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ABSTRACT
         Two writing teachers designed a graduate-level seminar where
other writing teachers could share writing with the global electronic
community. They expected these seminar students to embrace this new
technology because the benefits of Internet writing seemed to provide a
practical way to promote audience, voice, and collaboration, three of the
basic tenets of the process movement in writing instruction. What the
instructors found instead was resistance, fear, and uncertainty. The graduate
seminar was designed around the basic idea that students would write a series
of papers for publication on the Internet. What actually happened was that
the students (seasoned writing instructors who had little experience with
computer classrooms and even less experience with the Internet) distrusted
the notion of writing for an unknown audience and resisted sharing their own
personal work with the world. There was no establishment of an on-line
community and the instructors' desire for a global discourse never
materialized. The instructors worried initially that the students were being
constrained by fear and distrust of the Internet: they now understand that
these are ethical considerations that teachers must address in seeking to
make Internet technologies a part of the classroom. Contains 10 references.
(RS)

ED 429 305

Behind the Black Veil: Fear, the Internet, and Teaching Composition

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"Hereafter there shall be no veil over my face, no darkness between our souls! It is but a mortal veil--it is not for eternity!" (Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Minister's Black Veil," 1198)

When a student writes a paper, who reads it? The teacher, certainly. Maybe a friend or a parent or a peer review group. Most student papers don't reach a wider audience. After all, schools don't have money for large publishing runs. Enter the Internet, where any paper can be published and reach an unlimited number of readers. This should be an English teacher's dream: a real audience for student writing, a place for creativity and individual voice, and low cost copies.

With these benefits in mind, we designed a course where writing teachers could share writing with the global electronic community. We expected these teachers to embrace this new technology because the benefits of Internet writing seemed to provide a practical way to promote audience, voice, and collaboration, three of the basic tenets of the process movement in writing instruction, tenets so far only partially realized in most writing classrooms. What we found instead was resistance, fear, and uncertainty, what we call the composition teacher's black veil.

Our essay will tell two stories: the story of the class we planned and the story of the class that took place. We designed a graduate seminar around this basic idea: students would write a series of papers for publication on the Internet. By publishing their papers on the web, the students would be forced to reconsider audience, voice, and collaboration. This seemed like the

CS216654

perfect way to teach doctoral students how to make use of the Internet in their own classrooms.

That's the way we planned it. What happened was this: The students didn't like the idea. They distrusted the notion of writing for an unknown, uncontrolled audience. While they wanted their students to gain the collaborative benefits of the Internet, they resisted sharing their own personal work with the world. While they spoke of the positive benefits of technology, they feared their students' knowledge would exceed their own, thus rendering them useless and vulnerable to a changing educational environment. While they thought using the web was a good idea, they were uncertain what it would change their classrooms into. For these students, change brought fear, a fear that they would no longer be the experts in their own classrooms.

The class that we planned:

The writing portfolio movement of the early 1970's promoted a significant change in the process of writing instruction. According to Elbow and Belanoff (1991), portfolios send a message "to students about the richness and multiplicity of writing as a process ("State," 16)." In another article, Elbow and Belanoff explain that using portfolios in composition classes shifts students' view of the activity of writing as solitary work to a more collaborative, communal activity ("Using," 1991).

The central issue here is the limitation when students view writing as simply an activity done for the teacher. Mills-Courts and Amiran (1991) assert that we underestimate students' abilities when we ask them to "turn in papers that are purely passive responses to what 'the teacher wants to hear'" (107). The portfolio movement suggested that writing teachers needed to

find ways to make writing a more socially meaningful activity, so students could learn to view writing as a communicative act with a wide range of readers. While the use of the portfolio managed to alter the notion of audience, voice, and collaboration in student texts it still limited that socially meaningful activity to the physical limitations of the individual institution. While portfolios may be shared with other teachers and students at one institution, they are rarely circulated outside of that institution. This means that the readers of portfolios tend to be of the same geographic, cultural, and economic background, thus limiting the range of readers a student can write for.

With this limited range of audience the promise of portfolios was never fully realized -- until the introduction of the Internet. Through this new medium there is now the potential for collaboration among academic institutions, both local and global. Our excitement over the prospect of empowering students to consider and engage in a global dialogue fueled the design of our course. The challenge of writing for such a diverse public audience cuts the safety net of the controlled classroom writing environment. With this uncertainty of audience the student faces potential challenges, criticisms, and refutations as well as support, interest, and unexpected interpretations. Writing which is placed into a public arena carries the danger of rejection, but also emphasizes the social value of the act of writing. This kind of writing can be dangerous, messy, and unpleasant, but this sharing of writing lifts the black veil from the traditional sanitized
mode of classroom writing.

In the spring of 1997 we developed a graduate course aimed at exploring these potentials. We wanted students to write a series of papers which would be circulated in an electronic

portfolio. The students in this course were seasoned writing instructors, but had limited

experience with computer classrooms and even less experience writing for the Internet. Since

our students came from six different countries, we hoped that the students would invite dialog

from their home institutions, thus expanding the possibilities of collaboration and cultural

interaction.

We designed the electronic portfolio as a series of five papers. Two of these papers were

to be autobiographical stories, with the other three being syntheses of personal journal entries

reflecting upon the class readings. The plan was for each student to post their work on the

Internet and include an embedded E-mail link within each individual document for readers to use

as a means for responding to the work. Any responses, whether from class members or web

surfers, would be added to the students' portfolios to demonstrate the social and public nature of

the electronic portfolios. We hoped that this portfolio method would encourage the students to

view their writing as an ongoing dialogue within a larger community rather than the standard

isolated teacher-to-student paper exchange. Our vision was that these portfolios would become a

repository, remaining in place even after the semester concluded, and would become a reference

site for the students to use as a model for developing electronic portfolios at their home

institutions.

The class that happened:

"Can't we just xerox this instead?" complained one student. She turned away from her

computer and held out her paper. "It would be a lot easier."

Another student raised his hand and said, "How do I know that somebody won't steal my

paper off the Internet? I've heard about that happening."

"What does this have to do with teaching writing anyway?" asked yet another student.

These were the complaints raised during the semester when we asked our graduate seminar to place their class papers on the Internet. Fear, frustration, and anxiety of the unknown overwhelmed the students. This was a class for experienced writing teachers to explore the possibilities of the Internet as a pedagogical tool, but instead of exploring they resisted.

In many ways the class was a disaster. While the students wrote all the papers we assigned, most only published one or two on the Internet. No one posted an autobiographical story on the Internet. While the students did read and respond to hard copies of the papers, they did not make electronic E-mail responses. So there was no establishment of an on-line community and our desire for a global discourse never materialized. In fact, there was a divided sense of classroom community. The class was fractured between those who saw purpose in using the technology and those who questioned its validity within the writing classroom.

The problems experienced in this class can be organized into three main areas that are represented by this section's opening quotes. There were those who feared the technology and its public nature; there were those who distrusted the Internet community; and, there were those who believed that Internet technology was just a fad that writing teachers really didn't need.

The student who wished to xerox her paper was making a complicated request. She was indicating her frustration and difficulty at making the technology work, a technology that threatened to replace the pedagogies she knew and understood. Her resistance highlights the difficulty in re-educating our existing teaching force to new methodologies. Although she believed in the potential benefits this technology might offer her students, she abandoned her

exploration when she found she could not control the technology and the type of classroom it would create. For teachers like this one fear of technology paralyzes pedagogical change. The ethical questions here are whether teachers have the right to make their students confront fears about technology. Do teachers have the responsibility to make technophobic students endure a semester of technological exploration?

There is another ethical issue that is implied by this student's request to xerox her paper rather than post it on the Internet. Do instructors have the right to ask students to expose personal writing to a global audience? If teachers require this, how does it effect the nature of what students write? This student feared the consequences of putting autobiographical writing on the Internet. She feared potential ridicule or, worse, harassment for her personal beliefs. She also worried that releasing sensitive information about herself might jeopardize her personal relationships. The potential that a friend or family member could misinterpret the contents of her personal narrative, a narrative now potentially available to them on the web, led her to rewrite and censor personal information. She even stated, "I can't talk about my personal life in this paper when there's a chance my mother might read it." Likewise, she feared that revealing intimate facts about herself might put her in some kind of danger from an uncontrolled audience. This fear, perhaps guided by popular media accounts about web stalkers, led her to approach the autobiographical writing with extreme caution. Clearly, this student did not write the kind of narrative she would have written in a non-Internet based course. Since our course hoped to foster student empowerment and a sense of community, we are left with the question, to what extent does this student's self-censorship limit the principle of empowerment? Without the basic tenet of freedom of speech, how can the authentic voices of student writing ever be heard?

The student who feared his paper would be stolen off his web page represents yet another set of difficulties. While we envisioned the electronic portfolio as a method to enhance student collaboration, this student was threatened by the concept of sharing his writing outside a protected environment. The student was willing to give his paper to a teacher and to his classmates, but not to an unknown readership. Not only was the threat of theft a possibility, but so was the threat of untempered criticism, rejection, and alienation. Unlike the first student who chose to alter her writing when she learned it would become public, this student saw no value, and in fact detriment, to public writing, and therefore refused to share his work. When students are unwilling to make their writing public, they are really approaching writing as a task done for only one reader, the teacher who grades the paper, not as a way of communicating with others. The ethical questions here are whether students have the right not to participate in a global, public discourse. Do teachers have the responsibility to make their students collaborate? Is there a point when our efforts to empower students actually subjugate them?

The student who felt that technology had no proper place in a writing classroom was raising a third type of objection. This student was limiting the teaching of writing to one particular viewpoint. In her words, "I didn't learn to write on computers, and I'm an English teacher now!" Her resistance to making technology a part of her classroom fails to consider the value society places upon technology. She was not acknowledging the ways writing is commonly engaged in outside the academy where most businesses and professionals do their writing with computer technology. This student wanted to keep the writing classroom isolated from technological change, the exact opposite of what we hoped our electronic portfolios would achieve and the exact opposite direction of the most recent composition theory which raises as a

central concern the issues of electronic literacy (Bolter, 1990; Costanzo, 1994; Selfe and

Hilligoss, 1994). Embedded, then, in her resistance to technological change is also a resistance to

theoretical change. It seems that many teachers don't want reeducation programs to be about

rethinking pedagogical theories. Instead, they are concerned with their careers and the efforts it

will take simply to stay employed. These teachers want a piece of paper to hang on the wall, not

libertarian doctrines and challenges to their fundamental beliefs about what it means to teach

writing. As we come into conflict with the practices and ideologies of the people we teach, we

raise new ethical concerns. What is our role as teacher educators in insisting that theory become

practice? Do we have the right to grade our students on their refusals to adopt our beliefs and

values? And finally, when these conflicts arise, can they be mediated within the existing

student/teacher relationship?

We had set out to create a course that would empower students, one that would connect

them to new audiences, give freedom to their voices, and create new purposes for their writing.

We built this course on the collaborative power inherent in Internet technology. Instead of

reaching the global community we had hoped for, we became mired in problems we never

anticipated. While a black veil built of fear, distrust of the Internet, and conservative views of the

teaching of composition left us short of our initial goals, it opened up a path for the study of the

ethical dimensions of teaching with Internet technology.

The Aftermath

As we reflect back upon the semester that was, we are left with more questions than

answers. In retrospect, our planning of the course may have suffered from what Ellen Barton

(1994) calls "the dominant discourse of technology." According to Barton, we often assume that "first, technology, particularly computer technology, is here to stay; second, that technology ultimately benefits most individuals and all of society" (58). Others have also cautioned against this type of unguarded optimism (Heim, 1993; Stoll, 1995). Perhaps we were veiled by this untempered belief in technology. What the dominant discourse obscures are the ethical questions that our students have helped us to see. We worried initially that our students were the ones being constrained by their fear, their distrust of the Internet, and their resistance to bringing technology into the composition classroom. We now understand that these are ethical considerations that teachers must address in seeking to make Internet technologies a part of the classroom.

Now confronted with this host of ethical dilemmas, the paramount questions are these: How do we implement an Internet based class in the future? Or do we abandon our study of electronic literacy since it clearly alters student voice, empowerment, and classroom community?

To answer these questions what is needed is an ethics of technology. When we teach the subject of technology, we must do it in a way which considers the philosophical, socio-political, and cultural underpinnings of technology. Before we put students in front of computers, it is our ethical obligation to help them consider what that very act means. If we don't do this, we subjugate the students' identities and impose our dominant technological discourse upon them. If technology is truly a medium for student empowerment, we must beware of its shadow and our own.

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