DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 465 162 CS 510 954

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TITLE The Intersection of Community-Based Writing and Computer-Based Writing: A Cyberliteracy Case Study.
PUB DATE 2002-03-23
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (53rd, Chicago, IL, March 20-23, 2002).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Classroom Research; *Computer Literacy; Discourse Communities; Educational Objectives; Educational Theories; Higher Education; Participant Observation; Service Learning; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Computer Assisted Writing; *Rhetorical Sensitivity; Writing Contexts; Writing Intensive Courses

ABSTRACT

The learning goals that inform service learning as a whole can contribute to the computers and writing field significantly. This paper demonstrates how two lines of inquiry can be furthered, community-based writing and computers and writing, through new data and critical reflection on learning goals and communication tools. The paper presents a case study of an upper division cyberliteracy course in which the author/researcher functioned as a participant-observer. The overarching questions that frame the study discussed in the paper are: Does writing for, in, and/or with extra-classroom communities ("community-engagement writing") provide opportunities for significant engagement in learning; and Do students demonstrate evidence of "rhetorical sensitivity" through participation in community-engagement writing, online and off-line? The paper focuses on evidence of rhetorical sensitivity (considered by the author as the main goal of writing instruction and defined as a process in which students accrue the ability to recognize and critically examine writing tools and rhetorical situations and their position(s) therein) among students in one section of an upper division cyberliteracy course. It chooses to focus on the influence Nora Bacon's work has had on the author's definition of rhetorical sensitivity, because Bacon situates her discussion of rhetorical sensitivity in the specifically relevant context of community-engagement writing. (NKA)

The Intersection of Community-Based Writing and Computer-Based Writing: A Cyberliteracy Case Study.

by Catherine Gabor

Talk for 4Cs – Chicago 2002 Catherine Gabor

The Intersection of Community-Based Writing and Computer-Based Writing:

A Cyberliteracy Case Study

In the proposal I submitted to the 4Cs selection committee nearly a year ago I claimed that "I will demonstrate how we can further two lines of inquiry, community-based writing and computers and writing, through new data and critical reflection on learning goals and communication tools. I will present a case study of an upper division cyberliteracy course. The learning goals that inform service learning as a whole can contribute to the computers and writing field significantly." Although we usually change our focus from the time we write proposals to the time we actually give the papers, this time, I am surprisingly prepared to make good on my proposal claims!

My talk today is part of a larger investigation of teaching writing by going beyond the four walls of the classroom. The overarching questions that frame my larger study are:

- **Does writing for, in, and/or with extra-classroom communities ("community-engagement writing") provide opportunities for significant engagement in learning?**
- **Do students demonstrate evidence of *rhetorical sensitivity* though participation in community-engagement writing, online and off-line?**

Obviously, I cannot address all of the answers that I have found in all of the various sites I studied; therefore, I focus my talk on evidence of *rhetorical sensitivity* among students in one section of an upper-division Cyberliteracy course (I am currently collecting data

on another section of this class, but it is too premature to report on that data – check back with me next year!)

I begin my talk today with my succinct definition of rhetorical sensitivity. Then, before describing the specific class I studied and reporting on students' comments, I will highlight a few recent works in our field that address issues related to community-engagement writing in cyberspace. Finally, as I just alluded to, I will share several students' arguments and reflections about their own participation in cyber-communities and the rhetorical sensitivity that they attribute to writing in online communities—statements such as "I think I will never be able to use technology again, without at some point at least, examining what it means to be using it" and "I will not necessarily question, but I will evaluate the effect of computers."

Thus, I begin with my definition of *rhetorical sensitivity*: I consider rhetorical sensitivity to be the main goal of writing instruction. I define rhetorical sensitivity as a process in which students (or anyone) accrue the ability to recognize and critically examine writing tools and rhetorical situations and their position(s) therein. For example, following John Dewey's progressive theories of education, I believe that students gain rhetorical sensitivity through action and reflection; that is, the action of writing in and with communities—in this case online communities—and reflection upon that action.

While my definition of rhetorical sensitivity has been influenced by various scholars, from classical rhetorician Isocrates to the aforementioned John Dewey; in my talk today, I will focus on the influence Nora Bacon's work has had on my definition of

rhetorical sensitivity. I choose to focus on Bacon because she situates her discussion of rhetorical sensitivity in the specifically relevant context of community-engagement writing.

In her widely-touted article "Building a Swan's Nest for Instruction in Rhetoric," Nora Bacon champions using the combination of community-service learning and traditional academic essays in the composition class as the best route to rhetorical sensitivity among students. For example, based on her research and teaching, she notes that two of the most common problems she observed among students were misreading community audiences and transferring academic writing skills to community-based writing tasks. By bringing to light "problems" such as misreading audiences and transferability, Bacon argues, teachers can create moments in which they show students that there is not one right way to write, but that different situations call for different kinds of invention, arrangement, memory, delivery, and style. Bacon ends "Swan's Nest" with the claim that by asking students to do traditional academic writing *and* non-traditional community-engagement writing, we can more immediately demonstrate the need for rhetorical sensitivity given the contrasts that arise.

Like many service-learning compositionists, Bacon does not discuss cyber communities at all. However, her notion that reflection upon the differences between academic writing and community-engagement is extremely insightful. When I read Bacon's argument about how using community-based writing and academic writing in the composition course fosters rhetorical sensitivity, I immediately think of feminist Linda Alcoff's work on positionality theory and cyber-theorist Tharon Howard's use of Alcoff's work to further his conceptions of community.

In Tharon Howard's theoretical examination of electronic communities: *The Rhetoric of Electronic Communities*, he explores the relationship of an individual to electronic communities. He brings together several theoretical notions such as: the Burkean parlor as a metaphor for community; feminist Linda Alcoff's positionality theory (which I'll talk more about in a bit); garden variety social constructionism, which contends that we are always already context-bound; and post-structuralist theory, which rejects the notion of a unified self and describes agency as fragmented and in flux. Howard agrees with Kenneth Burke's description of community as an ongoing conversation; however, he takes issue with Burke's representation of a single conversation in a single parlor. Instead, Howard envisions multiple conversations going on in parlor*s* and kitchens and hallways; in other words, he rejects the notion of one, monolithic parlor conversation. Thus, he recognizes that individuals (fragmented and in flux) belong to several communities. Likewise, he asserts that communities arise when subjects coalesce around a common interest; however, he realizes that communities, although based on common interests, contain dissent. It is our membership in multiple communities, Howard contends (relying on Alcoff's positionality theory), that allows us to critique our communities. Because he subscribes to the notion that individuals are always socially situated, he does not believe that we can ever get "above" our reality and see it from an omniscient vista. However, he does believe that by communicating with members of various communities we gain a kind of partial outsider's perspective, or in Alcoff's terms, we occupy "multiple positionalities."

Bacon, Howard, and Alcoff's work leads me to ask the following question: By engaging in academic writing and community-engagement writing—in local and/or online communities—in the same class, do students demonstrate a sense of rhetorical sensitivity—a sense that writing has multiple, meaningful purposes in multiple "parlors"? I answer this question with a resounding "YES," based on evidence gathered in an upper-division writing-intensive class which I will now turn to.

I studied an upper-division, writing-intensive class entitled Cyberliteracy. I acted as a participant-observer for a semester: I sat in on class sessions (online and face to face); I interviewed students individually; and, I read all of the students' written work, collected in final portfolios. Students enrolled in Cyberliteracy focused on the issues of literacy, identity and community in cyberspace; the students read mainly theoretical texts that helped them shape their notions of literacy, identity, and community in electronic environments. In addition to reading about these topics, students were required to participate in at least two online communities: one of their own choosing and the Inter-collegiate E-Democracy Project (IEDP), a web-based discussion site designed for interchange among college students around the nation. Students then wrote individually-authored, reflective analyses of their experience in said cyber-communities.

Several students displayed evidence of rhetorical sensitivity through meta-analysis of their own discourse. These instances of rhetorical sensitivity showed up in formal papers, informal but required short writing assignments, and in interviews that I conducted. At this point, I am going to go ahead a dive into some specific examples from two students' texts and interviews. Please refer to the hand out during this section.

I'll begin with Claudette's work (please note that all student names are pseudonyms): "Probably the experience I *learned the most* from, though, was participating in the online communities. Now that I have had *time to reflect* on what makes a community and why I identify with particular ones and what that means, I have a better grasp on the concept of interpersonal communication, a force which I think is so important today. I am a speech minor, and I find communication and the circumstances surrounding it, and reasons for it very interesting. I also have a better understand [*sic*] of myself, *my styles of interpersonal communication, and how they change from situation to situation*" (emphasis added).

- *Claudette, cover memo for final portfolio*

If you refer to the handout, you will see that I have italicized the portions of her response that I find particularly important. To start, she notes that she learned the most from the community-engagement assignment. I concur with many contemporary compositionists who argue that students are more engaged when they write for real audiences. Her commentary supports my initial hunch that community-engagement writing is, in fact, engaging. But a lot of things are engaging, and they do not all necessarily lead to critical self-awareness and rhetorical sensitivity.

Claudette does claim, however, to have a better understanding of her styles of interpersonal communication and how they change from situation to situation. Her comment could function as a summary of my definition of rhetorical sensitivity. She demonstrates that she recognizes that she uses different rhetorical strategies in different rhetorical situations. For example, when I interviewed her, I asked her to comment on

what she perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of writing in online communities. She notes that the category "online community" is not one rhetorical situation, but many; she says, "Not knowing someone else in the online community is NOT a drawback – some things are easier to talk about to people you don't see daily, therefore it is actually a strength. Strengths also depend on specific sites." She then comments that the women's health site functioned as a safe space for her, but bolt.com did not. Bolt.com id a college life chat space on the web. She attributes this, in large part, to the fact that the participants in women's health site were almost all women and all signed their posts with real names, not screen names. At bolt.com, where most use screen names, she did not feel as safe nor as accountable. In her interview she demonstrates that she recognizes how rhetorical strategies and conventions, such as naming, contribute to the feel of a community.

In her paper she notes that she comes to these realizations because she has "had time to reflect on what makes a community". Not only do her words show me evidence of critical sensitivity to "interpersonal communication"; they also show that she used reflection upon her actions in various communities to reach this level of rhetorical self-awareness. Let us now turn to some further examples regarding Claudette's experiences in online communities. Please note the excerpt from Claudette's "Community and Identity" paper on your handout.

"My identity on [the women's health online discussion board] is one of a welcome, active participant. *I play the role* of information absorber and questions asker. When I first started posting and still considered myself a 'newbie,' I did not feel comfortable

welcoming someone to the site, for example, but now that I have had more time to grow as part of the community, I have actually welcomed people to the site. [. . .] *I do not view posting as writing but as more of a conversation.* In that light, I write my posts here [the women's health discussion board] much like I talk. On sites such as the IEDP, and our class Blackboard discussion board, *I did find myself taking a different approach.* The whole context of the situation is completely different. We are not posting on the IEDP or Blackboard to support each other, but rather to discuss/debate issues or to analyze an author's work. Both cases are much more distanced personally, and are academic and cognitive in nature; therefore I took much greater pains to make myself as clear as possible" (emphasis added).

- Claudette, paper entitled "Community and Identity in Cyberspace"

This excerpt shows evidence of Claudette's awareness of her shifting rhetorical strategies as she moves among online communities. For example, she notes that in the academic online communities (the class site and IEDP), the rhetorical situation calls for discussion, debate, and analysis which are "academic and cognitive in nature." She contrasts her rhetorical choices in those communities with the strategies she uses in the women's health discussion board, where she writes "like she talks." She does not, however, simply conclude that one site is less formal than others. She reflects quite astutely on her multiple roles in the women's health community. She states, for example that she began "playing the role" of "information absorber and question-asker." Since she has spent more time on this discussion board, she has shifted into the role of "welcomer." Later in her paper, she also contrasts the rhetorical relationships she has with the older

participants on the board who function as supportive, surrogate mothers and the younger women on the site with whom she chats "like girlfriends." In a further reflection upon her various positionalities, Claudette compares her online girlfriends with her face to face girlfriends, noting that the pseudo-anonymity of the online community allows her to talk more openly about intimate health issues, issues that she does not talk about with her "real life" girlfriends because she finds the constraints of the face to face rhetorical situation too intimidating.

Another student, Frankie, employed the same Deweyean approach to cybercommunities: he took the action of writing in an online community and then engaged in critical reflection of his action. Dewey, as you may well know, saw action and reflection in a recursive cycle, with reflection leading students to ask new questions that in turn result in further action, and so on. Frankie, as we shall see, exemplifies this cycle of action and reflection resulting in accruing rhetorical sensitivity.

Please refer to the handout for excerpts of Frankie's written work:

In his final portfolio cover memo, Frankie acknowledges the benefits of action and reflection when he writes that "the second paper [about online community and identity] took me outside of the classroom talking to strangers ands then writing a paper, not only about Internet communities, but about how these communities affect ME. [. . .] Never before have I had the opportunity to do so much self-assessment. I think it has changed the way I think about a lot of things." The two key elements in this excerpt are that Frankie recognizes the value of "self-assessment" or reflection as integral to the learning process; furthermore, he recognizes the online community as a place "outside of the classroom," a site that has different rhetorical rules and tools from the traditional

classroom. In fact, in his paper, he presents evidence of his burgeoning sensitivity to the kinds of rhetorical constraints in his online community, and the kinds of rhetorical strategies that obtain. For example, he contrasts two sections of Yahoo's "Question of the Week" site: a chat space and a discussion board called "Talk Back" (you can follow along on the handout – I'm reading from Frankie's online community and identity paper):

> The responses in the [Talk Back] section seem much more educated, or at least they appear that way when compared with the chat area. I gather that this has a lot to do with the form in which it is written. It is much more like a message board and therefore, most individual write much more formal [*sic*]. The second reason community members are attracted to this portion of the site is because one individual does not as easily dominate it.

Frankie, by mid-semester, is engaging in meta-discourse about audience, writing tools, and writing spaces. What I am highlighting here is that the marriage of experiential educational philosophy and cyber-community –engagement make the accrual of rhetorical sensitivity more visible and more immediate. The action of writing cyber-communities where the textual artifacts often remains accessible for scrutiny is a fruitful and immediate way for students to "see" rhetoric. Frankie notes that the online environment is especially helpful in allowing him to see change; he states, "I don't think that it is more common for individuals to have rapid turnarounds when it comes to "thinking" online, but I certainly think it is easier for people to see change."

As I said earlier, Dewey (and others) envision a cycle in which reflection leads to further, informed action. Frankie is an excellent example of this cycle. I have already explained Frankie's initial action of writing in a cyber-community and his analytical

reflection. He took what he learned from his initial action and reflection with Internet communities and took the new action of designing a website using the programming tools Dreamweaver and Fireworks. In an informal writing assignment that Frankie did while completing the community and identity paper, he responds to Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* by stating that, "People can use these online communities to benefit their everyday lives. Forget getting involved in all the emotional 'stuff.' Instead, use these groups for knowledge." Despite what you may think about Frankie's dismissal of the emotion elements of communities, he does practice what he preaches. He took the lessons he learned about audience, writing spaces, and rhetorical constraints and applied them to his own web creation: an online version of the university's student magazine.

In my final section here on Frankie's work, I will refer the to excerpt on the handout from his "new technology" paper. In these passages, he analyzes himself and his collaborators (two classmates) as manipulators of audience and new tools while discussing his specific rhetorical strategy for using links on his new website.

> [I]n our project I left my "I'm a journalist" life for a moment to pursue my "I'm a journalist/artist/web developer" life. I felt a little torn and for the first time I felt alienated from the world of journalism because I was almost suddenly trying to sell a product. Instead of informing people about the news, now I was selling it—and selling it through a completely different medium than I had ever worked with before.
>
> Links themselves become agents. By designing and creating the Web site, we were able to do something that most web users don't get to do: We created the agents. It sounds kind of scary, really. Instead of letting the

> agents control us, we had the opportunity to control the agents, which will in some ways, control our readers.

He astutely recognizes the power of rhetorical decisions such as where and why to create links on a web site. He also demonstrates insights into the multiple nature of rhetoric, that words not only communicate, but that they also persuade and, in his terms, "sell." And as the "sellers," Frankie points out, they "get to do something most web users don't get to do: control the agents, which will in some way control the readers." That insight, brought to light through action and reflection in cyberspace, is the kind of insight that demonstrates rhetorical sensitivity. He sees the connections among creators/disseminators of text, the textual artifacts themselves (in this specific case: links), and the audience. While you may all be thinking that this is basic rhetorical theory, my point is that he has gained an intimate understanding—a sensitivity to—such basic rhetorical concepts and acted upon that sensitivity.

As I have said numerous times during this talk, I consider rhetorical sensitivity to be the main goal of writing instruction. In my view, writing instruction teaches students to use (and recognize that they are using) writing as both object and tool of study. Writing instruction is not just preparation for college classes, not just pre-professional training, but a site of knowledge and contemplation. I have already demonstrated that John Dewey's theories of experiential education, which serve as the foundation for many community service learning curricula, offer writing instruction the cycle of action and reflection, a process which embodies rhetorical sensitivity. I realize, however, that some of Dewey's ideas are simplistic to us now, unable to account for poststructuralist notions

of text and self. However, I argue that Tharon Howard's work refines Dewey's somewhat simplistic vision of community. Howard's idea that our multiple positionalities, our liminal stance among various communities, gives us the ability to engage in both community membership and meta-analysis of our own communities fits hand in glove with Nora Bacon's notion that engaging students in different writing situations fosters rhetorical sensitivity. Although Dewey and Bacon do not talk about cyber-communities and Howard does not discuss writing instruction in the academy, I bring these theorists together to shed light on the rich pedagogy of combining the action of occupying various positionalities on- and off-line with the requisite refection so characteristic of experiential education and service learning. As teachers of writing, we cannot afford to ignore the pedagogical and theoretical relevance of community-based writing or that of computers and writing; I advocate that we teach and think from their intersection.

Numbers from initial analysis:

Of 13 students and one total slacker

In papers:

Rhet sens (overt comments about writing functioning diff in diff situation):10

Some sense of real world engagement/importance:10

In interviews: all but one commented on rhet sens and all but two commented E

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Title: The Intersection of Community-Based Writing and Computer-Based Writing: A Cyberliteracy Case Study

Author(s): Catherine Gabor

Corporate Source: Conference on College Composition and Communication

Publication Date: March 23, 2002

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