Unheard Voices in the TicToc Conversations

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The TicToc conversations were in some ways similar to one of Plato's dialogues. Like Socrates and his interlocutors, members of the TicToc discussions engaged in dialogue whose ultimate and idealistic goal was to decide the 'good': given the corporate-driven and administratively supported drive to push university instruction into on-line environments, what is the best policy for UIC's English department to take? What should the department's role be with regard to teaching and learning in Cyberspace? Or as Ken McAllister has said, "How can we best move forward given our concerns and expectations for higher education as computing begins to dominate its direction?" Through the six-month listserv discussion and at the symposium, we heard a variety of views on this position, including technoenthusiastic recommendations to embrace this new technology and shape where it is taking us, technocritical warnings to consider the social and economic impact of this technological shift, and even a few technoskeptical views suggesting we'd be better off teaching Chaucer and leaving computers as an at-best optional component.

As in many of Plato's dialogues, however, the voices we heard by no means fully expressed or included all those who have a stake in the outcome of these questions. Significant in their absence in the TicToc conversations were undergraduates and staff. From the 4.1% undergraduate representation and 2% support staff asked to participate in the listserv discussion, none posted a response. This isn't surprising, given the intimidating presence of 48 pairs of eyes—department heads, faculty, graduate employees, and academic staff—ready and waiting to read and judge what they would say. In fact, only one comment by an undergraduate was uttered during the TicToc cycle and that was at the symposium by the exceptional Niki Aguirre, former UIC undergraduate and web spinner for eworks. She was invited as a respondent to Randy Bass's recommendations, yet through the competition to be heard, she

managed to add only a few words in defense of the types of communities she has found in on-line settings.

It might have been tempting to invite a panel of UIC undergraduates and support staff to the symposium, to act as consultants to our consultants. The students could have provided first-hand information about on-line work (or the lack of it) in their current classes, about what it's like to work in a UIC computer lab, about how easy or difficult it is to gain access to a computer, about their interests (or lack of them) in working in electronic environments, about their anxieties of facing an uncertain job market or their fears of not having skills desired by employers. The staff could have told us the practical difficulties of the plans to have a department go on-line, remind us of the staff hours needed to support on-line initiatives, and let us know what sort of training and compensation would be desirable and what wouldn't. This sort of panel discussion could have been interesting and eye opening, but more likely, it would have been a failure. Given the power dynamic of having undergraduates sitting in front of important-looking, mostly white, mostly male professor types, it's likely that they would have given the answers they felt were expected or desired from their audience. Or else, they may have said little, afraid of saying the wrong thing. Staff members would have faced the legitimate concerns of not wanting to appear resistant, lazy, or openly opposed to departmental goals or initiatives. Additionally, as one staff member told me about TicToc, "It's an academic situation, not one where I would feel comfortable speaking."

How, then, do we consider student and staff voices, realities, and concerns as we move beyond TicToc to the day-to-day decisions of teaching and administration that slowly but certainly change the shape of university education? I have three recommendations; I'd be interested in hearing others: One, we can become aware of the fictions we already create of students and critically interrogate the actions we take based on those fictions to ask who benefits and who gets hurt. Two, we can equally make explicit and interrogate the assumptions we make about support staff; and three, we can try harder to listen to students and staff.

Constructing Students

At the 1996 Midwest Modern Language Association Conference, Patricia Harkin, responding to a paper about a cultural-studies-based composition course I was in the process of teaching, said that as teachers we always create students who are in need of what we have to offer. She suggested that it is worthwhile to consider how we construct students and what implications those constructions have on our teaching. Her recommendation seems especially pertinent to discussions of increasing technology.

Consider, for example, how the rhetoric of the UI-OnLine initiative, a program well-funded by the University of Illinois system, constructs who its students are and what they need. It promises the following:

> As UI-OnLine experiments with interactive, at-distance provision of public-service information, short courses, regular courses, certificate programs and degree programs, it will simultaneously support computer-based enhancement of traditional, on-campus instruction. . . *Its off-campus students will occasionally be the same students who are enrolled on the campuses, but a new, underserved population will be drawn from Illinois citizens constrained by work, family, or other limitations from access to a campus*. The UI-OnLine will be the twenty-first-century realization of the University's historical land-grant mission. . . . The advent of *broad access to the Internet* has created a new medium for education, in effect a space into which the University of Illinois may or may not move, but others surely will. It is unlikely that the University will survive in the twenty-first century if it does not utilize these rapidly developing information technologies. (italics mine)

In this statement, students are represented as needing "computer-based enhancements" in both traditional and off-campus education. The representation of "underserved" students excludes a notion of economic disenfranchisement: here they are people who are limited in their access to a University of Illinois campus, but not to a computer with a modem and Internet connection. This redefinition of "underserved" students to include businessmen in Rockford, Peoria, or other cities without an Illinois campus is paired with a palpable anxiety that if U of I does not move quickly into the "space" of "broad access to the Internet," "it is unlikely that the University will survive in the twenty-first century." As a result, a student with private Internet access is presented here as the only option for the future of the university, which is involved in a life-and-death battle for existence.

In a world of unlimited resources, I would not object quite so strongly to the UI-OnLine initiative and its related shift toward economically advantaged but geographically distant students. Certainly, such on-line options might be used by disabled students, even in Chicago, who would otherwise have to navigate the generally not-wheelchair-friendly UIC campus. This UI-OnLine document, however, never specifically mentions the physically disabled; instead it focuses on examples, like the following, in which the university will be able to further corporate and government interests:

> •Small City, Illinois, is 150 miles from the nearest graduate program in engineering. The city has one major *employer* of engineers, which has identified 7 or 8 employees *whom it would like to see* earn master's degrees. The company provides the equipment and the site for these employees to complete courses for a Master of Civil Engineering. . . The degrees are offered jointly

by the UIC and UIUC Colleges of Engineering. They are managed through UI-OnLine.

- A *major federal installation* in the Quad-Cities area, as well as several smaller agencies, *is eager to have* available to its staff coordinated opportunities for single courses, certificate programs and a full Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree. Under the leadership of the UIC program in Public Administration. . . and management by the UI-OnLine, a program is offered that is accessible through private Internet connection, agency-provided access, or the Quad-Cities Graduate Center, depending upon the needs and preferences of the student. . . . (all italics mine)

Given the university's exuberance for meeting the needs and desires of government/corporate interests, and given public education's enduring economic constraints, it seems likely that the large resources devoted to projects like UI-OnLine will result in less money (in the form of staff and equipment) devoted to the *current* students of UIC-people largely from the urban public school system, who are seeking a quality education near home so they can continue working a job outside of class time. It seems that the university, in the name of broader access, is slowly but surely working to exclude the best interests of these undergraduates in favor of idealized future students of tomorrow with 30+ ACT scores, top-percentile GPAs as well as the economic resources to have their own on-line computer at home. (This trend is clearly visible in other campus initiatives, including expanded funding and space allocation to the honors college, well-funded programs to recruit "top performing" high school students, and cutback of building space to existing programs like the Writing Center, which is widely utilized by students struggling either with the English language or academic writing.) UI-OnLine's construction of students both represents and helps shape a university attitude that seeks resources and prestige at the cost of students "for whom a university education is not a long-standing family tradition and who must surmount economic, social, and educational barriers to achieve academic success," which is UIC's stated mission (*UIC Undergraduate Handbook* 9).

As teachers, administrators, and staff members we make as many assumptions as UI-OnLine does about our students and what's "good for" them. Certainly our faculty and staff positions do grant us the privilege to express what we think is good for students based on our experiences, the prevailing teacherly lore, and educational theory in addition to a heap of institutional pressures and economic constraints. I think it's vital, therefore, that in the process of deciding what is good for the undergraduates we interrogate our own assumptions and constructions of students to consider which students we are talking about as well as who benefits from our visions and who loses out. We can do this by

critically examining new initiatives (like UI-OnLine), departmental goals, and course syllabi, to determine on whose behalf we're working. For example, we can ask whether a course makes success easier for some (like those who have private computer access) while making it difficult or impossible for others. We can ask ourselves what pedagogical good is served by a course, and whose idea of good it is.

Listening to Students

Given that U of I's current institutional documents seem to favor a "not-yet," idealized and economically advantaged student, I would like to consider how TicToc members, the English department and the university as a whole can take under advisement what is good for UIC's *current* undergraduates. Since the push to computerize education comes primarily from sources that will directly profit from this trend, the need for teachers to examine their own views and try to learn from student opinions seems more imperative than ever. It seems vital that teachers develop a self-reflexive, critical practice—informed by theory as well as day-to-day experiences—to guide decisions about who gets to learn and how that learning will take place. C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon state well why this process is so important: "If theory unresponsive to practice is at best empty talk and at worst an academic power trip at the expense of other people, teaching without theoretical articulateness is a product of unthinking custom, accident, and the imposition of others, with no less potential (perhaps more, in fact) for taking advantage of the powerless"(9).

I suggest, as one step in our critical practice, to try listening to our students. This isn't always easy to do. How can or do we best listen to undergraduates? As a group or even as individuals, students, like the rest of us, rarely if ever speak with a unified or consistent voice. How do we decide exactly what they're trying to say? Or if we can't, how do we act on their behalf most ethically? With any new initiative, such as a shift to computer-based learning, you're likely to have some students love what you're doing, others hating it, and some who find loveable and hateful elements. The question then is, what is good enough? If we benefit most of our students with our pedagogy and only a few students suffer or don't thrive, can we consider it successful? How do we know what makes a certain type of learning not work well for some students? Sadly, the very thing that solicits a large number of positive comments from some students, might be exactly what makes the class difficult for others to navigate.

As we move on from the TicToc symposium, with these questions about what is good raging on, I suggest we think about what it means to listen to students' concerns and how to proceed in light of them. Listening does not guarantee a change of position, nor should it neces-

sarily, but it is something that as a teacher, I know I do far too little of. Listening goes beyond hearing the words spoken or the ideas expressed; it means re-evaluating your own position in light of what's heard.

What follows are comments solicited from a number of UIC undergraduates about their views of technology and learning. All were students of mine and these comments come from a range of places in which I ask for anonymous feedback about their response to learning with technology: surveys at the beginning of the course, midterm evaluations, and end-of-term evaluations. I offer no analysis or conclusion about these comments, nor about how sincerely the writers held these positions. Instead, I would like the voices of a few undergraduates to be registered among the proceedings of the TicToc conversations. For whatever the lasting results of this symposium will be (especially if they are nothing), they will be felt most immediately by students like these:

- "The only problem I have is that I have limited access to the computers here on campus and I don't have the programs or a computer at home. This is not only a problem for me but for my teachers also. You see they can't e-mail me and be sure I'll get the message in time for our next class or in time at all. It is also a problem for me when I get to campus and have to use a computer, because there is always a line and the computers tend to freeze."
- "I think that [computer] technology has both advantages and disadvantages. The positive aspects are that many times you could find what you need right on the computer. I was amazed at all the information and pictures the Internet provides us with. I spend enough time browsing Netscape and I never thought I would be able to find my cousin's e-mail address that lives in England by typing my last name in the search box. . . .The negative side to computers is that you might not always find what you need. As our English class probably learned, you still might have to pick up a phone and call someone that might have the answer for you."
- "I have concluded that computers do solve some of our problems, but not all of them. Some issues require human interaction and problem solving to resolve."
- "At the beginning of the semester, I was scared to even think about posting anything over e-mail. I couldn't figure out how a teacher would be able to grade anything on a computer screen. I also thought that if she didn't receive my writing, I'd get into trouble; I wanted to stick with the old-fashioned ways of typing a paper out and then just handing it in class. Now that I think back, I think how stupid I was to have thought that. Now that I'm more familiar with the Internet and my e-mail system, I prefer to post anything over the e-mail system, rather than handing it in."
- ".. . .This class has been such a good experience for me, not only as an english class, but also as a cultural experience. I've become more familiar with the new culture of the email system and at blending in with other cultures and making new friends. I have really gotten to know my classmates a lot better. Because we were all working

together, I feel we bonded somehow. Now, whenever we see each other on campus, we say hi. This class has really helped me make friends with people that I never thought I'd ever be friends with."

- "I like computers fine, but I HATE the Internet. It can really bug me sometimes. Bill Gates is yukky. Maybe I'm an anarchist, but I don't feel different."
- "I am planning on purchasing [a computer] in the next few weeks. I am comfortable using them because my teller position at the bank requires it constantly."
- "I don't have any qualms with using computers. It just seems that I haven't had enough time to fool around here at UIC to activate/use the available computers."
- "If I had my own computer I would use it all the time. I feel rushed using a school computer and I feel like a burden using a friend's. I am not intimidated by computers, but by not having access to one at all time I am still leery of using them."

Becoming Aware of Staff Concerns

Unlike the much mythologized student, support staff members are marginalized, near to the point of disappearance, in discussions of university change. Yet, at the same time, much is assumed about what they can and will do. To return to the UI-OnLine document, about staff, it states, "A minimal administrative staff for the UI-OnLine will attend to the following matters: intercampus coordination, public relations, information and outreach, student services, technology support, course development, support, evaluation, and budget." The writers of this document attribute almost super-human abilities to the personnel who will administer this program, people whom they refer to elsewhere as "an existing resource" alongside computer hardware and networks. (In other words, they feel they have enough staff on hand to take on these jobs!) Such a wide range of responsibilities for even a small program would prove a daunting job for any "minimal administrative staff;" but given the ambitious scope of this initiative, the job as described seems even more unrealistic. I wonder how many members of the "minimal administrative staff" were asked for their input about the amount of time, people, and resources would be needed to perform all the functions described?

Turning to UIC's English department, the TicToc discussions did invite staff participation: two English department support staff and several staff members in the computer labs. So, in some ways, the lack of participation of administrative staff could be described as self-selected; they chose not to participate. Given the academic tone of TicToc, however, some staff members said they felt uncomfortable participating. Also, the presence of department heads and faculty on the list might have also been a factor in their decision not to participate. In other words, we invited staff to our discussion but it was not a setting which allowed

an open and honest consideration of the profound ways a shift toward on-line pedagogies and a virtual department might affect everyoneÕ's jobs: students, graduate employees, faculty, and staff.

The question I raise here, with few suggestions, is how faculty and administrators can call upon themselves to be more ready and able to consider the impact new initiatives will have on staff and listen to their concerns and suggestions? Bogged down with the existing demands of their positions, staff members are given little to no time to do long-range planning or consider the way changing technology will affect their jobs. Instead, they are more frequently asked to adapt to large-scale departmental changes rather than have a say in shaping them.

In preparing this essay, I decided simply to walk around UIC's English department and ask the staff what they thought about increasing technology and how it might affect their jobs. As a graduate student, I think me asking these sweeping questions seemed more puzzling than intimidating. My explanation of why I was asking, especially to those who had not participated in TicToc, was probably inadequate. Even so, the people I spoke to were not without opinions. They were articulate and generally quite interested in thinking about and participating in a dialogue about the changing demands of their workplace. Below, I share with you the comments given to me by some staff members, either by email, in person, or in writing. Another challenge going beyond TicToc is thinking up ways that allow staff members to have the information, time, and freedom they would need to think through these complex issues and feel free to speak their minds about them, even if it contradicts the prevailing department beliefs or opinions.

- "I think that we would have to (and should want to) keep pace with technology. As technology grows in leaps and bounds we are obliged to keep up with it as best we can. I believe the Department has been 'behind the times' as they say. That is until recently. By joining the World Wide Web we have taken a step into today. We can only better ourselves technologically speaking; and won't know completely what adjustments we will need to make or what roads we may need to cross until we get to them."
- "I read everything that was said on TicToc, but I didn't respond because I didn't think I could be pedantic enough. No real discussion was taking place. I think most of the participants forgot what it means to have a dialogue with someone other than themselves. Have we lost the art of correspondance? Try reading again the letters between Einstein and Freud on 'War'."
- "I've tried but I just can't conceptualize what a department of on-line courses would look like. I've read a lot of science fiction, so I should be able to, but I just can't imagine electronic courses and all the problems that would arise. And many people who seem to understand this online world, I don't trust. They speak in such a technical language and could be feeding me a line, and I wouldn't know it."

- "Look at this manual. To even look something up in the index, you need to know the terminology. Even simple things are presented with such complex terminology."
- "As a staff person who also has to supervise administrative personnel, I see training as a real issue and a problem. As technology increases, our staff jobs keep evolving, so that people who have been working for years might be lacking skills and need to adapt. The only means of training, that I have been made aware of are student-led workshops in the computer center. These students are knowledgeable about the hardware, but not in communicating information to an audience not as familiar as they are."
    - "I'm having a hard time responding because I don't know specifically what the issues are. If you give me something concrete to respond to—like a proposal or some sort of plan—I would very much like to do that. But I can't just discuss technology and this department in broad terms."
- "I haven't really had a chance to think about these issues before you brought them up to me. But I'm very interested in them. I would like to get more background and enter into a discussion about how technology will change my job and this department. Are we going to have these kinds of discussions? If so, count me in."

Works Cited

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