Private Lessons, Public Learning: Reflections and Revelations about the TicToc Conversations

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The TicToc Project

When researchers and inventors conduct experiments, they sometimes informally distinguish between promising and disappointing failures, promising and disappointing successes. Promising failures and successes point the researcher in a useful new direction; disappointing failures and successes point only toward frustrating dead-ends. The difference between an adequate researcher and an excellent one, it has been said, is that the excellent researcher is able consistently to transform disappointing results into promising ones with only a shift of perspective.

The TicToc Conversations were from the beginning a grand experiment. Keith Dorwick, David Downing, Paula Mathieu, Jim Sosnoski, and I started with a list of questions about the future of electronic pedagogy which, if addressed sufficiently, we believed could be synthesized into a set of useful and humane guidelines about teaching in electronic environments. These guidelines were to be put into use at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where Donald G. Marshall, the English Department Head, had charged an ad hoc committee to establish a policy for how courses with an electronic component should be monitored and evaluated. There was no doubt among our initial group, however, that with a range of broad and sophisticated consultants our local policy could achieve more far-reaching goals.

The members of that initial cadre shared a number of beliefs: we all had a substantial commitment to teaching in general, and particularly to experimenting with how the use of computers might enhance our courses; we all believed that the trend toward the computerization of the classroom was deep and not readily resistible; we all recognized that there were hundreds, if not thousands, of teachers already who either wanted to use computers in their classes, or who were being strongly encouraged to do so(to euphemize the process of institutional

pressure), even though their "computer literacy" was insufficient for undertaking such an endeavor very thoughtfully; we were all intimately familiar with the mixed messages that institutional administrators sometimes conveyed, wanting on one hand their faculty, staff, and students to invent and engage in creative, cutting-edge technological solutions to the challenges that current colleges and universities often face, and on the other hand wanting their faculty, staff, and students to behave traditionally (i.e., faculty are to lecture to students in physical classrooms that staff members have reserved for the act of education); we all shared a belief that these factors constituted an administrative and pedagogical timebomb that would detonate sooner rather than later. We foresaw such explosive consequences because we had already witnessed numerous smaller explosions catalyze out of tense interactions among administrators, faculty, graduate employees, staff, and students over how, when, why, and to what extent computing ought to be taught and used in humanities courses. From these shared beliefs grew the TicToc Project.

At the same time that the TicToc Project was being developed, Jim Sosnoski was spearheading an eclectic team of UIC faculty, administrative and support staff, and graduate and undergraduate students who had undertaken the task of creating a virtual English department. This team called itself "e-works"; the "e" stood for both "English" and "electronic." Initially, the English Department's administration supported e-works with encouragement and a small grant. Such resources alone, however, cannot create an electronic environment in which faculty, students, and staff collaborate, exchange information and ideas, and develop and exercise new creative skills.

The e-workers–as the growing cadre of people involved in the project called themselves–knew they needed human and material resources too, and so when they won a grant they had applied for, they began to gather them. They purchased a file and web server (a very powerful computer) and put together a group of "wizards" who could direct this new electronic project. The e-workers soon had almost everything they needed to begin the challenging task of creating an electronic extension of the English Department: talented writers, computer programmers, teachers, scholars, system administrators, artists, web designers; a fast network connection for their fancy computer; and lots of energy. While many of the e-workers set off designing web pages and inviting people to make their courses and research projects a part of e-works, others took over the technical details, namely setting up the server. This was where they hit their first snag, but not where one might expect.

Their problem was not technical, it was administrative; the one person with experience setting up file servers was a graduate student and he rightfully expected to be paid for his time and expertise. Unfortunately, there were no departmental funds available for such an

expenditure. A similar problem arose sometime later when our chief web designer, who had been helping e-works gratis, lost her regular campus job as part of a cutback scheme. It seemed obvious to the e-workers that the English Department should hire her as a student worker and put her in charge of the English Department's web pages, a job that needed doing immediately and regularly. The current computer support person in the department was already over-extended and so was unable to help with the Department's on-line presence. But once again, the Department was unable to help.

To the core group of TicToc'ers, it became clear that e-works was a project that exhibited many of the characteristic traits that an explosive experimental electronic educational project does: (1) it had substantial *initial* support from all levels of the institution, from undergraduates through top administration; (2) it had garnered some small amount of money with which it could make some early steps toward achieving its goal; (3) it had a small number of highly active and creative people who could make much (technically, artistically) out of little; (4) it had no uniform set of goals among its activists. To those of us watching closely, e-works indeed seemed like a project destined to explode–or at least crumble suddenly–like the numerous other electronic educational experiments we had seen fail, and which were typically followed by overly harsh institutional judgments that all but squelched further experimentation. It was this institutional dynamic–from encouraged experimentation and limited failure, to overbearing skepticism and open rejection for further experimentation–that the TicToc Project participants believed would power the explosion suggested by its name. As a pool of bad feelings and negative experiences developed, as rejections and failures became more frequent, the day would come when the first shockwave of that immanent explosion would be felt; this shockwave, we TicToc'ers speculated, would likely bring one of two changes: either it would almost completely turn educational institutions away from trying to implement innovative, electronically-based curricula in their programs–as it had with phonographs, radio, and broadcast and cable television in years previous, or the task of developing new electronic educational tools would become corporatized and thus homogenized. Such academic homogenization would realize a common concern among educators, namely, that all members of the developing global (capitalist) village would be forced to follow rules established by corporate America or risk being shut out of the pedagogical process.

The TicToc Project began referring to itself as "the self-reflexive part of e-works" (heavy member crossover allowed for such presumptuousness), initiating a dialectical approach of action and critique among the processes of this actual experimental electronic project. This approach, we hoped, would highlight many of the ways in which projects like e-works were prepared for successes and failures.

The TicToc Consortium

Among the most compelling components of e-works was its central-ization of several electronic courses that had been developed within the department. Using e-works (the project and its server that bears the same name, i.e. eworks.engl.uic.edu) as a resource and as a facility for storage and retrieval, teachers could easily develop and test new elec-tronic tools and pedagogical variations quickly and with input from a variety of experts. Several classes had already been developed by e-workers, and these classes depended heavily on computer interactions among students and teachers who were sometimes located at two or three campuses around the country. It was clear to many of us that elec-tronic course work was one of the most popular uses of computers in educational institutions, and so, when two proposed electronic courses were prohibited from the English Department's list of standing course offerings by the Curriculum Committee, TicToc'ers interpreted the rejec-tion as a striking renunciation of the departmental administration's ear-lier commitment to e-works as an experimental educational enterprise.

The refusal to institutionalize electronic pedagogy was not particular-ly surprising to the TicToc Project organizers; they had heard about such administrative reversals numerous times before. In fact, the listserv for the Alliance of Computers and Writing (ACW-L) regularly shows mes-sages posted by teachers and administrators alike who are surveying their "available means of persuasion," asking colleagues how best to sell electronic courses to administrators (if the writers are teachers) or how best to evaluate electronic course proposals (if the writers are administrators). More often than not, the people who post these mes-sages are anxious either that their proposals will be rejected because similar past proposals in their department have been rejected, or they fear that their acceptance of a proposal will conclude just as disas-trously as some other course that had been recently allowed. Once the TicToc'ers firmly established that it was the development and imple-mentation of electronic courses that most often became a problematic issue in academic departments around the country, they developed a plan by which they might defuse, or at least catalyze a controlled explo-sion of, the tense situation they saw escalating in their own and at other institutions.

The TicToc Consortium, as the originators of the project were called, adopted the concept of a "cycle" as a foundation for their plan. "A post-disciplinary cycle," writes David Downing and Jim Sosnoski in the 1996 issue of *Works and Days*, "is intended to be dialogical through-out. It begins and ends as a conversation and is published in dialogical form" (14). The purpose and benefit of Cycles is that they encourage thoughtful, articulate discussions of focused issues among a range of

people with diverse backgrounds and professions. In trying to forge a productive conversation among administrators, scholars, teachers, graduate employees (TAs/RAs/GAs), graduate and undergraduate students, administrative and support staff, the TicToc'ers found the Cycles model to be particularly well-suited for so complex and open-ended a task as they had envisioned. By adopting the Cycles model, TicToc would become a research group, which, once it had collectively discussed personal experiences with developing and implementing electronic courses, would "propose coping tactics" (Downing and Sosnoski 15). A moderator would oversee these conversations, identifying themes, asking participants to clarify terminology or claims, and calling attention to conflicts that arose as the group worked to find solutions and strategies for resolving the problematics they had mutually agreed were most pressing.

The TicToc Conversations

I was chosen to moderate what became known as the TicToc Conversations. Because our participants were scattered among fourteen different institutions around the world, we decided to hold the TicToc Conversations electronically, via a listserv run from UIC. Our general plan was fairly simple: once we chose our participants, we would spend a short time introducing ourselves; next we would express our concerns and expectations for higher education as computing begins to dominate its direction; we would describe our experiences of how electronic experimentation as a part of our pedagogy and scholarship was acknowledged (or not) by our departments; we would discuss in detail seven detailed scenarios that had been drawn up by a member of the TicToc Consortium, each of which described the implementation of a college course with an electronic component; finally, the Project's participants would post to the list their specific recommendations for how UIC's English Department ought to proceed with their creation of an on-line extension of itself. At the conclusion of these four "Phases," the TicToc Participants would meet together for two days in mid-May 1997–eight months after the Conversations began–for a symposium at which they would solidify and express in person their recommendations for how faculty and administrators might proceed most effectively with their planning and execution of electronic coursework in North American colleges and universities. Our ultimate goal for the TicToc Conversations and for the TicToc Symposium was to combine our expertise as critics, administrators, teachers, staffers, and students so that we might address some of education's most pressing problems; from this collaboration we hoped to develop resources that anyone interested in electronic courses could use to help them recognize and avoid the most common problems associated with teaching with com-

puters.

Within three weeks of adopting our plan, nearly fifty people had reviewed the TicToc Project's goals and accepted our invitation to participate in the TicToc Conversations: Vainis Aleksa, Niki Aguirre, Joe Amato, Randy Bass, Eva Bednarowicz, Thomas Bestul, Elizabeth Burmester, David Coogan, William Covino, Eric Crump, Jamie Daniel, Mick Doherty, Keith Dorwick, Sabrina Downard, David Downing, Joe Faust, Ann Feldman, James Fletcher, Judith Gardiner, Robert Goldstein, Karin Gosselink, Judy Gudgalis, Thomas Hall, Gail Hawisher, Cynthia Haynes, Jan Rune Holmevik, John W. Huntington, Laurie Husak, Ulrike Jaeckel, David Jolliffe, Ahmed Kassem, Sajjad Lateef, Marjorie Coverley Luesebrink, Donald Marshall, Ken McAllister, Paula Mathieu, Burks Oakley II, Thomas Philion, Cynthia Rodriquez, Gene Ruoff, David Seitz, Cynthia Selfe, James Sosnoski, Joseph Tabbi, Greg Ulmer, Virginia W. Wexman, Beth Wilson, Michael Wutz, Mary K. Zajac. Ostensibly, this was a somewhat diverse group. Of the 49 invited participants, approximately:

> 40.8% were women
> 8% were non-Caucasian
> 28.6% were not from UIC
> 26.5% were administrators
> 18.4% were academic professionals
> 49% were faculty
> 26.5% were graduate students, most of whom were

also graduate employees (TAs/RAs/GAs)

> 4.1% were undergraduates
> 2% were support staffers

Our experience suggested that if the TicToc Conversations were to remain lively throughout particularly busy (e.g. final exams) and particularly slow (e.g. breaks) parts of the academic year, we would need to provide some incentive for the participants. To this end, Alternative Educational Environments, a national organization under the direction of Jim Sosnoski, contributed $8,000.00 to pay eight selected participants $1000.00 each for their active and regular participation for the duration of the conversations. Randy Bass, Eric Crump, Mick Doherty, David Downing, Cynthia Haynes, Jan Rune Holmevik, Cynthia Selfe, and Greg Ulmer were selected by the TicToc Consortium to be our paid "consultants"; our selections were based on an informal evaluation of each participant's experience and reputation in both studying and working with electronic educational environments.

On Tuesday, October 8, 1996, the TicToc Cycle was ready to begin: the hardware, listservs, and web pages had been prepared and tested, the participants had been organized and taught a simple set of e-mail protocols to make following conversational threads easier, the consultants were prepared, and there was a sense of eagerness and urgency

surrounding the whole project.

In the remainder of this essay, I will present two different views of the TicToc Conversations in order to begin the revelation of e-works' and of TicToc's successes and failures. The first view is the public one, the view of the TicToc Conversations that is most apparent in a reading of the TicToc listserv's archive or in a reading of the slightly edited Conversations archive found elsewhere in this issue and on the TicToc Project's web page. The other view is a more private one, and represents some of the concerns, joys, and frustrations I experienced as the moderator of the Conversations. This private view, it will become clear, also reveals that some of these feelings were shared by the other members of the TicToc Consortium. In presenting these two views (which are not the only views), I hope to provide both a story of the TicToc Conversations that exemplifies the TicToc Consortium's commitment to self-critique, as well as a panoramic background that informs both the "TicToc Manifesto" and the "TicToc Non-Manifesto" found elsewhere in this issue.

Phase I: Virtual Universities

Public

The Conversations began when I raised several issues on the list that had been brought to my attention by a recent newspaper article on Duke University's virtual MBA program. In addition to these issues, I also posted several responses to that newspaper article that members of UIC's English Department faculty, staff, and student body had shared with me on the day it was published. Although I suggested a number of possible threads that the participants might take up ("QUALITY: Can one learn anything well in a virtual environment?"; "SALARIES: How will on-line teachers be hired and paid?"; "ASSESSMENT: Is virtual assessment possible?"), the larger concern I expressed in the body of that early message involved what the consequences might be for citizens of the physical university if they suddenly, rather than gradually, realized that the virtual university was upon them.

Perhaps the most striking theme, not only of this phase, but throughout the TicToc Conversations was that as educators, administrators, and staffers, was that we all need to seriously investigate what we believe the purpose of the university to be and how we might best fulfill this purpose given our available resources—human, financial, and technological. Such an investigation, it was urged, needs to take place at all levels of the institution, from the Board of Trustees to the individual teaching assistant. In general, participants agreed that there seemed to be little consensus among the diverse groups who help operate institutions of higher learning about what education is "for." As a result of this

missing shared objective, educators seeking to experiment with electronic media in their courses must tilt for a golden ring of the latest pedagogical fashion, a difficult game with little long-term administrative support once won.

Other conversational threads enriched this theme. For instance, some participants observed that until we can talk honestly and specifically with each other about how we are compensated as administrators, scholars, and especially as teachers, we will never be able to build a coalition strong enough to demand fair wages and working conditions. A logic of institutional authority suggests, consequently, that if we allow ourselves and our colleagues to be cheated of fair wages and adequate medical benefits by an educational model increasingly driven by corporate capitalism, we will never be in a position to demand anything more than whimsical support of our educational experiments. Other participants were concerned by the extent to which mass media generates false impressions of both computing and of education, then promotes those impressions to the public. When there is a general public sense that computing is easy (e.g. Apple), international (e.g. IBM), fun (e.g. Intel), and inexpensively educational (e.g. Dell), at the same time that newspaper headlines across the country regularly read "National Reading and Math Scores Lower Than Ever," confusion and conflict naturally arise, especially when computer-using students' academic performance does not improve. If the steep learning curve for innovative pedagogical approaches is not readily apparent to students or teachers, they will probably not be apparent to the administrators who are funding these approaches. As a result, that funding may be cut due to what appears to be–in the short-view–a lack of beneficial results.

Private

As the Conversations began, the Consortium's energies were high. We had solid commitments from our participants and consultants, we had administrative support, and we had composed what we thought were several provocative "Getting Started" messages to get the discussion off to a strong start. After the introductions were complete, I sent out the initial messages on November 1, 1996, suggesting several possible threads to which our participants might or might not respond. Within about three weeks, however, the Consortium knew that the Conversations were not proving as provocative as had been expected; already by this time there had been several fallow periods on the listserv, including one that lasted five days.

It had been our experience that listserv threads tend to be concentrated discursive events; most threads have a life span of somewhere between two to four days. These threads, short-lived as they are, however, usually generate new threads; such is the regenerative life of the

typical on-line, asynchronous conversation. The TicToc Conversations, unfortunately, were not following this pattern. In the eleven weeks through which the "Virtual Universities" discussion lasted, only 67 messages were sent; only 46 of those messages were by non-Consortium participants.

The Consortium members were beginning to get anxious about the Conversations, sometimes for practical and sometimes for personal and psychological reasons. On the personal side, we had worked hard at getting the Conversations off the ground and had become excited at the prospect of perhaps developing some recommendations concerning electronic pedagogy that might have far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. Additionally, at least two dissertations were bound up with TicToc and e-works, as well as several other academic works-in-progress; bad, or even uninteresting results would change the projected content of those projects, making them more difficult to complete. On the practical side, the TicToc Conversations were to be the basis of this issue of *Works & Days*, a publication that typically runs to around 300 pages. By the end of Phase 1 of the TicToc Conversations, which comprised about 42% of all the time allotted for the Conversations, only about 53 journal pages worth of text had been sent to the listserv; since many of the messages contained the text of the message to which it was a reply, the actual, usable number of pages submitted by mid-January was lower still. Even if the number of messages remained roughly the same throughout the remainder of the Conversations–something our experience, again, suggested was unlikely–there would still only be about 190 pages (at most) of conversation for the journal. And although these figures were calculated well after the Conversations had been concluded, we knew intuitively that not enough discussion was occurring if we were to fill a journal issue with insights, anecdotes, and advice about electronic pedagogy.

An additional concern that developed among the TicToc Consortium was the relatively small number of participants contributing to the Conversations. During the first eleven weeks, only 21 of the 49 participants (43%) sent a message to the listserv, excluding messages sent by Jim Sosnoski, Keith Dorwick, and myself. Because the crux of the TicToc Project depended on the regular participation of people from all areas of higher education, this lack of participation by the majority of those whom we had invited to collaborate was more than a little troubling. Without the diverse range of opinions we had carefully brought together, the TicToc Conversations would differ little from other similar discussions that ensued more naturally on listservs dominated by faculty and academic administrators. In an effort to address what can be summarized as the TicToc Conversations' poor level of participation, the Consortium elected to try a number of strategies to engage more people more often.

Our first strategy was to use word-of-mouth and "back-channeling," prompting participants privately to send messages to the TicToc list. These prompts sometimes occurred spontaneously–in casual telephone or hallway conversations, (e.g., "That's an interesting point, Chris. You should send that to the TicToc Conversations and see what other people think.")–and sometimes they were well-planned requests–as when we prompted various administrators and staffers to raise an issue with which they were directly involved. On average, these special requests to submit questions, comments, critiques, and clarifications to the Conversations resulted in posted messages only about 30% of the time.

The refusal of our back-channeled encouragements were sometimes justifiable, we discovered. One graduate employee, for instance, outright refused to send a strongly-felt criticism of a message sent by a member of the administration for fear of being passed over for a Summer Term teaching position. For similar reasons, one untenured faculty member who had originally been willing to participate in the Conversations, later backed out, suggesting that there was too much pressure on her to produce material suitable for her upcoming tenure review. If she were to be observed writing well-articulated messages to a listserv about electronic pedagogy, she feared that senior faculty who were also on the list would think she was working too hard in the TicToc Conversations and not hard enough on writing a single-author book that would warrant her promotion.

One support staffer told me that she was reluctant to send messages to the list because her comments were not "high brow" enough; one of her main concerns, for example, involved how current paper-based administrative and clerical tasks such as the filing of grades, grade changes, the filing of class rosters, and the preparation of course schedules could be converted to electronic formats without huge expenditures for new equipment and staff training. This point, which is eminently practical and which most faculty would not regularly think about, absolutely needs to be addressed as universities shift their organizational bases to be more computer dependent. At the same time, it raises some monumental socio-political questions, one of which could involve an examination of the institution's labor practices and another of which might involve a Foucaultian genealogy of academia. In short, it was a comment worth pursuing at many levels, but one that the institutional culture effectively stifled.

One final story of a TicToc refusenik. I overheard the following conversation about a younger participant's flippant, yet insightful, post regarding the thread about receiving fair wages: "Doesn't he know he shouldn't act like that on this list? Two Department Heads, an Associate Head, and two Vice Chancellors are getting those messages." Reply: "I know! He's going to mess up his career if he's not more careful."

Often, the majority of the 49 invited participants did not participate

because they were busy with their classes, their jobs, or other academic responsibilities. But as we tried to persuade more people to contribute to the Conversations we discovered–as the stories above show–that there was also an undercurrent of fear, or at least professional caution, that was constraining people's participation. This raises a question that needs to be addressed much more fully if electronic pedagogy is to advance to a useful point in the culture: If a group of professional adults exhibit so detectable a sense of anxiety about what their supposed collaborators will think about them and their electronic messages, how much more so will students in roughly the same circumstances?

   Our second strategy for developing more discussion was to assign deadlines for the remaining three phases of the TicToc Conversations. Our thinking was that overt deadlines would prompt more rigorous and frequent responses from participants because they would have a more holistic sense of how the Conversations were going. For example, if a techno-skeptical participant felt that techno-enthusiasts were dominating a particular thread, that participant might be more likely to respond sooner, rather than later, if she or he knew that this particular thread would in a few days be abandoned to assume its place in the fabric of the Conversations.

   This strategy proved to be effective as far as we could tell. Each time an impending deadline was announced, the number of postings would rise considerably, a phenomenon that usually lasted two or three days. The problem with this strategy was that it was really only effective toward the end of a phase, which often left open days or weeks at a time with no dialogical incentive other than the participants' own initiative and sense of responsibility and interest in TicToc; such motivational forces, we had already determined, could not be depended upon. We resolved upon one final method–it might even be called a gimmick–to draw people into the Conversations.

   Our last strategy was to develop, even at this very early stage in the Conversations, a draft of a set of guidelines for electronic pedagogy; this last strategy evolved into what we called the "The TicToc Manifesto." The Manifesto, as its name suggests, was intended to be provocative, intended to get the participants to say "Yes, I agree with that," "Hey, that's not right," or "Wait a minute. I'm not sure about this." Nine items were on the original Manifesto, dated 1/21/97, and demanded, in essence, that teaching with computers be understood as an ongoing experiment that warranted care and critique from the instructor's perspective and respect and patience from the administrator's perspective.

   But the Manifesto was also a defensive measure. Each of its nine demands were concise and vehement summaries of some of the participants' main concerns, what we called on the list "KEY ISSUES." Each of the demands, therefore, carried a citation to one message or

another, giving the (false) impression that the Manifesto was a product of successful collaboration. On the web page, the citations were linked to their originary documents in the listserv archives, a feat of leger de technique that further suggested to browsers of the TicToc Site that the Project was a model of professional collaboration. As the statistics detailed earlier reveal, however, this was far from true. Privately, then, the original Manifesto was a conversational teaser and a cover-up for the meager participation we were getting, as much as it was a summary of the insightful observations that had been posted to the listserv.

We had one additional purpose for the original TicToc Manifesto: to encourage the participants to begin thinking about practical solutions for the problems and concerns that they were raising. One of TicToc's goals had always been to develop implementable, workable solutions to the problems that the participants identified as being most common and most pressing. Our discussions about the virtual university had certainly raised problems for our consideration, but much more often than not the threads evolved into speculative exchanges, rather than a collaborative brainstorming of possible solutions.

That our conversations rarely took this turn from observation and speculation to problem solving, was, to some extent, the fault of the TicToc Consortium. The TicToc Consortium had determined early on that the dominant voices in the TicToc Conversations were to be those of the many participants we had invited to collaborate on the very general problem we had raised. In our view, we initiators of the TicToc Project had already given strong voice to our concerns in all the details of TicToc, from our decision to work exclusively with *Works & Days*, our choosing of participants and consultants, and the design of the web site, to the way the TicToc Conversations were opened, the protocols we asked participants to follow when submitting messages, and the timetable for the Project as a whole. My role as moderator, therefore, was played under a Consortium-imposed set of restrictions that we all believed would help to ensure that those of us organizing the project were not also creating its content. Briefly, we agreed that as the moderator I would not enter the Conversations except under certain conditions:

> --a new phase was beginning (e.g. "the Virtual University")
or an existing phase was ending (e.g. "The Virtual Department")
> --a point of information needed mentioning (e.g. a new feature on the web site)
> --a story in the media relevant to a current thread had come to my attention
> --I was addressed directly
> --a flame war was impending

It was up to the participants and consultants, therefore, to make the TicToc Conversations practical. By the time we realized that few practical suggestions were being made, the first Phase had drawn out for too long and it was too late to redirect and refine the threads. We decided to call Phase I our learning phase, cut our losses, and initiate Phase II: a discussion of virtual departments. The first draft of the TicToc Manifesto provided some closure on the discussion of virtual universities, it put some practical demands on the table for discussion in the next phase, and, we hoped, the genre of the manifesto–if not the demands of the TicToc Manifesto itself–would invigorate the Conversations.

To our surprise and disappointment, none of the participants responded to the list about the Manifesto. As Phase II began, our frustrations were mounting and our creative energies were being depleted.

Phase II: Virtual Departments

Public

The segue between the TicToc Conversations about Virtual Universities (Phase I) and Virtual Courses (Phase III) was a two-week long discussion of how to allocate human and technological resources in the development of a virtual department. In the introductory message for this phase I suggested that participants try to answer three questions that had caused some consternation among UIC English Department faculty, staff, and students: What should we expect from a virtual department? Who runs a virtual department? and What is the pedagogical purview of the virtual department? Although the subject lines of the messages that responded to these questions varied, making it difficult to identify threads with a glance, almost all subsequent messages addressed the questions in some way.

In particular, participants emphasized the importance of having intelligent, committed people behind any departmental endeavor to establish a sophisticated on-line presence. Without solid administrative and technical support, several participants noted, a project such as e-works would fail. Administrative and technical support is imperative, one participant explained, because the development of a virtual department is a demonstration of the transitional time that education is currently working through. As paper and electronic media are made to engage in a falsely polarized and metaphorical battle signifying traditional and innovative ways of teaching, that conflict is going to find its way into the human relationships that constitute an academic department. Wise leadership (administration) and an abundance of technical know-how, therefore, are the most valuable assets a department's faculty can have as they explore the costs and benefits of working in electronic environ-

ments.

Private

Our expectations for this Phase were low from the beginning. We had allowed Phase I to die slowly, which had consumed more time than was wise. As a result, Phase II began behind schedule and we were now at risk of abbreviating the discussion of the two most important phases, namely III and IV. Rather than allow four weeks for Phase II, we cut its duration to one week (it eventually ran to two-weeks), and sent out an introductory message suggesting three very specific questions we needed feedback on.

Not including the two messages sent by members of the TicToc Consortium, thirteen messages were sent during this phase by eleven different participants; three of these messages were sent by paid consultants. On average, each of the discussants submitted about two journal pages worth of material, an average that remained about the same throughout the TicToc Conversations. In the first Phase, roughly 37% of all the invited TicToc Participants sent one or more messages to the list; in Phase II that percentage dropped to about 22.

Perhaps the best way to describe how this dwindling participation felt to those of us who had organized the project is to recast the situation in another way. Imagine that you have invited ten people to participate in a roundtable discussion. These ten people are folks you find particularly insightful, charming, and accomplished, and they each say they *want* to come and be part of the event. Now, imagine that the day of the roundtable has arrived. All ten people arrive and most introduce themselves as they come in and sit down. The energy in the room is palpable; everyone is excited. The first question is asked and the discussion begins, but after about an hour and a half, after a number of painfully long and awkward silences (e.g. five to ten minutes between responses), and after several attempts to engage the participation of all the people who are sitting around the table, only three or four of the ten members of the roundtable have said something. The rest have sat in silence, some occasionally nodding their heads, some dozing off, some not really paying much attention at all. When the second question is asked to the participants, only two people choose to address it. The third question, which is asked after a long lunch break, draws out three or four people again, as does the fourth question. At the conclusion of your roundtable, four of the people who accepted your invitation to participate have never said a word. The six people who have participated have been sometimes quite insightful, but wasn't that to be expected from everyone?

This was essentially the scene of the TicToc Conversations as it was transpiring around us. To make matters worse, the few people who

were participating in the Conversations were articulating one of the main problems that both e-works and now TicToc were experiencing: without adequate administrative and technical support, an electronically-based academic project will almost certainly fail. Judging from the scarcity of departmental and university administrators' comments on the list, despite numerous private attempts by members of the TicToc Consortium to encourage them to share their thoughts and concerns, it is safe to assume by this time in Phase II that we had lost the support–or at least the interest–of those who had initially encouraged us to proceed with the TicToc Project and who had promised their assistance in making it a success.

Why are administrators so important to exploring the benefits and drawbacks of electronic pedagogy? Primarily because they have the power to advocate at the institutional level for a rewards system that is both encouraging and patient with those who choose to experiment with new ways of teaching. Administrators need to communicate to faculty, staff, and students that their participation in experiments with electronic pedagogy will not be deemed a waste of time, particularly in the face of traditional academic evaluative procedures such as tenure review, performance evaluations, and academic advising. They also have the authority to allocate or re-allocate human and financial resources to support those technologies that have been chosen for experimentation. At UIC, for instance, a large grant allowed the university to purchase new multimedia computers for almost every faculty member who requested one. Unfortunately, very little funding was set aside to handle the substantial amount of technical support necessary to get these machines up and keep them running. In many departments, this meant that numerous computers sat in unopened boxes while faculty waited for technicians to come and set the machines up, install all the requisite software for networking, and teach the basics of sending e-mail, browsing the web, and subscribing to listservs and newsgroups. In some cases, this wait period approached a full year, a delay that pleased no one.

The loss of administrative support from TicToc lent a subtle sense of futility to the Conversations. If administrators were not really going to participate in this collective struggle to resolve some of the problems with electronic pedagogy, some people suggested to each other privately, why should anyone else waste their time? Without administrative support, no institutional policies would be changed, and therefore all evaluative procedures would remain the same. And if evaluative procedures remain the same, experiments with such activities as electronic pedagogy and collaborative scholarship would count for naught. One final hope remained for those of us who had organized TicToc: Phase III, a discussion of highly detailed scenarios depicting virtual courses that had either been taught already or had been proposed to a

university curriculum committee and been rejected.

Phase III: Virtual Courses

Public

   Having discussed virtual universities and virtual departments, the TicToc Conversations next turned its attention to virtual courses. Keith Dorwick, with some assistance from Jim Sosnoski, presented seven scenarios each depicting a different on-line course. These scenarios were quite detailed, containing syllabi, background information on the development of each course, and a technical summary providing such information as the "Percent of Internet Use," "Percent of Face-to-Face Contact," "Percent of Technical Training Needed by Students," "Technical Training Needed by Faculty," and "Attendance Requirements." These scenarios were sent to the TicToc listserv in a standard text form, but they were designed primarily as Web documents. In their HTML formats, the scenarios contained dozens of hypertext links to definitions and external and internal references, making them a rich example of how scholarship, including collaborative scholarship, could be done effectively in an electronic environment. The Scenarios were introduced and participants were asked to draw upon their own experiences as teachers, scholars, administrators, staffers, and students in commenting on them. Among the threads initially posed were:
   What could an on-line course look like?
   How could it be designed?
   Who could teach it?
   How could the university determine compensation?
   How could quality control be maintained?
In finding answers to the questions above, we hoped that we would discover whether or not a common body of knowledge existed concerning the design and implementation of virtual courses. The wide range of participants' experience led the Consortium to believe that it would be possible to discover whether or not there were pedagogical, organizational, or administrative components to electronic pedagogy that most of us recognize as being problematic. If so, we wondered if there were also common solutions or work-arounds to these problems.
   The participants' responses were slow in coming and occasionally emotionally charged; the public progress of this phase was also the most contentious. On February 10, 1997, participants received ten very long messages introducing and detailing the seven scenarios as well as other related materials. On the following day, I sent a message to the list suggesting that people not worry about reading all of the material they had recently received, letting them know that it had only been sent out so that people without web access could review the Scenarios

when they were mentioned in later conversations. Two days after that message, when no participants had yet responded to the Scenarios, I sent another message that advocated following Keith Dorwick's suggested order for discussing the Scenarios. I also posed four additional questions: What problems do you imagine the Virtual Writing Course would raise for its instructors? Its students? For support staff? For departmental and university administrators?

Four days into the third Phase, the first response was posted about Scenario I, which in turn provoked a second response later that same day. These first two messages conveyed a deep concern about how people with different socio-economic backgrounds might obtain college educations that were equivalent qualitatively despite any differences in pre-college academic training. More than a week passed before the next message was posted, a message that expressed a concern that a discussion of virtual courses was moot if fair use laws were not protected; without laws protecting citizens' right to use small fragments of texts, films, and audio recordings, this participant warned, the legality of electronic distance education courses, which often rely heavily on the transmission of such fragments, would be imperiled. For two more days, a number of other responses trickled in, responding either to the fair use posting or picking up the Scenario I thread. Then the Conversations stopped.

After two weeks of silence on the list, I exercised questionable judgment and sent the following ominously-toned message to the list:

> The original idea behind The TicToc Project was to catalyze a controlled detonation of what many of us in the profession (staff, faculty, students, administrators) agreed is a cultural and economic bomb that will explode sooner or later. In the shock waves that radiate outward from the explosion there will be inevitable casualties: teachers who didn't learn how to teach in cyberspace and so were not (re)hired, students who couldn't afford the technology necessary to keep up with an increasingly techno-philic academic environment, staff who lost jobs to automation, administrators who made the wrong decisions in trying to balance their institutions' technological and human resources.
>
> Steve Cisler, the director of the Apple Computer's Library of Tomorrow Program, calls this process "disintermediation . . . removing skilled people from a process because their knowledge or craft is thought to be replaceable by a machine or automation program."
>
> The scenarios that we've been shown on this list, but ideally consulted on the TicToc web page, exhibit disintermediation, and in fact, Claudine Keenan's three models for how technology may be used pedagogically implicitly confirms that disintermediation within our institution is inevitable.
>
> We all know what happened when those early 19th-century weavers of Nottinghamshire (Luddites) were disintermediated.

And yet we're all so quiet now.

This message prompted four responses over the next day and a half, two of which were critiques of my recent messages. Shortly after these messages, a new thread was started that returned the Conversations to a discussion of the Scenarios, suggesting that virtual writing courses might actually be better than traditional writing courses because in an electronic environment students must *write* about writing and reading, rather than *talk* about them as they would have to do if the course were held in a classroom. A final thread was added by one of our consultants who sent along an essay that encouraged us to ask ourselves how well traditional classroom activities helped us to achieve our pedagogical goals, and then to ask how electronic course activities might, with a bit of effort, better facilitate our achievement of those goals.

And then the Conversations stopped again, this time for an entire month.

Private

In this Phase, our private feelings began to be expressed publicly. The extended periods of inactivity, the avoidance of the Scenarios, and the generally pathetic levels of participation had an almost devastating impact on the morale of the TicToc Consortium. The consultants' apparent lack of interest in the Project had made us feel like we no longer wanted to participate in it either. And for better or worse, the TicToc Consortium members' profound frustration discouraged us from intervening yet again. The Phase was finally closed after an entire month of absolute inactivity.

Over the two and a half months of this phase, only thirteen different participants sent messages (again, not including those sent by Sosnoski, Dorwick, or myself). Only sixteen messages were sent by these thirteen participants, and only half of those messages actually discussed virtual courses at some length. Of the eight consultants being paid $1,000.00 for their active participation in the TicToc Conversations, only four sent messages. It was this overall situation that prompted me to send to the list the three notes that conveyed in increasingly bothered tones: Participants, please participate!

Several private conversations had made me aware that perhaps the participants initially felt bombarded by the ten long messages that opened the Phase. My first intervention was meant to allay such feelings, encouraging people from the subject line to "Fear Not!" My second intervention came two days later with a message that again tried to ease people's anxiety about the wealth of material they were now responsible for looking over, and also specifically asking people to

respond to particular Scenarios using four specific questions I provided. I had posed these questions as a challenge that I thought would help us discover whether or not a common body of knowledge existed about setting up and teaching virtual courses. My thinking was that if a majority of the participants could accurately imagine how the courses outlined in several of the scenarios had gone (these courses had actually already been taught by Dorwick and Sosnoski), then we could surmise that certain factors in teaching electronic courses, once articulated and collected, would constitute the beginnings of a wisdom literature for teaching in cyberspace.

I had been warned by one of my colleagues who had read an earlier and admittedly more angry-seeming draft of this second intervention that it was too agonistic and went against the carefully conversational tone that the TicToc Consortium had originally set out to encourage in its participants. I did not respond to this critique well because I felt that my having to intervene at all in order to stir up discussion ought not to be necessary; the suggestion that not only did I have to intervene in this way, but that I also had to be less aggressive about it really made my blood boil. I was tired of being patient with these "participants," and I was no longer interested in coddling them. I had come to feel about the TicToc Conversations like it was one of those classes we all get every once in while in which about 90% of the students are uninspired introverts, the kind of class that makes us compare teaching to pulling teeth.

I knew my colleague was right, however, and so did my best to heed the advice implicit in the critique. I made my note a bit less aggressive, a bit more like a game. No one took up this game, ultimately, which asked participants to "Predict the Future" of the Scenarios by answering several questions about them; perhaps they saw a less gimmicky path in responding to Paula Mathieu's more gracious posting about Scenario I. By this time, Mathieu herself had become an integral member of the TicToc Consortium and was providing some much needed energy to our organizing efforts. Unfortunately, her efforts were resisted almost as strongly as Dorwick's and mine had been; we soon had two more long periods of list silence.

My third intervention, which is quoted fully in the "Public" section above, generated two direct critiques of this and my previous intervention. It also generated two exchanges in which one participant accused administrators of Luddism while another participant accused faculty of Luddism. The first critique of my intervention was directed at my "Predict the Future" game, as well as my likening the state of electronic pedagogy to a "timebomb." The critique almost exactly echoed the warning my colleague had given me in private about the draft of that message: it was too aggressive, too agonistic, too overwrought.

The second critique was based on a misinterpretation of my "disintermediation" message (above), suggesting that I was implying "that

Luddites will fail in our university." Such an implication, this participant argued, was "exactly wrong." I think that the implication in my disintermediation message is actually fairly obvious; it is not that Luddites will fail in the university, but rather, that they will eventually revolt if they are disintermediated. My final comment in that message, "And yet we're all so quite now," was meant to suggest that we were all in the midst (possibly) of being disintermediated, but were not saying anything about it; I was suggesting, in short, that if participants refused to make their opinions and desires known publicly (i.e. in the TicToc Conversations) they could hardly be surprised when their desires for a just academy were not met and their opinions about electronic pedagogy were treated as inconsequential. Unlike the Luddites, who were among the most vocal and active citizens of a work force in the last two centuries, the TicToc Conversants seemed to be quietly hopeful that their rights and privileges as teachers, staffers, and students would eventually be recognized without the muss and fuss of a fight. Such a hope, as some of our participants have suggested, is remote in the extreme.

One week later, on March 18th, the last message was sent to the list for Phase III even though a month remained on the Conversation's schedule for the discussion of the Scenarios. Our grand goals for addressing some of the major problems associated with virtual universities, departments, and courses, were now virtually unattainable. Our few back-channel efforts during that month to revive the Conversations failed, and even the freshest of the TicToc Consortium members were skeptical that the Scenario discussion could be revived. We decided more or less informally to reserve our energies for the Symposium, now only four weeks away.

Phase IV: Recommendations

Public

The final Phase of the TicToc Conversations began with a message posted to the list by Jim Sosnoski on April 17, 1997. Participants, especially the Consultants, were asked to submit position papers on how an electronic English Department at UIC could best be developed so as to both fulfill the needs of the local institution and to provide a model for other institutions that might wish to carry out similar projects. The following questions were specifically asked of the participants in that first message:

> *How do you think our department should respond to the UI-Online Initiative [a state-wide intercampus educational computing project]? Should we take a pro-active role and try to establish leadership? Should we take a wait and see attitude? Should we oppose being included in their plans?*

> *What should be included in our plans for e-works that has not been mentioned? What should we rethink in our stated plans?*
>
> *Should we establish the scenarios as "templates" for future courses in our department? Which practices should we encourage? Which should we discourage?*
>
> *From a more general perspective, what problems, issues, directions should we be most attentive to as we move more towards "Teaching in Cyberspace Through On-line Courses?" What effects will these new technologies have on our working conditions and teaching practices in English studies? What specific kinds of actions should we take to resist the negative effects and enhance the positive? After about a week, recommendations began to come in, and they continued to come in regularly (one or two a day) until the first day of the Symposium.*

The recommendations articulated opinions and observations that in some cases had been conveyed in earlier Phases, and in some cases had never been raised. Two days before the Symposium, I posted a revised TicToc Manifesto, which I had composed as a way of summarizing all the recommendations. The Manifesto detailed seven major intentions for UIC's development of its virtual English Department, and it was hoped that these intentions could eventually become a useful guide to other institutions developing similar on-line departmental presences. The seven major intentions were:

WE SHALL seize the initiative in the development of Electronic Educational Environments (EEEs) at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

WE SHALL thoroughly and continually investigate the nature of our labor in the context of the labor of our colleagues within our department and institution, in the context of our cultures, and in the context of our society.

WE SHALL thoroughly, energetically, and creatively assess the activities of those people who are engaged in electronic education projects within The e-works Project.

WE SHALL establish as the foundation of all our electronic educational initiatives a set of humane, rather than technological or institutional, ideals.

WE CONCEIVE of our purpose as being community and culture development within an educational context; our scope is greater than the dissemination of information.

WE SHALL be self-reflective at all levels of our activity.

WE SHALL establish a formal leadership role for The e-works Project so that the ideals of the TicToc Manifesto may be accomplished and upheld amidst the changes in our academic fields and despite the endless fluctuations in what is deemed technologically necessary.

I elaborated upon each of these major intentions in individual mes-

sages, referring often to the participants' recommendations and suggesting any implications each intention might have if successfully carried out. When the day of the Symposium arrived, a copy of TicToc Manifesto placed prominently in each attendee's folder suggested that our collaborative efforts had been successful; we had hammered out a forceful document outlining the fundamental demands that workers in higher education imposed on themselves, on students, on staffers, and on administrators in the context of electronic pedagogy.

Private

It is safe to say that our expectations for the TicToc Conversations could only have gone up from where they were when this last Phase began. We sometimes found ourselves feeling both annoyed and pleasantly surprised at the rate at which recommendations were coming in, a rate for the TicToc Conversations only matched by the period before Phase I when participants were asked to introduce themselves. (The rate, by the way, averaged less than two messages per day.)

At various times during the Conversations, participants had suggested that they were too busy to post to the list, citing various academic and familial responsibilities. Now, most members of the TicToc Consortium had themselves been drawn away from the Conversations by their (our) efforts to arrange the best Symposium possible. While the participants–Consultants almost exclusively–were gaining their on-line voices, we were finding rooms for them to sleep in, restaurants and caterers that would feed them, seminar facilities that would house them, and computers and technicians that would help them make their presentations most effectively. The Symposium was our last hope to discover some common kernels of wisdom that would allow us all to collaboratively begin to effect some lasting consequences for electronic pedagogy.

The TicToc Consortium's break from the Conversations that had begun in frustration half-way through Phase III had revitalized us for the face-to-face conclusion of the Project, and the break lasted throughout most of the fourth Phase as well. We read the recommendations quickly when they came in, we discussed them occasionally with people in the hallways and by e-mail, and I studied them carefully in developing the Manifesto, but mostly we left the participants on their own: no back-channeling, no interventions, and (almost) no complaining about the dearth of messages.

Throughout the Conversations I had been confiding in my friend, Sam, about how the Conversations were going. Sam is a senior manager for a large company, and is occasionally asked to organize teams in which people from various departments collaborate on special projects; he was not involved in the TicToc Project at all. As the date for

the TicToc Symposium approached, Sam told me he had been assigned a new task: once again he had been asked to organize a project team, but this time the people were from all over the country, rather than from all over his area. He suggested to me that he was going to have the project team meet first in person for a couple of days, and then they would carry out the rest of the project via tele-conferences, e-mail, and fax. This was the reverse of the TicToc Project's plan. Sam and I had, on an earlier occasion, speculated that perhaps the participants did not trust each other very much, a reasonable guess since most of them were strangers to one other. Sam's thinking for his own project team was that by having them meet first in person–getting to know each other, doing some preliminary work, eating, drinking, and smoking together–they would subsequently work together more effectively when they were separated.

After the TicToc Symposium, which was socially rejuvenating for everyone who came I think, I knew that Sam's plan was better than ours had been. More trust and camaraderie was generated in the first two hours of our Symposium that had been generated in the previous seven months of our infrequent, asynchronous, electronic communications.

Phase IV, in conjunction with the Symposium discussed elsewhere in this volume, was the high point of the TicToc Conversations. Participants seemed to feel more relaxed than they had in previous Phases: anecdotes and jokes were told, strange yet fitting metaphors were used, comments were picked up and modified by others. In short, the participants–sixteen of them at least–were beginning to collaborate. I was left wondering if we had simply all needed the first seven months to get to know each other, or if, somehow, the TicToc Consortium had guided the participants too sternly or too gently to allow for a collaborative ethos to develop. There are other explanations I have considered since the Symposium ended, and readers of this issue of *Works & Days* who were not participants in the TicToc Conversations will likely have their own theories for why this project progressed as it did. It is my hope that this essay and this volume, with their multitude of perspectives, will work to transform any disappointing results of our grand experiment into promising ones, results that encourage institutional and pedagogical critique and that contribute to improving the ways we teach, with or without technology.