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ABSTRACT

Just as the spoken word, virtual discourse in the listserv-assisted composition class unites the writer and the audience into a group. On-line writing takes the form of dialogue, and the reading of the on-line text does not shatter the audience but gathers them into collectivity. Since writing on the listserv is less rule-governed, students are free of bounds of grammar, syntax, or style, and they perform more like speakers than writers. On-line writing reshapes invention from private individual process into a collaborative one and restructures the teacher-student relationship. On weekly journal postings, students exchange thoughts, for instance, on their preliminary ideas for topics for writing assignments. This transparency between students' minds and projects helps the teacher to anchor the writing process and modify pedagogical strategies. The transparency of metaconversations indeed transforms the artificiality of technology into second nature and provides additional environments for better teaching and learning. (CR)

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**Students' Conversations We Have Never Heard:
Transparencies on the Listserv**

Plato associated writing to death and condemned writing as
inhuman, thing-like, and memory weakening (Walter Ong 81 1982).
This is because he could not imagine that a twentieth-century
writing community on the listserv is almost as responsive as his
interlocutors. The written word on metaconversations is almost
real like the natural spoken word: real speech and thought exit
in a context of give-and-take between real persons (Ong 79).
Actually, on-line writing espouses traditional orality in which
"the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests
human beings to one another as conscious interiors" (Ong 74).
Just as the spoken word, virtual discourse in listserv-assisted
composition class unites the writer and the audience into a
group. On-line writing takes the form of dialogue, and the
reading of the on-line text does not shatter the audience but
gather them into collectivity. Writing is no longer an
"autonomous" or "detached" discourse from the author who cannot
be "directly questioned or contested" (Ong 78). Virtual writers
can be reached and challenged. The discourse takes two-way

directions--manifesting interiors of both the writer and the reader. Thus reading and writing are no longer private, isolated activities; they involve exchanges and interactions. This way metaconversations make thinking and writing processes transparent.

Based on Ong's contrastive descriptions of the spoken word and writing in his Orality and Literacy, I will address the impact of computer technology on mental process in writing and teaching. According to Ong, writing as a technology manifests two major features, separation of the word from the living present due to a void of sound and artificiality because of articulable rules (82). However, electronic writing in my class soundlessly associates the living experience to the word and to a large degree transforms students' writing consciousness. Since writing on the listserv is less rule-governed, students are free of bounds of grammar, syntax, or style, and they perform more like speakers than writers. The interiorized writing spontaneously mixes with a newly-mastered, more advanced technology and is displayed in turn through textualization. Consequently, metacorrespondence in many ways transforms traditional rhetoric of teaching and learning. In this brief discussion, I will limit myself to two issues of listserv-assisted writing class. First, on-line writing reshapes invention from private, individual process into a collaborative

one. Secondly, it restructures teacher-student relationship. As a result, teaching and learning become interdependent and reflective.

Traditionally, invention is considered a secluded individual mental performance. But on cyberspace, the performance of this rhetorical office becomes communal and interactive. On weekly journal posting students in my class share their repertoire for *topoi* and exchange thoughts. While searching for a topic for a writing assignment, students would post their preliminary thoughts on the listserv. Writing about their ideas and choices help them share memories, fulfillment, and frustrations. For example, one of my assignments was a narrative on personal writing experience. One student thought that this experience was the least significant aspect of his life. Racking his brain for a topic, he was trying (unconsciously) to dig out some fragments of his writing history: "From the start of my English classes in 7th grade, my writing has progressed one step at a time. With each new teacher, I learned a new writing skill, and a better means of expressing myself through my writing . . . Even studying the art of poetry has raised the level of my writing." However, he was troubled by the boredom of his topic that might not convey an "exotic replica" of his writing history. To extricate him from this dilemma, one respondent posted, "I understand where you are

coming from[,] seeing how I had a hard time picking out a really unusual or enlightening writing experience . . . I guess my advice would be to think hard, maybe about one of the times you read a poem and really understood it or something. I think a general overview would be interesting too as long as you gave lots of detailed examples." It is by means of these informal, less rule-constrained interchanges that students converse and think together. By virtually and collaboratively working out their topics, writers retrieve their thoughts from dialectical and visual contours (Cf. Ong 96). Unlike traditional composers with pen and paper whose thinking process is private and opaque to others, metawriters disclose the innermost correlated thoughts in dialogue. Writers and readers are intimately gathered into a unity. Members cooperate and collaborate to escalate interiorization of technology which in turn enhances their consciousness (See also Ong 82).

This transparency between students' minds and projects help the teacher to anchor the writing process and modify pedagogical strategies. Usually in a traditional composition classroom the writing process is compartmentalized into several steps. Students fulfill each step under teacher's mentoring. The teacher sees only semi-products or final products but usually has no sense of what students must go through emotionally and strategically in order to produce those products. For example,

in a traditional classroom, how much do we know about students' reactions to our assignments? How do they feel about writing conferences? Almost none. In fact, we don't have any knowledge or understanding of what is going on in our students' minds during the writing process except drafts and finished products. But along with the flux of metaconversations the teacher is exposed to a team of voluntary critics ready with feedback.

One semester, I designed a sequence of three writing assignments. Basically, those papers should address the same topic from different perspectives and to different audiences. In other words, this assignment required students to envision a long-term project composed by three papers on a common topic. On the list, many students expressed their interest in the complexity of the project but mental fatigue at a repeated topic. Thanks to those comments and suggestions, my modified assignments worked better with later classes. The listserv also enables me to discover students' innermost feelings for the teacher whom they perceive as the authority on their writing. This discovery is amusing, somewhat fearful, but beneficial. One student said, "I am going in tomorrow to have my paper read. I doubt she'll like it much . . . She'll probably write all over the thing." His portrait of me conveys a dreadful picture of a writing teacher. I could almost see myself sweating over students' papers, tearing them apart. Unpleasant as his comments, only

transparencies on the listserv can give us this insight. Although I was happy to hear "She is easy to talk to," or "my paper became much much better than my first draft since I had the conference," it is rewarding to me who have to confront discomfoting thoughts rather than to be excluded from the community. In addition, this message might have expressed a general anxiety among many students before writing conferences. Although many students think conferences are helpful, almost all of them virtually sighed a relief after the session. It is students' straightforward opinions on the listserv that revitalize writing activities and to a large degree influence their instructor's perspectives on teaching and the relationship with them. In this sense, teaching and learning are interdependent and facilitated even when we are away from the actual classroom.

Ong predicts, "the new technology is not merely to convey the critique: in fact it brought the critique into existence" (80). What he says is happening in the virtual classroom. Writing and reading on the listserv give life to the text and the writing process. Since computer technology connects the writer and the reader at a speed almost comparable to sound, it shortens the distance between them, thus challenging the writer in a "reachable" space within limited time. Had Plato known how interactive and influential writing can be on metal process, he

might have withdrawn his criticism of writing. The transparency of metaconversations indeed transforms the artificiality of technology into our second nature and provides additional environments for better teaching and learning.

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