Virtual Diversity:
Transforming the Classroom through Cross-Cultural Encounters on the Web

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The expectation that multicultural study will be transformative, especially of educational objectives and of the pedagogical practices by which those objectives are achieved, is a commonplace in the literature of multiculturalism. Computer technology is similarly heralded for its promise of educational transformations. In my case, interactive Internet technology provided the means to achieve the primary multicultural objective of my course. My challenge was to teach African American literature in a relatively small and geographically isolated Oregon community to a non-diverse class of students inexperienced with cross-cultural encounters. I transformed, at least temporarily, the makeup of this class by using the Web to create a place where my students could interact with a more diverse student group. We linked to a freshman writing class taught by Michael Bennett at Long Island University, Brooklyn, for an asynchronous collaboration

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Field(s):
American Literature, American Studies, Rhetoric & Composition;
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HUM 256 Introduction to African American Literature and Culture
Context:
The course is a Humanities elective, offered only occasionally as an alternative to our regularly scheduled sequences, such as British Literature, American Literature, and Introduction to Literature. Central Oregon Community College has a strong lower division transfer program and an enrollment of about 3000 students, the majority of whom are part-time students.
Intention:
I used a WEB bulletin board to enable my Central Oregon students to discuss a common "text" with students at Long Island University (Brooklyn campus), in an effort to at least temporarily overcome the lack of diversity among my students.

largely conducted outside of class and extending over a period of several weeks. Both classes were traditional on-site classes with students who varied widely in their computer skills and access. The assignment which the two instructors created jointly and gave to both sets of students required participation in an electronic discussion of a shared subject of study (Spike Lee's film, *Do the Right Thing*) followed by collaboration online and across the continent in the writing of essays capping—and analyzing—the discussion.[1] The Web Bulletin Board which constituted our public space is a widely available technology easily accessible for student users with varying access, systems, and abilities. When combined with a carefully designed assignment, this technology can promote interaction and collaboration across regions and classroom cultures.[2]

Much of the discussion of multicultural pedagogy assumes a multicultural classroom. Thus the justifications for multicultural study tend to be the creation of comfort and the building of self-esteem for students whose ethnic voices have previously fallen outside the canon, and channeling all students toward appropriate and productive cross-cultural encounters. According to Magnus Bassey, "Multicultural education is an attempt to instill pride in minority consciousness by incorporating people of color into the curriculum—an affirmation of self-worth." Geneva Gay affirms this impetus for multicultural education: "The process of personal empowerment recommended by critical pedagogues and multiculturalists begins by modifying curriculum and instructional strategies to develop self-consciousness, respect, and confidence for diverse students through cultural validation" (176-177). Gay also identifies the necessity of creating bridges within a diverse classroom: "The fact that many students do not share the same ethnic, social, racial, and linguistic backgrounds as their teachers, may lead to cultural incongruencies in the classroom which can mediate against educational effectiveness" (159).

My students and I were indeed well-matched as cultural outsiders in relation to the African American texts. Without diversity among learners, the questions of why we teach a multicultural subject and how we do so take on a certain edge, or at least they did so at my institution and some of my colleagues and I began to promote a more multicultural Humanities and Social Science curriculum. My own answers to the question of why we undertake such study took shape within my department's recent efforts to articulate learning outcomes (or exit "proficiencies") for all of our courses. When one attempts to state what it is that students will know and be able to do at the end of a multicultural course of study, espe-

cially with the caveat that all such outcomes be observable and measurable, the gap between multicultural theory and classroom pedagogy becomes painfully apparent. The literature of multiculturalism tends to be rather silent on measurable course outcomes, despite much discussion of goals and objectives. The "objectives" tend to be improving society rather than educating individual learners. Thus my Internet searches of the term "multicultural outcomes" netted such outcomes as appreciation of diversity, advancement of equality of opportunity, even serving the ends of democracy and building healthy human interactions.

At bottom, I do hope our multicultural curriculum will advance the aims defined by Geneva Gay as deriving from both multicultural education and critical pedagogy: "educational quality, access, and excellence, and social equity, freedom, and justice for culturally diverse groups" (156). However, I believe that the justification for a course of study must be the educational achievement promised to individual learners, and I also find such learner-centered objectives to be highly productive in terms of identifying appropriate pedagogy. I began my experiment with the idea that my culturally-confined students would better engage with the material if they were exposed to other ways of looking at the experience it treats. Currently, I have more fully articulated this course outcome for the African-American Literature course as follows: "Students will examine the effects of individual and culturally-determined factors (such as race, gender, class, region, biases of information sources, prior cross-cultural experiences) in one's own and others' responses to African American texts and culture." Christine Sleeter, reflecting on her own use of multicultural and critical pedagogy "When Students Are White" includes the observation, "When multicultural education is reduced to teaching about 'other' people, students are usually allowed to retain their perspective and theories about the workings of society" (417). Sleeter argues for the need to have students widen their perspective, noting that while the students' "own social reality and their interpretation of that reality is valid within limits. . . the entire social order is structured around boundaries that define different sets of rules for different categories of people" (427). Similarly, Gay observes that students "need to develop habits and skills for critiquing the presumed universality of any one canon of truth" (178).

When I teach multicultural texts to students who (like me) are white, I believe the most important outcome is for these students to become more aware of our confinements and of the probable determiners of our outlooks. Such awareness contributes immea-

surably to the education of a literature student—of whatever eth-
nicity—by fostering a healthy respect for the complexity of the
reader's task. Donaldo Macedo argues for such nuanced reading
on the grounds of literacy education: "the exclusion of social, cul-
tural, and political dimensions from literacy practices gives rise to
an ideology of cultural reproduction that produces semiliterates"
(84).

Our Internet connection to a classroom on the opposite coast
enabled my students and myself to challenge our confinements and
temporarily transcend our borders by providing what the Chicago
Cultural Studies Group has called "a space where a relatively non-
colonial comparative contextualization could take place" (121).
Since it is clearly not enough to set up a Bulletin Board and expect
students to easily and openly discuss covert assumptions with
strangers, the construction of this public space involved not only
the technological tool of the Bulletin Board, but also the detailed
construction of an assignment designed to foster interaction. The
Bulletin Board was designed to allow students to post responses (in
threads) to assigned discussion questions, to provide dedicated
sites for each of five groups to confer and exchange drafts as they
created their essays, and to provide a site to publish their final
products, five "collaborative essays." The "threading" feature of the
Bulletin Board enabled students to comment on one another's work
and provided a means to organize students' textual "discussions."
Following one orientation session in a computer classroom, stu-
dents were able to access the Bulletin Board—which we termed
the "Discussion Page"—from any campus computer or any home
computer with a modem and an Internet provider.

After viewing *Do the Right Thing* and receiving on line orienta-
tion to the operation of the Bulletin Board, students were directed
to post their responses to five reflective questions about the film
and the issues it raises (for example, "Apply the title to the film.
Who does the right thing? What conditions make it hard to know,
or agree about, what's right?"). Following their posting of individ-
ual responses to the discussion questions, students were slow to
initiate additional interaction. While there were some significant
differences in the answers they posted, and they were invited to
post "follow up" messages to one another, exploring those differ-
ences, they did not do so. For example, my students, replying to
the question, "What causes the tension in this neighborhood,"
were more likely to identify black/white tension as the cause; the
Brooklyn students were more attuned to the class issues and the
diverse population. Thus one Brooklyn student replied, "Most of

the people in this neighborhood are Blacks, but that is not where the problem lies. There are other races living here also; races who are reasonable [sic] better off in terms of wealth and living standard [sic]."

We had anticipated the students' reticence, having collaborated the year before on a similar project using a Majordomo list and largely limiting the students' contact to seeing one another's responses to a list of brief essay questions (See Bennett and Walsh). Therefore, we had designed this "collaborative essay" project to stimulate further interaction beyond simple reading of one another's responses. To imitate this phase of the project, we conferred on assigning students to collaborative writing groups, each of which contained a mix of students from both sites. Groups were instructed to collaborate to create an essay analyzing the posted responses to certain questions, in particular looking for patterns in the way students responded and to some degree attempting to account for these patterns. They were asked to think about why people agreed on certain things but not on others: instructors "suggested" (terminology which proved to be a weakness in the assignment, as will be discussed below) that analysts consider whether variations had anything to do with the race/gender/region of the respondent.

Students initially approached this phase of the project by attempting simply to post set pieces—their assigned contribution to the essay—and did require prompting from the instructors—and, finally, the promise of additional points for all engagement in what we termed "crosstalk"—to begin additional interaction. At this point, the students began to give one another substantive editing suggestions and to explore ways to unify their contributions into a coherent essay rather than simply praising one another's "great idea," comments which had characterized their earliest posts. For example, the following responses were posted, within the Group area of the Discussion page, commenting on group members' drafts: "Your analysis left me slightly confused as to how exactly the blacks in the neighborhood felt inferior – because of their not owning property?"; "Could you include something on why the Korean store was spared and if Sal's represented 'white colonialism'? I think that those two stores present a strong and important dynamic in the community and movie. Good analysis of responses." These two responses—made by students in my class to one another—point to an unanticipated numerical mismatch between the two sets of students that in itself slowed their interaction and certainly affected their analyses of one another's responses. For my

students, this activity came early in the Spring quarter while my enrollment was at 26. For the Brooklyn class, the spring semester was almost at an end, and their numbers dwindled to 8 students before we completed the activity. In addition, the Brooklyn class was an entry-level developmental writing class while mine was a sophomore-level literature class. Thus, my students' tendency to comment more often on one another's work is probably due to the simple fact that there were more of them, and the Brooklyn students' reluctance to communicate beyond the required minimum most likely reflects their relatively lower level of writing sophistication.

The Long Island students were aware from the outset of our ethnic confinement (indeed, a photograph of my class decorated the Bulletin Board). Initially, my students only knew that the LIU students lived near the neighborhood depicted in the film, that they lived within an "ethnically-diverse" culture, and that their own backgrounds were likely to be more diverse than ours. Students were asked to introduce themselves within their groups; except for one student from LIU who identified himself as an "African-American 18 year old male," the information students supplied about themselves rarely included ethnicity. At the completion of the project, the LIU instructor sent a message identifying his group: "We have African Americans, a double Russian immigrant, an Indian/Guyanan, a Pakistani/Egyptian, a Puerto Rican, a Dominican, and a multi-ethnic white woman." While engaged in the project, my students were not aware of the ethnicity of the individuals with whom they interacted. Because "Do the Right Thing" dramatizes racial tension in the Bedford Stuyvesant area of New York, my students saw the others as experts on the basis of location more than on the basis of skin color, seeming from the outset to relish the opportunity to discuss the film with students living adjacent to that neighborhood, and certainly living with those tensions. The initial responses posted by the two sets of students in fact reflected that my 200-level literature students were more comfortable analyzing the film, but the developmental writing students at LIU were more forthcoming with contextual detail; for example, the film's ongoing distinctions between the philosophies of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were better understood by the New York students. Both groups of students were somewhat cautious and tentative in their phrasing. I had been wondering if "flaming" would be a problem, but in fact the unfamiliarity of each set of students with their audience and with the medium, the listening in of the instructors (who had access to all areas of the Bulletin Boards),

and certainly the fact that my students had already identified their cross-cultural sensitivity by electing to take the African American literature class, all worked in various ways to restrain spontaneous discourse. And of course the repression of spontaneity in favor of formal and careful discourse was not wholly productive.

Instructor involvement in the students' on-line collaborations was deliberately limited. Within our designated groups, we assigned each student a particular task (specifically, the writing of a portion of the essay: the introduction, the conclusion, or a section analyzing responses to a particular question.) We then monitored the students' work, all of which was openly available to all participants, giving encouragement, answering questions, and tracking down or finding substitutes for non-participants. We offered no substantive observations or suggestions, wanting the students' ideas to fill this space.

The products of the students' work were the finished essays themselves. Each student contributed a draft, received comment from the group and the group leader/instructor, then revised and posted the final draft of their portion. The two instructors pasted these finished sections—individual contributions ranged from one paragraph to five pages—into "final essays," one per group, and posted these onto a new page, where students could review their "published" work. In their final posted form, these collaborative essays do provide limited evidence of the cross-cultural analysis we had aimed at. Thus one of my students commented: "Some of the COCC students suggested that the riot took place as a result of a combination of the two messages: Martin Luther King's and Malcolm X's . . . I think that residents of New York tend to choose a peaceful way because they are tired of those bloody riots." Another student noted, "Of the seventeen responses posted, there were just two that seemed to place blame on the people of the neighborhood for their situations." In a conclusion to one of the essays, one of my students attempted to articulate the principle that we all read different texts depending on who and what we are: "All of these responses connect to the way in which we view the world, ourselves, and everybody around us." The examples quoted above also reflect other tendencies on the part of both sets of students, tendencies which were evident throughout this project: they looked for similarity more than difference, and they situated such differences they encountered within location rather than race. Thus one student commented: "In the end, most of the respondents agreed that tolerance and self-control are necessary in order to make progress in dealing with racial conflicts." Another con-

cluded her group's essay, "We didn't all come to the same conclusions, but we agreed on several aspects. We all worked together to come to an understanding. . . . Maybe that is what Spike Lee was trying to say."

In retrospect, cross-cultural analysis might have been fuller if the assignment itself had specifically directed students to seek such patterns rather than treating this analysis as a suggested possibility. When I teach the course again next year, if a find a suitable partner, I intend to define the assignment more narrowly. After another full year's work with articulated learning outcomes, I now recognize the utility of explicitly stating for students the learning objectives for particular assignments and clearly integrating those into the larger learning objectives of the course. And because this type of analysis is new for both groups of students, I'd spend more time in my class modeling this exercise.

While the cross-cultural analysis in the essays themselves is limited, it should be noted that the prime pedagogical objective of the activity was that students begin to see that there is more than one way ('our' way) of looking at these matters. Based on solicited and unsolicited remarks throughout the rest of our term, and based on their thoughtful, measured, and I think appropriately tentative responses to the literature which we studied subsequent to this project, this objective was clearly met for most of my students. For my students, this project came at the beginning of a quarter's introduction to what was for them an unfamiliar culture, the study of which was complicated by their relatively undeveloped set of tools for literary analysis. This project enabled them to see that viewers (or readers) respond differently to texts, that their differences are partly constructed by region, environment, and culture, and that art may raise questions rather than give answers. As one student stated in her introduction to a collaborative essay, "The question of who decides what is the right thing appears again and again from various perspectives. Questions, not answers, were provided throughout the movie." Given the frequency with which my students referred to this project in their later work, reading a wide range of African American texts, I believe that this project enabled my students to greatly increase their sophistication, confidence, and tolerance as readers. In our earliest discussions, I had found my students unwilling to venture interpretations of the texts, commenting that the experience depicted was far from their own. I believe that they were also inhibited by a sense of political correctness, which made them unwilling to venture a possibly offensive comment, especially in the presence of one student of mixed

race in our class. The more open, though always politically correct, discussions in our class following this activity indicate to me that students gained confidence in their abilities both to understand and not to offend.

My students' direct evaluations of the project were positive. Based on a questionnaire to which they responded anonymously two weeks after completion of the project, students felt they had sufficient instruction in the mechanics of the Bulletin Board use. Moreover they largely understood what they were required to do, and they experienced relatively few technical difficulties. Best of all, they grasped the relationship of the assignment to the class: promoting diversity, understanding different points of view, understanding effects of region, race, experience on interpretation. Surprisingly, none of them objected to the time commitment or the technological complexity. They rated this activity intriguing, challenging, and frequently "fun." Their comments on the evaluation echoed unsolicited earlier comments posted to the Discussion Board in the Group areas: "I am eager to read your classes [sic] comments toward the movie"; "I'm looking forward to getting to know you all – it's pretty exciting to be in a study group with people from Long Island!" The following are comments from the formal evaluation (submitted anonymously, by my students):

> "I felt that this was a very helpful activity. It was very beneficial to experience differences in answers from the students from LIU and COCC. I also felt it was helpful because many students shared opinions, insights, etc., that they may not have shared in a traditional classroom discussion."

> "It was an excellent way to get a different perspective and get to work with people from a new area."

> "It was surprising to me to see how the students from Bend mostly had little direct exposure with different ethnic groups, while the LIU students had a very large exposure to different groups. These differences showed me how much our opinions and attitudes about race can be affected by our everyday exposure."

The question may well arise, what did the New York students gain? Certainly the objective of understanding that points of view may differ—and that region and experience may contribute to these differences in outlook and perception—is appropriate for

both groups. Each group of students found themselves addressing a population who lives under exotically different conditions: in Oregon we're surrounded by sage brush and ski slopes, we drive on two-lane highways, we rarely hear accented English or see people of color. Teresa Redd describes "accommodation and resistance" between student groups in a somewhat similar project, linking her "all-black composition class" with a group of white student artists to collaborate on graphic design for the composition students' essays on racism. Speaking for the diverse students, Redd concludes, "our students need to practice accommodating appropriate audiences" (140). Redd's writing students improved their writing skills by addressing an audience that did not share their assumptions: "Such an audience could challenge my students to consider other perspectives as they wrote, while encouraging them to explain their own perspectives vividly and clearly" (141).

Such audience-awareness within the context of a genuine writing task is a benefit of interactive web technology which has applications beyond multicultural studies. My students achieved greater fluency as writers by participating in this project. By engaging in what Reiss, Selfe, and Young have termed "Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum," my students at least temporarily experienced the benefits identified by these writers: "Electronic media . . . can extend our ability to expose students to a variety of purposes and audiences as well as to spread students' involvement in complex communication projects" (xviii). The relatively simple—though admittedly time-intensive—design of this project has a number of potential applications beyond the multicultural objectives targeted here. For example, instructors could connect students to a group of experts in the discipline. Or instructors might temporarily forge an interdisciplinary connection among students in topically related classes.   In fact, one of my students commented on these possibilities in her evaluation of this project: "The interaction between the students could be helpful for many types of joint projects within many different classes. I can imagine more discussions, science experiments, psych studies, etc. that could be done in a similar format."

While my primary objective was the multicultural outcome of anticipating and respecting a diversity of responses to the texts, I also found that the project was beneficial in transforming my own role in the classroom, from expert, which, as a cultural outsider, I clearly could not be, toward facilitator of my students' and my own learning. Using a Bulletin Board to connect learners, while the instructor is silent, is a way to harness the distributive power of the

new technology. Especially in a situation where a white instructor is teaching white students about African American literature, it is difficult to avoid the misperception that only the teacher has the expert knowledge to "speak about" the target culture. However, by initiating my course with this electronic cross-cultural encounter, I was able to encourage my students to look elsewhere for authority. After this project concluded, we continued the habit of looking elsewhere, often tapping into the wealth of Internet resources dealing with African American literature, music, art, and political and social experience. As a condition of multicultural education, or what he terms "insurgent multiculturalism," Henry Giroux claims, "teachers need to be educated to be border crossers, to explore zones of cultural difference by moving in and out of the resources, histories, and narratives that provide different students with a sense of identity, place, and possibility" (341). Thomas La Belle and Christopher Ward, summarizing the findings of S. Nieto, also identify an expanded role for students as a condition of multicultural education: "Pedagogy must change to engage students more in their own learning" (52). This project in which I was a largely silent observer while my students had the floor and the responsibility for making meaning certainly furthered my own education about how to be a border crosser.

Notes

[1] This was the second such experiment linking these instructors and courses; the previous version (Spring, 1996) lacked the element of collaboration, used a longer shared subject of study (Zora Neale Hurston's novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God) and occurred via a Majordomo e-mail list rather than a Web Bulletin Board. For a full discussion of that experiment, see Bennett and Walsh.
[2] The Bulletin Board was created by Bob McWhorter, Central Oregon Community College's instructional support provider, using Front Page software. I now use shareware, WWW Bulletin Board, because it can be edited to delete multiple and misplaced posts.

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