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ABSTRACT

With each technological advancement--telephone, automobile, television, and modem--people gain convenience, efficiency, and speed; they lose immediacy, real as opposed to virtual community, and physicality. At a writer's computer conference, journal writers who have used a diary with a lock and key to keep writings private wonder how to reconcile this with a posting on an electronic conference, which can be transformed into hard copy at any time by anyone at the conference with a simple press on the "print screen" button. Many college teaching assistants also have discussions about their discomfort with assigning the "personal essay," knowing that the perception of their students is that the more "gory" the paper, the higher the grade. Important questions can be raised about the ethics of either requiring or encouraging such personal revelation copy from students, with concern about the vulnerability this produces, especially in female students. (CR)

Issues of Difference in Hypertext and Networked Discussion

"The Electronic Diary: The Technologization of the Personal"

Daphne Desser

Paper Presented at the 1995 Conference on College Composition and Communication

My relationship to technology, mush like the age old battle of the sexes, is oftem characterized by ambivalence, desire, struggles over turf, expression, and positioning. As a woman, I am told, I am more likely to be computer phobic, more likely to distrust technology, often more concerned with the losses involved in technological gains.

Agreed: with each technological advancement; telephone, automobile, television, and modem we paradoxically simultaneously "make the world a smaller place" and increase the distance between us. We gain convenience, efficiency, speed. We lose immediacy, real as opposed to virtual community, physicality.

If I am to believe the essentialists, then I can trust that I am not alone in my feelings of ambiguity, that women have long been more suspicious of progress that leaves individuality, the unique, the imperfect behind. I can speak for myself at least; during my first experience with a writer's computer conference, I mourned the loss of paper, the telltale expressions of human handwriting, the end of a clear distinction between composition and conversation.

Would I now give up the convenience of my e-mail to return to the joy of finding a colored envelope in my mailbox, the wrm comfort

in recognizing an old friend's handwriting, the sensual pleasure of taking pen to paper at a small table as the afternoon light turns to dusk? No.

But there are times when I stare at my generic computer screen, the letters so regularized, the setting so clinical, the feeling of punching keys on the keyboard so mechanical, that i feel a moment of loss at how detached from the physical world and each other we've become.

Unfortunately, I have not yet found a way to respond to my nostalgia for a more real, physical form of communication without burying my head in the sand. My discomfort with technology reminds me of my struggles with academic prose, and I am still searching for ways of making both more comfortable. Some feminist rhetoricians suggest the inclusion of "the personal" as a way to make academic writing more relevant to women's experiences. I recently had the serendipitous opportunity to examine simultaneously my ambivalences toward technology and my feelings about the impact on women of encouraging "personal" writing. In my first experience with computer conferencing, we, as graduate students in Rhetoric, were required to post weekly journal entries under the designation "personal j.," to stand for personal journals.

I am a lifelong journal writer; my first diary was a small brown book with blank pages, and significantly, a lock and a key. The understood implication of the lock is that diary writing is the most private of all communications, so much so that audience is not only considered, it is locked out.

How then, I wondered, was I to reconcile my years of private

musings, interspersed with poetry and the recording of dreams, sketches, and doodles, quotes from favorite authors, remembrances from significant conversations, with a posting on an electronic conference where the medium was so impersonal and the audience so immediate? For the irony of electronic writing, as we all discover soon enough, is its deceptive privacy. Because the writer composes alone on his/her computer, it is easy to be fooled into a feeling of privacy. Words appear as rapidly and smoothly as one's ideas, quickly reformulated and changed. The process is seductive, since the audience seems removed, absent. The reality, however, is that the writing is neither private nor malleable, since it can be transformed into hard copy at any time by anyone on the conference with a simple press on the "print screen" button.

What happened in this particular course was an escalation of the personal, so that by the end the entries were sometimes highly confessional in nature with no bearing on the required reading. I began to wonder what the purpose of these entries was. Venting? Therapy? I did not feel similarly compelled to discuss my private life, and I wondered what were my responsibilities as a student to respond.

Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Stamler raise some important questions about the ethics of either requiring or encouraging personal revelation copy from our students. "Students beleive that the papers that receive the highest grades are those detailing highly emotional events or those that display the most drama." (Swartzlander, 3). Many teaching assistants have discussions about their discomfort with assigning "the personal essay," knowing

that the perception of their students is often that the more "gory" the paper, the higher the grade.

Janice Hayes is similarly concerned about the vultnerability of students who are encouraged to write about personal experiences, and she sees the female student as being potentially in the most precarious position. She uses Belenky, Goldberger, Clinchy and Tarule's identifications of women's cognitive developmental stages to further understand these dynamics. She is particularly interested in the impact on the "subjective knowers," i.e. a "woman who thinks from a perspective from which truth and knowledge are personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited." (Hayes, 15).

She argues that "in some writing classes it is appropriate to use material for the course's content, and students' experiences can be a rich source of data, provided a climate of safety has been established. However, many subjective knowers will not wish to disclose their often painful experiences to peers although they may comfortably share more neutral material. They may want to write about conflicted events in a paper that only the instructor reads or in their journals, and indeed, for the subjective knower the journal comes into its own as a site for constructing meaning." (26-27) For many years, women have recorded, in journals and in secret, instances of physical abuse, loneliness, and sexual betrayal. It is important that in our fervor for technological improvement, we do not allow this once safe place for women to be invaded. How much more would the dynamics of personal revelation be exacerbated when the personal essay takes the form of group conferencing?

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