teaching. Finally, in May 1994, we were reintroduced to one another by a mutual friend in the department of English who felt that Bob and I should talk about our mutual interests in cyberspace.

because I was searching for an interactive way to do scholarly work, a responsive way. As a teacher, I was already practicing democratic pedagogy in my classroom, which was a good beginning, but I was still searching for other ways to be interactive and responsive.

You know, Bob, "responsiveness" was something I was looking for, too, but I never thought of it in those terms. I was in a big hurry to get my computer account and log on to "conversation." You see, it had been over a year since I finished all my academic work at the university. For a while, I kept myself occupied with studies for written and oral comprehensive exams, but those were now behind me as well and I found, in the aftermath, that I really missed the multilogue of the scholarly seminar, the discussions and the social meaning-making process. So, I logged on for conversation, to keep my mind active, so to speak. Although my motives had intellectual merit, I have to be honest and admit that it was more the need for social interaction that sent me on-line than any quest for knowledge.

The strange thing for me was that I wasn't getting what I would call responsiveness in scholarly seminars even. It still seemed that the professor was transmitting or broadcasting rather than responding; it was stilted. The school experience came across like one more mass medium for the most part. It had its moments when artful instructors made things look real, but it still wasn't what I was looking for. When I read the Clarke and Holquist biography of Bakhtin, I imagined people sitting around talking, drinking strong tea, and talking about

intellectual things in a natural way, that was what I was looking for and not finding in the classroom, even the seminar classroom.²

In his essay "Requiem for the Media," Baudrillard says

The mass media are anti-mediatory and intransitive. They fabricate non-communication -- this is what characterizes them, if one agrees to define communication as an exchange, as a reciprocal space of a speech and a response, and thus of a *responsibility* (not a psychological or moral responsibility, but a personal, mutual correlation in exchange). We must understand communication as something other than the simple transmission-reception of a message, whether or not the latter is considered reversible through feedback. Now, the totality of the existing architecture of the media founds itself on this latter definition: they are what always prevents response, making all process of exchange impossible (except in the various forms of response simulation, themselves integrated in the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact).³

If you plug school into this, you find plenty of response-simulations -- some good, some not so good, but none ultimately satisfying. I was also finding lots of talk about moral responsibility, for example, but an almost complete silence on the need to establish response-ability as a precondition. On-line conversation, however, is much closer to the tea room experience; response-ability does seem to be a precondition.

² From *Mikhail Bakhtin*, by Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) There are many differences between a "circle" such as Bakhtin's group and an academic seminar. Mainly, in this instance, I am referring to the difference between having one's intellectual activity knit into life and having one's life knit into intellectual activity. As I read this biography, it was the former that appealed to me.

³169-170..

I find much I can agree with in Baudrillard's comments about media and about response-simulation. And I looked to the conversations I had on-line as responsive conversation in which the conversation as well as the response could happen at times convenient for me. But, as time went on, I began to wonder whether or not the responsiveness was not just another simulation. In this case, the simulation being initiated by me. I began to wonder whether or not cyberspace was the ultimate illusion factory, so to speak.

Let's face it, electronic conversation, while it seems rich and multi-dimensional, is in fact one-dimensional. Electronic conversation is entirely rhetorical; electronic communities are rhetorical communities. While I might attend any number of "real life" seminars in which to share conversation with colleagues, those "real" seminars take place in specific locations at specific times; those engaged in seminar conversation are entirely embodied. Electronic conversation, however, takes place under circumstances of chronotopic variation, hence the appeal of being able to engage in exchanges only when it's convenient to do so. The discourse is also completely disembodied; one hasn't the advantages of body language and facial expression to interpret how successfully one is communicating. But, on the positive side, one hasn't the disadvantages of visual cues like gender, race, age, body size, and/or physical ability to overcome.

I found it quite comforting to be able to cast in a conversational text the ethos of my choosing. When I talk to colleagues on-line, they have no clues about my appearance, no clues about my "legitimate" authority to speak. They judge me solely on the quality of my rhetoric. This is a real advantage for a short, middle-aged white woman with an obvious feminine voice and southern accent.

Beyond that, I don't have to worry about being interrupted when I'm speaking in cyberspace. I compose my message in isolation (even though I

strongly sense the presence of my audience, people hanging-on to my every word) and at my leisure. No one says a word in response until I finish what I'm saying and strike the "send" button. For a short, middle-aged female with a feminine voice, southern accent, and a feminine style of argumentation, this is a great advantage -- at least I get a fair hearing.

But the question is, of course, do I? I strongly suspect that what I get is the illusion of a fair hearing. I create an ethos for my interlocutor and that ethos is, at the very least, one of a fair and open-minded person. I strongly suspect that the reason I'm so fond of communicating on-line is that I can disembodify myself and create for myself an illusory world from what Baudrillard refers to as "the missing dimension."⁴ Free of my body and my voice, I can be wherever I want, whenever I want, as whoever I want in cyberspace.

I suspect that in concealing some things, other things are revealed. I would want to say that in electronic conversation you reveal, through your word choice and metaphor choice, for example, your desires. You reveal the contours of your world-view, the contours of the world you would like to see in ways that might not be apparent in other mediums, including face to face.

Although Baudrillard may not be writing about electronic conversations as such, his comments in "Requiem" allude to a potential which I think such exchanges in fact have:

In effect, an immediate communication process is rediscovered, one not filtered through bureaucratic models -- an original form of exchange, in fact, because there are neither transmitters, not receivers, but only people responding to each other. The problem

⁴*Seduction*, pg. 67.

of spontaneity and organization is not overcome dialectically here: its terms are transgressed.⁵

In other words, I am thinking that you're onto the transgressive aspect of electronic conversation, but that you're describing it dialectically, in terms of illusion/reality. Graffiti, according to Baudrillard, is similarly transgressive, yet still responsive:

Graffiti is transgressive, not because it substitutes another content, another discourse, but simply because it responds, there, on the spot, and breaches the fundamental role of non-response enunciated by all the media. Does it oppose one code to another? I don't think so: it simply smashes the code. It doesn't lend itself to deciphering as a text rivaling commercial discourse; it presents itself as a transgression.⁶

So I would say, if there is a dichotomy, it's transgressive vs. non-transgressive rather than illusion vs. reality. What you feel subjectively in electronic exchange may be a heightened responsiveness to your own signals, but this sensation may ultimately not be recoupable as illusion. I am thinking that the subjective aspects of electronic conversation are better recouped as transgressive or hyperreal.

I don't follow the allusions to graffiti relative to electronic exchange. For one thing, it's hard to see that particular medium, graffiti, as conversational in any except the most remote of senses. But, I do think it's worth exploring electronic conversation from the perspective of hyperreality. Let's first agree on terms. Hyperreality, as I understand it, is the realer-than-real; it's reality without distance from that reality, therefore without perspective. As interesting example

⁵182.

⁶Ibid. 183-84.

is Baudrillard's Teflon-coated pan in which one heats water to boiling. Although, as he points out, the pan transfers heat to the water, it does so without ever physically touching the water.⁷ This is as close as one can actually come to the paradox of touching without having contact. There is, for me, this same kind of "lack of distance" between interlocutors in cyberspace -- quite an illusory lack since there may indeed be all the distance in the world. I may, for example, feel the direct contact heat of conversation with someone in Thailand while I, in actuality, am here at my terminal in Greensboro, NC.

Referring to graffiti, I was thinking only that if electronic conversation is transgressive, like graffiti in *some* sense is, we would need to model it in a very novel way. If it falls outside of normal parameters, then it would be misleading to describe it in normal terms. My question, for example, concerns whether or not it is misleading to characterize the "contact heat" you feel from an electronic message, from Thailand or anywhere else, as illusory.

It does seem to transgress our customary paradigms for understanding distance, and Teflon may be a helpful new metaphor for describing this transgression, but I am not so sure the old metaphor of illusion is helpful. An old metaphor which might work, though, is emotional distance; for example, we might compare the old-fashioned intimacies of letter writing to the new-found intimacies of electronic conversation. And what would be the overall connection? In a "real life" seminar, a lot of daydreaming goes on; people can be very much elsewhere and yet sit in the same physical space with others. Or, longtime partners who

⁷In *America*, Baudrillard actually refers to this surface as the "interface." Because of the interface ("the code of separation" or pan surface), heat is transmitted "as a message" rather than as heat itself (32-33).

share the same house can remain strangers to one another in some ways. But, in electronic exchange, you could be next door "hearing" my keystrokes or you could be in Thailand; in either case, we might be closer in some ways than if we were sitting together in the same seminar at the same time. Thus, conversation in cyberspace defies/transgresses normal categories, causing us to have to rethink our terms.

Along these lines, hyperreality is, to me, like scurrility rather than illusion. Hyperreality transgresses at one end of the reality-effect spectrum and scurrility transgresses at the other. Electronic conversation can indeed be *too much*, although I'm not sure what it is *too much of*. Too much of self, maybe. Too much awareness that we construct our own reality, maybe. In any case, how can we describe this world from a perspective-less position, up close like perception must be to infants? What mileage do you get from describing this in terms of illusion?

I agree that there's a too-muchness to electronic conversation, and I would be so bold as to claim that what it's too much of is indeed Self. What I construct when I construct you, my interlocutor, is whole-heartedly what I desire. You become the perfect Other, which is Self. So, you bringing up the difficulty inherent in describing cyberspace from a perspective-less position, up close like it must seem to infants, is very apropos. Self, Other, mirror phase -- all are Lacanian concepts (or concepts that Lacan appropriates from Freud).

As I understand it, the Self is one with the universe prior to birth (what Freud refers to as oceanic consciousness); the Self exists in a state of unity. At the moment of birth, unity is destroyed, perhaps making birth the original sin metaphorized in Genesis. But, there can be no real return to the mother's body, no going back to the Garden. The original oceanic experience of unity translates

for Lacan into Object A after which we are in perpetual quest, looking for "mother's body," the original Self, in Other.

So, after birth, we are only fragmented selves harboring unfulfillable desires for an Other to perfect us. Infants, of course, have no sense of their fragmentation, thus it is the mirror, by reflecting, that instructs us, that gives us perspective of sorts. We look into the mirror and see an ego-self.

In many ways, I "look at" the computer screen as I would look at a mirror, a surface upon which I see the reflection of my own ego and desires. I am thus seduced not by an interlocutor, but by my own image, what I create. I idealize, for better or for worse. As Baudrillard says in Seduction

Seduction cannot possibly be represented, because in seduction the distance between the real and its double, and the distortion between the Same and the Other, is abolished. Bending over a pool of water, Narcissus quenches his thirst. His image is no longer "other;" it is a surface that absorbs and seduces him, which he can approach but never pass beyond. For there is no beyond, just as there is no reflexive distance between him and his image. The mirror of water is not a surface of reflection, but of absorption.⁸

The only "mileage" I get out of using the word "illusion" is that I feel it most closely circumscribes my meaning. I think that what happens between interlocutors in cyberspace is, indeed, illusion.

"Illusion" circumscribes your meaning or circumscribes your desire? The difficulty I have with Freud and Lacan, and grand theory in general, is that so much can be annihilated with it. Doesn't this trouble you? As an alternative to

⁸*Seduction*, 67.

Freud/Lacan, let's say that human nature is socially mediated and technologically mediated. Conversation is a clear example of social mediation. Computers are a clear example of technological mediation. Computer conversation, electronic conversation, in this sense doubles human nature -- and in the transaction a double is produced, by which I mean a novel subjectivity or persona. Let's furthermore say, then, that I have a desire to construct the subjective dynamics of electronic conversation with terms such as "transgression" and "doubling" and you have a desire to construct those same dynamics in terms such as "seduction" and "illusion." Since we are socially constructing this text, how will we mediate our conflicting desires? I now extend my question about the "mileage" of terminology: not, then, what mileage *you* get from using words like "illusion," but what mileage *we* get. My argument for not using such terms is that they provide a ground for dismissal of whatever work is done on electronic exchange as somehow less-than-real (i.e., illusory). What we get from talking in terms of transgression and doubling is a world wherein there is no position from which anyone could declaim on reality in order to dismiss illusory processes, or declaim on illusion in order to claim ownership of the real.

Baudrillard concludes "Requiem" by asserting that "what is strategic in this sense is only what radically checkmates the dominant form."⁹ Having already identified the dominant media form to be simulated or quasi-responsive (e.g. the call-in radio show which, because it is controlled at one end only, simulates responsiveness), what would checkmate the dominant media form would be genuine responsiveness. Electronic conversation enacts genuine responsiveness insofar as the control is dispersed much more evenly between participants. What

⁹184.

you are arguing -- that electronic conversation is illusory in this other personal sense of over-full projection of ego onto the screen -- seems not to be the case at least on the level of experience and politics; I mean it may be that ultimately we are deluded and in fact really do want nothing more than to return to unity in our mothers' bodies -- just as we are deluded into thinking we are really responding to one another in cyberspace -- but it doesn't feel that way to me. For example, when we put ourselves and our students on-line for discussions in the classes we taught last fall, people and power relationships were transformed; the usual power channels were transgressed.¹⁰ Even if it could be demonstrated that this kind of thing is an attempt to return to the mother, suppose we just say that whatever allows a sense of return is good, rather than illusory. For me, terms like illusion have a way of degrading experience and it's not my desire to do that.

In the remarks you cite from Baudrillard's "Requiem," you suggest that electronic conversation is an example of a reciprocal, truly responsive relationship, that there exists between interlocutors a kind of self/other relationship. Interestingly, I would say, then, that electronic responsiveness is more illusory while the call-in radio show responsiveness is more real. After all, there is a power disparity between the radio host and his caller and power disparities are real. The host, as owner of power, treats his caller, to whom he

¹⁰In the fall of 1994, Bob and I collaboratively designed and taught an interdisciplinary course in which students in education and students in English composition were linked together via a single VAX electronic conference. Conversation and discussion occurred only in electronic text, resulting in a leveling of the usual hierarchies of authority. This class is discussed in depth in chapter 5 of this work: "Conversations: Learners Learn about Writing/Writers Write about Learning."

condescends to give air-time, as other. The further apart are self and other, the less reciprocal or responsive their exchange. Electronic conversation seems to close the gap between self and other as Baudrillard directly points out in "Xerox and Infinity":

Thanks to his computer or word processor, Telecomputer Man offers himself the spectacle of his own brain, his own intelligence, at work. Similarly, through his chat line or his Minitel [electronic conversation], he can offer himself the spectacle of his own phantasies, of a strictly virtual pleasure. He exorcises both intelligence and pleasure at the interface with the machine. The Other, the interlocutor, is never really involved: the screen works much like a mirror, for the screen itself as locus of the interface is the prime concern. An interactive screen transforms the process of relating into a process of commutation between One and the Same. The secret of the interface is that the Other is virtually the Same: otherness is surreptitiously conjured away by the machine.¹¹

Now, I think we need to consider this carefully. I think we need to weigh this against what he has to say in his theories of seduction. It's quite easy for me to see the computer screen as a mirror surface, reflecting (doubling, if you prefer) my own desire, closing the gap between self and other.

This in no way negates the things that happened to us and to our students in the electronic exchanges; it in no way makes our experience unreal. But, I still think that it's the essential quality of the interface to function as a mirror, to seduce. In the long run, it's the seduction that facilitates communication, understanding, learning, and a sense of human fulfillment that strikes us as union with another when it's really the self that we find.

¹¹*The Transparency of Evil*, 54.

Okay then, in terms of my now proliferating explanations of electronic conversational phenomena I would want to add this: the boundary between self and other has been dissolving for some time now under the signs of the social construction of reality and intersubjectivity, and that what Baudrillard proposes in this passage from "Xerox and Infinity" is precisely a merger of self and other (in the Same), so why should this be thought of as any big deal? If there never was a self and there never was an other, because both were already and always merged, then what happens in electronic conversation is routine, run-of-the-mill. Our brains, including the "spectacle of our brains" that we see on the computer screen are not our own anyway. When we "exorcise intelligence and pleasure" on the screen we find that we are composed of the so-called others anyway. This scares us, and so we run off and come up with complicated theories which reinstate the familiar boundaries. Even Baudrillard gets scared. He retreats all the way back to medieval terms -- exorcism no less-- to talk about electronic media. Rather than reinstating reality/illusion as you want to do (a modernist dichotomy), he wants to reinstate self/other (a medieval dichotomy). Either way you slice it, it slices all the same. Again, I would say that this talk of terminology is important and pertains directly to making maps of the electronic conversational terrain.

So you say that the dichotomy between self/other is a false one. Without bringing into the discussion any metaphysical or mystical considerations, create for me a narrative of day to day life in a world where this dichotomy does not, to some extent, exist. Let's reduce it to something really manageable, you Bob and I Beth meet on Monday morning at the local coffee shop to talk. There's no dichotomy between self and other . . .

(Co)Responding

Actually, I don't have to create much because, if you recall, we've already done something quite like non-dichotomy at the local coffee shop -- we "merged" there several weeks ago when we met our colleague to talk about an essay that we'd all just read -- not quite to the point of finishing each other's sentences, but nonetheless. . . . Then later, we had a long string of e-mail exchanges about what had happened between us two, finding ourselves to some degree co-responding univocally to a third party. So, I would only ask what it was like for you? For me, it was scary and also exhilarating; boundaries were dropping; the world was looking different.

Louis Althusser talks about how we are constantly "hailed as subjects" of a particular, individualistic sort.¹² Meetings at coffee houses, writing, reading, etc. are all stages on which we are called to see ourselves as "me Bob" and "you Beth." We don't see that these are *particular* stagings of self until we experience some other kinds of stagings, and electronic conversation is one of these other kinds of stagings. It hails us as socially constructed selves but most of the world is still set up to hail us as individually constructed, *ex nihilo*, selves. It's irresistible to try to restage electronic exchange in terms of self/other because that's what we are used to. It totally perverts the meaning but makes it comfortable.

About that day at the coffee shop, I agree that it approached a dissolution of self in other, a blurring of the boundaries, but it was still not you Bob and me

¹²"Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 153.

Beth without the dichotomy of self and other. Let's imagine that we did progress to the point of finishing one another's sentences, or, even better, we began to speak in stereo, expressing thoughts in perfect unison. Let's even go so far as to say that we found a doctor who would agree to sew our tiny little heads together, to hook up our circulatory systems, etc., we would still only be approximating more closely a merger of self and other.

My point is that at all times, and in all places, there is to some extent a boundary between self and other. We cannot completely do away with boundaries that separate us, at least not until we shed our mantles of flesh, and at this point, one must speak only in metaphysical or mystical terms. Beyond the pale, we may very well be reunited, but that's merely speculation. Let's focus on to what degree the boundaries dissolve in electronic exchange. I will say that the interface as mirror surface does traditional interpretations of Narcissus one better. You see, in psychologically reductive theory, Narcissus only saw his own reflection but never moved beyond seeing himself. But I don't think Narcissus was admiring himself so much as confusing himself with an other. In electronic conversation, after Narcissism, we may be able to see ourselves in others and others in ourselves, thereby weakening any convictions we might have held that Other actually exists. Because the discourse is disembodied, it's easy to let the mantle of flesh be shed in a way that's psychologically analogous to death.

I agree that complete merger is impossible in the physical world, but that would be dichotomous anyway in relation to complete individuality of the ex nihilo type. So, we are in the middle, in the soup, and I'm comfortable there. There will always be a me Bob and a you Beth; my point was only that there are many encouragements to see *only* that and to exclude the complexity of identity as a

social and technological mediation, to reinscribe familiar terms and dichotomies in unfamiliar settings/stagings such as electronic conversation.

Prior to this meeting at the coffee shop, you and I had found some contact points with one another, but when we added in the third party we discovered that we two responded to her with a unusual degree of mutuality. Maybe that's the key -- what had been agreement on points somehow, through our long history of electronic exchange and its concomitant dissolution of self/other boundaries, became agreement in response; so we're looping back to the theme of responsiveness, adding the *mutuality* of responsiveness.

Touching again on Baudrillard's "Requiem," at the time he was writing this piece, he evidently believed that something like genuine transgression is possible. He clearly sees this transgressivity as non-dialectical or non-dichotomous (in particular as disrupting or stepping out of the sender-receiver terms of standard communication), and he cites graffiti production as an example of transgressive communication. It remains unclear to me if he would include electronic conversation as transgressive, or whether he would say it's just an instance where the receiver and sender (self and other) are one and the same person, thus a non-transgressive internalization of the same old standard terms of communication. In any case transgression is a very different metaphor than seduction, but in a way seduction is transgressive in the sense that it defies the standard approach to meaning and so on, more like an implosive transgression than an explosive, graffiti-like, one.

Does the implosive transgressivity of electronic exchange also connote an explosive transgressivity in the political sense because it allows for the possibility of non-bureaucratized exchanges between people? Baudrillard alludes in this text to going beyond bureaucratic models towards people responding to each other;

this is the radical potential of electronic conversation as I see it. We saw this potential made kinetic in our electronic classroom; we watched our authority as teachers becoming much more responsive, less prescriptive, and so on. It seems to me there is this larger potential for political transgression of the usual categories such as superior/subordinate, receiver/sender, etc. in electronic exchange. Anyway, I now see seduction as meta-political, as a strategy which defies political strategies as they are usually defined, but as having a politics all the same.

Has electronic conversation been a transgressive force in our lives (you Beth and me Bob)? Subjectively, I would clearly say yes: witness our experience of mutuality of response. Politically, I would also say yes: witness our collaborative writing, constructing a platform from which to speak in the public realm.

There's some interesting digging to be done in regards to this phenomenon, and I hope the digging won't find itself reaching too quickly issues of word choice and definition. Okay, we had found those "contact points" to which you refer; we named those contact point positions "meta-liberality."¹³ Then, we met with a third party and found that not only do we share the meta-liberal position, we also share the same notions about appropriate response. It was the responding that became mutual. So "response" was to our colleague, but

¹³Interestingly, throughout the history of our collaborative relationship, Bob and I have seldom seen eye-to-eye on the more pedestrian details of social, cultural, psychological, or philosophical nature. We have, however, found that in regards to over-arching moral and ethical concerns into which all other issues can be subsumed, we are in firm agreement. Bob and I have named this position "meta-liberalism" to indicate that we allowed for liberal interpretations of liberalism, that our ultimate position was one of inclusion as opposed to one of totalitarian directiveness.

to one another it was something else. There was no "re" to it -- it was more of an ur communication, spondere rather than re-spondere. We no longer had to respond because, I think, the self/other boundaries had been dissolved through the process of electronic communication. We came to see not only our self in each other but each other in our self such that we, in metaphorical ways, had become each other. What about the electronic medium facilitates this? I wouldn't say that spondere doesn't happen outside the medium, but I suspect it happens much more rarely.

As for transgressing the standard terms of communication, the question is, what are the standard terms of communication. If I recall my theory correctly, communication happens when a message is sent and is received; there's not necessarily any feedback. And I know from reader-response theory that we all construct the meaning of a text, a communication, based upon our own contexts, experiences, what Frank Smith calls the "theory of the world in our heads."¹⁴ I don't see graffiti as transgressive except in the most crude sense. I could, though, see seduction as transgressive based on communication theory. To effectively communicate, one (the sender) would not intentionally withhold the message in part or in whole. Seduction however requires a secret, a with-holding, a missing dimension. Thus, seduction transgresses communicative law.

Here it becomes quite complicated. I do see electronic conversation as seductive; it's just that locating the point of seduction is not so clear cut. Sometimes, the rhetor (the message sender) intentionally withholds information -- for example gender, race, age, credentials, marital status, whatever. Complicating this further is that the withholding may be intentional or just a by-

¹⁴Understanding Reading, 57-58.

product of the fact that electronic exchange is disembodied. In other words, in normal face to face conversation, we're not accustomed to declaring our gender, age, race, credentials, etc. because these things are visible and the people with whom we speak often know us. So, on the level of the rhetor, the seduction may be conscious (which Baudrillard might see as evil), or unconscious.

Seduction also may occur on the part of the message receiver. I see this as primarily an unconscious self-seduction in which the reader creates from the text and its missing dimensions an idealized interlocutor. What the reader pours into the gaps is therefore himself, thus the screen functions as mirror. Only when he becomes conscious of this seduction, this self-seduction, can he begin to read himself in what he reads in others.

What I'd like to do is play with that notion of "people responding to each other" by rewriting it as "people re-ponding to each Other." Perhaps this transgresses the psychological Law of the Father that commands us to separate existences. Electronic conversation is transgressive so far as it encourages us to unity.

I think I follow, but would like some elaboration on what you call the meta-political aspects of seduction. Perhaps Baudrillard lends insight in Seduction when he points out that

The strategy of seduction is one of deception. It lies in wait for all that tends to confuse itself with its reality. And it is potentially a source of fabulous strength. For if production can only produce objects or real signs, and thereby obtain some power; seduction, by producing only illusions, obtains all powers, including the power to return production and reality to the fundamental illusion.¹⁵

¹⁵70.

Thus, seduction is political about the political, a source of power, transgressive, and therefore potentially dangerous to the existing order.

Reading the "Requiem" text, my general impression is of someone who dislikes the six o'clock news. The notion of media treated in this particular essay seems archaic, written prior to electronic mail exchange. Nonetheless, I take this from the text: "the dialectic itself . . . has reached the moment of deadlock."¹⁶ This made me start thinking about the difference between the dialectical and the dialogical, made me think that what happened in our classroom and what happens in our electronic exchange can be more aptly described and dialogical or multilogical rather dialectical. The latter suggests argumentation, a logical exchange of arguments. Thus, it is to a degree inherently confrontational, with a view to winning. Dialogical, on the other hand, suggests a conversational exchange of ideas. The argumentation, as confrontation, is diffused; mutual understanding rather than winning is what counts. Electronic conversation as a dialogical form transgresses dialectic terms by breaking the deadlock with a view to exchange.

But what has been transgressed for you Bob and me Beth as examples of electronic interlocutors? Is it the Law of the Father?

Let's say that electronic conversation allows for the construction or realization of the self as a perpetually half-full glass. If we go the direction of construction, then we enter into the realm of the cyborg; electronic exchange literally enables a re-constructed human ontology, one that never existed before. If

¹⁶182.

we go in the direction of realization, we enter into something like Sartre's formulation of the self as "being and nothingness," in perpetual suspension; electronic exchange enables us to realize the true nature of our selves. But in either direction, we could say that it powerfully models something about human nature, and either way we could say that it transgresses the Law of the Father because through it we connect to others and to ourselves. Otherwise, we could just say that what is modeled is fascination -- something like watching a spinning top, or getting caught up in a brain teaser which transforms ontological boredom into ontological trance.

Combining all these possibilities, it might be the proliferation of selves via electronic conversation which fascinates and transgresses; it might be that creating and re-creating selves electronically in effect allows us to perceive our other selves differently as well. According to Carl Pribham, perception is the effect of "mismatch" between what we expect to find and what we in fact find. This explains, for example, how it is possible to notice that something is different in an otherwise familiar room or street before you, in fact, notice that someone has moved a painting, cut down a tree, or what have you. What you perceive first is the mismatch or difference, then you perceive the things which have been moved, removed, etc.¹⁷ Electronic conversation, by adding cyberselves to our repertoire, perhaps similarly affords us opportunities to notice our usual selves through the initial generation of difference or mismatch. Having a child around is perhaps fascinating and insightful for parents in much the same way; the play of identity/difference, match/mismatch, provides "sweet confusions" of ontology which enable perceptions, including perceptions of our familiar selves, which

¹⁷297-313.

would otherwise not be possible. In this way, parents learn things about themselves through their children.

Anyway, for me, this loops back to the cyborg again, and the particular features of the self that *is* in electronic exchange. We have to remind ourselves that this screen-thing hums because it too is embodied -- it is, after all, a piece of machinery. In this sense, there is a danger of sorts in referring to electronic conversation as disembodied. In fact, it's differently bodied; it transgressively constitutes and/or reconstitutes embodied selves.

As for Baudrillard's position on the potential of seduction to "[obtain] all powers, including the power to return production and reality to the fundamental illusion," it seems overdone in a way. More and more, it looks to me like graffiti-transgression speaks of 1968 and seduction-transgression speaks of 1979. What I am able to see is a move from explosive, explicit, oppositional politics to implosive, implicit, strategic politics -- a move from a first order use of language as expression to a second order use of language as rhetoric. This partly explains evil for Baudrillard. Plato saw this too, the potential for evil in those nasty rhetorician-sophists. It also somewhat explains our need to haggle over terminological nuances. In an electronic world defined as rhetorical, what could be more important than the choice of descriptive and analytic terms?

This particular connotation of "rhetoric" represents a return to the classical roots you yourself allude to by bringing Plato and the Greeks into our discussion. I am reminded, too, of Julia Kristeva's observations that a rhetorician is in this sense not one who invents language, but is rather one who is fascinated with language's symbolic function, someone who "seduces it in the Latin sense of the verb -- he 'leads it astray.'" But, I would like to emphasize that

this kind of rhetorical seduction is not always to the ends of evil as Plato cautioned. In either case, for good or for evil, the cyber-rhetorician, like her traditional counterpart, attempts to "seduce the [law of] the father by rhetorical affectations," weaving from materials of the existing symbol system (language) a snare in which to hold fast Father and thus, transgressively, return incestuously to Mother.¹⁸ Return to one and an-other.

Electronic communication between interlocutors is, of course, carried out in text, in the words one types on his interface and sends through space to another. Beneath the interface the words pass through the cyber-territory wherein the proliferation of selves of which you speak may occur. This proliferation Kristeva calls heterogeneity.

This proliferation of selves of which you speak is precisely the heterogeneity that Kristeva locates in the other of text, inviting identification but denying it at one and the same time. Each self seems to be "me," but, as she points out, "it is not me, it is a non-me in me, beside me, outside of me, where the me becomes lost." The textual territory is therefore peopled with self/non-self, the same and the different at the same time fused and barred. The text, she says, "bounces back to me echoes of a territory that I have lost but that I am seeking within the blackness of dreams . . . lifting up the dismembered, sleeping body. Territory of the Mother."¹⁹

Reconstituted cyborg-selves are just such echoes bounced back from the interface, a virtual territory from which the body can be re-membered. Perhaps I could more accurately say that the particular body that is disembodied in

¹⁸"From Identity to An Other," *Desire in Language*, 138-39.

¹⁹ibid., "The Novel as Polylogue," 163.

electronic exchange, is the one normally hailed in pedestrian social stagings while the body impossibly re-membered is a chorus of selves seldom hailed, elusive if not illusive. The dissolution of boundaries between the particular body and the chorus, while bodily experienced, yet remains elusive. I don't think this "new" human ontology is new at all; I think it's actually primary ontology -- oceanic -- but lost, cast irrevocably into the territory of the lost. As close as we can get is the interface where the variety of cyber-selves appear, illusively, as others.

Reflecting on our work/words, I think that we get very quickly to a point where the words looks like exoskeletons because what we're talking about or getting at is the juice flowing around and through them. I am thinking of Marshall McLuhan's idea that technologies represent amputations/externalizations. Perhaps the machine, the different embodiment that we effect in electronic conversation is the externalization of the husk or covering for the nervous system, such that what we get in this exchange as soon as we begin to operate in cyberspace is huskless, the juice only. I mean to say that the machinery itself, the humming box with its glowing screen, represents the externalization not of the whole body but instead the externalization of just the casing, the "flesh" around the nervous system. If we get into it, just a little bit, the whole thing goes liquid.

Without a doubt, I agree that we get to the juice behind the words, the symbol system. You may wish to call this "differently bodied" rather than "disembodied" (which smacks at bit to much of political-correctness anxiety -- "differently" connoting some state not in the normal ways of thinking and looking), but I still prefer the latter as an accurate descriptor. In electronic

exchange, I can get right to the juice because of the absence of the usual visual signals one gets from the body.

I wonder to what extent some would see what we're talking about as soul or essential self . . . or, in Jungian terms, as a collective experience of human intelligence, being.

And, in terms of the Self/Other boundary dissolution, when we get into cyberspace exchanges and the thing "goes liquid," whose juice are we getting into? Our own (as rhetor), the juice of the Other (as receiver), or the collective juice, the oceanic consciousness? Many people who get carried away with electronic conversation say things like "you get to know others from the inside, out." What this kind of claim reflects is a limited view of the juice -- that the Other in his otherness is actually what one sees. It completely dismisses (or fails to consider) the possibility that a good deal of what one sees is actually Self, not Other. And, beyond that, that in seeing Self in Other and Other in Self, the juice becomes the collective. It's this last possibility, once we're conscious of it, that's so thrilling to me.

I'll grant your preference for "disembodied" as a descriptor of electronic conversation, but I still prefer "differently bodied" -- not because it's more politically correct but because it reminds me that I am merging my human ontology with machine ontology as I type at the keyboard with my eyes riveted on the blips of light being instantly produced in front of me. I don't know; maybe someone would read this as Jungian soul; someone else might read it as Freudian anal, kids playing with feces, fascinated by the product; what was inside is outside, and so forth. In any case, I need to keep with the particularities of this differently bodied experience. The person at the terminal is, in effect, the aestheticized egghead

version of the cyborg. A merger across the last great (false) divide between humans and technology is now in process. Describing the state as differently bodied allows me to cross that divide with my eyes open. And following this thread, I would say that the cyborg as a figure, even a mythical figure, is much more suited to what is going on in electronic conversation than is Narcissus, although a merger of Narcissus and the T1000 might more accurately capture it.²⁰

One may very well abandon Narcissus; but, the person at the terminal must first see the Narcissism before abandoning it. I see this as a kind of progression that follows along these lines:

Log on

Engage in electronic conversation with an other

Believe that what you see on the interface is genuinely and only an other

Recognize that part of what you see is really your self

Recognize Self in Other and Other in Self -- i.e., move beyond narcissism

Co(re)spond

In thinking about the cyborg, though, I'm troubled by the thought of it being human/machine in the way we normally think of cyborgs. I'm beginning to

²⁰Claudia Springer writes "the T-1000 [the liquid metal cyborg in the movie *Terminator 2*] has the ability to transform himself into a stream of silvery liquid, and he can fashion himself into any shape. . . . He is the embodiment of feminine fluidity and as such is a particularly frightening adversary. . . ." (96). Here, we regard the T-1000 as a hybrid of male musculature *and* feminine fluidity, thus embodying the complex, dual protectedness referred to earlier in the text. In terms of scale-shifting, it is interesting that the T-1000 meets his demise in an industrial setting when he is thrown into a vat of molten metal; in this single gesture the macro scale (the industrial setting) and the micro scale (the properties of liquids) are fused, revealing that the control mechanism for the metal man is both larger and smaller than his human-scale body.

see it as more of a human/human, machine mediated. I'm suggesting something beyond cyborg reality.

I was thinking about this last night, this "Other in Self" in relation to past real-life relationships of mine -- the sort of thing where one might say "he or she became part of me" and literally mean it. No doubt this is where exorcism gets its punch, same with voodoo I suppose. Our ontology is such that it does indeed seem to be collective to a much greater degree than we might like to think, and (looping back to Louis Althusser again) it gets scary to step outside of the separations, the Law of the Father, because in thousands of ways every day we are hailed or called into being as individual, separate beings. It may be the most audacious feat of human engineering to make this individuality feasible, like an intricate levee system, and electronic conversation just may be making fiber-optic sized holes, one by one, in the system of separations. There won't be a flood, but rather a saturation. Cosmic consciousness coming right up? Could be. But for me, it's got to have a body, too -- the Internet is a physical thing, requiring maintenance and all the rest.

It's in many ways a frightening prospect to "spondere" because our culture simply doesn't support selves hailed into being in that relationship. For a very real example, Bob/Beth will most certainly not get a job. You Bob will get a job and me Beth will get a job, but not Bob/Beth. As you say, that would be a mismatch in the marketplace, a transgressive alternative.

And why wouldn't we want to be a part of a movement that would make this cyber-communication a disembodied mystical thing? You're assuming what? Let's assume that I see electronic conversational media as catalysts. Once the

spondere relationship is catalyzed, could we continue with the media? I suspect we could. And if you'd agree, then we're obviously not talking about cyborgs in the usual sense of the term. This is why I say the spondere is a human/human relationship, machine mediated. Insofar as humanity meets humanity to a great degree in cyberspace, there is about the experience something mystical and beyond any language we use to describe it. Considering our epigraph, Lisel Mueller's wonderful poem "There Are Mornings," she says that it's a plot that calls for her to turn to stone but the sun, intervening, fills her with life, the power to resist turning rock hard, desiccated. In much the same way, the Law of the Father, the plot, would have us turn to stone pillars; the "sun," the divine and the unnamable, however fill us like a mystical secret. Perhaps, in electronic conversation, the contact heat at the interface is similarly the mirror that burns, reflecting this secret, when we pass.

The cyborg figure is indeed troublesome/frightening. But I think we need to embrace that troublesomeness to some extent, and you provide a way to do that. Human/machine/human is a cyborg that goes beyond cyborg reality as it is usually conceived. But even this model is conventionally disturbing, maybe because it disrupts our need to see ourselves as apart from technological, social, and biological/natural mediatedness. The anti-mediations belong to the Law of the Father, and a high and dry desert God. To refuse these separations is to be voluptuously mystical, to bring the Goddess, the Mother, like a splash of water into the arid territory of our exile.

Could we continue our work without electronic conversation? Sure, and Ulysses could have walked on his journey rather than sail; but, we would not have had *this* experience, right now for example, of writing this essay together. To

regard the machinery part of our work as "just the vehicle" or a "catalyst" is the subtlest Law of the Father, the law which also says that women are merely vessels, separable from meaning. Do we want to reinscribe this? I argue for the cyborg as a way of arguing for the nothing that matter and meaning are together divine. But I still like your idea of extending cyborg sense beyond the human/machine dyad. Maybe we are arguing about how many cyborgs can dance on the head of an egghead, but I don't think so. What do you think?

CHAPTER V
**CONVERSATIONS: LEARNERS LEARN ABOUT WRITING/
WRITERS WRITE ABOUT LEARNING**

If what follows can be described as an ethnographic study, I feel I owe it to the students of ENG10205/ELC38107 to recognize them all as my co-ethnographers rather than as my subjects or my informants. The subject of our ethnography, after all, was the class itself: ourselves as a community of meaning-makers, our conversational exchange the content of the course. If, as Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater said in her book *Academic Literacies*, "an ethnographic account gives you then, the lived-through experience of informants' lives, by means of the ethnographer's lens" (xxi), each participant in the combined classes that Bob and I referred to affectionately as the "Inter-Course" lived through and held a lens to the unfolding experience of our dialogue. Each in his or her own way contributed profoundly to what the class meant, and to what now comes down to this singular account of what transpired during the fall semester of 1994. They were *all* ethnographers of the collective experience; it is only with deepest respect and gratitude that I speak for the collective.

As in any ethnographic study, indeed any study at all, the "objectivity" of the one who does the observing and reporting is defined by that person's background, experiences, desires, and beliefs. In this case, the "one who does the observing and reporting" is myself, a doctoral student at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a poet, a writer, a wife, a mother, a middle-aged woman, and a teacher who loves the classroom. At heart, I am what Stephen North calls a practitioner -- one of those ghettoized composition teachers whose primary mode of meaning-making and knowledge-acquisition is experientially based on intense interaction with colleagues and students, a person for

whom the work of the scholar, the philosopher, or the theorist is empty unless that work finds its way into actual practice in classrooms where students and teachers reciprocally engage in authentic learning activities. Like other practitioners, I'm concerned about what works, what doesn't work, and about any changes in cultural and classroom conditions that impede effective education, specifically the learning of communication skills. Working in the trenches, as they say, pragmatism counts for more. Philosophy, science, and theory notwithstanding, what counts are methods that best help students learn to read and write, to communicate effectively and to think critically. And although North points out that "practitioners know that the best course is usually to stay with the tried and true" (37), this doesn't necessarily mean that we are always content to fall back into comfortable grooves, satisfied with an acceptable proportion of *A* students, *B* students, *C* students, and so on for year after year. Ideally, we're all keeping up with new research, and if we're really good practitioners, we're sharing our experiences with one another in the oral tradition of lore -- our most distinguished method for making and disseminating knowledge a conversational form itself.

Thus, as a practitioner, my life and my practice are informed by and carried forth in conversation with others: my colleagues, my teachers, my students, my family and friends. Our ghetto of choice is a noisy one, filled with voices sharing personal stories, classroom experiences, swapping recipes by the water cooler, delivering messages from the front. In short, our ghetto is a site of social-construction *par excellence*; and what I find so exciting is that most of us who inhabit this space are consciously aware of its social dimension. We depend upon one another for personal and professional support, we empower our collective through conversation, we get a more accurate picture of contemporary culture because we draw upon one another's observations, experiences, and narratives to enlarge our perspectives. It seems inevitable to me, considering our practice, that philosophies of

social-constructionism would predominate our hermeneutic, and that being experientially oriented, we would transfer those philosophies into our classrooms. And, as I have pointed out, this has indeed been the case. An increased emphasis on collaborative writing, peer review, small group work, class discussion, and democratic practices illustrates this transfer of the practitioner's lived experiential model to the classroom.

North refers to us practitioners as a "reactive" bunch, but suggests that there's no need to put a pejorative spin on that term. I agree. Our lived experience, our philosophies, our research lead to the pedagogical reactivities as cited above. Reactive doesn't necessarily mean "passive-until-stimulated-to-action" when practice in the comfortable grooves wears out and stops working. We teachers in the trenches are an extremely active group who tend to embrace as our primary task "preparing [our] charges for some real or imagined exigencies . . . imposed from outside, beyond the bounds of [our] immediate relationship with students" (North 37). Our practice as inquiry is not *inactive*; it is *reactive* -- meaning that we renew again and again the way we look, the way we think, the way we act. Clearly, instituting a pedagogy of textual conversation is a *reaction*, one that reflects this teacher's desire to see the teaching of rhetoric through writing more closely parallel the use of rhetoric in real life situations -- those "exigencies imposed from outside" -- and in such a way that the social nature of meaning-making is immediately experienced and can be almost as immediately critiqued.

I wouldn't say that the old groove of teaching writing (which inevitably involves the production of the monological essay as a central focus) is wearing out, if one takes that to mean that it is beginning to fail. I would rather assert that we're simply stuck in an old groove, not moving forward in our efforts to connect what we teach with real uses of language in the world. Many of us, for example, note that our student writers seem unwilling to take controversial stands on current social issues that find their way into

classroom reading and discussion. Not only do they seem to avoid the controversial, often opting for the politically correct, but they also seem to avoid taking any position firmly one way or another. Culturally imbued with skepticism about foundational truths (as are many of their teachers in the academy), students flounder in non-positions which allow them to avoid the responsibility of defending specific moral or ethical points which may apply generally to the human condition, preferring instead to foreground their indecisiveness in what paradoxically sounds like a foundational truth -- "it's just a matter of opinion." Such floundering has often been exemplified in diagnostic writing exercises I've assigned during the first few days of class. Normally, I give students a brief essay in which the writer takes a clear stand on a controversial topic; I ask students to read this essay, restate the writer's thesis, and then elaborate their own positions on the issues be they in agreement or disagreement. Most recently, I had students read a brief article in which the writer linked white male homophobia to white male sexual anxiety ("I hate homosexual men because they reflect in their lifestyles choices that I might be subject to make myself"). Interestingly, although my student readers successfully identified the writer's thesis, very few of them went on to respond directly to that thesis, choosing instead to dodge the issue in favor of a more politically correct, therefore safer, tact: "homosexuality isn't right for me, but no one should engage in gay-bashing because we should all have the right to choose our lifestyles as long as we aren't hurting anybody." It's all a matter of opinion, a basic freedom, a matter of choice -- a way to avoid having to express your own opinion. Patricia Roberts has called this non-position the "avoidance angle" and contrasts avoidance with "arguing the slogan," another, although less typical, kind of response I observed among my students' papers. Roberts offers as an example of the latter the familiar maxim "guns don't kill people; people do" (409); analogous

responses among my writers were statements such as "homosexuality is a sin in the eyes of God" and those of a similar fundamentalist ilk.

It seems to me that we get these kinds of responses from students because we deserve them. We have, at the very least, facilitated them. Despite our own lived experiences as practitioners and despite our familiarity with social-constructionist theory that emphasizes the importance of dialogue to meaning-making, knowledge production, and understanding, we tend to focus on rhetorical practice as dialectic. Perhaps both kinds of responses, avoidance and arguing the slogan, may very well signal the end of the dialectical insofar as dialectics can be understood as an argumentative process whose ultimate aim is "winning," one dialectical pole logically out-maneuvering the other and reaching once and for all the right answer, the right position, the universal solution. Dialectical relationships inherently imply dichotomies of logical positionings squared off in confrontational modes of exchange aimed at foreclosing further conversation. And if one were to embrace the most liberal interpretations of "logical" thus including not only empirically based, scientific reason, but also irrational forms of reason based on belief, metaphysics ("homosexuality is a sin in the eyes of God"), or even mysticism, one may reasonably concur with Baudrillard who asserts that it is "the dialectic itself which has reached the moment of deadlock" ("Requiem for the Media" 182) -- the old groove is getting us nowhere.

The conversational model upon which ENG10205/ELC38107 was built, then, was meant to be *reactive* -- to move us forward. Because Bob and I both suspected dialectical deadlock, we sought a new way for students, and teachers, to begin once more talking to one another, to own their own opinions and positions in exchanges free from the confrontational imperative to *win* the argument. Our *research*, we hoped, would lead to the *reactivity* of communicative processes, a kind of *ur*-exchange, original because the old

dichotomies of winners and losers dissolves as dialogue replaces dialectic. What we wanted to do was to replace confrontation with conversation, to replace gaining assent with understanding.

Who are we? The Ethnographers of the Inter-Course

ENG102 is a introductory level course in deliberative writing at UNCG; 05 indicates the section number of that course and its meeting time on Monday and Wednesday evenings. In the fall of 1994, ENG10205 was comprised of thirteen students - - two African-Americans, one Middle-Eastern-American, and ten Caucasians -- of whom none were freshmen, most were sophomores, and two were seniors. Majors ranged from the humanities and the fine arts to business and "undecided." Only two students had prior experience with computer-mediated communication, and none were aware before the first day of class that this particular section would require them to learn and to use such skills.

ELC381 is an education course taught in the school's program of educational leadership and cultural foundations. It is the one course in this program required of all education majors and, as such, attracts students in all years of study from freshmen to a very few graduate students. The course title is "The Institution of Education" and its focus is primarily on federal and state programs of compulsory education -- their history, their ideological foundations, and their effects on individuals and society. Section 07 also met on Mondays, and Wednesdays, but in the mid-afternoon. This semester, the class was comprised of nineteen students, four of whom were African-American and the rest Caucasian. Like ENG102 students, ELC381 students had little experience with computer-mediated communication and none of them knew in advance that such would be expected of them in this section.

Our decision to link these two classes across disciplines was an exciting part of our teaching project. While electronic conferences had been often used for purposes of carrying on further discussions about *intracourse* materials, we wished to extend the conversation beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries to include a greater variety of insight, opinion, experience, interest, and style. We wanted to, as much as possible, simulate in microcosm a larger civic arena and we wanted to see what benefits might accrue to students from enriching one another's learning environments with a focus broad enough to include the inquiries of our two disciplines at once.

While composition courses, such as English 102, are often criticized for being *contentless*, for being *skills* courses rather than content courses, classes in other disciplines, such as education, are criticized for their content insularity, their failure to take into consideration broader public concerns, cultural realities related not only to ethnic diversity but diversity of interest and scholarship, and communication skills. By connecting the two classes for interdisciplinary conversation, English 102 students benefited from having a content upon which to focus the exercise of their rhetorical skills, a content supplied not only by the traditional approach of reading essays, stories, novels, etc., but greatly enriched by sharing a textual exchange with students whose major was in the field of education itself, many of whom had already spent time teaching and experiencing those things normally encountered by composition students only as ideas. ELC381 students benefited from interacting with students whose primary focus was on rhetorical skills, students who were studying reading, writing, and critical thinking skills and who could challenge their colleagues in education to communicate clearly and without fallacy, to elaborate their claims, and to anticipate the reaction a real audience would have to what they said.

Where are we? An Inter-Course in Cyberspace

The structure of the class came as a surprise to both groups of students. While they could expect to be doing a lot of things they'd normally be doing in a more traditional class, they'd be doing these things in a decidedly different classroom -- an electronic classroom that existed not in the McIver Building (which houses the English department) or the Curry building (which houses the school of education), but in a space that is at once real as well as imaginary. Although my class met bodily on Monday and Wednesday evenings, and Bob's class met bodily on Monday and Wednesday afternoons, the primary work of the class was carried out atemporally in a metaphorical classroom constructed by keystrokes, electronic signals, and an unseen, often unfathomable, network. We were, in short, *in* a Burkean parlor: an imaginary room in which the life that precedes any given participant and that which endures once that participant leaves belongs solely to the conversation itself, a room in which others have gathered to discuss social issues or personal issues of common interest. In such a room, a newcomer would enter quietly, listen for a while to get a feel for the topic of discussion, the attitudes of other participants, the ambiance of fellowship, and then enter the dialogical arena as a full participant. During the conversation, long-time participants would leave; new participants would arrive; although the topic of the conversation may change, it would nevertheless survive. And from the outset, we described this place to our students in these terms, emphasizing that we had organized the course around the metaphor of conversation and that everything we would do would reflect a "pedagogy of conversation," meaning that what informed the core of our work would be the dialogic or multilogic process of social meaning-making: sharing our ideas and experiences, talking about our differences and our similarities, discussing what we'd read or what we'd talked about in class, etc., all in an effort to find a common ground from which to make mutually satisfactory decisions. We encouraged

them to think of the parlor as an enjoyable place, a place where a party was going on and they'd all been invited to meet there to have fun, to talk about ideas, and to enjoy one another's company. When one arrives at a party, we explained, one finds the place noisy and full of people who've been there for a while, have loosened up, and are standing around in groups talking to one another. Normally, as a newcomer, one would circulate about the room, listen to the conversations, and then, having gotten some sense of the subject, join in. In such a parlor or party, the people may come and go, but the conversation endures. So, while Bob and I valued all the individual contributions, what really counted was the conversation itself; that was the life of the party, so to speak.

Over the course of the semester, I grew to admire deeply all our students' senses of adventure, their willingness to pioneer this new territory. Since so few of them had prior computer experience beyond word-processing, they were challenged to learn not only the normal course content, but also to learn computer skills. Understandably, many of them felt quite anxious about this challenge, but because they were willing to pursue the adventure, most of them mastered it in short order. But beyond learning the skills, which in the long run were quite basic, these students had to find time to go to computer labs on their own to do homework, to make their weekly conversational contributions, to "meet" their colleagues in the other class. To our surprise, none of our students dropped the course because of its inconvenience or its challenge (although we did hear a number of complaints and afterwards we learned that several had certainly considered it). In general, the parlor turned out to be an amiable space for us all, a space in which we gradually began to practice meta-rhetorical skills, achieved a remarkable degree of intersubjective understanding and tolerance, and engaged in authentic learning activities.

An Issue of Anonymity

In teaching this particular Inter-Course, we had a real opportunity to explore the pedagogical usefulness of disembodied discourse. Having experienced for myself the benefits of communication untethered by the visual sense of the body, I was curious to see in what ways, if any, these benefits might accrue for students. Because our two classes would not be meeting one another face-to-face, I proposed to Bob that we take advantage of the situation and provide for all our students as much anonymity as possible by assigning them VAX usernames that marked them in no way. Normally, usernames are based on real names such that in cyberspace I am known as *baldwine*. Bob is known as *kingbx*. If nothing else, one's last name is revealed and students can connect the name to the person with little trouble. Some usernames, especially those assigned on the basis of first names (*karenm*, *williamn*, *saraht*, *jeffreyc*, etc.) also reveal gender. If one were to receive a message from *karenm*, one might safely assume that *karenm* is a female whose first name is Karen. Since I wanted to avoid marking even for gender, my idea was to keep students completely unmarked by assigning as their usernames the names of various mountain ranges worldwide. Usernames such as *denali*, *massif*, *sierra*, etc., would reveal nothing about the real person behind the name. We could, I argued, do at least this much to provide masking. Beyond that, whatever unmasking, role-playing, pseudonym-taking, or whatever would be a student's choice. If I began the course by marking them in anyway, I thought, I would be making choices for them that really should be theirs.

Fortunately, Bob called to my attention a possible problem of logic involved in my argument. Wasn't my act of unmarking just a different kind of marking? Was this not marking them as disembodied, anonymous, etc., constructing them in such a way so that I could observe their interaction and learn more about the effect of embodiment of discursal relationships? Perhaps this seems like belaboring the obvious, but I'd not considered it.

Ultimately, though, Bob liked the idea, regarding it as both aesthetically and ethically pleasing. As long as we kept in mind the fact that we were still doing a mark-up job, he liked the idea of having students arrive at what he called a "menu of selves to start with, a regular gush of *nymity*, just to make clear that what is going on is the construction of yet another self out of available materials." In other words, it was the issue of choice he found appealing -- of not forcing students to deal with familiar selves or identities they felt were imposed upon them because they were black or white or Asian, fat or skinny, old or young, handicapped or physically whole. If we provided *initial* anonymity, they could choose to construct themselves in any way they pleased. Thus, my students became mountains and Bob's became rivers.

Course Requirements and Structure

Because we wished to make conversational aspects of the Inter-Course the central focus of our approach, we placed the greatest evaluative weight in both classes on students' contributions to VAX notes, requiring as a minimum "good faith" effort from each weekly entries of not less than thirty lines. Although we continued to ask them to write individual or collaborative essays after each one of our major conversational turns (of which there were three), these papers carried only 1/3 of the evaluative weight as did their ongoing VAX conversation. Thus, dialogue was foregrounded and both the process of its production as well as its specific subject (the topic) became fair game for study.

To stimulate conversation further and to provide initial source material, Bob and I chose readings from the second edition of Jack Selzer's anthology, serendipitously entitled *Conversations*, which included over 140 contributors whose works ranged from fiction to advertisements, letters, poems, magazine articles to essays, government documents and reports, and cartoons. Representing a wide variety of positions on topical social issues,

these selections often referred to one another, encouraging readers to regard the collected texts as a conversation in writing -- something that appealed to us a great deal. As Selzer himself noted in the Preface, "the book will encourage students to adopt a social and rhetorical model--a `conversation model'--for their own writing: Instead of seeing writing merely as private or as debate or point-counterpoint, students should sense that `people are talking about this issue--and I'd like to get in on the talk somewhere'" (viii). Precisely what we hoped to encourage in Inter-Course.

And talk they did. While each class met separately at different times throughout the semester, each focusing during that time on its more traditional topics (rhetoric in my class, the institution of education in Bob's), we drew into our classroom discussions material from VAX conversation and left each meeting with ideas to add to the conversation. With thirty-two students and two teachers each contributing at least thirty lines per week to our electronic conversation, we generated quite a noisy parlor indeed, eventually amounting to more than five hundred pages of transcript printed in eight point type -- the "phone book" as we called it.

Complexity and Instability

Having laid the groundwork as much as possible in methods and materials, having written a syllabus and scheduled computer-orientation labs for students, having talked endlessly with Bob about what we proposed to do and why, the inevitable first day of class rolled around. Thus, at 6:30 p.m. on a humid Wednesday in August, my ENG102 students strolled anxiously into my classroom, took their seats, and prepared themselves for yet another opening lecture delivered by a stranger with whom they would be stuck for the next dozen or so weeks of their lives. And by the end of that dozen or so weeks, I had a pretty good idea of what North meant when he said:

In practical inquiry . . . the investigator deliberately . . . reopens her practice to both complexity and instability. Just getting the solution in place in the intended form can be troublesome. If nothing else, it will be new to the Practitioner, who will have to learn to handle it on the job. And even when the Practitioner is reasonably comfortable, there remains the considerable task of selling it to its prospective beneficiaries. . . . Surely many such solutions will evoke unexpected reactions just because they aren't business as usual (47).

Conducting an interdisciplinary, conversational class in cyberspace was far from "business as usual."

First of all, imagine the first day of class, a time filled with more than enough complexity and instability even under normal circumstances. Off students go from building to building, trying as hard as they can to be on time for classes that meet in rooms they have trouble finding. Then, once they successfully negotiate the physical challenge and the anxiety that attends it, they find themselves seated in the company of a roomful of strangers (probably all smarter and more well prepared than they are, or so they worry) waiting for the professor's arrival. "Will she be old? Will she be ugly? Will she be mean? Strict? Fair? What will she expect? Well, whatever it is, I certainly hope it's not too hard." Normal circumstances: students are already immersed in complexity and instability.

But what about *this* class? Well, at 42, I may be "old" to my students . . . and ugly is in the eye of the beholder. But, I'm neither strict nor mean and I'm constantly vigilant about being fair. So far, so good. What about expectations? There's the rub.

As the demographics of my class reflected, typical English 102 students have already had some college experience. Despite the fact that it's a 100-level course, English 101 is a prerequisite. Thus, they arrive on the first day with certain expectations built on experience: "we'll do a lot of writing both in class and out, we'll do a lot of reading and

talking about what we've read, we'll have to have conferences with our professor, we'll have to keep a journal, we'll have to write three or four essays . . . no problems. I *know* this game." When I looked out at those faces, what I thought I could read on them was a sense of relief; at least in this classroom, on this day, they would find respite from complexity and instability. I was on the verge of injecting a fair amount of chaos into the situation.

I knew that the computer component of the class would come as a surprise to them. At the time, our department published no information distinguishing a computer section from a traditional, non-computer section so that the first news any of them heard about having to use technology was on the first evening of class. Nevertheless, I'd assumed that the news would be more welcome. To my surprise, several students initially balked, feeling fairly incensed to find themselves facing this obstacle with no forewarning. As I mentioned, many later told me that if they did have warning, they wouldn't have signed up. Several considered dropping. Only a couple of them had ever used computers for anything other than word-processing, and although they did suspect that they'd need to learn something about it in the future, all of them would rather have procrastinated that learning. Simply put, they felt that the technology was so complex that they couldn't spare the time or effort as full-time students, many with full-time jobs to boot, to learn. Additionally, they were dismayed at the prospect of having to go to one of many computer labs on campus to do part of the work required for class. While almost all expected to do homework, *this* homework had to be done in a physically specific place. VAX entry requirements, they argued, might be less of a burden were they able to do them in their dorm rooms or outside by the fishpond.

I could certainly sympathize with technophobic feelings. After all, I'd been there myself. So I tried to share my own experience with them in an effort to assure them that

they, too, could learn with ease how to negotiate the electronic environment. I did, however, have considerably less sympathy for their logistical complaints. Our campus has many computer labs, consultants included, for student use. On most weekdays, these labs are virtually empty. Not even at the most popular sites (the library and the business school) have I had to wait in line for a terminal. Besides, I countered, many courses have requirements that can similarly be fulfilled only by going to specific places: library research, for example. But, then, library research was "business as usual." VAX notes was different.

Electronic obstacles notwithstanding, students seemed receptive to the idea of sharing conversation with another class, particularly since we would be talking about the same topics and doing the same readings. This particular relationship, despite the VAX requirement that enabled it, was not an additional burden in terms of effort. Since we'd be studying education in our composition class, they understood that they might actually gain a lot by sharing ideas with students for whom education was a specialty. They also liked the idea that they, too, would be considered "experts" in their field by the other class, education students who were also being expected to write and to write well. So instead of merely taking another class in composition, my students, too, found themselves elevated to the level of specialists, people who had something to offer to others. In this way, the *mountains* as well as the *rivers* were made to feel stronger senses of camaraderie; in many ways, each class became a team of teachers.

To summarize, the traditional composition course was destabilized by our having introduced into it the anonymous electronic conversation carried on between two classes connected across disciplinary boundaries via a single VAX conference. Summarizing the *effects* of this destabilization, however, is considerably more complex. There is no single evaluative site from which to assess the impact of this approach on the learning process,

the acquisition of rhetorical skills, the mastery of content, or the liberalizing of thought. Indeed, from the first lines of text entered into the conversation to the final course evaluation, this class can best be described as a meta-class, a class about our class, reflexive more than reflective, embracing the idea of looking as an ongoing process of action as well as *reaction*. In light of human complexity, as well as system complexity, evaluative sites were multiple and the views from each of those sites were equally diverse.

Through the VAX conference, which we also entitled "Conversations," students exchanged ideas prompted by the reading of shared texts and related topical class discussions ranging from issues of authority to multiculturalism to the study of popular culture in the classroom, all addressing to some degree moral and ethical concerns experienced profoundly, yet differently, by individual students. As we anticipated, most entered the conversation tentatively after reading an initial dialogue between Bob and me. Early entries tended to rely on references to reading materials we'd assigned as well as narratives of personal experiences, many of which sounded stilted -- somewhat formal in tone, disconnected, and directed to an audience only in an academic sense. Paralleling the VAX research observations of Brewer and Davis, we also noted that the most frequent pattern for response was the "claim-warrant" pattern ("Blurring the Frames," 9) in which students made brief assertions and supported these assertions with a sentence or two of support based on observation, experience, or a kind of logical assumption based on stereotypical ideologies. Tocantins illustrates this pattern in her response:

2 SEP 1994

I do not believe that all should have the authority to evaluate [claim]. Evaluation is something that must be done in an objective fashion. Everyone does not have the ability to be objective [warrant]. There are people in this world whose main goal is to get ahead and they will do anything to get to the top. Therefore, if you give them the power to evaluate themselves they are not likely to be objective.

But this initial style and pattern changed in relatively short order. Contributions became more personal, more responsive, as well as responsible, and more imbued with authentic voice. Although the conversation was happening in text, the text had a real audience whose immediacy was felt by all participants. As students began to feel a deeper sense of personal involvement in the ideas they were exchanging with actual peers, they started attending more closely to constructing sound, source-based arguments, and exercising meta-rhetorical skills.

In addition to developing such skills through exchange, learning in general was often enhanced as it became a more authentic activity in which students felt personally engaged and invested. Levels of independent study increased as more of them used the library, read additional texts, and brought new sources to bear on the discussion. Motivation for such activity was often internal, i.e., not prompted by course assignments but by their own desires to engage more deeply in class conversation; learning became a personal rather than in institutional imperative.

On a human level, students who participated in this experimental Inter-Course enjoyed the rare opportunity honestly to express their ideas in a real, yet disembodied, forum. Those who normally felt marginalized in classroom discussions spoke out, aired their views no matter how unpopular or politically incorrect. In the long run, this free speaking-out led to a deeper understanding between people of conflicting views -- not so much that positions were changed, but that a greater variety of positions were understood and tolerated, as if opposing parties walked to their borders and shook hands with one another.

If this were an ideal situation, my co-ethnographers would all be here to speak for themselves or to annotate the transcript of our entire textual conversation. Since process

and immediacy played a major role in what happened, *seeing* it again, as it happened, would do more in regards to offering explanation, making generalizations, and so forth than anything I can do by way of summary. But, the class transcript is a ponderous tome, and my co-ethnographers are not here. Therefore, in what follows, I will attempt to discuss in greater depth the most significant differences I saw between this class and traditional classes.

The Development and Exercise of Meta-Rhetorical Skills

Since I had a responsibility to my students to teach rhetoric and Bob had a responsibility to teach the institution of education, we found some initial common ground for beginning our conversation around the issue of *authority*. What is authority (a question of definition), who has authority (an observation), who *should* have authority (a question of ethics), and how can I get authority (a question about action). We proposed that we ask each of these questions as they relate to classroom practices. And to make the assignment meaningful to them, to make it a genuine experience, we asked that *they* decide who would exercise evaluative authority in our classes. While Bob and I had written the syllabus and had decided, non-negotiably, what evaluative weight certain assignments would carry, we wanted them to decide by consensus *who* would do the grading, so to speak. We told them that we were open to any option, meaning that they could decide that students only would do the grading, that teachers only would do the grading, or that we could share this responsibility. Whatever decision they made, we assured them, we would abide by. This, too, not being "business as usual" opened the classroom to greater complexity and instability, challenging us all to be a real audience engaging in a real process that would have implications beyond just an "academic"

exercise. To succeed in the month we allotted them, they would have to use skills of sharing narratives, arguing definitions, arguing ethics, and negotiating differences.

In our separate "bodily" classes, we talked about definitions of authority. We had students write about and share their own personal definitions and we also sent them to the library for some research in the *OED*. In other words, we launched off into new territory from the site of the familiar, giving us some good material with which to begin the shared, textual conversation.

Bob and I made opening entries into the VAX conversation:

29 AUG 1994

Hi Beth!

My initial response to the question "who should have authority to evaluate" was to be boggled! I mean the question of authority is big enough, but when you add evaluation to it, it becomes almost unmanageable!

My next response to the question though, a short response, was to think that everyone has authority to evaluate and (if democracy is the best form of social arrangement), everyone "should" have the authority to evaluate.

29 AUG 1994

Bob,

*My initial response to the question of evaluative authority is exactly the same as was yours -- but for different reasons. For me, the sense of being "mind boggled" comes from breaking with tradition. Let's face it, I've been part of a school environment for a lot of years, and evaluative authority *always* belonged solely to the teacher. This question makes me rethink all my past experience and the reason why I never questioned that experience as the way it *should* be.*

*But, you say that everyone *does* have authority. Well, yes, in a way that's true. Unfortunately, not everyone has the *power* to exercise authority. We run into problems of definition.*

29 AUG 1994

Beth,

. . . It is true that the power to exercise authority differentiates one person from the next, but there seem to me to be many instances as well when a person either does not realize their evaluative power or chooses not to exercise it. Students actually have quite a bit of power but rarely exercise it for example. When they do it is often in a negative way -- i.e., disrupting the smooth flow of teacher authority -- such that they don't end up realizing that they are in fact exercising power.

29 AUG 1994

When students exercise "evaluative authority" by disrupting class or when they fill out a course evaluation at the end of the year, they are in effect evaluating the class, the course content, and/or the teacher's performance. Unfortunately, in my experience, those evaluations carry little weight -- we tell students they have authority to evaluate, but then their evaluations have no authority!

I'm interested in a couple of things: one is in having students assume responsibility for *self* evaluation, and the other is in giving power to their authority. What they say and do will have real consequences.

29 AUG 1994

Beth,

I disagree that these student exercises of power are ineffective. One of the standard resistance techniques is "work slowdown;" the much commented on slippage of academic standards throughout the educational system is a testament to the hard work which students have done in the art of work slowdown technique. I would also want to say that end-of-course evaluations do have some weight for instructors; they may not cost us our jobs, or get us jobs, but having come through the system as we have we are very concerned about evaluation of any kind, at least I am, so at the very least they have a strong effect on me.

I completely agree with you though on the issue of making the power which students already exercise -- albeit negatively -- explicit; since this power is real, we might as well acknowledge it as such and see how we can all work together with it. My image is that the cultural field is *flooded* with power and authority (again democracy did this flooding), so we might as well get into swimming and boating.

29 AUG 1994

*In recognizing the fact that we *all* have authority, in deciding to own up to it (teachers and students alike), I think we should open this discussion to our classes and allow them to decide the question of evaluative authority. First of all, who *should* have this "power" to exercise evaluative authority, and then, who *will* have it. How will they put this into practice?*

In order to reflect what we believe to be a general social reality, we chose to open the conversation amiably, but not in complete agreement with one another on all issues. We hoped that by doing so from the outset, that by offering this as a model of sorts, they would see that it's okay to have a unique opinion and to feel comfortable about expressing that opinion. After all, if the teachers don't completely agree, they shouldn't "have to" either. We also demonstrated in this initial dialogue that this issue had several layers of complexity itself -- there were many angles that needed to be talked about.

Massif, a student in ENG102, was the first to join the conversation. Using the conventions of the letter, he began with "Dear Beth," thereby speaking directly to *his* teacher and excluding Bob. His response, reflecting the claim-warrant pattern, was brief and direct; he supported his position based on tradition:

29 AUG 1994

Dear Beth,

I believe that the teacher should have the evaluative authority in the classroom; maybe this is because of my 15 year career in the public school system where all work was evaluated by the teacher.

Capitan, another ENG102 student, also followed the letter convention, but this time included both Bob and myself. In his response, he puts his own spin on the differences between authority and power:

29 AUG 1994

Bob and Beth,

I agree with what you are saying. But I feel that authority is with the teacher but the student has the power. The student is in control of his or her destiny -- the "grade." The student chooses whether or not to do the required work.

A number of similar initial responses followed, most of the same brief nature addressed to either Bob or myself, or to both of us, and offering similarly brief statements of position followed by one or two sentences of support based on general personal experience. Even in these early exchanges, a tangent developed in which students talked more about classroom authority in general (the teacher as "boss" who tells students what to do and when to do it) than about evaluative authority. Notions of shared authority took on a meaning of shared classroom floor-time, discussion vs lecture classes.

Everest, in his first entry, the thirteenth in the full-class conversation, takes note of the tangent:

29 AUG 1994

*I thought this was about *evaluative* authority. . . .*

If you are not concerned with the evaluations of those with "evaluative" authority, then they have no authority over you. The context we are working in is one of a university community in which we are paying to be evaluated. The society we live in lends credence to the academic community's capacity to evaluate. We are members of that society and for whatever our reasons we value that socially sanctioned evaluation [emphasis mine].

Here, Everest calls attention to the tangential drift of the conversation in an attempt to redirect everyone's attention to the task at hand: deciding who in our two classes will be doing the evaluative work. Following his attempt to refocus, he elaborates his position by

first recontextualizing the conversation (we're in a university community) and then asserting his belief that we are paying to be evaluated; education is a consumer product and evaluation is part and parcel of that product. The missing "therefore" is thus that teachers will have evaluative authority in this class as well.

Sierra responds directly to Everest's refocusing and offers an assent:

29 AUG 1994

We as students gave you as teachers the evaluative authority when we mailed in our applications. Then and there I, we all, accepted whatever was said about our person starting with the question of qualification. . . . This silly power game sucks; I want to learn, not battle about who gets to boss who around.

But much to Everest's dismay, our academic conversational "assignment" was already becoming a real conversation rather than an academic assignment, meaning that the issues most important to all participants in general were beginning to emerge and take on a life of their own. Thus, in the ensuing exchanges, most students ignored Everest's attempt to refocus and followed the earlier drift in two distinct directions: the issue of classroom authority in general, and the issue of students being able to evaluate teachers. In addition to following the drift, more students, as they saw what they and others said, began to take note of the process, to see and to think about the ways that knowledge and meaning actually evolve in interaction with others. Denali says:

29 AUG 1994

[In an earlier post], I stated that the teacher has the authority in the classroom and that the only authority the students have is what the teacher gives them. But I have changed a little. To me authority is who or what has control. After thinking about it, the main objective of the teacher is to help the student learn. But if the student neglects the help, they are taking control. They have the authority to listen or not to listen. Thinking about

it a little more, *asking questions is another way of expressing authority but in a positive way. The teacher gives the authority away to the student. I have to think on the subject a little more [emphasis mine].*

Clearly, this student has been influenced by the interactive exchange. Having initially responded in one way, he changes "a little," and through the course of this one entry we can see, and he can see, that forming an opinion is a process, one that involves thinking, thinking a little more, then being quiet and listening, and thinking some more.

Looping back to Sierra's comments, Madeira takes issue with the idea of this "academic exercise" being a "silly power game." Signing herself "your challenger," she asks:

31 AUG 1994

I pose this question to you . . . do you have replacement for the "silly power game" before us; perhaps you like "rote memorization" for your teaching method, (frankly I'm back in school now because I learned nothing from this method), or maybe you're such a unique person you have some marvelous answer for us . . . please share, I would like to know. I'm interested in your response and hope you will take on this challenge. I look forward to debating you.

Although expressing willingness to see things in new ways, to practice some kind of different approach in the classroom, Madeira still reflects in her response a dependence on dialectical tools, the uses of language as challenge and debate. The motivation behind her language, however, may reflect conversational goals -- to keep the conversation going. Despite her somewhat sarcastic tone, she ends her turn at the floor by expressing an interest in what Sierra may have to say and directly inviting her to respond. So, while Madeira may want to win the issue, she also wants to establish a relationship with her interlocutors, to keep the talk going.

Now, while yet only twenty or so entries into the conversation, all participants are starting to sound more relaxed and are attending more closely to what's being said by other students than what was said by their teachers. Bob and I in very short order lose control of the floor, the specific focus of the conversation, and traditional authority. The exchange has become a textual conversation. Almost all entries now reflect interactivity, one student citing what another has said, reacting to what was said, and directing comments in such a way as to elicit further response. Additionally, responses become more analytic and narratives become more elaborate as students draw in greater detail on personal experience to illustrate points they try to make in general. Many share stories about former K-12 school experiences, especially experiences with dictatorial teachers. Some compare and contrast classes they'd taken in college, one where the teacher conducted a traditional "banking"-style class to one in which the teacher attempted a more democratic approach. Still, the major focus of the conversation seemed to lie with sharing the classroom floor and the evaluation of good teacher/bad teacher.

In our own physical classrooms, in addition to reading articles and talking about the issues raised therein, both Bob and I were covering some rhetorical territory. Both of us discussed at length the importance of definition to argument, reading several essays from Selzer's book that modeled argument by definition. We also talked about a number of logical fallacies that tend to crop up and talked about why fallacies make for weak arguments subject to attack.

To my delight, our classroom activity began finding its way into the VAX conversation practice in many cases. Responding to an earlier post in which one participant claimed that students have little choice in class other than to "listen and agree" with whatever teachers say, Paraguay says:

31 AUG 1994

I may be a little hasty in labeling your argument as a False Dilemma, but something caught my eye as being too simplistic. . . .

He also identifies a fallacy in another post (cited earlier) in which Everest asserts that university students are all paying to be evaluated:

I may be . . . wrong . . . but my observations lead me to believe that there are as many reasons for paying to go to college as there are university students.

Several days later, Paraguay returns with the following:

2 SEP 1994

I realized after I left here the last time that all I did was criticize other entries without adding any opinions of my own.

During the lag time between the last entry and this, he realized that it's not sufficient just to criticize what others say without taking the responsibility to get into the game himself. Therefore, he follows this statement by sharing a personal narrative which illustrates how over the years his needs for personal evaluation have changed such that he now cares less about the evaluations of others and tends to look more inside himself for "support, criticism, and strength." Following his narrative, he generalizes:

. . . I feel as a child grows he develops slowly the ability to rely on his inner strength just as he has to in order to stand and walk. In the early years as he relies on expert assistance to do so many things so he must also rely on these experts for his own personal evaluation. . . .

Then, suddenly realizing that he has a real audience, he reacts to the immediacy of their presence, adding:

Forgive me for my constant references to "he." He is shorter than she, or he/she, and "it" just doesn't feel right.

In a relatively short time, then, Paraguay begins to think about his colleagues' comments, not just on a superficial level but also on the level of their rhetorical structure, and having done so he also turns a critical eye on his own responses. His comments on his comments, his style, his own rhetorical choices, demonstrate that he is beginning to think about his thinking almost at the same time as his thinking is unfolding, while he is in the process of talking rather than after a certain amount of "lag time" as when one looks critically at a draft of an essay or a homework assignment, etc. This rhetorical self-awareness, prompted by the fact that the conversational audience is quite real and quite responsive, unfolds *in process*. Because Paraguay knows that there are real people to whom he "speaks," and he wants to keep the conversation going rather than risk foreclosing it, he apologizes for using gendered language choices which may be offensive to someone, explaining the reason he chose to use "he" is not because he's sexist, but because it's more efficient and because saying "he" just plain sounds better than saying "it."

Within a week's time, the class had generally settled in to the conversation about evaluative authority, putting a significant emphasis on issues of trust. Could a student be trusted to fairly evaluate/grade himself? Would he not tend to give himself a much better grade than he deserved just so that he could maintain a high GPA and thus have a better chance of getting into graduate school or getting a good job? Could a student be trusted to fairly grade his peers? Would he not tend to be too harsh if he didn't like someone. Would he not tend to give better grades to his friends? Does he know enough about the

subject to be able to grade in the first place? Massif, who came out early in the exchange in favor of teachers maintaining evaluative control (based on precedent), now tries to deal with this latest complication to the issue:

2 SEP 1994

. . . I believe evaluative authority in the classroom belongs to the teacher. I believe thusly for two reasons: 1) the teacher has been educated, supposedly, in the subject matter, and 2) possibly unlike her pupils she may not be vindictive in grading. . . . It is my personal opinion that students do not have the social skills or the cognitive ability of complete and sure unbiasedness to be in charge of deciding one's academic progress, at least in the terms of grades. . . . Surely someone out there in cyberspace has realized that I have made an over-generalization [in saying] that all students would not be fair. I must correct myself by saying the vast majority would tend to be preferential. . . [emphasis mine].

Clearly, Massif's entry demonstrates a level of immediate attention to rhetoric that we value. He may make a mistake, over-generalizing, while making his point, but because he can see it (literally) he can *see* it (figuratively) and respond to it as it unfolds. The reason Massif is able to write on this cognitive level is threefold. First, we talked about logical fallacies in class. Had we not done so, he would not have had basic background information enough to be able to name to the rhetorical fallacy. Second, Massif and his colleagues are engaged in a genuine conversation, meaning that he has a real rather than a theoretical audience; he cares about what he's trying to say and he wants to be taken seriously by a group of people who are both genuinely listening and who will undoubtedly respond. Paralleling Madeira's rhetorical appeal to her audience, Massif here makes an ethical appeal that he hopes will demonstrate that he is both reasonable and that he respects the intellectual capacity of those to whom he addresses his remarks. Third, Massif can more effectively and immediately exercise meta-rhetoric because this

conversation is carried on in text -- he can see what he says. Note that Massif did not go back to edit his over-generalization. In text, the original "free write" stood as is even though in VAX notes he very well *could have* erased the generalization and rewritten it in a more sound form. Because the exchange is perceived not as writing but as talking, the text words become as "unerasable" to conversants as do words spoken in real oral exchanges. Thus, one of the things that Massif reveals to his audience is his humanness, his inclination to err; but, although he makes human errors, he takes responsibility for the error, addresses it, and goes on.

One student in Bob's class, Irtysh, was very much in support of traditional applications of authority and evaluation:

11 SEP 1994

I feel that in today's world evaluative authority is a necessity. Today's youth are nearly out of control and need someone to offer them guidance and control. Unfortunately, they are incapable of being self-sufficient to the point [that they let] fun and laziness take control over priorities. . . .

Again, Massif reacts:

15 SEP 1994

[I believed] that as a child I was in complete control of what I learned and did not learn. . . . I also believe for you to over-generalize and state that children today are nearly out of control is one of the most fallacious arguments (sorry, fallacy ad hominem, I believe) [emphasis mine]. . . .

Not only is Massif sensitive here to the rhetorical choices his colleague makes, he is, once more, sensitive to his own choices. Although he isn't really guilty of making an ad hominem argument, he feels strongly that his remarks might be construed as a personal attack and thus apologetically calls attention to his own rhetoric.

These instances of rhetorical and meta-rhetorical awareness were not limited to the VAX exchange. In addition to textual talk, oral in-class talk along these lines increased as well. On numerous occasions, students would show up for class armed with printouts of the week's conversation or notes they'd taken about it while in the computer lab. Sharing and talking in class was then centered not only on what was said, but on how it was said. One particular exchange noted by students in my class involved a tangential conversation between several students in Bob's class who as a group lamented the demise of prayer in public schools. Kolyma asserted:

9 SEP 1994

. . . since prayer was taken out of school, look at how violent and corrupted the schools have become . . . coincidence or not? Everybody go hmmmmm . . .

To which Parana added:

9 SEP 1994

I agree with Kolyma in 2.70 [the number of Kolyma's VAX entry] that since prayer was taken out of school, the kids have become more violent and the whole system has been going downhill.

Students in my class, while not on the same side of the issue in regards to prayer in public schools, noted that Kolyma's comment was an implied fallacy -- specifically, one of false cause -- and that Parana's response was a direct fallacy -- again, false cause. While they were willing to entertain the possibility that the demise of school prayer mitigated the effect, they felt that the problem of violence in schools probably had more complex dimensions. In short, they felt that the issue deserved a much more thorough treatment.

Similar talks about talking were a regular occurrence in both my class and in Bob's throughout the semester. As in the VAX textual conversation, the talk was not limited to critiquing what others had said but also included self-critique, drawing attention to things like the use of false or weak analogies, slippery slope arguments, instances of poisoning the well, etc.

In general, my observations point to a level of rhetorical awareness not heretofore seen, at least by me, in traditional classroom experience. The electronic environment, creating the illusion of conversation that could be seen, effectively facilitated the conflation of what James Britton has referred to as the participant and spectator roles in language usage. On the one hand, students used language in the participant mode in order to get things done as Britton suggests when he says that "the need to act and decide characterizes the participant role -- to act and decide in response to the social demands of human co-existence" (105). They were, after all, charged with the responsibility of making a decision about who would hold the evaluative authority in our two classes. In dispatching this responsibility as participants, they had numerous occasions to relate past experiences in ways that mimic spectator roles of relating and interpreting. I say "mimic" here because, as Britton notes, a speaker relating events remains in the participant role "in the event she must describe because its consequences in action and decision have not yet been consummated" (104). Thus, when Paraguay relates his experiences in a pass/fail grading situation, he is not merely telling an interesting story for the enjoyment of others; he is doing so in order to influence the decision-making process. When Japura tells about fellow students he has known who would do anything to get ahead, he's doing more than sharing an anecdote; he's using an example drawn from personal observation to illustrate what might happen in *this* class if students decided to evaluate themselves. These

narratives, which seem like spectator uses of language, are offered in a participant mode, as part of the decision-making process.

However, because students could see what they were saying at the same time as they were actually saying it, they could in effect be spectators of their own participation. In other words, on a higher critical level, they could interpret their own language uses and rhetorical strategies since their conversation unfolded in text on a screen and became, immediately, not only a speaking act but also a language object. So, for example, at the same time that Massif is a participant in the decision-making process, he is also a spectator of his participation and thus offers coterminously an interpretation of his participant-role rhetorical choices.

The remarkable thing about making conversation visible in this class was that it led to a genuine evolutionary process in learning about language use. The participant became a spectator of her participation and, in turn, a participant in her spectating. Calling attention to one's interpretation of rhetorical strategies entailed a further participation, an attempt to build or repair ethos with a real audience. It is at this point, on the meta-rhetorical level, that our students began to genuinely learn about themselves and others as lanuaged beings. What choices did I make? Why did I make them? What was good or bad about those choices? How do those choices effect what others think of me? Do I like what they think, or do I need to make different choices? By participating in this interactive educative experience, each one of us learned a great deal about the complexities of even a straight-forward sounding issue and we learned what it meant to deal with those complexities in responsible ways by listening to others and by voicing our own opinions in ways that could be heard by others. We learned that negotiation and consensus are not easy processes, but that they are rewarding and that they secure us

places within the community of speakers with whom we share interests, hardships, or even assigned tasks.

Students in ENG10205 and ELC38107 *did* reach consensus in the long run. After much talk, many proposals, many hours of corporate consideration, they decided on the traditional tack: Bob and I were to remain in complete evaluative control of our classes. But, more important that the outcome was the whole process insofar as it revealed to each of us the things we value, the things we fear, and the ways we communicate those values and fears to others.

Liberalization: Increased Inter-subjective Understanding and Tolerance

In addition to their consensual assignment regarding who would have evaluative authority in our classes, students were also directed to use VAX notes conversation as a means to carry on further class discussion of issues related to multiculturalism and anti-foundationalism in education. This assignment was specifically intended to give students a forum for talk and for sharing rather than for decision-making. In other words, they didn't have to decide if multiculturalism was a good idea or a bad idea or if curricula should or should not reflect foundational truths; they had to read about these issues, talk about their reactions to the issues, and share their feelings. This kind of textual talk put them more firmly in the role of spectators regarding their language use although clearly from time to time their rhetorical intentions involved strong elements of persuasion as they attempted to get their colleagues to accept their interpretations of experience as either right or wrong.

As we anticipated, most of our students didn't really have a firm grasp on the abstract meaning of multiculturalism, but clearly they'd all observed or experienced the influence of the multicultural movement in their school lives whether it be the proliferation of ethno-centric organizations on campus, the fairly ubiquitous focus on race

and gender in humanities' classes, the opening of the literary canon to works by women and people of color, the widespread press coverage of political-correctness, the celebration of black history month or women's history month in public schools, or the effect of affirmative action programs. Armed with personal experience and ideologies formed through the local influence of family, friends, neighborhoods, and religious and ethnic groups, they had a strong narrative basis for rich conversation which included conflict, affirmation, anger, and compassion.

Their first assigned conversational task in this unit was to share with one another their personal experiences of ethnicity. Up until this time, they'd existed for one another pretty much as genderless and colorless others who shared the common bond of the class, the learning task, and learning experiences. Only two students -- Bhutan and Everest -- had chosen to disclose their identities to this point in time, so what we asked them to do was in large part to unmask themselves publicly. In addition to the unmasking, though, the assignment required them all to think of themselves as ethnic beings, a new way of thinking for many white students who were accustomed to thinking of ethnicity as an experience only of African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, or Native Americans. For most white students, the vividness of ethnic experience increased with the vividness of skin color such that having white skin meant having little or no ethnic heritage as Rainier illustrates in the following response:

10 OCT 1994

Being a white, southern, small town female doesn't involve much ethnic background . . .

or, as Ganges said:

7 OCT 1994

What is the ethnic history of GANGES? Well, being white and of the American society, I would suppose that it would be fairly generic. . . .

What we wanted to do was to have *all* of them get into the mode of thinking of themselves as individuals with ethnic backgrounds no matter their skin color, to realize that whether or not they belonged to a demographic majority, the experience of ethnicity is a basically human experience, thus something that they all share in one way or another on a human level.

Although many of the early responses written by white students reflected this "my ethnic background is *no* ethnic background" stance, most contradicted their own claims as they offered further elaboration. Thus Ganges, for example, offers a more focused view of his experience when he continues:

I am of the "majority" race. More than that I have blond hair and blue eyes, a typical North American trait. I as a white grew up in a neighborhood of mostly white neighbors and school peers. I am from the country and lived on a farm. I usually played with my cousins, of which there were many. As a result, I did not need to go to surrounding neighborhoods to make friends. If I had, however, they would all have been white as well.

Interestingly enough, although the majority of our students *appeared* white, and the majority also identified with white culture, the majority could also claim ancestry from diverse backgrounds. Manaslu's response was typical:

10 OCT 1994

I feel almost like I don't have a culture. I'm a white-American. Big whoop. I have a lot of nationalities in my background. However, I don't think it would be possible for me to connect with them. . . . I know for a fact that I have Eastern-band Cherokee in me, but we can't seem to find its beginnings. My mom's great-great grandfather has the last name of Black

and I believe that at one time this was Black Bear. . . . My ancestors probably changed it to plain old Black when trying to pass for white.

And Tahoma provides a further illustration:

4 OCT 1994

In a search for my heritage I found strong European backgrounds on my fathers side of the family. Dutch, Welch, Scottish, Swedish, Irish, etc. Not a shock, huh. On my mother's side I ran into a brick wall. There were a few stray British but there was, basically, no record of the majority of my family. I went to my grandmother to get the so-called lead. She sent me in the Native American direction. I was shocked! I am a blondie with blue eyes and no signs of American Indian blood. I looked anyway. Guess what, I am a descendant of the last chief of the Comanches. I am related to Quanah Parker!

All told, very few of the students we would consider "white" based only on appearance were "white" by purely ancestral heritage. Similar experiences of genetic diversity were also noted among many of our black students as Orizabo's and Euphrates's entries illustrate respectively:

9 OCT 1994

My family history is really strange. Strange because it's so mixed. . . . My mother's side of the family was and almost still is purely of African descent, even though there is a little European but no one will admit to that. . . . My Dad's family, however, is really fun to dig through. . . . My dad's paternal family . . . were all mixed even though the birth certificates say Black. There were mostly Eastern Band Cherokee, Black, and Scot-Irish/Welsh (or at any rate of Celtic descent). My great-grandmother apparently owned some land in North Carolina and in those days, the land would be taken or you could be killed if you were Indian, so she "became" black. . . .

5 OCT 1994

. . . initially my ancestors came from the continent of Africa, and were brought over here as slaves, and then there was some race mixing so to speak and I guess the only thing I can really tell you is that I am African-American, for those that want to be "politically correct," and Black for those who don't. I have some Indian from both sides of my family, Cherokee from my mothers' side, and Lumbee from my fathers' side. This really doesn't mean much except that I am a minority. . . .

But despite the fact that these students could recount genetic diversity, most of them identified with specific ethnic groups that mirrored the ethnic group with which they *appeared* to belong based on skin color and physical features. Everest, in my class, and Madeira, in Bob's class, were clearly exceptions. Products of mixed marriages, neither of these students identified securely with any one ethnic group. Everest tells us:

I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. My Dad's from upper Egypt -- he's a naturalized US citizen. My Mom's EuroAmerican from Chicago. . . . I spent 6 years in Cincinnati, 8 years in Kuwait, 2 years in Egypt, 2 years in Spain, and 6+ years in Greensboro. So what is ethnicity? . . . I just don't know about this ethnicity thing. Besides, if ethnicity is "the condition of belonging to a particular ethnic group," I just don't see which particular "group" that is, aside from humanity.

Madeira's experience reflected a similar attitude of confusion:

I am proud to say that I am a total American. My ethnicity has been a constant source of pain, frustration, and near fatality during my life. Not being able to put me into ONE category has cost me dearly.

As these early entries in the multicultural assignment illustrate, a great deal of what was said about ethnic experience was related in terms of "who my ancestors were and where they came from." This strategy seemed to reflect a kind of honest "owning" of personal heritage whether as a source of pride, frustration, or simple recognition. But the strictly

formal genealogies yielded quickly to anecdotal stories about individual or family ethnic experiences that got more to the heart of defining who our students were or felt themselves to be. Massif, an African-American student, shares this poignant story of individual history:

. . . I grew up in a town about twice as big as UNCG. We as a community joined together often to help those less fortunate than ourselves. I felt as if I was just a regular member of my surroundings; I felt as if [the whites in my community] had no need to shun me and I had no reason to dislike them. I soon found that this was not the case. When I was around 5 or 6 years old my mother and a friend of the family decided that it was time that their children became social beings, they decided we should join the cub scouts. They called around town trying to find out where and when the scouts met. They soon learned that the scouts met in a white neighborhood, in a white church, with a white scout master. No problem. My mother and more of her friends packed us all in a car, about six of us, and headed for the church. When we arrived to the meeting all went well. We were readily accepted and on the surface made to feel at home. We left after the meeting was over and went home [and] anxiously awaited the next meeting. Before the next meeting there was a phone call from the scout master. He said the meeting had been canceled. Sure, we didn't mind. The next week, the meeting was held as scheduled and we attended. The scout master upon our arrival told us that we would no longer be meeting with this troop. We were asked to form a new troop on the south side of town, our home, the black neighborhood, the polar opposite of the white neighborhood. Our parents did not cause a fuss; they simply took their black babies home and I will continue.

Of her experiences with trying to get in touch with her Native-American ancestry, Manaslu shares this story:

I joined the Native American Club on campus last year and it really opened my eyes to the prejudices. We openly talk about our heritage and most of us are really accepting of each other. But, I have blonde hair and blue eyes. Therefore, I do not look the part. At a Pow Wow that I attended, I noticed that some of the Natives, particularly ones that were in

charge, scrutinized every move and word that people that didn't look the part made. True, some people claim to be native and aren't, but there are those of us who are and [can] prove it. Sometimes, I've wished that I could dye my hair dark brown, but of course that would be ridiculous.

The examples I cite are characteristic of class entries for most students. The pattern of genealogical "reporting" followed by personal narrative set the stage for students to get to know one another on a more intimate level than they had during the decision-making assignment, allowing them an opportunity to enter into the spectator role at whatever level they felt comfortable with. What Bob and I noticed was that the level of comfort was remarkably high in terms of self-disclosure and talking about feelings. Neither one of us had observed these levels of trust and openness to such a degree in traditional classes to this point. Because students had become familiar with the electronic medium in the preceding weeks, they had established a genuine rapport with one another and their writing reflected an earnestness of communicative purpose often absent in monological text-writing where there is no real immediate audience. The "safety" of distance, however, reduced the intimidation that comes with normal face-to-face class discussions, perhaps accounting for the kind and number of remarkable disclosures we noted.

But a mere sharing of personal stories is not enough in and of itself to regard the experience as liberalizing. And mere sharing is hardly the extent of interaction on this assignment. The process of feedback, affirmations as well as dissent, began almost immediately as students read one another's stories and were led to comment on them, interpret them, and share further stories of their own in a process that led naturally to abstracting from the store of particulars some notion of common experience, common problems, and shared questions. You may already anticipate my reporting to you, for example, their tangential forays into exploring what it means to be an "American" rather than a member of an American ethnic group. I do, in fact, have to report this predictable

foray. It was, however, a brief milestone in the conversation that turned the whole group onto a new path that included a good deal more text generated in the name of questioning, trying out possible answers, and further questioning. Typical openers into dealing with the larger questions are reflected here in posts written by Massif and Madeira, respectively:

13 OCT 1994

. . . I have a question: What is the purpose of identifying with a certain group or race of people? What are the benefits of knowing what your roots are. . . what does it mean to comment on our ethnicity?

13 OCT 1994

Even if we all had to identify our origins . . . what good DOES it do. . . I feel that if a Purple person is born in this country, they are AMERICAN . . . NATIVE AMERICAN . . . not better, worse, or anything . . . just AMERICAN! If we all had the same traditions, I think we would all get along better with each other, because we would all know what to do to belong.

The spirit of the questions raised ranged from a questioning of the assignment itself -- why are we being asked to share our ethnic experiences; where are we supposed to go with this assignment -- to a more general level of inquiry -- what public purpose does ethnic identity serve. It is precisely in the gap between these two orientations of spirit that both learning and liberalization occurred. Students working on this particular assignment started where all students must start -- responding to a teacher's prompt -- but the interpretation of the assignment was intentionally left open-ended such that through their continued conversational interaction students were obliged to identify for themselves a "purpose" and to try out possible "answers." Each "answer" they found problematic on some level, opening the conversation to further questions, complexity, and levels of uncertainty. The back-and-forth movement of the interactivity from individual to group

and group to individual, from assertion to query to revised assertion or further query created a conversational reality in which the process of relationship itself was brought to the fore in such a way that what students learned through practice was how *to be* with one another as a social group. Shotter refers to this as a special "third kind of knowledge," neither "knowing that" (theoretical knowledge or "banked" knowledge) nor "knowing how" (as in knowing a craft or a skill), but a knowledge-in-practice held in common with others in the communicative group (19).

In the case of our students, our communicative group, individual members had unique ethnic backgrounds, experiencing themselves as black, white, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, Christian, Jew, and/or atheist, etc. But, in our class, they held in common their membership both in the human family and the "local family" of our classroom. To the local family, then, they had to bring their unique experiences, share them, listen to those of others, and figure out how to take in all that "information" in order to learn how *to be* with one another. *Being* with one another meant, in this case, having to come to terms with the limits of personal ideology in the face of the lived experiences of others, not in order to dismiss one's heritage or upbringing but to see more clearly what created that upbringing, to see how one came to be a unique person in such a way that the process of becoming itself is foregrounded, opening up the possibility of choice (or ideological revision). Stretching to answer the more general question about the assignment's purpose, Japura says

14 OCT 1994

I have been wondering about and asking why knowing our roots or lineage is important. Maybe it gives a person a sense of knowing where they come from. Maybe it is like a base or foundation from which one knows he started. . . . Maybe it is similar to what we learned in Intro Psych: a child who has a good sense of self and confidence can go into the world and explore, learn, and live

Sharing stories and personal ethnic experiences in conversation, as "spectators," gave each student an opportunity to first examine her own "sense of self," her own "foundation" from which she came to the conversation. And as each student read the experiences that were shared, responding to similarities as well as differences, she was opened up beyond the boundaries of her unique self into the world of others in which she was an equal participant, moving back and forth naturally between the role of spectator and participant - - participating in the seeing and seeing the participation.

In one exchange, Japura sparked a heated debate over offensive words which quickly evolved into a debate about taking offense to words in general. Referring to his Native American ancestry as "Injun," he opened the door to criticism for lack of sensitivity. Even though he had used the term to refer to his own ethnic background rather than to cast dispersions on others, some of his Native American colleagues did not appreciate what they felt to be an ethnic slur. Other colleagues with similar backgrounds, however, came to Japura's defense, pointing out that what was important was the *spirit* with which he used the term -- many saw his comment as an attempt to be laid-back and conversational, a comment not meant as a slur but as an indication that he felt comfortable enough with the group to not be guarded about word choices. Manaslu, for example, felt that the attention given to words led to a silencing effect:

21 OCT 1994

. . . I can't even express my views without someone jumping all over my case about not being sensitive or being too sensitive.

while Mackenzie felt that word choice, as level of diction, was an important consideration in light of who we were as a group:

. . . we need to maintain a certain "political correctness" among ourselves. I'm sure none of us want to get into a race war over our ethnic differences. . . . We don't need to use words like [Injun]. Terms like Native American and African American are much more suited to a discussion by college students.

Following a lively exchange of views, Japura himself attempts to conciliate by making connections between opposing camps:

I believe part of the issue in discussing multiculturalism and pluralism . . . is that we cannot talk about too many things without offending someone.

Clearly, he has identified that part of what comes about through talk is learning the consequences of talk. Madeira echoes this same observation, generalizing now to how the experiences and observations made in this conversation may be applied in the future lives of those pursuing careers in education:

. . . What are we going to teach these precious little minds we will be molding in their formative years . . . that INJUN is a bad word, how to be politically correct . . . or that listening, communicating, and ACCEPTING are the keys to the universe? and what about that . . . ARE THEY?

Thus, in this one example of conversational exchange, students themselves, through their interaction, were able to move with ease from specific instances to generalization, making a more comprehensive or over-arching umbrella of meaning under which connections between threads of discourse could be gathered, named, and filed for future use. No one ultimately *won* the argument -- at least not the ordinary argument arising from the use of the word "Injun." No one position ultimately won out in regards to whether or not using the word "Injun" was good or bad or whether it would be allowed or disallowed in

continuing conversation. What happened instead was that a greater lesson was generalized from the exchange between contending sides. Japura did not have to see the error of his ways, nor did he have to apologize nor promise never to say "Injun" again. Neither did Mackenzie have to yield to arguments advanced against "political correctness" or linguistic self-consciousness in a community of friendly peers, scholars though they be. What arose instead from the free rhetorical exchange of conversation was a *common sense*.

To many of us, the ideas of liberalization and common sense are contradictory, especially if common sense is erroneously held to be, as Shotter says, "either a harmonious repository of more or less shared, non controversial, but outdated (merely propositional) beliefs; or something that is useless and confused . . . [in other words] what one person knows (and feels) is taken to be, more or less, the same as another" (173). After all, a homogenous *sensus communis* that assumes harmony hardly keeps with our ideals of liberal attitudes as those which are generously disposed to individual freedom, open-mindedness, and tolerance -- to those attitudes not slavishly bound by conventional ideas or values. But, as Shotter advises, closer examinations of the matter make it clear that

. . . common sense is far from unitary (and far from lacking in passion too). In fact, as we have seen, in the tradition of rhetoric it was thought to be a source of the 'seeds' from which arguments strong enough to move people in some way could be developed. But these 'seeds' or 'commonplaces' are such that, by their very nature, it is perfectly possible for every *logos* -- that is every persuasive formulation -- to be confronted by and *anti-logos* . . . formed from the same commonplace. . . . In other words, the contrary nature of common sense is such that while certain matters are taken for granted in the community, and an appeal to them will close off arguments . . . others, which are just as much a real part of people's common sense as the first, will unavoidably open them up again (173-74).

Thus, while the proverbial "last word" may have seemed, by logic, to go to Madeira who raised discourse to a level of generalization ("accepting") under which opposing threads could co-exist, the exchange was re-opened by a fellow student who, moving from general to specific, wanted to make a distinction between "accepting" and "tolerating." For this last student, *accepting* difference, *accepting* other cultures and ethnic traditions, was *not* common sense. For her, there was a great difference between tolerance and acceptance, arguing more closely to the denotative meaning of "liberal" than having to accept something, rather than respectfully tolerate it, involved a compromising of one's personal liberties and the liberties of others as well.

Ann Berthoff makes a distinction between the often conflated concepts of generalization and abstraction. Generalization, it seems, is a criticism that many of us writing teachers level against our students whose papers lack specificity, detail, and example, papers that rely for their meaning on things like Roberts's "arguing the slogan" or Shotter's "outdated (merely propositional) beliefs." What we really should level as a criticism, Berthoff suggests, is that our students are being too abstract. Abstraction, she says, is natural and normal; it's the way we make sense of the world through our dreams and perceptions and imaginations. Generalization, on the other hand, is what students need to learn to do; it's what the whole educative process is all about:

We do not have to teach abstraction. What we do have to do is to show students how to reclaim their imaginations so that "the prime agent of all human perception" can be for them a living model of what they do when they write. What we must learn to do, if we are to move from the pedagogy of exhortation to a pedagogy of knowing, is to show students how to use what they already do so cleverly in order to learn how to generalize -- how to move from abstraction in the non discursive mode to discursive abstraction, to generalization (Berthoff, *The Sense of Learning* 20).

The remarkable thing about a pedagogy of textual conversation, however, is that students are much more likely to arrive at this knowing on their own, through practice, than they are if we merely try to "show" them. While we often strive in our conscious ideals away from exhortations, the monological essay is often just another form of exhortation. It is, at the very least, a "form" in which our students are asked to demonstrate their proficiencies in rhetorical exchanges that are merely metaphorical. "Showing" is another kind of exhortation -- certainly qualitatively different from "knowing" arrived at through the kinds of personal discovery that genuine conversation-in-writing facilitates. Abstraction, it seems, is a personal affair, the way our individual minds normally operate. Often, our students enter our classrooms trapped in abstraction; the "slogan," which sounds simple, specific, and uncomplicated, is an effective mental wall that isolates the individual in her own ideological world where answers are cut-and-dried. Inside this isolated, abstract world, the individual is bound to conventional ideas, values, and beliefs - - at least to those that are the "conventions" of her originary social group. It does little good, in terms of "liberalization" to simply replace, by one exhortation or another, her originary conventions with conventions we find more politically or ideologically acceptable (or even those we find distasteful). It does, however, do a great deal of good to provide opportunities for open discourse in a manner in which a number of conventions are made visible and reactions to them are made equally visible in a back and forth exchange through which generalizations emerge as naturally for the social group as abstractions emerge for the individual. The generalization, then, is subject to revision, reconsideration, debate -- in short, to *common sense*.

Authentic Learning Activity

In many ways, this course was all about the exploration of a central abstraction -- *authentikos*, or that which is primary, original, first-hand. From the first assignment which involved talking about and deciding issues of *authority* (what is it, who has it, who should have it, etc.) to the on-going reflexivity of all the conversational exchanges, our activity as a class involved a level of genuine participation whose meaningfulness lay in the investment of personal energy by all participants in the communicative act as social phenomenon. What this involved more than anything was immersing our students, and ourselves as teachers, in a rather unstructured, chaotic conversation-in-text from which each of us necessarily had to create meaning or, I should say, come to *know our knowing* and *how we know*.

Our approach informed by theorists such as Berthoff, Freire, and Dewey, Bob and I attempted to provide an optimal learning experience not by depositing into our students a preformed knowledge, but rather by proposing some general ideas or questions in hopes that our students, through conversational interaction and negotiation, would add detail, specificity, and meaning. What we assumed was that students learn from any assignment in proportion to the energy they put into claiming the educational experience. To a great extent, Bob and I provided our students with "threadbare" assignments and abstract ideas with which they had to come to terms as a group through conversation. Through dialogue only, and the *authentic* activity that arose from dialogue, a unique understanding of such ideas was constructed. It was very important, we felt, that our students involve themselves in this process of "fleshing out" rather than rely on us as teachers, as repositories of knowledge. Without their direct involvement there would indeed be no experience at all, at least if experience is understood as an active process.

What is the difference between activity and "authentic" activity? Again, that familiar prefix -- *auth* -- presents itself for consideration just as it did when our students

were asked to decide issues of evaluative *authority*. "Auth" as in authority. "Auth" as in author. "Auth" as in authentic. The Greek root means original, primary, first hand; the *authent* is one who does things himself. Therefore, an authentic learning activity would be one that proceeds from the learner, from intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation. It would be an activity not just undertaken as a requirement, acquiesced to as something that must be accepted to get through the course, but an activity informed by effort, intellectual spirit, and genuine participation. Authentic learning is what all good teachers strive for as an ideal, unfortunately an ideal too difficult to achieve on a broad scale given the real constraints of time and energy involved in traditional instruction. Our students are with us only a semester, maybe two. Our classes are too large; our energies too divided. The pressures of making grades, of performing for evaluation, of dealing with teacher-as-audience as well as teacher-as-grader weigh heavily on students requiring the more successful of them to pretend or to imagine that simply completing the details of assignments constitutes authentic learning. While they may be making plenty of effort, intellectual spirit may be totally absent and genuine levels of participation very low.

A striking difference between the traditional classroom and our electronically interactive classroom, however, was the degree to which students engaging in textual conversation genuinely participated in their own learning and did so with what we would characterize as real intellectual spirit. Just as they became naturally more aware of their rhetorical choices because they had a real audience, a responsive audience, and were engaged with that audience in an interactive enterprise, they also felt more compelled to enlarge the dimensions of their participation by making connections between issues being discussed in VAX conversation and issues being discussed in their other classes, by appealing to other textual authorities, by informing themselves about current affairs, historical events, or classical knowledge.

This enlarging of conversational dimensions began quite early in the exchange. As could be expected, there was a good deal of interaction on topics of shared readings (those readings from *Conversations* that were assigned to students in both classes), but it went far beyond that. Significant references to unassigned readings entered the discussions in the form of sharing comments connecting the general topic of our class discussion with readings done by individual students for other classes that semester or in preceding semesters. Most often, students offered references to readings unassigned for our class for the purpose of further elaboration of a point or to offer authoritative support for the position a particular student was asserting. During our discussion about evaluation authority, for example, Everest asserted that there is a direct relationship between the *process* of assessment and feedback and the outcome in levels of mastery for students and offered this quote from Peter Senge as support:

20 OCT 1994

. . . "An example [of Pygmalion effects] occurs in schools, where a teacher's opinion of a student influences the behavior of the student. Jane is shy and does particularly poorly in her first semester at a new school (because her parents were fighting constantly). This leads her teacher to form an opinion that she is unmotivated. Next semester, the teachers pays less attention to Jane and she does poorly again, withdrawing further. Over time, Jane gets caught in a ever-worsening spiral of withdrawal, poor performance, 'labeling' by her teachers, inattention, and further withdrawing. Thus students are unintentionally 'tracked' into high self-image of their abilities, where they get personal attention, or a low self-image, where their poor class work is reinforced in an ever-worsening spiral."

The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization
by Peter M. Senge. Pgs 80-81.

We get a clear picture of how and why Everest offers this reference to Senge after another student expresses interest and asks whether or not Everest had ever written an essay on this topic:

22 Oct 1994

. . . I only recently picked it [Senge's book] up. I'm reading it for an independent study in which I'm doing research to phrase a question about the evolvability of systems (such as education). I've mostly been focusing on the old (1945-65) Cybernetics field. Recently, I've added the emerging field of complexity and Senge's works on learning organizations to my reading list.

This example is typical of offerings made by other students throughout the semester's conversational exchange and represents the kind of social knowledge sharing and the evolution of community knowledge bases made possible by dialogical/multilogical exchange.

One of the most striking examples of authentic learning activity involved sharing between a group of seven students whose conversation evolved around a mutual interest in the influence of media on children in school. Klamath, a student in Bob's ELC class brought to the conversation the summary of an unassigned article she'd recently read:

19 November 1994

[The article I read] specifically addresses: 1) the consequences of the media socialization of children on politics, i.e. the future of liberal-democratic "Lockean" politics; 2) Rousseau's framework for understanding the issue, which calls for "enclosure" -- meaning children's advertising and commercial television should be curtailed; 3) the role of the advertisers (industry), critics of children's advertising, and the government; 4) how heavy t.v. watchers become the products of a Hobbesian market society (citizens whose values are ill-suited for our liberal-democratic order, let alone for the more participatory kind of democracy some of us would like to see; 5) the nature of the harmful

effects of children's commercial t.v.; 6) violence in children's television; 7) opponents' views of the proposal to eliminate children's television advertising; 8) the critic's unwillingness to put the power of censorship in the hands of the government because that would involve violating the free-speech principle of the First Amendment. . . . There is much information here that I cannot mention here and that only a thorough reading of this essay will elucidate. . . . In fact, the essay is saying that our country is based on the principals of Locke, or liberal democratic politics. The results of the media socialization of children don't bode well for the future of liberal democratic politics or for the various "participatory" alternatives to liberal democracy.

Klamath goes on in her enthusiasm to give a number of direct quotes from the essay she'd read, often encouraging her friends to read this essay as well. She ends her entry by apologizing for its length and then by asserting her desire that this particular group work together on an end-of-semester group project that would involve further exploring the general issue of advertising using a similar focus. Most of all, Klamath wanted to "address the need for 'enclosure' (eliminating children's commercial t.v.) in our society in order to prevent children from continuing to be victims of a Hobbesian market society, which creates citizens who are not ready to participate in the type of political society we live in."

I must admit when I first read Klamath's entry, I myself was stunned by it's mention of Lockean and Hobbesian theory. I regarded it as one of those "over-zealous" entries by a student working far beyond the capabilities or interests of her peers and I assumed that Klamath would receive little if anything in terms of response -- silence being a rather strong conversational strategy to express a community's regard for the inappropriateness of dialogical turn. But, I assumed wrong. Two days after Klamath's entry, Paraguay offers this:

21 November 1994

. . . I would like a better explanation of what the hell Hobbes is proposing. In class last Wednesday I was given these short explanations [by Vilyuy]:

Hobbes: The consumer has a choice. I gather from this that the consumer can be educated if such enlightening material is presented.

Locke: The consumer is being taken advantage of. The consumer is a wet slab of clay on which society leaves an impression.

It is the Hobbes definition which is completely different than that which is presented in your article. Someone please clarify if I am to make any sense of this paper.

Paraguay goes on to offer his position based on personal experience. As a "service brat," he says that he grew up as a television addict. Having been deprived of television during the years his family was overseas, he and his brother did little else than watch it all day long once they returned to the states. "To this day I am a victim," he says. "As much as I hate and I do hate the machine I can not approve of its censure only because I would hate to make it into a saintly martyr."

So, to my surprise, Klamath did get a response and it was not a response that said "hey, you're over my head." Apparently, since Paraguay shared Klamath's interests, there was a real attempt on his part to understand the point she had tried to make in her article summary. I did note that Paraguay mentioned an "explanation" that he'd been given in class, so I began to think that Bob was introducing material on Locke and Hobbes in the ELC class. To my surprise, when I asked him about it, he said "no;" as a matter of fact, he was wondering if *I* had introduced similar material in my class. Obviously, then, these students had introduced Locke and Hobbes into their conversation quite independently of what their teachers were talking about or assigning in class -- an indication that some authentic learning activity was going on.

For several more days, the conversation continued to be primarily between Klamath and Paraguay, both reaching for some kind of understanding about Lockean and

Hobbesian ideas. At one point, the process of the unfolding activity was made visible when Paraguay offered this:

28 November 1994

. . . thanks for paralleling my confusion on Hobbes. I love the terms "Hobbesian." Sounds like some sort of puffed up toy-dog like Pomeranian. I am here in the library but I doubt I will have time to look up Hobbes' definition of man. . . .

Now, we actually see students going to the library, thinking about a little investigating. They have a mutual problem -- Locke and Hobbes sound interesting; it might be something they'd like to explore for a collaborative end-of-semester project; but they don't really understand Locke and Hobbes. And it's *this* imperative, not one imposed by teachers, that drives them to further research.

The following day, more students began to participate in the conversation that had heretofore been a dialogue between Klamath and Paraguay. Obviously, there's still a good deal of uncertainty going on, but interests have been piqued:

29 November 1994

. . . you're confusing me. Locke's theory of impressionable children goes hand in hand with Hobbes' view of conditioning. I do not believe it is possible to condition someone who is not impressionable. That's the point . . . don't you see!!! Hobbes would urge our society today to educate our young children because they are so impressionable. . . .

I think these thinkers have a lot in common. They're just on different levels. Locke = impressionable; he states that there is an issue to be aware of! Hobbes = education against the inevitable "conditioning" of the media! Let's talk some more!! I really need to get the literature from you. . . .

Not only is there now another voice in the conversation, but the voice of someone else who is more than willing to work with her peers towards understanding complex issues. Vilyuy's use of numerous exclamation points throughout her response and her passionate plea to continue the conversation along with sharing literature illustrates a self-motivated desire to clarify issues and to learn. For the teachers' part in this scenario -- what we'd supplied was a very general *topic* (advertising and its relationship to education) and what we referred to in the "Prelude" as *response-ability*. Because of the electronic medium through which textual conversation could flourish, students were *able to* respond to one another, and because they were able to respond, they *did* respond and their collaborative learning activity became a truly authentic activity.

The day following Vilyuy's entry, Paraguay returned to the conversation having read the article in question as well as "a few abstracts on Hobbes' and Locke's philosophies." In his rather lengthy entry, Paraguay offers a historical and biographical overview of Hobbes including his membership in the royalist party, the relationship of Hobbes' philosophies to the middle class, and a synopsis of Hobbes' *Leviathan*. He includes a number of quotes of Hobbes and a summary of the philosopher's ideas written in his (Paraguay's) own words. Near the end of his 75 line entry, realizing that he's run out of time for writing anything else, he says "stay tuned for the continuing saga of Locke and Hobbes." His concluding remarks indicate that there is more to come.

By this time a number of other students entered the conversation as well. Like their colleagues before them, most expressed confusion and a desire for further clarification. By December 3, however, the group felt sufficiently competent with the material, and with their understanding of how the material could relate to their interests and their end-of-semester project to "publish" their thesis. As Klamath writes:

3 December 1994

. . . our group thesis is: Because "enclosure" from commercial television seems a practical impossibility, although it is the desired solution, we must content ourselves with trying to educate children to become critical consumers of television so as to counteract some of advertising's negative effects and avoid their exploitation. We are going to address the media socialization of children, including the theories of Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau concerning this matter.

For the next week leading up to exam day (the day when students presented their collaborative projects), the group continued to exchange ideas involving personal experience (their television viewing habits), personal observation, and personal as well as collaborative research vis-à-vis Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, and contemporary articles on commercial television and the use of commercial programming in education via sources such as Channel One. Ultimately, this exuberant activity culminated in a group presentation in which individual members took turns at explaining Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau and in relating their ideas to the issue of educating children. It was obvious throughout this process that these students were engaged in this process not because they were directed to do so by their teachers, but because it was a matter of mutual interest. All-in-all, they went further with their research efforts and their efforts as a group to mutually inform one another than they ordinarily would have had the imperative for learning been externally applied rather than one that arose in them as a social group with a mutual interest. Bob and I, as a matter of fact, stayed out of the process entirely; we watched as our students carried forth their learning activity quite independent of either of us. And, in the end, when these students gave their presentation, they fully stepped into the role of "teachers" themselves -- a group with an interest that they genuinely wished to communicate to their peers, *not* a group of students who stood before teachers who were merely there to grade their efforts.

Of course, this group's experience was not the only example of *authentic* learning I could offer. Numerous other groups of students engaged each other with similar levels of enthusiasm and generosity, although on issues of less complexity. And, contrary to claims that electronic communication drives people into social isolation, a number of other groups actually met one another face-to-face outside of class in order to pursue mutual interests. One group whose members found a shared interest in music met often to review tapes and work collaboratively in the library on research regarding the educative value of music. Their work led to a "performance" presentation involving every member of the class in song as well as dance. In another "group," two students, often at odds with one another in conversation, met outside of class to talk over issues surrounding gender stereotyping. Through their VAX exchanges as well as their face-to-face exchanges, these two were able to broaden each other's perspectives on gender issues, and broadening of such dimension that it led to each student showing up in the other's class to act as what Massif referred to as a "visual aid" -- really, as an additional voice to add to an end-of-semester presentation.

As a matter of fact, near the end of the semester, students in ELC regularly appeared in my ENG class and vice-versa -- in other words, students were attending *extra* classes, not because they were required to do so, but because they were genuinely interested and were authentically engaged in the process of learning. This, in addition to what we observed in terms of self-motivated and independent, collaborative research, is indeed noteworthy. While I did have an attendance policy in my ENG class, and Bob had one also in his ELC class, there was no policy whatsoever regarding attendance in each other's classes. As much as we had done in the teacher role was to extend to our students an open invitation to attend the other's class. Maybe it was less an effort for my students to show up for an afternoon in Bob's class; maybe being on campus already made things

easier. But, since my class met at night, I feel that ELC students had to make a truly significant effort born of interest and enthusiasm to take time from work, to return to campus, or to merely extend in time their already busy days. Clearly, that any of these students put forth this kind of effort demonstrates a personal commitment to learning and to the sense of social unity born from the conversational relationship.

Chaos, Conversation, and Coherence

Earlier in this chapter I talked about a few ways in which Bob and I introduced new levels of complexity into our classes and how these new complexities destabilized the class, threw our students off-balance in regards to disrupting expectations they held based on prior classroom experience. To review, I focused primarily on the destabilizing effects of the electronic component of the class as well as the fact that this was an interdisciplinary endeavor and that my students and Bob's students, although "sharing" a class, never met face to face. But even more destabilizing an experience was the focus we maintained on textual conversation as the centerpiece of the course: none of our students had ever had an educational experience before this where talk and talking about talk seemed to be "what the class was about." Entering into a conversational arena necessarily meant entering into what Shotter referred to as a "hurly burley" situation, a chaotic situation where teachers were far less in control than normally they are in school. In addition, we gave our students much more abstract, loosley structured tasks from which the students' emergence from chaos to coherence grew out of the process of multilogical exchange independent of teacher approval, authorization, or ideological direction. Obviously, many of our students felt uncomfortable in this new environment. In this class more than any other, they were *truly* immersed in chaos.

As chaos science has shown us, the world and the universe are filled with unpredictability, randomness, incoherence. Therefore, a chaotic classroom may be said only to mirror the natural order of things, and those of us who have devoted our energies to teaching writing have more than likely been taught, and in turn *have taught* that chaos is to be valued because from it arises order, form, and control -- from incoherence rises meaning. In other words, we have begun to value chaos because in its "hurley burley" are the infinite materials from which we are able to construct knowledge and meaning.

Yet despite the way we claim to value chaos, we seldom *really* allow our students to be immersed in it. *We* control -- our curriculum, our assignments, our assessments, even the direction students are allowed to take as they work themselves out of the little bit of controlled chaos that we ourselves have introduced for the purpose of teaching. This is understandable. It is a frightening thing to open one's classroom practice to a genuine chaotic experience. The fear of the class spinning out of control is too great. If things get out of control, what can there be of substance or coherence to the educative experience we ask. Therefore, we let our students read things that *we* assign; we let them freewrite (because freewriting is an excursion into personal chaos); we encourage them to discuss assigned readings with one another in class (while we stand as judges to the correctness of their interpretations, the meanings they might make); we let them *pretend* that they are moving naturally from chaos to understanding though all the while we are there like immovable rocks in a flowing stream, ever gently diverting thought into channels of meaning that *we* approve.

But, I believe that our fears are unfounded for the most part. We don't have to worry about things spinning out of control or becoming incoherent rather than coherent because we don't take into account that human nature naturally seeks coherence. As Deepak Chopra has observed, "chaos may provide compelling science, but it is no way to

live. The lack of meaning hurts too much" (13). The fact that chaos is painful to humans is exactly what makes conversational pedagogies work so well, independently of us teachers/controllers, as a means to a meaningful experience. It would be good for a moment to belabor the obvious and admit that we and our students are all human beings, and as such naturally seek ways to interact with others in order to make meaning, to gather what we can from chaos in order to create ways of living together that are comfortable, coherent shelters from the randomness and disorderliness of nature.

I believe that this is exactly what my experiences with conversational pedagogies have shown: people who are allowed to genuinely *interact* with one another and who are given *response-ability* will be responsible persons simply because it is in their nature to do so. The development and exercise of meta-rhetorical skills, the liberalization of ideas, the exercise of authentic participation, despite the fact that I found it necessary for clarity's sake to talk about them as separate entities, are all inter-related activities that arose from conversational exchange without my direction simply because that's the way that languaged social interactivity works. As James Britton has noted, language is a tool that helps us turn confusion into order by "enabling us to construct for ourselves an increasingly faithful, objective and coherent picture of the world" through a lifelong exchange with others in our worlds such that "the way I feel" increasingly becomes similar to "the way people feel" (105-06). When given *response-ability*, our students have demonstrated that they will put this wonderful tool to work because they are compelled to do so as part of their nature, their desire to be social and interactive and sheltered from the chaos that naturally threatens to impinge up us all. The lack of meaning at the extreme of the "hurley burley" cannot withstand the creative energies of a social discourse community simply because the lack of meaning is indeed painful and people generally do whatever is necessary in order to avoid painful situations. In this case, they will work together to

make meaning. For better or for worse, they create together the world they inhabit. Immersing students in a conversational environment will *not* lead to a completely out-of-control or incoherent experience, but to a meaningful experience born of their own desire and efforts in the direction of learning and growing both individually and as responsible members of a community.

CHAPTER VI
STUDENTS TALK: VALIDITY AND THE
INTERACTIVE EDUCATIVE EXPERIENCE

Up until the latter part of November, our students had never met one another face-to-face as the one, unitary class that they actually had been throughout the semester in the electronic VAX environment. Although a number of them had formed friendships, or had at least developed curiosities that prompted them to arrange meetings outside of class on their own time, the whole group had never sat down together in the same physical space along with their teachers. Bob and I thought that it would be an enlightening experience, however, to arrange such a physical get-together as the end of the semester approached in order that we could all meet, unmask (if we so chose to do), and discuss the electronic experience we'd all been having. Thus, on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving break, Bob canceled his regular class meeting and asked his students to meet my ENG students in one of the large lounges in the university's student center. A relaxed get-together accompanied by food and drink, we all participated in a deliberate reflective process, talking about the class and about whether or not we felt that what we'd been doing could be called a *valid* learning experience.

This chapter presents some of our comments, students' as well as teachers' extracted from an audio tape made of that meeting along with elaborations that may add to my readers' understanding from a theoretical standpoint. Because in most cases I am unable to identify the speaker's name by the sound of the voice that I have transcribed, I

will refer to them merely by the appellation of "Student 1," "Student 2," "Student 3," and so forth.

The first order of business was to allow everyone in the group to introduce himself or herself to the others. We asked only that each give her *real* name, then added that revealing one's pseudonymous VAX username was optional. For many, this would be the first opportunity they had to put faces and names together with the names of the mountains and rivers of the cyber-classmates they'd come to know so well over the past weeks.

Janet "Madeira"¹ was the first to introduce herself, but only by her *real* name. Afterwards, she turned to the young man seated next to her and added "and this is Samuel." Of course, this meant little to the class in the context of their VAX experience, so Samuel chimed in "also known as Everest;" his addition drew a collective set of *oohs* and *aahs* from the group due to the fact that he'd been one of the most outspoken of the group in VAX conversation. Next, Ron introduced himself along with giving his username, Massif, followed by Tracey as Klamath, Meredith as Bhutan, James Lee as Paraguay, and Tom as Ganges. Then, we came to Mike who interrupted the flow of unmaskings by *not* revealing his username. A period of meaningful silence ensued while everyone waited to see if he would change his mind and supply the missing information. Finally, the silence was broken by friendly giggles and laughter as Mike held firm to his silence. "Anonymous!" someone in the group exclaimed.

All-in-all, the class pretty much unmasked itself with the exception of four students who obviously felt more comfortable protecting the identity of their cyberselves from

¹"Madiera" was this student's VAX username. "Janet" is a pseudonym I am applying in order to protect my student's identity. All subsequent "real" names are likewise pseudonyms.

exposure in the face-to-face environment indicating to me that these were perhaps students who would not have spoken out (or who would not have spoken out quite so honestly) in a traditional classroom where, for some reason, being seen is an impediment to participation.

Following introductions, Bob talked briefly about the notions of chaos and complexity in education in order to get the conversation started:

At the level of education, the implications of chaos or complexity theory deal mostly with the concept of recursions or iteration in which the individual looks back on himself or herself, and through this process of looking back a sense of value emerges. Here the curriculum becomes strongly imbued with experiential transformation wherein the individual realizes that there's less of a set product to be mastered. It's a reflective process more than a set of goals to be reached. . . . We are embarked on a new paradigm, one that is both scientific and spiritual, metaphorical and mystical, playful and serious.

The forms which educational institutions take at any given time are closely related to prevailing paradigms of knowledge and truth. For example, in an era in which religious views of truth prevailed, educational institutions not surprisingly had a distinctly religious orientation. In the 1800s, on the other hand, in the wake of the scientific and industrial revolutions, schools came more and more to resemble factories. People were educated en masse much in the same way as products were produced en masse. Educational methods and curricula were standardized in the same way as industrial methods were standardized. So, if the idea of knowledge and truth changes, then most likely schools will change too, partly because schools are the institutions that

deal with knowledge. The important thing for us to remember is that we are now in the midst of major change.

American society is now involved in both a long-wave and a short-wave change. On the long-wave side, we're continually involved in a shift from looking at things from a religious perspective to a scientific perspective. That's a Long-wave story going back to Galileo who tried to convince the Pope that one could do science and religion at the same time. A shorter wave change is the move from doing science in a modern way to a postmodern way. The modern way is aligned more with the factory model of school, while the postmodern way deals with information and learning more on a personal level. In the factory model of science, knowledge is "broadcast," while in the postmodern model, it is "distributed." And right now, we're right in the middle of these changes, therefore we should be seeing changes in school. Luckily, we have this class, this merging of ENG102 and ELC381 which very much reflects this shift from a linear and mechanistic world view which can be a broadcast truth (Newton, for example, viewed the world/universe as a machine), to a complex world view that allows room for chaos and the kind of structure that may arise from chaos, especially when people work together with emerging order in a distributive sense. This is all very new, though, and there are not now constructs of validity in place that would easily help us define that an educational model built on complexity/chaos is a valid or valuable learning experience. There may very well be people in this class who, when all is said and done, will not feel that ENG102 and ELC381 was a valid learning experience in terms of education. They may feel that it was not real education because Beth and I did not "deliver the goods" (broadcast) as one would according to the factory model of school. Instead, we worked with the logic of interactivity, one that is not associated with the factory model.

We expect there to be healthy differences of opinions, then, about whether or not this class was valid and about what real education actually is. We hope that one of the things that arises from this is a thinking through of these issues as students, student-educators, future educators, and citizens. The most important part of this new paradigm is that disagreement is accepted and welcomed because both of these are part and parcel of conversational interactivity.

Finally, I ask, is this approach valid? Beth and I think this is an interesting question because one of the things that happens when change occurs is that the tools of understanding and knowledge-making also change, therefore validity constructs must also change. This may be a valid experience depending on what index of validity you use. If your index is linear, built on the factory-model of the broadcast, then what we have done may not appear valid. If your index is complex, what we have done may appear quite valid. What we've aimed for in this class is a complex form rather than a linear one. Our pedagogy has been over-full with options for conversation and for interactive learning, a kind of learning where the responsibility for knowledge production is distributed equally between us. Whether or not you see this experience as having been valid depends upon what your own validity construct happens to be and that's accessible to your own self-reflection.

To Bob's preamble, I added:

We're looking to complexity and these kinds of ideas to form a new way of looking at this class and others like it, those which introduce the kinds of chaos in which we've found ourselves immersed from time to time, in order to determine valid ways of looking at what we've done. How are we going to use our validity index to see some kind of order

emerging from the chaos? Is there any kind of order emerging from this system, this class?

The discussion then begins when Student 1 comments:

The way you conducted class, I didn't think there was too much chaotic about it. I know that in the beginning, some of us balked at what was going on simply because it was different, but it didn't seem chaotic. You more or less led a seminar and we've had a lot of great discussions; a lot of information's been bantered back and forth; everybody brought something in.

This student's comment illustrates the point I made in the last chapter. Simply introducing chaos into a classroom system does not necessarily mean that students will flounder around lost in confusion for the entire semester. What we are trying to get at when using conversational pedagogies is the kind of chaos that can also be seen as complexity rather than meaningless confusion. As this student notes, the class seemed different and that difference may have caused initial dissent, but before too long we were having good conversations, were sharing stories and "information," and that most everyone was participating meaningfully by bringing something in, by making contributions. Shotter has maintained, as I have noted, that conversation, when viewed in a linear way, is a chaotic thing, a hurley-burley thing, but yet it is the natural ambiance of human life and, thus, students in a conversational environment are less likely to experience the ambiance as meaningless confusion.

Student 2:

I think you do have to remember that initially there were a lot of chaotic moments because we didn't really know what you expected. During those first days of the semester

we were coming into brand new situations with brand new peers, and we had brand new professors standing up telling us "here's what you have to read, here's how much you have to write, here's what's going to be on the exam" -- the normal stuff right down to the letter. In this class, you didn't do that; there was less direction. It did seem chaotic to me. But in about two or three weeks, I started noticing that a lot of the notes that I wrote down were starting to be comments being made by other students in the class rather than by you teachers. It's then that the chaos started to balance out. I might write something down that someone in this class said, put it in a report and then cite her. I saw the comments of others as being valid.

As this student has learned, a conversational class is a much more democratic arrangement than is the traditional class. Yes, we'd disrupted the normal expectations ("here's what you read, what you write, what you learn for the exam") and that disruption felt chaotic simply because it was not business as usual. While we did share some readings in the traditional sense of the word, those readings were hardly the central reading task our students had to engage in. With the VAX conversation requirement, what they read a great deal more of was their own talk. Suddenly, these students started giving authority to comments and contributions made by other students, *their* authority was given equal footing with that of published writers working "conversationally" only in the metaphorical sense of the word. If Everest, for example, made a comment deemed noteworthy by his peers, why should they *not* write it down, use his comment in a report, cite him as an authority just as they would cite any published scholar, journalist, or teacher?

Gregory Clark claims that any text's true authority arises from an interactive process in which the text's claim is made public and is then subjected to critical scrutiny and response by the audience for which it was intended:

Although every [text] is essentially a claim to power in which one person attempts to determine for others what they will together believe and do, such claims, regardless of the strength with which they are made, have no authority until the people whose beliefs and actions they address respond with their consent. Indeed, the ethical problem inherent in every rhetorical statement is situated in the moment that separates its claim to power from that subsequent authorizing consent. . . . [W]hat is claimed is transformed into something real only when it is actualized in the authorizing response of the people it addresses. The ethical function of rhetoric, then, must be understood in terms of this relationship between power and authority in a community (59).

In traditional classes, the kind that Student 2 was entering into during the first days of the semester along with our conversational class, business as usual means that students read pre-authorized texts and "get the goods" from teachers who by their very position in the academy have been "pre-authorized" by a lot of other people with impressive positions and lots of letters behind their names. Seldom are students allowed to enter into a genuine discourse with those authorities. Even more seldom are they allowed to authorize one another as students. What happened in our class was something quite different. With the focus removed from teachers and authorized texts (although neither were absent), it shifted to conversational text generated in the electronic environment by students. Each and every claim was subjected to the scrutiny of the community of conversants who, in turn, authorized the claim or responded in a way that led to revision. Thus, when Student 2 found herself making notes based on the comments of her peers, she was authorizing a text, the claim made by one of her equals that had been subjected to public scrutiny and response.

Student 3 adds:

On one extreme, you could have a class where there really is chaos. The chaos is the unstructured, unpatterned parts, the parts where you can't see what's going on. But

on the other extreme, you could have a class where order is imposed. There's a lot of predictability and you always know exactly what's going on. Then, you have what's in the middle where things are fuzzy. There's a complexity where the two meet and overlap. A lot has to do with control. In chaos, there is no control. In the order side, you can predict everything, but there's not room for diversity. In the middle where there's complexity, you have to let go of some of that control so that the order that is average throughout the group emerges and you kind of guide that emergent order and let it grow. That's the difference I see between these two extremes of classes, moving away from the factory model to the new model.

This student seems to have some feel for the difference between chaos as confusion and chaos as a complex system. Our class was on neither of the extremes that he mentions, but was rather in that middle zone, in the place of complexity where diversity is welcome and from which some kind of community sanctioned order emerges. Returning to Shotter's work, the kind of chaos we introduced in this class was primarily the chaos of conversation; we expected our students to arrive at a socially sanctioned meaning/knowledge (sanctioned by them, not by us nor by the authority of outside texts) by talking to one another over an extended period of time. This particular chaos was what Shotter calls "the everyday, disorderly, practical, self-other relationships constituting the usually unnoticed background to our lives [from which we] unknowingly construct between ourselves those orderly forms of (intralinguistic) relations I . . . called person-world relations" (35). Rather than chaos as confusion, we introduced chaos as complexity -- something quite natural. It follows, then, that students would just as naturally (and unknowingly) construct some kind of orderly form. In our class, we tried to do precisely what Student 3 observes: "guide that emergent order and let it grow."

Student 4 now chimes in, directly addressing the question about whether or not our class was "valid:"

I think that this class was valid because I had to create or generate my own knowledge in the course just like everyone else had to. I also had to adsorb information from others in the class, not just from my teachers who were throwing the information out. I think when knowledge is personal like this, when it's really coming from inside you, then it's already very meaningful so you're going to remember it. That's what's valid about it for me. I'm going to leave this class and I'm going to remember more than I normally would. I'll remember the controversial issues that we talked about more than I would if I'd just read them in a book or if the teacher had just told me what to think or what the issues are. The ideas are reinforced by others and by having to put them into your own words.

In many ways, this student is using *remembering* as an index of validity. What is remembered effortlessly and what can be applied to future life situations should indeed be a hallmark of valid learning because only those things we can recall when appropriate are useful to us as individuals and as members of a social community. In his work on reading, Frank Smith talks about comprehension and memory, noting that "the conditions that make [these things] fluent are meaningfulness, relevance, and personal involvement" (98). If "remembering" is a particularly valid index for this student, it is clear that her ability to remember has been impacted precisely by the conditions set forth by Smith as Student 4 herself notes. The knowing for her and for the entire community involved in the conversation project was personal. At all times they were encouraged to share personal narratives and to make connections between the more abstract ideas and issues we were dealing with and their own personal experiences. The knowing was meaningful, because it arose, as this student says, "from inside you" without promptings or direction from

teachers. Additionally, because the forum for sharing was the conversational, social forum, the knowledge was made relevant simply due to the fact that it had its life within the context of talk that created it in the first place. It is quite likely true that this student, as well as her colleagues, will "remember" much of the knowledge they generated in this class and that they will find opportunities to apply it at some point in their future experience.

Student 5 offers an assent to her colleagues observations and adds:

I'd like to agree with what you said and point out that it's a process of learning. It's all been about learning how to learn. If you can learn how to learn then you can actually go teach others how to learn. You're not only creating your own knowledge in this class, but you're also living it, so it's making it more of a real experience. I was personally shocked, for example, to find that so many other people are creative thinkers like me. People aren't as much linear thinkers as I thought they were. As a person who'd been put down for being creative all the time, I feel validated to find out that not everyone is a linear thinker.

What's really happened for this student, I think, is that the messy *process* of making knowledge has been made visible to her. Always, we are creating our knowledge socially, interactively in our daily lives. This is less so in the traditional classroom because the traditional classroom generally involves a broadcast structure, or Freirian bank structure, in which students are told what to think and are told what constitutes knowledge. But, in this class, the social nature of meaning-making was made "rationally visible" as Shotter calls it. This student could suddenly see how meaning is made in conversation with others whereas most oral conversation is often lost in the moment and is not available for later critical review. Shotter says that "by making these disorderly

moments [of conversation] rationally visible, by critically describing them from within the event itself, we can bring into view the character of the social negotiations, conflicts and struggles involved in the production, reproduction and transformation of our current social orders" (60). This disorderly, non-linear character is precisely what was brought into view for this student as well as for others. It's sad to think that so many years have passed for this young woman during which she has been made to feel enigmatic for being a "creative thinker," a non-linear thinker, when all along the simple truth is that all knowledge is in great respect created through non-linear processes.

Building on Student 5's comments about linear thinking and the construction of knowledge, Student 6 adds:

Einstein said that he was at his best when he just let his mind wander and then he'd take those wandering thoughts and organize them later to write his theories.

And Student 7 makes a general observation to the point:

That touches on something that's skipped over with the whole scientific method; the way that one formulates an hypothesis is a process that's tucked away. You don't usually get to see how the hypothesis comes about. I'd like to see more classes like this one in the hard sciences so that it would be experiential. Rather than being told "here's so-and-so's theorem," students can get to go through the same steps the scientists go through in order to get the "ah-ha" so that students can experience themselves the insight. Like you were saying, you experience it, so you retain it since you've been through it yourself. You understand it.

Student 7 ties together a couple of threads in the unfolding conversation by first talking about the kind of process that even scientists in the hard sciences have to go

through in order to create their hypotheses and then by relating the experiential process to the idea of understanding and retention. Experience, once again, is seen as a key to genuine learning. I am reminded of a story told by the mathematician, Henri Poincare, in which he relates the experience which led to his first memoir on Fuchsian functions. Now, one would think that if there ever was a "science" that involved pure linear thinking, neat progressions of steps leading to orderly hypotheses and proofs, mathematics would be it. However, Poincare's experience shows quite another side to what we end up seeing as a linear, logical mathematical theorem:

For fifteen days I strove to prove that there could not be any functions like those I have since called Fuchsian functions. I was then very ignorant; every day I seated myself at my work table, stayed an hour or two, tried a great number of combinations and reached no results. One evening, contrary to my custom, I drank black coffee and could not sleep. Ideas rose in crowds; I felt them collide until pairs interlocked, so to speak, making a stable combination. By the next morning I had established the existence of a class of Fuchsian functions, those which come from the hypergeometric series; I had only to write out the results, which took but a few hours (25).

Poincare, it seems, labored for fifteen days under the same kind of misconception as our Student 5 who believed that the acquisition of knowledge should be, for some reason, a linear and logical process -- one that could be applied simply by sitting down and working hard. One could say that the hard sciences (and the humanities as well) could do a better job of teaching if we would expose our students to some narratives such as Poincare's in which scientists and mathematicians and other creative artists share their experiences with the creative process. Such a sharing would at least be a step in the right direction to dispel any myths that surround such creativity. But, then again, I can't help but prefer Student 7's suggestion. Perhaps if the process were made truly experiential then the theorems in question would be more genuinely understood.

Along these lines, I would hold to the claims of Vygotsky who observed that "practical experience also shows that direct teaching of concepts is impossible and fruitless. A teacher who tries to do this usually accomplishes nothing but empty verbalism, a parrotlike repetition of words by the [student], simulating a knowledge of the corresponding concepts but actually covering up a vacuum" (150). Although Vygotsky's concerns here are primarily with young children, I believe that the same can apply to an analogous order to learners of any age. Although students in our classes were young adults with a much greater context of knowledge to begin with than that which belongs to the young child, there are still many instances in college instruction where students talk about *parroting* back concepts that teachers present in direct manners. Students openly admit that their "knowledge" in these cases is more a simulation of knowledge than true understanding. Yes, they can give back the words on a test, and they can do quite well. Unfortunately, if they were ever faced with situations of having to apply such knowledge, they would be unable to do so. If we offer them opportunities, however, to engage in a discovery process for themselves, they are more likely to get the "ah-ha." When the light bulb flashes on, we can count their learning experience as fruitful.

Student 8's comments, however, demonstrate just how reluctant some students are to abandon the idea that learning and knowing are not neat and tidy:

I was really expecting for this course to help me come up with a useful neat method. I didn't want to know that the process of learning and knowing could be so chaotic and messy -- a lot of time things are just accidentally discovered. This has been made more visible to me in this class. The focus has been on process and that's been at times chaotic. It seems to me that what's been important in this class has been the

process, almost like there's no concern placed on the finished product at all. But, if the process is correct, then I guess the product is guaranteed.

This student speaks directly to what I believe to be the case in any field -- the process is of greatest importance. One has to get *down and dirty*; one has to dip deeply into chaos as part of the process. But, if one does genuinely act and do, then some kind of product of quality is virtually guaranteed.

Student 5 again chimes in with:

I see the process as having taken my mind's focus away from the notion that I have to always be thinking about rules to one where I understand that it's okay just to relax and learn. That's a better approach for me as a future teacher. This course has helped me more than any other course I've taken because I now have a better empathy for what people want when they come into the classroom and want you to teach them something. Yet I now see that you don't really become a taught person until you go through the process of learning something as living it -- learning by living helps you retain it.

This class has also helped me see that while creativity is, yes, a messy thing, it is also a process and one that's essential to learning. So the next time that someone says "yes, you're a creative person, but that won't really work here in this class," then I'll know that, first of all, I should feel sorry for that teacher, but also that that's not a valid comment. Students are creative people and learning is brought out through a creative process. I no longer feel stupid now when I'm at a certain part of the process where I'm not understanding; as long as I can engage in something like questioning and answering with others as part of the creative process, then I'll be okay.

Here, we can see that this student's interaction in the class has led her to a more secure feeling about herself and her *style* as a creative learner. Additionally, she acknowledges the relationship between being a "taught person," "living" the learning process, and engaging socially with others in a dialogical process that allows for questionings and answerings

Student 9 adds her own perspective:

I get really frustrated in my linear order classes, especially when I'm told what to write about and what to say in my papers. It's interesting as a future educator to compare that kind of traditional class to this class and to ask what kind of education I actually want. Do I want to be told either what has been thought or what I should think, or do I want to be given some general ideas and then be set free to figure out what it is that I actually do think. I think I'll take this experience into my own classroom. Until I got here, I wasn't able to really think on my own.

I think there will be a change from the linear, traditional model because it's out of date. I think there's a new generation who will want to get their education. But because there's always been such a focus on grades and there doesn't seem to be any way really out of getting them or giving them, it'll slow down the change. In the earlier question [that our class considered about who would have evaluative authority], I didn't want the teacher to have all the grading authority. I find it better not to have a classroom structured around worrying about what grades are or are going to be. I'd rather have the focus on the process. For one thing, as you're working [if you don't have to worry about your grade], you can actually change your mind.

This shift in conversational focus from what makes learning valid to how we validate learning through a system of grades created a good deal of exchange in which students revisited the first interactive experience of the class: having been asked to decide as a group who would have evaluative authority. Student 5 asks, in retrospect:

Do you think that if we voted again, that the vote would be different? Has the process taught us that there may be an alternative way?

Student 9 answers:

I don't know. So many of us always need the grade, need to be on some imaginary list like the dean's list. Some people don't want to change, but then again a lot of people are willing. That's the wild side of people speaking out. I think, though, that more people are willing to stick to tradition, so I don't think the vote would change.

Student 5 again adds:

I thought that if people could actually see the class as it turned out now in retrospect, that they would vote for something different because the process has brought us through to another place that has shown us that we can work well together as a group. It doesn't seem like you agree that that's happened.

Student 10 responds:

I do still think that a lot of valuable stuff has gone on. I think we did work well together as a large group and then in our smaller groups as well. Although the grade thing was still hanging over our head [after our vote], I didn't feel as oppressed by that as I do in other classes. I think something good went on. I think that some people did change, even if they wouldn't vote differently.

Student 11 enters with a justification of her vote:

The only reason I voted for the traditional model is because I didn't think it was an issue that was ever going to be settled if we just allowed ourselves to keep talking about it, so I just voted for expediency I guess.

Student 12 explains his position thusly:

I was determined that teachers be the sole evaluators. But grades have always been very important to me. I come from a family that has worked its way up to the middle-class. I have to take home something every semester showing that this is what your money is going for. It's too abstract to go home to your mother and tell her that, well, I learned something about problem-solving theory today; that isn't enough. I come from a family where there has to be two of everything. If there's one duck on the table, there has to be another one. Everything has to be balanced. We're a very linear family you could say. So the abstract thing wouldn't work at all.

Student 13 points out another consideration in support of a focus on grades:

After this class, it doesn't really matter if you learn anything or not because all that matters is the grade -- whether or not you graduate and get a good job. I'm not saying that's right.

Student 5 really takes exception to the direction class opinion seems to be taking:

I disagree. Going back to the industrial revolution and current education. There's a book called The Fifth Discipline which has to do with businesses and how to help your employees learn; they talk about emergent orders within companies. I would

argue that if you follow the model, the factory, linear model that you mention, and that if you just get your grade, you're going to have to go back and learn new ways of learning. The real world is changing and education hasn't caught up with it. The idea is that the next generation of companies that succeed will be following things that are more along the lines of carrying your own weight and communicating with other people. There will be less focus on the product and more focus on the process that leads to products. How do we work together? How do I fit in and work with others on my team?

Student 5's comments were followed by a general exchange of ideas regarding the current "real world" workplace and what kinds of things are now being expected of employees. In general, it was agreed that the collaborative, interactive learning model is becoming more and more important in the business world and that the kinds of learning experiences that students had in this class would be applicable in the current marketplace.

Student 14, however, wished to re-assert the continuing importance of grades *despite* changes going on in business:

Let's talk for a minute about grading though. When you get out into the world, into the workforce and you're looking for a job, all you have to show to an employer is your GPA. Only that will tell him how smart you are, how well-rounded you are. If grades were not that important then they'd have no bearing on whether or not you got a good job. That isn't the case. I know my Dad, who's a principal, says that your NTE [National Teachers' Exam] score has to be good, and you have to have a 2.8 GPA or better if you want to get a job as a teacher. So about not worrying about grades, I'm sorry; I've got to have my A or my B. Even though classes are built for creative thinking like this class, I know grades are still important if I want to work in the school system. Employers may not know what it means to have a 3.0 or a 3.5 or what went into that, but

it at least proves that you are smart enough to know how to play the game so that you can get that good job.

This student is perfectly right to raise this issue about grades and to express her continuing concern about them. It's quite a legitimate concern as long as it continues to be the case that employers look at things like a student's GPA when considering new hires *even though* they may have no idea whatsoever what went into creating that GPA. We as teachers who wish to institute complex, interactive systems owe it to our students to honor their continuing need not only for assessment (and interactive, conversational pedagogies are assessment rich) but also for traditional grades. Grades, in most cases, continue to be the *product* for which they feel the most concern.

The fact that this face-to-face conversation followed the path that it did from questions and comments regarding what constitutes an *intellectual* experience of learning to an objective, *measured* experience of learning is noteworthy. Not only does measurement continue to *sum up* (no pun intended) the student in terms of meaningful content for parents and employers, it does so for the educational institution as well. Despite our more recent turns to assessment vs. grades, despite the fact that many of us attempt to institute some non-grading policy in our classrooms, we nevertheless (except in rare occasions) *must* end up assigning each student a grade. We *must* at some point measure them and record that measurement no matter what index we use to guide us. As Student 13 remarked, it doesn't really matter what you learned in class when all is said and done -- what counts in the end, or what will be remembered because it is objectively and publically recorded, is the grade. Our system, despite espousing theories to the contrary, treats students as if they are indeed vessels-to-be-filled and then weighed at the end of twelve years of "lower" education and again after four years of higher education.

We writing teachers often like to see ourselves as above all that (despite the institutional imperative to grade). We substitute assessment for grading as long as we can, postponing the inevitable while we expect students to play along with this strategy as if they really can forget the larger pressures brought to bear upon them to achieve the grade as product of their efforts. And even if we don't try some new strategies for grading, current theory in writing instruction in all grades speaks to the importance of writing as genuine communication rather than as a set of skills that can be mastered and then performed for our evaluation in "themes" and essays. I find it a curious and sad irony that our institutions often actively disseminate such theories, encourage staff and students to give papers at conferences that laud such ideas, and send their teachers to these conferences and workshops in order to expose them to this alternative way of viewing writing when the same institutions clearly engage in practices that speak to quite opposite approaches.

Recently, I worked on a project for the state of Ohio which involved evaluating writing proficiency tests administered to all students in grades eight through twelve. Over the course of five weeks, nearly 100 readers assessed 150,000 tests, each with two writing samples per test. In our training sessions, we were drilled in ways to break down each sample of student writing into categories to evaluate separately: content (was there enough writing -- a volumetric consideration), organization, language (were word choices appropriate, predictable or imaginative; did the writer use imagery or simply report), and conventions (grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.). It was quite a challenge on the one hand to be asked to assess a sample "holistically" and on the other hand to be asked to "divide and grade." I remember being often told to ask questions like "do these grammatical errors *impede communication*," "does the child's language *impede communication*," "does the organization *impede communication*." Yet, it was quite

explicit on the level of genuine exchange that communication was irrelevant. Here were 150,000 children, all of whom had been taught as part of Ohio's writing curriculum to write with an audience in mind in order to *communicate*, yet the audience which so carefully poured over these children's papers was not to allow communication to impede their assessments. I can't tell you how many times children, for example ESL students, would communicate with me so beautifully that I was moved to tears, yet I had to deliver failing scores. I can't tell you how many children were trying to say something either to me or to me as part of this assessment system about what they thought of the system, yet I had to ignore that communication just as it was ignored by the whole evaluative hierarchy on up the line. Then, there were those students who were obviously trying to *communicate their pain, their need, their troubles*, yet unless they clearly expressed suicidal intent or disclosed experiences of abuse, these too were explicitly ignored. I could barely tolerate the hypocrisy of the whole situation and I felt it was a terrible tragedy for these children to be told one thing about writing (write to communicate) while the lesson they'd get from experience would directly contradict what they were told. We were surely an audience of some sort, but we were charged by the system with being an un-responsive audience; there was no opportunity for communication. Can we doubt that our institutions themselves ironically create poor, "irresponsible" writers? Where is the *response-ability* in this system? What students take away from experiences like these, which are pervasive experiences, is a combination of cynicism and a reinforcement of the idea that the grade, the evaluation is what counts.

During this face-to-face meeting with the students of ENG102 and ELC381, Bob and I learned that the class had been a *success* in the best sense of the word. Although their anxiety over grades was deeply entrenched, justifiably entrenched considering institutional and social reinforcement, students had learned how learning happens through

interaction with others; they had learned that learning is a process, a messy process; they learned that they had the power to authorize claims, to create, revise, and re-create meaning in collaboration with others. They also learned to question critically the status quo even though, at present, the status quo seems too hardened to change. It is the hope of the teachers and students of ENG102 and ELC381 that continuing efforts to make interactive learning experiences available will gradually lead to a broader change in our current indices of validity.

In the meantime, we take heart in knowing that successfully "play[ing] the game" at school, as Student 14 called it, may involve students finding some way to get genuinely and personally connected to what they're doing in their classwork, and genuinely and personally connected to their colleagues. For people who are really involved, for those that care about what they're doing because their learning projects are intrinsically motivated, there's not much of a way to miss; good grades will most likely follow. We believe, in the wake of our experience, that complexity, interactivity, and *response-ability* have been shown to get students involved and personally connected to the work they're asked to do, and that this connection is ultimately a valid learning experience.

CHAPTER VII
POSTLUDE:
EXPLICIT REFLEXION/IMPLICIT DEVOLUTION¹

It seems to me that we need to talk about what we think is important about the Inter-Course we taught together, when we combined your section of English 102 with my section of Educational Foundations. From my perspective, it seems that the experience took us (you and me as well as our students) "out" to continue our learning -- you found the work of Shotter and Clark, for instance; I found the work of Lather; we talked about Dewey; our students introduced Locke and Hobbes -- and we're still spinning those themes. So I think it's important to note that the class produced tangential or supplementary effects, and that in Derridian fashion these supplements/tangents might be right at the heart of the importance which we felt about what was happening at the time. In a way, we still pursue some of the tangents from the course such that we become an exemplary "answer" to the question we were asked at the Writing Across the Curriculum Conference in Charleston: "don't you need a different sort of time frame to talk about the effects you experienced?"

Yes, we need to have this conversation; we need to see where it leads. In answer to the WAC question, "where it leads" is actually the most important part of the conversational experience all of the time, not to begin with a goal in mind and then to end when that pre-stated goal is reached. Although, for example, we pre-stated goals for our class and we directed them to consider certain issues such as "who should have such

¹In this chapter, Bob's conversational turn appears in regular typeface; my conversational turn appears in italics.

evaluative authority in the classroom," their conversation bucked those pre-imposed constraints.

The most evident tangent to this whole experience, the one that really shines, is the one in which evaluation came into question as an abstraction. In other words, each person had their own interpretive spin on "evaluation" and its value, the authority which claims evaluative power. But, in conversational turn-taking, everyone had an opportunity to get a feel for how complex the issue really is. The conversational exchange de-simplified things. That's the only way liberalization can happen in my book. People always have their own ideas about what the abstract thing means, what value it carries; but, only through interaction can that idea be opened up to other possible meanings and values. What our classes found out is that the whole question is very complex, not nearly so simple as they thought in the first place. Then, in light of the revealed complexity, they were able to be more care-ful in their future dealings with evaluation and authority.

Another really interesting offshoot or tangent was the focus that developed on teacher evaluation. A lot of energy went into that. So much so that I ended up letting my students do a mid-semester evaluation with Professor Roskelly.² I feel that it was critical to make sure that our students' conversation connect to some real effect in order that they see that words do indeed have power to move others to actions, that something could be made to happen by talking about it.

In any case, the conversation pretty much refused the constraints that we originally imposed. What was revealed through it was what happened to be important to

²Professor Roskelly was the Director of Composition during this semester and as such was my direct supervisor, the person to whom I was directly accountable for my classroom practice.

the conversants. What was revealed was the ember of the real. And to open up one's pedagogical practice to that undirectable kind of change/exchange can be scary for a lot of teachers. I'd say it's less scary for compositionists since rhetoric is still the central focus no matter what topic students take up. That's less the case in a "content" course.

But, the life of the conversation is really in the tangents because the goal of conversation is mainly to keep conversation going. This means to me that tangents are absolutely essential. It's almost as if learning, growing, expanding the base of knowledge is a very positive side-effect of conversation. You don't really start with learning/knowledge in mind as a goal; it just happens because it's necessary in order to keep the conversation alive. The kind of "knowledge" that is the goal of conversation, then, is "understanding" -- a richer kind of knowing than is made available in monological models. When you come to see the complexity of issues, you "know" more than you did before.

This is interesting to me to think about the extent to which conversations "go where they will" and the extent to which they have tacit "goals." When two people talk, do you suppose there are always "goals" in play? I remember that when you and I first began our conversations in and about e-mail, which eventually led to our teaching collaboration, my goal was in a way to convince you that I was a worthy conversant.

Still trying to prove myself, I'll go on to say that maybe the bucking of constraints whenever we chose topics for our classes was, in addition to other things, bound up with the fact that our students were more concerned with proving themselves worthy conversants in the eyes of their peers as well as ours than they were concerned with the issue of authority, the issue of multiculturalism, and/or the issue of popular culture (our "assigned" topics). Your comment has made me think about the kinds of tangents

different people took; invariably it seems to me they took those that would allow them to feel the nice feeling of having something to say, of having something to offer almost as if a gift. While I once interpreted their tangents in part as an inability to stay on topic, I am now thinking they might be better thought of as excursions that people took to areas with which they were familiar in order to bring back some "presents," or in order to "present themselves" as worthy to the group.

But I would agree in any case that the conversation bucked at whatever direction we supplied. I remember that one of my fears as a teacher was that the topic would just get swamped, would just disappear. That fear was one of the things that made my own learning real in the situation; I had to honestly consider if the thing was working, and that eventually led to my having to arrive at a coherent statement about our validity index. That really made me work, made me learn, made me articulate things which I hadn't before had a need to articulate.

When you say that the de-simplification process led to adding new levels of complexity to issues which, in turn, led to liberalization, I have to agree. The "turn-taking," as you put it, did exactly what you describe. Their struggle with the authority question was real, and that added intensity. One of the things I remember most about that conversation on authority was the tangent about trust that spun out of it. When it got personal, it really heated up; some people really got incensed that their peers did not trust them to evaluate fairly. This was not an abstract thing; they were actually *in* the authority apparatus, and this provided some spice I think. But anyway, I was taken with the discussion of trust that grew out of the one on authority. And I completely agree with you that we could have said "be care-ful in your dealings with evaluation and authority" in a thousand different ways, with the most eloquent of textual representations and what not,

and it wouldn't have touched the effect that they saw for themselves when they began to *experience* the complexity which you are writing about here.

The conversational tangent that evolved around the issue of teacher evaluation was another interesting example. This one because they were able to have that conversation with us present. They were grousing about a topic that I would bet is most usually only aired at bike racks and in dorm rooms and in other mutterings as the course evaluation forms are passed out in class. You, in effect, extended the reality effect by allowing your students a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to directly relay their feelings to *your* authority figure, your doctoral chairperson and teaching supervisor.

Indeed, the goal of conversation is conversation. Realizing this saves me from falling into a hole I seem to love to dig for myself -- the question put to me when I say I'm in favor of interaction is always "*any* kind of interaction?" I, too, am interested in *any* kind that leads to "richer knowledge than was available on monological models" as you say. Conversational interaction allows this kind of knowledge to emerge *along with* content knowledge.

I don't think we can too strongly stress the importance of conversational goals (the goal is to keep talking, to keep us in relationship with one another). Really, when you think about it, can you imagine what it would be like if we had the ultimate conversation and at the end of it we "solved" everything, we came up with a once-and-for-all consensual answer? There would be no more need to relate! Ideally, the goal of conversation is not just to solve a problem, but to keep people in relationship with one another. Thus tangents are necessary. Like I said, "knowledge" and learning are nice by-products to relating. So, your comment about trying to be a worthy conversant is apropos; it's an acceptance into the conversational fold that we're all looking for. We

want not only to hear, but to be heard and to be taken seriously. We all need that "nice feeling of having something to say," to offer a gift that will be received and reciprocated. The natural place to turn for those "somethings" is personal experience, and this is what we saw evidence of over and over again in the course transcript. There was so much narrative. So much telling of stories.

But there seem to have been places where the conversation went to the very edges of language such that sometimes there was no longer any need to relate *in words*. I remember when we pictured the Japura-against-the-liberals story in which Japura held forth that homosexuality was just plain wrong while others marshaled more liberal arguments. All of the participants "de-simplified" the issue for one another, but at the edge of their talk, they "closed" with a metaphorical handshake (tolerance vs. acceptance). We maybe missed the part about that being a non-verbal communication. So maybe, we are also looking via conversation to get to the edge of the ceaseless buzzing of language and into other terrain?

Yes, that is interesting. These two sides reached a point where they saw self in other and other in self to some degree. They shared a non-verbal handshake which I suppose in this instance was a deep kind of relating beyond words. The area beyond the "ceaseless buzzing of language" is that space at the border between self and other, I think.

This same example also serves to illustrate how important it is for the political to be personal. Until people can insert themselves personally into an issue it can remain "simple" for them and thus "solvable if only everyone would straighten up and see things my way." Although one could get busy and try to "straighten up" those who see things differently, there's not enough heat to get "busy-ness" going. One can just sit back feeling comfortable, self-righteous, or disinterested altogether. In this case, Japura and

his colleagues in dialogue each felt to some degree incensed to find their positions contested, but the contestation forced them to re-visit their positions interactively with those who disagreed such that in the long run they were all "liberalized" -- they all came to see the issue as having more complexity than they'd originally assumed.

The goal of conversation as the languaged social life of humans is to "keep it going," to not finish. Wherever we finish, we lay relationship to rest which is contrary to basic human desire. It's no wonder to me that so many people, even those in college, are outside the loop of academic, scholarly writing. It's just too difficult to experience that kind of writing as conversation, as a living relationship in which the personal and political blend, except in the most remote of metaphorical senses. Take us, for example. Haven't we been through the wildest of textual gyrations to not finish? What's the point in finishing?

Your argument makes "the personal is the political" more than just a slogan we toss around in the academy. Reading your comments against my thinking about education as a cultural phenomenon, I can say that the insertion of the personal becomes, in a way, the *technology of complexity* in that through this fairly simple inclusion/insertion many other things are made possible. This is pretty much what Dewey had in mind; he felt that if schools were like societies, complete unto themselves and without exclusions, then the education would more or less take care of itself without much worry. Adults/teachers were still necessary for guidance, as they are in any society, but need not be the central figures at all times. By removing the personal/social from school, a situation is set up wherein a lot of things have to be technologized. The personal has to be ventriloquized. This reminds me of how I spent my undergraduate years figuring out how I could *produce myself* through reading novels, philosophy, psychology. If I had just been conversing with

others, I think I would have gotten much further along, both in terms of growing up and in terms of learning about literature, philosophy, and psychology, etc. By disallowing the insertion of the personal, a disallowance that is structured in almost all institutional practices, text practices, and so forth, we in effect consign school to being fairly simple, and thus promote "simple solutions."

This is a long way of saying that I agree with you. I think the conversational pedagogy we used *did* allow the insertion of the personal, and in a way that's all we had to do other than HANG ON since it's a different kind of ride once the complexity cat is out of the bag.

Maybe it's just me, but it's not been good enough for me to just nod my head when someone says "the personal is the political," understanding it only on an abstract kind of level. In the conversation as we look back on it, you can see again how when the abstraction is enacted, the ember of the real glows more brightly. The ventriloquization of self, the removal of the personal from the political and vice versa, that happens in traditional education does, as you suggest, require us to "throw our voices" into ossified forms (writing monologues, memorizing facts, mastering material, taking tests, giving the "correct" response) in order to create the illusion that the dummy talks while we remain dumb. There seems to be a great deal more effort going into the production of illusion in the academy than into authentic learning. I'm not saying that conversing alone will do. One still has to read, write, follow assignments, listen to lectures, etc., yet the conversation, if it is allowed to become a central focus, makes the reading, etc., become more necessary because the experiences one brings from the reading or from the lesson back to the talk serves a real communicative purpose. Thus, I'd say that education and

learning would be worlds easier and more enjoyable if we weren't institutionally ventriloquized.

But one of the problems with inviting students to really reinsert the personal into the political and vice versa is that it causes a lot of fear. I think that what is feared most is that our "simple solutions" will necessarily be dismissed. Genuine liberalization can be a scary process for educators as well because, in its truest sense, it means that they themselves have to be open to the changes the process may bring about in their own world views.

Yes, in this kind of model, educators themselves have to be willing to be intoxicated by the process, willing to lose some control, willing to lose their/our ground in order to move to higher ground.

And I suppose that Dewey would say that this fear is completely understandable when you think of education as the kind of cultural phenomenon put into place precisely for transmitting the past as static, tried-and-true knowledge.

Part of my excitement about computers is that they can do what Dewey couldn't. No amount of Deweyan convincing could ever get people over those fears you speak of, but the computer can and does because it operates at the level of viscera, not argument. In other words, much of what is locked up in the "tried and true" is a mass-industrial approach. Dewey had impossible odds because he operated in the heart of the industrial era. Our odds are much better. The computer has finally made Dewey hearable/bearable. But he's now being "heard" at the level of sub-vocal speech. For example, the Internet replaces content with connection, which old-school folks really hate (the complaint I hear

most often is about the proliferation of "junk" on the e-wires), but which makes a great deal of sense in a de-academicized environment. Maybe the point becomes the ecstasy of connection, not truth -- or maybe the point becomes truth-as-ecstasy. If McLuhan's theory of technology is right, we have at this point almost rendered logical thinking peripheral through technologizing it. This leaves us with what? If we no longer have to think logically all the time, we can now think mystically; we can focus on connecting: to ourselves, each other, and the planet/god/goddess. True to our tool-using second natures, we are doing this via technology.

Maybe what the Internet makes explicit is the fact that we're now in a model that requires that we construct or make meaning one way or another. If the Net is clogged with junk, we have no one to thank but ourselves. Better get busy.

It's not that computers can do what Dewey couldn't; it's just that it enables the doing of what he advocated in a very immediate way. It's like the difference between us doing our work on cuneiform tablets and our using a typewriter. And, argument is visceral. Always. It's just that the way we've been teaching argument and communication has so far objectified the experience that it's almost impossible to feel the visceral, connection to real others. So, I would caution against saying that what goes on here is entirely new. It is, however, entirely "faster," and thus gives us the capability of returning to fundamental levels of experience.

The Internet, to me, provides both connection and content, and that's why we like it. It's the same argument I was making before about what knowledge actually is. Increasing the connection means increasing the content.

Indeed. I think we are explorers in the truest sense; we may be right on the edge of where we need to go in terms of energizing the kinds of desires that make people want to stay alive; and in a cultural sense I think that may be the only hope for saving the planet and ourselves. Lecturing won't do it, at least not alone.

As for the "focus" of the Inter-Course, that's difficult. We could say in order to catch the reflexivity that was a part of our work in the fall of 1994, that "focus" was part of the "focus" of the class. Questions we kept to the fore were "what should we be looking at; how should we be looking (together, singly), what are the limits to this approach to learning." To have this conversation about the Inter-Course conversation, we begin a journey to a place where everything was in motion. We are/were in it. It is/was reflexive. It is/was about learning. It is/was about communicating. It's the conversation itself that ends up keeping the journey smooth.

Along these lines, part of what Dewey was contemplating was a major shift toward dynamic foundations, a move away from the time-honored thought-picture of knowledge as a fixed, anchored building with static foundations and towards imaging stability and knowledge more on a psychological/biological model where stability often involves flexibility, mobility, etc. In a way the shift is from anatomical/architectural metaphors to physiological/biological metaphors (i.e., stability in biological systems is related to interactions, relationships, adaptive abilities, change and growth). Conversation energizes this shift.

I think that almost all of the students in this class rose to the challenge of operating in a condition of dynamic foundations or moving pictures. There was a lot of complaining, especially in the beginning, and mostly about having to deal with computer technology, but everyone seemed willing to give it a try. In looking back, I wonder how

much of this is simply another example of "doing what the teacher expects" in a relatively uncritical way. What's your take on that?

I think the conversational model creates an *inside/outside* complexity. It think it's unavoidable that students will figure out what the game is and then play it. No matter what we do as teachers, we can't get *outside* of the fact that this is an institution which is in effect set up to encourage students to do what the teacher expects. But at the same time, the conversational approach puts the personal into the mix; something more is at stake when people are being public with their rhetoric and thoughts. So no matter what might be done by students, they are still *inside* the process; their participation, or their lack of participation, or their cynical participation, is very revealing of who they are and what they really think.

What can, and for me *did*, get exciting was that we were able to feed some of this personal complexity back into the system/conversation, such that towards the end of the course there were times in class when students weren't allowing other students to hide, weren't allowing students to disavow their own rhetoric. My sense was that by the end of the course we were for the most part interacting as people, i.e., as people who also happened to be students or also happened to be teachers, but as people who were a whole lot more than either of those two roles. The conversational model not only mirrors real life, but *is* real life. It just happens to be taking place in school (again, just as Dewey would have it). So again, it's *inside/outside*.

The conversational model becomes more than a mere exercise not only because the people become available to one another through the evidence of the rhetorical expressions, but also because the rules of the game become available to critique as part of the conversation when the conversation itself is foregrounded. In traditional model,

monological model education, topics are placed in the center and parts of the conversation, such as the rules of the games, are *redlined*, placed out of bounds, backgrounded, in order to make sure the topics are covered.

By foregrounding conversation, topics are *covered* (I think we experienced this approach as an effective and thorough means of addressing topics) and the rules of the games, and central tangents and connections are also uncovered. For example, I think we experienced conversation spilling out into a healthy questioning of institutional power arrangements without having to prompt it. Your class did that unanticipated mid-term course evaluation in part because the students uncovered a particular up-close-and-personal question of institutional politics which intersected with our more general conversation about evaluative authority. In other word, things grew out of the conversational model which were unerringly pertinent to the topics being addressed, and in that sense the model promoted both the covering and the uncovering of topics and discursive parameters/rules. Inside/outside.

A couple of points here. First, Bob, I think that your pointing out that we created an inside/outside complexity is very apropos. Specifically, I felt that students had a hard time getting "inside" the issue (grading/authority) by having to do it instead of hear about it as in a traditional lecture class. The complexity of the displaced, unique, learning space of "inside" made it seem not like learning, but like administrative activity instead. I recall some students complaining because they felt they were being asked to take care of "details" that you and I should have had worked out before the semester began as if "details" are not somehow the subject of a "from the outside," traditional class. In our class, they had to enact the details from the inside.

Second, in regards to the conversational model, you say that something more is at stake when people are having to air their views in public. Now, let's look for how that airing was different in our class than it is in a good "discussion" class. There's plenty of airing views publicly in a lot of classes. The thing I see as a difference was that our airing was in text so that we could really look at what we said and what others said in a much more critical fashion. I called this the exercise of meta-rhetorical skills.

But we're so trapped into mere exercise educational models that we don't have good indices of validity for what happens in the conversational classroom. What's the long term value of all the foregrounding and making available of people and rhetorical expression? It was fun; but was it "worth it?" Would you say that more was learned because of the "uncovering" we did? A teacher in a single semester in a traditional class could not cover a topic with the same degree of complexity and comprehensiveness as we did in this conversational class. But, I still want to know whether or not the students saw it as learning by the end of the semester, or did it sink in later on (or not at all).

What you say here speaks to me of the fact that all of education is driven by assessment. Whether this is a classic case of putting the cart before the horse is something we probably need to talk about. In part, my inclination is to say that the kinds of things we saw and participated in during our Inter-Course ought to be the measure by which *other* pedagogical models are judged. But it may be that as long as there is a strong imperative to assess or measure (which means in part to assess or measure individuals), we will have to deal with it. In one sense monological educational forms are perhaps necessary in a system that requires that individuals be assessed individually. The deep point in this hermeneutic is the cultural idea, much taken for granted, that salvation is an individual affair. Even for people in our culture who are only nominally religious, it seems

to me the pull of monologism is strong enough to cause the move to write dialogically to be felt as a sort of low vibration rattling the entire cultural edifice, based as that edifice is on a singular God, individual rather than group salvation, and salvation based upon received rather than socially constructed truth.

I believe it's possible to assess dialogical writing and dialogical learning. But, one must be looking at the process more than at the product, relying somewhat on faith that when students engage authentically in process, in dialogue, that the quality of the product will naturally follow along. One of the interesting things I did in my class the semester following Inter-Course was to not give grades. I did, however, do extensive assessing. I read my students' dialogues and their monologues (essays) and I commented on them in depth. I just didn't give grades. Curiously, not one single student ever even asked about or fretted about grades. No one came forward to ask "what's my grade." One reason for this, I think, is that they were so involved in the ongoing textual conversation, the process. And, in many ways, my assessment comments must surely have implied what grade I'd have given them if called to the task.

To make a short story long, I think it's possible to engage in dialogism and still assess students. It's just that what gets assessed is their commitment to the process. It would be a very interesting project to teach ENG101 using a pedagogy of conversation, displacing the essay as centerpiece of the course, then follow up those same students in a traditional ENG102 class to see if they were any more or any less "traditionally" competent than their traditionally taught peers. Now here's a grant to write!

I think that there are some genuine religio-philosophical underpinnings to the general issue of assessment/evaluation in our culture as well. Martin Buber speaks to this issue, too, when he delineates the "attitudes of men" as falling into a "We-Them"

orientation. We, the right (teachers and students who earn the good grades) -- Them, the wrong (students who fail to make good grades). We, the saved -- Them, the condemned. The sheep and the goats. This We-Them orientation is precisely the orientation of monologic texts no matter how much lip-service we give to text-as-dialogue. It's not possible to grasp that as a metaphor if we don't let it live somehow in reality. What we as teachers in classes with traditional curricula end up doing is forcing students into the We-Them stance so that we can grade and evaluate their products -- tests, essays, etc. -- and then we let this sum up the learning experience.

Maybe the fix on grades goes both ways: students *and* teachers both need to be unhooked from the emphasis on product. Postponing grading, if that works (as it does according to the mores and lore of the practitioner community), constitutes a *good*. Creating environments in which the focus on product seems to be subverted, if that works, is also *good*.

It makes sense to me to assess students' commitment to the process because if it's evident that there is no commitment present, then there is an opening to meaningful conversation around the question "well, then, why are you here" rather than around some pretense or some meaningless question about whether or not that student who is obviously not interested will be able to "pull a C." Because schools, even colleges, are coercive environments in the sense that students often feel that they *have to* be here, a focus on process at least allows the possibility that some students will conclude that they do *not* have to be here -- at least not now; they can always come back later.

I had one such conversation with a student this past semester. I basically said that it seemed to me there was little evidence that she was involved in the process of the class. Instead of stringing the situation out, she told me that she preferred courses with more

structure by way of explaining her lack of involvement. This gave me the opportunity to say that it was most important that she got what the course had to offer in a way that she could appreciate it and take it in. So, she dropped, and I think for both of us, and for the class, this was a very positive outcome (product). What I am getting at here is that maybe we create a false dilemma when we contrast process and product overmuch. Maybe it's better to talk about how the product(s) we are aiming at are different, and about how monologic processes are processes all the same, but not ones that allow us to produce the particular products we desire to produce. We're not saying that we don't have a concern with product; we are saying that we don't think grading constitutes a good product -- defined as a product which fairly sums up learning. We are saying that dialogical methods produce good products -- defined as products which are open-ended and non-reductive.

The problem heretofore with Dewey is that there just weren't enough Deweys to carry out the kinds of ideas he promoted. And again, it's here that the computer steps into the breach; the textual conversation which electronic media now makes possible *does* enable a kind of recording and managing and/or evaluating of conversational interactivity that is somewhat less daunting than trying to be another Dewey without technological help.

Otherwise, I think many teachers beg off what you are arguing because 1) their students won't pass the end of year test if they "do Dewey" (this is the K-12 cop out), or 2) they can't afford the class time for Deweyan discussion (this is the higher ed. cop out). Well, the lowly computer doesn't allow either cop out because kids can learn to read, write, and all sorts of other things as they converse using computers. And older kids can hone academic skills as well as socialize outside of traditional class time now quite early if instructors set up electronic conferences to allow for it.

In other places, you have written about how much of academia is defined by "the essay." In my interpretation, you argue that the imperative to write essays in effect drives much of what goes on in the academy, practically and politically. What I'm saying is that your focus on the essay might find a good counterpart here in a focus on the computer. There is a curious play here: the subjective essay becomes an object; the objective computer becomes (as in "that dress becomes you) a subject. You could argue that the computer is replacing the essay as the technology of choice, the central technology of academe. What Dewey perhaps couldn't defeat, after all, was the technology of the essay. In other words, that measly thing which drives all of the other things he seems to despise although he probably didn't see it as his central obstacle. Anyway, it seems that people, traditional academics, are about to be blindsided by the use of computers as much as Dewey was by the use of the essay. This again calls attention to the need for an adequate theory of technology in curriculum/educational theorizing.

That process of theorizing is obviously now being played out even as we speak. We both know that there are great theoretical differences, for example, between people who welcome technology into the classroom, writing about it with great enthusiasm and zeal, and those who fear it, arguing that in the long run technology will do nothing but drive us into further isolation from one another as human beings. In both cases, and in all those that lie between, some kind of theory is, of course, already at play. People are making decisions and are putting practices into play in the classroom based upon their theories of what will work, what will fail, and what the long term implications of both will have on themselves and their students. Whether or not these theories are well-articulated or even well-supported by evidence is another thing altogether.

As in all else, I have to go on my own willingness to try new things and then to base further decisions on experience. Based on experience, then, my "theory" is that electronic communication will not drive us into further human isolation but will afford us new opportunities for connection, community, and responsible interaction. We both know just from this one class that disembodied talk can lead to embodied relationship -- our students from time to time actually did decide to meet, to socialize face-to-face. These are people who otherwise would not have met. I've experienced the same thing in my own personal dealings with others on the net. At this year's CCCCs conference, I shared lodging with a woman I'd met on the net, participated in a forum with people I met and worked with on the net, and socialized with a number of others I'd met the same way. So, from my own experience, I have to say that electronic communication has great potential for bringing us closer together. The implication for the classroom is that we won't be creating solipsistic monsters who avoid all human contact.

But beyond theorizing about what won't happen, I want to theorize about what will happen. And what will happen is that communication, and writing in particular, will come to have greater real (meaning "practical") significance in the lives of our students. Through this medium, they will come to experience that which heretofore we've only been able to teach theoretically. And, I see a real qualitative difference between what we can get students to know intellectually or theoretically and what we can get them to know experientially.

In the long run, I would say that I entered into the technological "experiment" with a theory based upon personal experience and that this "experiment" bore out that theory. As practitioner inquiry, the project was a success. Because the practical results were so positive, I would not hesitate to use similar pedagogical approaches in future

classes (as I indeed have done). As a matter of fact, I can hardly imagine teaching writing again using the traditional, monological approach.

I see the net as having a *set* of educational potentials and I'm convinced that we got a good taste of what's possible there when we taught the Inter-Course. But, to be honest with you, I'm more excited by the *social* potentials of the net, and particularly for the potential for people to have choices in what kinds of conversations they engage in to educate themselves. You could, for example, choose to spend time having conversations on chat lines in which the purpose of the talk is to get in touch with your own self; that would be a completely different kind of conversation than one you would have about the meanings of texts. Not that the latter is bad. Rather that it has pretty much monopolized the market on what it means to have a *serious* conversation. It has monopolized because academic institutions are so rooted in the mono-logic that we challenged in our course. Mono-logic is still the organizational principle, even when pedagogy is dialogical; but this, I think will have to change.

I personally think that there are good dialogical ways in which to talk about texts but they will involve having to abandon our control of knowledge as a pre-formed product that we can pass on from ourselves to our students. We can control, for example, the fact that we're going to study Frankenstein. But we can no longer control what people will end up "knowing" about that text at the end of the course. Our own "knowledge" must be made subject to question and to change.

I do agree, however, that things are pretty much still organized around the monological model. The ultimate display of proficiency is the monological text. This will,

I believe, change. I think people like you and me are taking some responsibility for that change every time we write dialogically or invite our students to write dialogically.

Schools will either have to hunker down and become conservatories (for example, what has happened with music) or they will have to get with being, at least in large part, net mediated. I can only imagine that IRCs³ will become much more important during the coming decade. Maybe they'll eventually take over some of the space when dorms are no longer functional because students can more easily academi-commute.

The net will still be a writing based medium, though, even when pictures, sound, and video become common, so this is good news for people such as yourself who are good at helping people with developing their writing, communication, and reasoning skills. It's just that schools will have to acquire a new concept of how much they can control content in society, just as we had to on a smaller scale as teachers in our own classroom and just as you allude to when you say that we can control what is studied but not what is "known."

Working with electronic technology in our teaching clearly did not turn us or our students into machine-assisted solipsists. Our experience showed us, to the contrary, that computers can be social tools. Not that there aren't some other, perhaps unanticipated problematics to be attended to such as showing people how to integrate electronically mediated experience with face-to-face experience. It may be that what we set up also helped people establish skills in something like large scale integrations (i.e., rhetorical self/face-to-face self), or at least pointed to the need for that kind of skills teaching. We

³Departments of instructional research and computing.

may see, again good news for you, that rhetoric re-acquires its place at the center of the whole academic endeavor in whatever shape the academy has.

I'm pretty comfortable with your visionary speculations, but I realize that this is precisely the kind of thing that really scares administrators and traditionalists of all sorts. Even those who would be receptive to technology in the classroom may be scared off by the kind of prophetic talk about radically different ways of organizing institutional and social life. I don't think I'm the hopeless ostrich with its head in the ground in this respect, but I'm perfectly happy to limit my theorizing and enthusiastic promotion of technology to the area with which I'm familiar: teaching writing. Of course, as an "institution of education" scholar, you'd have different agendas. I think it makes perfect sense, considering the different disciplines in which we were schooled (me in English rhetoric and composition and you in educational leadership and cultural foundations) that we each find different things about electronic communication exciting. In either case, it's good to be excited about these things and to have the courage to put our theories and enthusiasms into practice.

And, for us rhetoricians the news is indeed good. Since we are language beings and since the electronic medium is text dependent, I predict that our discipline will be considerably strengthened by ensuing shifts to conversational, multilogical communication.

I think it's good that we don't all put our enthusiasms in the same place, good that some of us work outside the walls, others inside the walls, still others working the walls themselves -- taking some down, building other ones. Inside/outside.

Precisely. And I think work in all of those areas is inevitable because the technology is here and its increasing use is also inevitable. So, change will not come only from inside or outside or within the walls themselves. Change will come through the concerted efforts of those working each in their own place and through the connections that some of those people are able to make with each other as they pioneer this new frontier.

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