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Essay

"We're Just Kidding": Sexual Obscenities in Classroom Chat and Teaching about Audience

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> "I am trying to change them. I'm trying to help us all see whole new possibilities, like the tilting circle of the world spreading below you when you stand braced in the wind on top of Eagle Cap. But I'm not off to a very good start."
>
> —Bette Lynch Husted

Husted's sentiments above mirrored my hopes and frustrations and fears as I read the transcripts of my basic writing students' unsupervised chat room exchange. These words accidentally or purposefully expose the underlying values of homophobia and sexism permeating our American culture. As Richard E. Miller explains in his essay "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone," writing teachers are trained to address student writing in terms of style, organization, thesis, support, and audience suitability, but to ignore some freedom of expression elements (394). As Miller and Husted struggle with examples of homophobia with violent messages about "hunting down gays" in otherwise reasonably well written essays, I share with them the desire to understand my role as a composition teacher and the "Who do you think you are?" question related to the address of ethics and discriminatory language use (Husted 243).

Generally, these forbidden words of discrimination are not articulated in our classrooms. So, we instead create a façade of equity separate from the world outside the classroom doors. Trying to combat hate speech, hate crimes, and the underlying hate values, I have attempted to create, through policies and example, a forum for students who counter dominant cultural communication experiences of intimidation, verbal violence, and discrimination. However, my attempt to create this utopia didn't work. Despite the "authority of the syllabus," calling for a space clear of the language that students have been exposed to their whole lives—discourses of their various communities of family, peers, religious congregations, educational institutions, and mass media— students' real voices come through the chat room exchange, expressing discriminatory messages characteristic of their peer conversations. Having said this, I'm not sure whether to be proud of them for asserting authority in their writing and taking a rhetorical risk of being "themselves" in this class writing situation or to be defensive about protecting gays and

women targeted by the sexually degrading banter among the dominant culture of heterosexual men, primarily white. Is this truly a victorious, rare moment of genuine agency and voice for these basic writers that should be celebrated or is this simply more of the same oppressive acts among dominant culture members, taking advantage of their power over minorities—albeit, without malicious intent?

Not surprisingly, researchers such as Mary Hocks, Cynthia L. Selfe, Paul R. Meyer, Pamela Takayoshi, Kristine Blair, Laura Gurak, Sandra Harding, Nancy Kaplan, Cheris Kramarae, Jeanie H. Taylor, Ruth Perry, Lisa Greber, and others argue that technologies are created from cultural processes and, therefore, reproduce social power relations of real realms, even as they affect technologies. While communicative acts such as harassment and silencing by males are readily available in online discourse, "technology also marks an essential site for feminist struggles and a place where real power can be grasped" (Hocks 117). Answering this challenge, Hocks, in her essay "Feminist Interventions in Electronic Environments," argues that feminist interventions, which she defines as "communicative acts that bring attention to the shifting power relations within a specific discursive context" (107), suggest ways to identify dominant cultural patterns that exclude and devalue "the other." Through our questioning of dominantly held assumptions, students can recognize that their beliefs may have been "absorbed as truth" without conscious decision making (Miller 391). In some cases, exclusions or power plays are purposefully designed to dominate, but, in other cases, those kinds of power dynamics are ingrained, imitative behaviors in individuals. The good news is that we are capable of self-reflection, at the least, with the possibilities for changes in our rhetorical choices.

Concentrating on the unintentionally dominant group, I consider how Walter Ong demonstrates that novice writers have a narrow concept of audience that is really a narcissistic fiction projected as an ideal reader (1975). Given this, writing instructors can work to broaden our students' sense of audience to consider readers who are not exactly like themselves. This essay, while not a success story of student chat room exchange, presents how I encouraged students' rhetorical analysis, "getting past the narcissism" (Hock 114), to enable more complex understandings of audience in online communities.

Hate Speech, Obscenity, and the Composition Teacher

During my basic writing class's first encounter with chat room exchange, my eleven male and one female traditional-aged students sent inflammatory language of homophobic, sexist and highly oppositional comments. At the beginning of class, I asked students to participate in our first session of real-time chat, responding to the following prompt: "How did the severe weather [that closed the campus the previous class day] affect your weekend plans with family, work, school, and recreation?" My goal was to get students familiar with writing in a real-time chat room and to compare this medium of writing with print forms in terms of style, conventions, constraints, features, orality, literacy, interactivity, and so forth. While I moved from one computer terminal to another to assist some students with accessibility problems to the FirstClass software, students with active accounts began their discussion without my surveillance for the first twenty minutes of class. With the gender imbalance in this group, the casual friendships that had formed, and my absence during the chat, one might have predicted a madcap outcome, and it came.[1] [2]

While some students presented messages that focused on the discussion prompt, other students produced messages that were unmistakably what Sharon Cogdill describes as "profoundly, shockingly offensive." More specifically, the text displays "lewdness," "human aggression," "emotionalism," and "electronic graffiti." What's complicated about

defining the obscene is that lewdness or offensiveness to one person is humorous or unthreatening or even appealing to another. Despite these difficulties with the concept, for my purposes here, I will add to these definitions of obscenities meanings written to graphically degrade others with high emotion, constructing agonistic interlocutor relationships of antagonism, competitiveness, and condescension (Berzsenyi 1999). My students' use of obscenities in the chat room exchange included insults about the following: sexual areas of the body, lack of sexual virility, homosexuality as perversion and social inefficacy, and hyper sexuality and sexual indiscretions.

While wanting to address how students reproduce dominant identities, construct competitive relationships, and assert social status in these transcripts, I also wanted to be careful to create a stimulating and open forum for discussion such as a "contact zone," as Mary Louise Pratt has termed social spaces for grappling with cultural clashes and asymmetrical power relations (34). Problem solving the pedagogical challenge of what writing instructors can do when hate speech surfaces in our writing classrooms, Miller suggests requiring self-reflectivity:

> in certain situations, reason exercises little or no persuasive force when vying against the combined powers of rage, fear, and prejudice, which together force innumerable hateful ways of knowing the world that have their own internalized systems, self-sustaining logics, and justifications. [. . .] The most promising pedagogical response lies, rather, in closely attending to what our students say and write in an ongoing effort to learn how to read, understand, and respond to the strange, sometimes threatening, multivocal texts they produce while writing in the contact zone. (251-52)

Miller here effectively highlights the emotional and physical potency of hate speech with its cultural underpinnings and rhetorical effects. Resisting the impulse to take on the role of enlightened leader of the masses, Miller remains focused on the responsibilities of the writing instructor, considering how threatening and discriminatory language can be addressed within the constraints of his perceived role and relationship with students. While I do wish to stay clear of constructing a condescending relationship with even offensive students, I am concerned with hate speech for minority individuals' social, intellectual, physical, and spiritual well being, which is the significance of having this conversation about ethics of pedagogy and opportunities for social change.

As a feminist, I think it's important to acknowledge my biases and motives while remaining critical of them and, in turn, encourage students to examine their own biases and motives. Making my teaching transparent with students helps me to bring to the forefront those conflicts that emerge among us in order to discuss connections between practice, values, and goals. For example, students and I discuss syllabus policies of appropriate and respectful behavior in our classroom along with how student writing may violate those policies, what all that subversion can mean, and why and how dissenting meanings function differently in varying contexts. We need to address both how students write as well as what students write, challenging them to examine what their writing can mean and to whom, which does not guarantee that those hateful values and behaviors will be abandoned. Like Miller, I hope to examine with students their own texts not as isolated cases of hate speech but rather as products out of their interactions with our cultural and political worlds. As Harriet Malinowitz has discussed issues of homophobia, sexism, dominant culture, and writing with her students, I strive to guide students in a re-examination of the social forces in their lives that shape identity conceptions, interrelations, and discourse.

Within the context of a computer-assisted classroom, instructors must face the possibility of ethical and pedagogical dilemmas of students' use of inflammatory language. In her

essay, “Indiscipline: Obscenity and Vandalism in Cyberclassrooms,” Cogdill examines various ways that high school students presented obscenities toward teachers and peers as an act of “indiscipline” or challenge to teachers’ authority in the chat room. In addition, she describes the injurious effects the written attacks had on the secondary school teachers. Her work considers secondary education teachers’ obligations to protect students from other students’ hostility and to provide appropriate repercussions for offenders’ behaviors. However, what is especially useful in the college classroom is Cogdill’s inquiry for understanding the complex origins, contexts, and problems associated with students’ offensive language and impact on student-teacher and student-student relationships. Such a rhetorical analysis discusses with students a range of ethical considerations beyond the “Because they say so” explanation of following rules and, instead, poses the roles of contexts, audience, and purpose in shaping communication. Like the teachers’ responses in Cogdill’s study, my first reaction was to take the students’ banter too seriously as a sign of total chaos and disrespect toward each other and me. I questioned whether or not I had explained why respect is important in constructing an open and student-centered learning space clearly enough? Importantly, I wondered if it mattered that they said they were just kidding? Such ethical concerns of the realm of online classroom communication present the challenges of assessing the potential for making these spaces opportunities for greater democratic exchanges (Takayoshi; Turkle; Gurak; Porter; Cogdill).

In the case with my 12 basic writing students, their obscenities operated within a peer communication context independent of me. While I was physically in the computer classroom with them, I was not in the conference space reading and writing their conference text. What resulted was a peer-run rhetorical game operating beyond my knowledge or control. Indeed, students later admitted, during a follow up class conversation, that they didn’t realize that I would be reviewing the earlier portions of the transcript. They reported feeling unaccountable for their text, just having fun with the freedom and lack of supervision, not unlike some of the ways students “act up” when the teacher leaves a traditional classroom. New order was established among the peers, and these students were actively engaged in a composing process as agents, experimenting with their own authority and hierarchical social status in a real, rhetorical context. In other words, they communicated in the roles of real writers and readers in a communication context that was motivated by genuine, not contrived, exigency—compelled to immediate discursive action.

On the one hand, I wanted to celebrate students’ finding their voices, as offensive as they were during this chat, because writing with voice isn’t an easy feat for basic writers. I didn’t want to discourage their generating of material and having something to say, because developmental writers are typically unmotivated, unconfident, and under prepared in skills and strategies (Matthews-DeNatale). Therefore, half the battle is just getting them to write and feel comfortable doing so; then, teachers can develop specific rhetorical skills, stylistic features, genre knowledge, etc. On the other hand, I wanted to express my concerns about their crude, dismissive, and graphic language that degraded women and gays. I questioned if I was pushing my own ethical values and practices onto students. Finally, I wondered about the value of outlawing obscenities, which perhaps would only function to give me a false sense of social harmony. My pedagogical challenge continues to be the negotiation of preparing and presenting a process of rhetorical analysis with students that avoids forcefully imposing particular values on students but opens the discussion. Certainly, the guidance should come in the form of discussing options available, conventions associated with a community and context, possible outcomes of various choices, and writer’s goals. Importantly, I wanted to offer my guidance in the spirit of “mentoring” and not “mastering”, a difference that Angela Haas, Christine Tulley, and Kristine Blair explain involves “facilitating more dialogic classroom interactions and fostering co-equal interaction among teachers and students

in electronic classrooms" (245). After all, my hope is for students to perform analytical and rhetorical processes on their own, not depending on my instruction. In turn, I wanted to introduce rhetoric as phronesis: "the art of considering divergent norms, principles, and conventions in light of particular circumstances that require action" (Porter 29). In application, students and I needed to consider language conventions in connection with university identity, the syllabus requirements, slang in context, and the peer and student-teacher relationships and community we were constructing within this internetwork writing experience.

Interpreting the Transcripts

After reading the transcripts later that day in my office, I noticed substantial variations in the discourse among students in language style, use of conflict with humor, and types of text-based relationships. Some messages were very bombastic and off topic, while others were cooperative and focused on the task of exchanging stories about their weekend experiences with the storm that closed our campus on the previous Friday. Within this section, I will analyze the range of language use in the transcripts, possible meanings, and my discussion about them with students.

Cooperative Student Dialogue

Overall, far more on-topic messages were exchanged than off-topic banter. Predominantly, students participated in conventional academic roles as students cooperatively performing a class assignment. Even when sending playful messages with abrupt commands or rude criticisms, these students include qualifiers such as "just kidding," to signal humorous and benign intent. The following is an excerpt of messages of the more cooperative nature with responsive messaging, genuine inquiries, personal details about the weekend activities, and light-hearted humor among members:

> Luke: My weekend sucked.
>
> Jeff: With my rental car, I drove through mud slides, trees, and debris scattered all over the road.
>
> Terry: Edward, what's up?
>
> Jeff: Then, I found out that I was the only one @ school . . . I figured it was cancelled.
>
> Terry: Why did it suck, Luke?
>
> Edward: Nothing much here, how about you?
>
> Terry: Ian what are you doing?
>
> Ian: nothing, I want to go home.
>
> Luke: Electricity went out for five hours in my whole area. I was so bored. I finally had to resort to playing with my. . . .
>
> Edward: I stayed home and watched MTV.
>
> Jeff: On sat. I took this hot chick to the tutor bookshop for some coffee, went to Josie's, and then we ran 3 miles.

Terry: get lucky?

Luke: probably not.

Ian: zzzzzzzz

Edward: Know any single women out there who want a real lady's man?

Ian: slut. . . jk [just kidding]

Edward: Bite me, prude. jk

Jeff: The party that night was kickin'. I was 3 sheets to the wind that night. . . and didn't even feel hung over hehehehehe

Terry: Finally, something woke Ian up! What did you do this weekend, bud?

Luke: Not me. I was wasted all Saturday after Friday night.

Ian: I went to this car show with Mustangs and Cameros and bought some pipes to modify my ride. There's no stopping me now.

Ian: It was cool.

Clearly, Jeff with his date story, Ian with his car show anecdote, Edward with his boredom tale, and Luke with his humorous power outage account accomplish the task of exchanging stories and information about their weekend activities, just as the assignment required of them. While not telling his own story here, Terry aptly propels student interaction with his questions, showing his interest and engagement in the assignment and his fellow students' experiences. In fact, Terry operates as an unofficial moderator of dialogue among the students and keeps others on task and writing. Notably, he is a very successful facilitator, as the transcripts reveal students responding directly and with elaboration to his questions. Before this chat room exchange, I had never seen such leadership in Terry. He was obviously comfortable in the online environment, with the transcripts revealing his high level of literacy.

Contrary to some students' active participation, a few students express disinterest in the chat, such as Ian refusing initially to participate and stating instead, "Nothing, I want to go home." To reinforce his stated disinterest, Ian sends a message that indicates he is sleeping: "zzzzzzzz." However, Terry breaks Ian's apathy and, in fact, gets Ian to give some specifics about the weekend car show he attended, even showing some enthusiasm for the event and his vehicle. While his expressed enthusiasm has a touch of bravado as he writes, "There's no stopping me now," it's an isolated moment of bragging that feels tongue-in-cheek and self-deprecating rather than obnoxious in posturing "gear head" machismo. In fact, his following message is a straight-forward, literal comment of "It was cool," which suggests a return to his mellow and reserved affect that's consistent throughout the conference dialogue. Apparently, Ian just needed that bit of encouragement to become a full participant.

Most students sent messages that were playful and still respectful. For example, Jeff's reference to his date at the coffee shop as a "hot chick" casually expresses his sexual attraction to her but not in a sexually graphic manner. Even the messages such as Ian's question about whether Jeff did "get lucky" with his "hot chick" inquires about a sexual encounter but does so without becoming very explicit or disrespectful about the female date. Similarly, Edward identifies himself as a "lady's man" in his self-advertisement,

“Know any single women out there who want a real lady’s man?” He operates playfully with the kind of competitive humor that Deborah Tannen describes men using in conversation with one another as they attempt to raise their social status within the group. Edward facetiously projects a bold and confident persona that displays security with his sexual and social skills with women, challenging the other men to a verbal contest of wits and tension. Other students use insult humor that is obviously hyperbolic and playful, including Ian referring to Edward as a “slut” after Edward describes himself as a “lady’s man”. What is curious is his choice of the word “slut” in that it is generally a term used to degrade sexually experienced females. With this term, Ian deliberately misapplies a reference out of the usual context for the term, which results in a kind of hyperbole. This exaggerated, insulting humor is followed by “jk” for "just kidding" to indicate humorous intent. In response to Ian’s competitive banter, Edward retorts with, “Bite me, prude,” with another out-of-context term that is typically applied to females but this time to criticize sexual inexperience and disinterest. The two young men play off of each other’s verbal gests quite cleverly and without malice but at the expense of women.

Inflammatory Messages

At the other end of the spectrum, some students use inflammatory language liberally and construct competitive, “hierarchical interlocutor relationships” (Berzsenyi) in the transcripts. Straying from traditional academic roles and appropriate language use, these students exchange arrogant insult humor, insulting gay men, femininity, female family members, and girl friends. In doing so, these male students forge a relationship based on their common anti-gay and misogynistic values, asserting compulsory heterosexuality. The following provides an excerpt that shows some of the more conflictual dynamics among the participants’ messaging, ranging from competitive to agonistic power relations:

> Sam: I got with 8 chicks this weekend
>
> Sam: I’m the man.
>
> Craig: And they all lay eggs
>
> Ron: Sam means the birds not girls
>
> Sam: Go to hell assholes
>
> Fred: Why are Ron’s pants so tight? Is he trying to turn us on?
>
> Sam: Because he wants you to see his little cock better
>
> Fred: Why is Karen so quiet?
>
> Sam: She sucks
>
> Craig: Sucking Fred.
>
> Fred: Is she scared to talk or is she just gay?
>
> Craig: Sucking my balls, and I am loving it.
>
> Ron: Your balls are small

Sam: Have crabs

Rick: Can't we all just be nice, jackasses?

Larry: Ok morons, settle down. Let's talk about our weekends.

Sam: Ron blows

Fred: Why are you queers playing with yourselves?

Ed: Fred, because we can?

Craig: Sam's girl's head is so good, we call it brain.

Rick: Does anyone give a shit about the fact that my car was hit by a tree that went down from the storm?

Ron: Absolutely not, Rick.

Jon: Dude, is it totaled?

Karen: Why do you guys like to be so mean?

Sam: Sorry for my horrible language

Larry: Oh get off.

Craig: Fred was molested by his nephew.

Fred: Sam's girl is my ho.

Sam: Well your daddy's mine.

Fred: Geez. Just kidding. You really know how to hurt a guy.

Clearly, many students exhibit a derogatory and competitive approach to humor, apparently unconstrained by the conventions of classroom decorum, or, rather, their subversive behavior may be fueled by an excitement for violating classroom decorum. The students' messaging is fixated on sexuality, ranging from subtler forms such as innuendoes to more graphic forms with the use of slang terms of underlying anti-gay, masculinist, and misogynistic ideology.

In sum, forty percent of the messages had some kind of sexual content that functioned in a derogatory or domineering manner and was designed to be playful as students joked with one another. Half of this forty percent were homophobic and/or homoerotic (playing homosexual), about a third were misogynistic, and just under a fifth were masculinist (insulting or hyperbolic references to femininity, virility, and/or sexual organs). Importantly, as an advocate of diversity education and tolerance on campus, I felt troubled by the biased viewpoints insulting gay men and women specifically, and by their bragging about masculinity. Interpreting their play-filled message exchange, I detected what Deborah Tannen describes as males engaged in "one-upmanship."[2] [3] Their discourse reflected competitive, status building "locker room talk" among males, which has been theorized by feminist and computer-mediated communication scholars such as Berzsenyi, Stowers, Gilligan, Herring, Gilbert, and others. Examining the transcripts, I identified three types of insulting oppositional messaging.

Of the three types of offensive messages, the predominant strand in the students' conference focused on who is gay and how that's not a good thing. More specifically, messages describe effeminate, inferior, and laughable traits such as molestation and hypersexuality associated with degrading and perverse homosexual stereotypes. The most significant exchange regarding homosexual accusations and their viewable effects is when Fred takes verbal jabs at Sam by saying, "Sam's girl is my ho," a threat of crossing social boundaries and personal territories as the girl belongs to Sam. In response to this verbal violation, Sam retorts by claiming that Fred's father is his sexual partner. Following what was obviously perceived as a powerful verbal strike by Sam, Fred says, "Geez. Just kidding. You really know how to hurt a guy." Apparently, Fred struck such a sensitive chord with Sam, suggesting shared possession of his girl friend, including sexual exchanges, that Sam used what was the most invasive threat to Western social order: a family patriarch constructed as a sexual object by a man, and a younger man at that. With this message, Sam transcends all levels of the social pecking order, and Fred calls a cease fire in this repartee, declaring defeat, which helps Ian to "save face" within the group after the insult to his girl friend. Further messaging from Fred reveals a fixation on homophobic insults through his use of rhetorical questions:

> Fred: Why are Ron's pants so tight? Is he trying to turn us on?
>
> Fred: Why is Karen so quiet?
>
> Fred: Is she scared to talk or is she just gay?
>
> Fred: Why are you queers playing with yourselves?

His questions highlight flaws such as sexual perversion and nymphomania, which he associates with homosexuality, expressing anti-gay insult humor and deflecting questions about his own sexual identity. Within this exchange, Fred vies for social status in verbal contest but maintains humorous intent with "Just Kidding."

The second most common type of offensive humor is misogynistic, describing women as an inferior sex and addressing women as merely sex objects. For example, students use sexually degrading comments designed to insult their girlfriends, mothers, and sisters. As discussed in the previous paragraph, Fred and Craig tease Sam about his girl friend's promiscuity when they write, "Sam's girl's head is so good we call it brain" and "Sam's girl is my ho." The deliberate use of the "royal 'we'" suggests that Sam's girl friend has sexual relations with other students, but other students' girl friends are not written about in that way. However, in the past, Sam has discussed plans with his girl friend with other students, perhaps as a status raiser. In turn, other male students may be insulting his girl friend in order to undermine Sam's efforts to use his social status to compete within the group.

However, what reveals the underlying culture of misogyny in this exchange is the absence of female voices, which is in part due to the class enrollment but also is symptomatic of the conference dialogue among this group of young men that discourages participation from the generally shy Karen. More specifically, the exchange presents a competitive and oppositional style of exchange, the topics discussed place women in roles as sexual objects and, therefore, status symbols, for the men in the group, and women are used as tools for insulting other men. Hence, Karen questions the males, "Why do you guys like to be so mean?" which I think is a really bold, brave, and assertive move on her part as the only female in the cyberspace at that time. In fact, her use of the interrogative places responsibility on the other participants to account for their discourse. Also, the question itself calls for a critical reflection from the classmates on why they are using such language, which is a strong rhetorical inquiry. Furthermore, to

her credit, Karen succeeded in soliciting a few responses to her question that ranged from an apology to more mischief: “Sorry for my horrible language,” “Oh get off,” and “Fred was molested by his nephew.” I am really proud of Karen for this incredible moment of feminist intervention that was especially significant because it came from a fellow student. She rejects the roles of sexual object, silent and to be used by the males. Regretfully, I wasn’t in the chat room at the time to support her efforts.

The third most common form of inflammatory messaging involves male students boasting about their physical and sexual features, emphasizing a potency of masculinity that operates as a competitive and intimidating discursive act, grounded in assumptions of heterosexual male power. For instance, analyzing Sam’s messages in isolation reveals his identity construction as a virile, heterosexual male through bravado and criticism of others:

> Sam: I got with 8 chicks this weekend
>
> Sam: I’m the man.
>
> Sam: Go to hell assholes
>
> Sam: Because he wants you to see his little cock better
>
> Sam: She sucks
>
> Sam: Have crabs
>
> Sam: Ron blows
>
> Sam: Sorry for my horrible language

The importance of large size comes through in the competitive banter in which students expose the embarrassing “fact” that their classmates have small genitals. Further, the sexual potency constructs the cultural ideal of a man who can continually satisfy many women and be “the man.” Portraying virility through a competitive, social power play amongst the newly or rarely sexually active adolescent males establishes a hierarchy with the sexually active males on top. Interestingly, Sam reveals the pretense of his image as an insensitive, sex-obsessed braggart with his final message directed to Karen: “Sorry for the horrible language.” His apology shows awareness of the inappropriateness of his language with Karen. Perhaps getting caught up in the exchange of verbal insults, Sam neglects to realize, as others in the class might have, that a woman was in the chat room—women not being the participatory audience for such banter. Also, Karen’s comment may have reminded him that this classroom context is not generally an appropriate site for this kind of discourse, and, therefore, clarifies playful intention and apologizes for the graphic nature of his meanings. Either way, I see this move as a self-reflective, rhetorically oriented act in which he steps outside of a narcissistic viewpoint to consider his language use in relation to his audience and context. Overall, the transcripts reveal moments when students use language with rhetorical awareness and other times when they message with inattention to rhetorical factors that construct our online communication situation. I decided to take this rhetorical lesson further by guiding students through a reading of the transcripts and discussion of the features and strategies present in the dialogue.

Reacting to Student Obscenities: Discussing Rhetorical Ethics with Them

During the class session following our chat exchange, we analyzed, on an overhead projector, the transcripts of our conference together. Throughout this analysis of their transcripts, students conveyed discomfort with seeing their words on the overhead and having to take accountability for them. While the immediate goal was not to embarrass them, I did draw on students' discomfort to encourage a discussion about their intended versus connoted meanings, their sense of audience versus the real audience, and their use of humor in one context versus another. With all eyes on the screen, reading their graphic messages, which were identified by their real names, I began discussion with an open question: "What patterns of participation do you notice here?" Initially, students, who were typically interactive in class discussion, remained silent, gazing at the screen with nervous giggles as they glanced at their classmates, avoiding eye contact with me. Madeleine, a female student who was absent the day of our chat conference, openly spoke about the messages more objectively than other students who had participated in the chat and whose discourse was under examination. Articulating the obvious, which was hard for the other students to admit, Madeleine described some messages as "insulting," "rude," and "antagonistic." As others nodded their heads in agreement, I asked students," Were you mad at each other? Why were you exchanging so antagonistically?" To these questions, students consented to not being angry, and one student replied, "We were just kidding." With a similar response, another student argued against a literal interpretation of the text: "It's not to be taken exactly. We're fooling around." Accepting this point, I asked, "What was the goal or point of fooling around, individually or as a group?" One student, Joe, clarified, "There really wasn't a point. It was a competition for who could say the craziest thing. I think Sam won. He was pretty whack." With giggles and some hesitation, students explained their getting caught up in the "contest" or "game" that they claimed was generally a part of "guys' talk" with each other. Following this line of discussion, I asked, "What's the reward for being the best at this game? If Sam won, what did he win?" After some pause with students having some trouble coming up with an answer, Madeleine spoke up, "I think it has to do with being the big man, you know, like the coolest guy in the group—quick and funny and fresh and all that." While some males rolled their eyes at Madeleine's summation of their behaviors, many agreed with qualifiers such as "well, something like that" and "not like they are permanently the top guy, just for the time," resisting their classmate's over simplification of the social, communication situation.

Another issue I raised was the anti-gay values expressed in many messages and how those homophobic insults might have affected a gay or lesbian student in the classroom. After asking the open-ended question: "What are many of the jokes about?" students acknowledged the numerous gay slurs that comprised their banter. We looked at specific messages and discussed their implications in terms of degrading gay men. For example, the message, "Fred was molested by his nephew," suggests that the gay nephew is a sexual deviant who forces himself onto his older kin. Another example message was when Fred asks the question, "Is she scared to talk or is she just gay?" In this case, he uses the word "gay" as a vague and general insult of weakness as one possible reason Karen is inactive and a nonfunctioning member of the chat room discourse community. Students justified their use of the word "gay" as a general "put down" and not as a direct description of, in this case, Karen's sexual orientation. Another message by Craig clearly asserts the negative connotation that he connects with homosexuality when he says, "damn homoes," which was a reference to students who were leaving the chat room prematurely. However, I led our discussion toward the multiple connotations a term can have and that "gay," no matter what it literally is intended to mean, suggests inferiority with connections to weakness, passivity, and social impotence. I challenged students to imagine how and why the word "gay" has come to supposedly mean a general putdown. After some resistance, students acknowledged the devaluing of homosexuals in our society and the derogatory connotations of "gay." Once again, students admitted to a lack of forethought about the various potential malevolent connotations and effects of their

humor that was directed toward an assumed heterosexual male adolescent audience with a common anti-gay sensibility. Clearly, as a writing instructor, my challenge was to increase students' awareness of their audience.

Pleased that students were showing promising analytical abilities regarding their messaging style and text-based relationships, I presented the following challenge to determine their sense of audience: "Describe who was in the chat room. What could you say about the members?" The responses included, "mostly guys," "one girl,""college students," "18 year olds," "Caucasians mostly," "weak students," "bad writers" and "and you [referring to me] later on." After praising their responses, I asked, "what about in terms of sexual orientation?" Students responded with "I think everybody is straight" and "I don't know if anyone is gay in here." Reacting to their expressed confidence in being able to know others' sexual orientation, I asked, "How would you know if a classmate were gay?" After more nervous giggles, students answered with "gay guys are feminine, girlish," "lesbians are man like, and they hate men," "gay guys bend their wrists like this [demonstrating] and aren't very tough, more wimpy," and "you can tell by how they dress." For a while, we discussed the stereotyping underlying their perceptions about gays and lesbians and how they may not be accurate, just like other stereotypes prove false with examples that we identified such as rural and regional accents represented in our area being wrongly associated with ignorance.

Challenging their assumed knowledge of all classmate's sexual orientation, I asked, "If you were gay or lesbian, would you be out to students of this campus, of this class?" After some thought, students responded with "I can't imagine being gay," "I would be embarrassed," "I wouldn't want to admit it," and "the messages are mean toward gay guys especially—I wouldn't want to deal with it." Asking the obvious following question, I posed, "Then, why do you think your classmates would let you know that they are gay? Isn't it possible and statistically probable that at least one person in this class is gay? And if so, what do we say about the messages we sent about being gay?" The male students confirmed their obvious lack of awareness that one or more of the participants may be gay: "It just didn't come to my mind. I guess I just assume everyone is straight." Admitting to not having considered them as audience members and focusing on a heterosexual male audience identity, the young male students also admitted that they forgot about Karen as well for the most part, until she spoke up. One student said, "It just felt like the guys talking like usual." Further, students stated that they hadn't thought about their messages as being offensive, but, now, that they have thought about it, they agreed that their messages did exclude and were insulting to women and gays in the chat room.

Developing our analysis of the potential and actual effects, I initiated discussion about students' discourse in terms of the range of consequences of their inflammatory messages, such as silence: "Who is participating and who is not participating?" and "Why do you think that those who are not participating are just lurking and not sending messages?" Madeleine spoke about the fact that Karen, the only participating female in the chat room, wrote very little in the chat and that there wasn't an "invitation or real opportunity for her to participate." Madeleine identified the lack of a cooperative space for a female voice in the sexually degrading discussion about women. Pointing to the moment when Karen tried to interject with her question, "Why do you guys like to be so mean?" I concluded by acknowledging that for Karen, a minority figure outnumbered by a majority group, such inflammatory language functioned to silence her. After explaining that they did not mean to hurt Karen or exclude her, they expressed regret for that consequence of their banter and added that they were doing "guy talk," not fully acknowledging that they were in "mixed company." One student, Fred, stated, "We shouldn't have said those things with Karen in the room. It wasn't meant for her to hear and talk back to us about." Several students admitted to taking pleasure in breaking

boundaries of expected behaviors in the classroom: “It was fun to say stupid shit that you’re not supposed to say in class,” “I wanted to shock everybody, just clownin’ around with the guys, not serious or nothing,” and “I didn’t mean any disrespect to you [me] and Karen.” With appreciation for their clarification, I added “but she was ‘there,’ and it did keep Karen silent.” What I emphasized is that the effects of their exclusionary banter are observable in the form of silence, even though the intent was not there. Clearly, the students’ comments, “I didn’t realize,” were an important first step toward building students’ rhetorical and ethical awareness.

Next, we discussed how the male students sent messages that paraded their sexual prowess and inflated sense of “manhood” and “masculinity” in a competition to identify the “real” man amongst them—heterosexual, sexually active, strong, aggressive, and large. Both a bit embarrassed and fascinated, students recognized masculine identity within the competitive banter among young males. They discuss the humor of their obviously exaggerated messages about weekend sexual activities and projections of manhood. After making some of these connections overt with students, I asked, “What does it mean to you if a guy has slept with many women or had a lot of sex?” One student remarks casually, “Well, it means that you have got it going on. Guys, who don’t get girls, aren’t getting attention because they aren’t whatever enough. I don’t know. It’s hard to explain.” Another male student spoke up, “Yeah, it’s like having girls means you’re cool enough to have girls want you.” Wondering if I understood them correctly, I asked, “Then, by telling tall tales of sexual relationships and encounters and mocking other men’s’ lack of sexual experience as failure and embarrassment, guys can use women as symbols of being a man?” With some reservation and pause, a few students acknowledged that “it’s something like that—I think.” What I tried to point out is that heterosexually identified male students, which includes homosexual male students who are not out about their sexual orientation, compete for social status in our class chat at the expense of women without their consent or participation, which is part of the problem here.

Transitioning back to the transcripts, I point to when Ron and Craig’s teasing elicits a put down from Sam that calls attention to Ron’s “little cock.” Again, referring to this message brought forth quite a few giggles in the class, to which I said, “So, what does it mean to have a ‘little cock?’” One brave young man stated, “It means you’re not a man but more like a boy or a wimp.” To expand on this explanation, another student said, “And if you’re big, you’re going to be liked by the ladies.” Attempting to synthesize their positions, I asked, “in other words, young guys construct your “manhood” in part by exaggerating the size of your own sexual organs while downplaying the size of other men’s sexual organs, but in this kind of funny way?” To this, a student said, “Yeah, but we all know it’s bullshit. We don’t really take it serious. The winner, I guess we could say, comes up with the best line.” Sort of perplexed but completely engaged in these concepts, I asked, “So, what if a woman goes out with a guy because she overhears this conversation?” With great delight, a student stated, “That’s her fault if she believes it. We know it’s mostly not true, except for me having three girlfriends, but anyway. . . [Students laugh at his fanciful exaggerations] back to what we were talking about. . . if she’s gonna listen to what’s not meant for her to hear and believe it, too bad for her and good for the dude!” When I heard this, I couldn’t hold back my excitement in explaining, “You just brilliantly showed what I’m trying to say here: we shape our language to suit audience, purpose, and context!”

Shifting focus to conventional practices, I asked questions relating to Porter’s principles, such as, “What do you think are the rules for discussion in our classroom chat room?” Students explained that they were not totally sure what was “ok to say” and what wasn’t. While half of the students indicated some experience with public Internet chat rooms, they had never been in a “chat room for school” and were concerned about “crossing the line” of behavior in our college classroom or “breaking the rules.” As a result of our discussion, I realized that I needed to establish ground rules more clearly. I should have

provided them with encouragement to be experimental with language and interrelations and still designate boundaries for behavior. Further, I was concerned that gender and technology research, which often finds that women tend to be less technologically literate, was being proven true, at least with my one participating female student. Karen primarily "lurked" or read without sending messages, remaining passive as an interlocutor. Concerned, I asked her, "Why do you think you weren't participating very much?" In response, Karen said, "I've never done this before and felt weird doing it." As Sloane, Takayoshi, Hawisher, and others have noted, less experienced computer users feel ill prepared for the rhetorical demands of computer-mediated discussion. Therefore, they remain mostly silent, observing the dialogue for a sense of what kinds of messaging are appropriate or the contrary. This initial observation period of discourse conventions when dealing with a new medium of communication is important to literacy learning and developing communication confidence (Daisley). Karen and others needed more time to become familiar with the language, pace, and interaction in chat rooms. Karen elaborated, "I was worried about saying something and being ignored; like that would be uncomfortable, embarrassing." This fear of invisibility in cyberspace, as Gail Hawisher has reported, is common among new chat users. Had I discussed such worries with students through readings and conversation prior to our first chat, students might have approached our computer conference with more confidence. In turn, I asked male newbies how they felt about using chat for the first time, and one male, Ian, responded, "I don't know. It was fine. I like trying new things. It's sort of a challenge and fun, messin' around with friends online." Ian's response raised the issue of gender distinctions in online communication, with a majority of users being male and with greater assertiveness among male participants in public communication that scholars such as Deborah Tannen, Gesa Kirsch, Pamela Takayoshi, and Susan Herring have identified both in oral conversation and computer-mediated communication. What I had learned is that some of the female students in the class had not had as much computer experience as the males in our class and needed more time to get comfortable with the medium. The class agreed that I needed to talk more with students about silences in terms of communication and gender, discussion topic, computer experience, literacy levels, and so forth.

An Asynchronous Exchange: Further Follow Up about Inflammatory Language and Rhetoric

To further develop our oral discussion about their sense of audience, I asked students to participate in an asynchronous message exchange on the FirstClass software bulletin board in which they were asked to answer several questions. Besides having to post one message, students were required to reply to one other student's message. In doing so, students could reflect for a couple of days about the class's interaction and their own participation in the banter.

The first prompt for student response was this open question: "What reactions and impressions do you have about our class discussion on the chat transcripts and ethics of chat room exchange?" Having the transcripts to analyze and reference in their answers, students gave general comments about the experience. More specifically, Fred writes in an asynchronous message: "I was totally surprised to see that chat room page again. I thought it was done and over and we wouldn't deal with it again. It kind of made me mad. But I could see why we talked about it and got Dr. Berzsenyi's point." Jeff writes, "I thought it was so cool because we were facing our words head on. It was sort of creepy and amazing. I couldn't believe that was me saying those things in a classroom. I don't know what I was thinking. . . . temporary insanity." Ian wrote, "Whatever. I admit that that's the way I talk with my friends. I don't mean anything by it like I hate women or gays and stuff. It's just how we talk. It's funny." Overall, they express a mixture of frustration,

annoyance, apathy, and intrigue with the discussion and analytical activity and all the rhetorical effects they had not anticipated or imagined.

My second inquiry targeting rhetorical ethics was, “What responsibilities or considerations might we have as the majority communicating in discussion with minorities present? Have you ever been the minority of a group—the only guy or the only one of European dissent or the only heterosexual? Explain.” On the one hand, some students write that the “majority rules” and minorities must “play the game.” Along these lines, Sam presents his view in his posting:

> If Karen said more earlier on, I wouldn’t have forgotten that she was there, and we probably wouldn’t have said half the shit we did say. Same thing if we knew someone was gay. Is it always up to us guys to make everything perfect for everyone else? Isn’t it their fault, too, that they weren’t included the same?

Obviously, Sam makes a valid point about the shared responsibilities of controlling conversational dynamics, directions, and participation, which sparked rich discussion with numerous response postings about dialoguing with a mixed audience. On the other hand, some students argue that “it’s never a good idea to insult people and act like they aren’t there or they don’t matter, even if they are the minority.” Also, Karen, who further confesses to feeling inhibited from participating in such a confrontational exchange “against girls,” writes, “I was intimidated being one of the only females in the conference and the others didn’t even talk at all”. Her message also elicited many response messages, which included “I had never thought about what guy talk sounds like from a girl’s point of view before.” Obviously, this message shows a rhetorical breakthrough. In the message board, students’ messages represent a spectrum of views about majority and minority, which was useful for getting to the assumptions that created a barrier in communication and relationships. Most of the white male students had not had that experience of being a minority, a few did once or twice, and most agreed that they didn’t want to be because those groups “don’t have anything to do with me.” Therefore, not only are rhetorical insensitivity and difficulties in identification across “cultures” problems here, but so are willful emotional distancing from diverse groups. Confronting and recognizing these factors in a “contact zone” enabled us to exchange ideas about how complex rhetorical situations are including writer, reader, purpose, and context. By asking students to identify with women and gay men’s positions as the targets of these insults, students viewed this communication situation and language through the eyes of audience members they had not considered before, which is the greatest accomplishment of our class’s work.

In Parting

As Kristine Blair advocates, authentic conversation with genuine exigency in the classroom engages students in what is typical discourse for them. In turn, instructors can raise their understanding of how that discourse has ethical dimensions and effects on participant relationships. Students’ participation in the discourse, their play, and their subsequent close analysis and critical discussions of the transcripts enabled me to dramatically engage students in a learning experience. I’m doubtful that they would have learned this lesson had I simply lectured about what not to do and why. I hope that other teachers who discover aggressive and offensive discourse behaviors with students online will find value in a similar opportunity to challenge assumptions, confront language issues, and deal with discomfort as we realized there is much to learn about how we interact with one another and teach effective online writing. I remain hopeful, realizing the limitations of changing students’ values, becoming ecstatic if I reach one student. As a feminist, I am concerned, frustrated, and yet compelled toward activism,

encouraging greater involvement among women, minorities, and members of disenfranchised groups in our classroom interactions and fostering an equal forum for exchange that validates all sincere contributions. I use the word, "sincere" to distinguish between genuine attempts at promoting the exchange of insights, critiques, and humorous criticisms with the class in contrast to messaging that functions to obnoxiously derail, undermine, or destroy productive dialogue. The challenge is to figure out proactive and responsive means of addressing some of the oppressive power inequities that manifest in our written communications, making feminist concerns more central to our students' rhetorical processes (Hock).

Taking on this need for sensitizing our students to the diversity of their audiences in virtual spaces, we need to emphasize with them that writing online means creating real relationships with real people in "real participation" (Berzsenyi; Condon). Furthermore, our constructed relationships play a vital role in our rhetorical success as well as in establishing an ethical frame within which we interact. The often messy converging of rhetoric and ethics needs to be made explicit to our composition students. Writing instructors can offer students guidance on how to go about making discursive choices that acknowledge numerous rhetorical factors beyond what they've already encountered in previous discourse communities.

—Christyne Berzsenyi

Notes

[1] [4] Students participated in a restricted chat room of FirstClass software, using their real names in the same computer classroom; their names have been changed here.

[2] [5] Deborah Tannen's work has focused on determining communication dynamics in the distinct ways that males and females typically talk and function in oral and computer-mediated conversation.

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