Using Electronic Discussions to Interpret and Construct Narratives of Women's Activism

Tracey M. Weis

Introduction

As part of my engagement in the New Media Classroom project, I have been working for more than a year and a half to incorporate electronic resources and technologies into my teaching repertoire. Initially skeptical of the grandiose claims of the transformative power of the new information technologies, I have become a cautious convert as a result of my brief, but intense, immersion in the waters of new media. Conversion has its consequences, however, even for the circumspect. Using a class listserv, online archives, and web-authoring tools in an undergraduate class on "Women in U.S. History" this past semester complicated the teaching/learning process for everyone involved.

I had spent the previous academic year (1997-98) exploring how various new media resources and technologies could enhance the study of African-American history and culture. Fortified by this

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Field(s):
19th Century U.S. History, U.S. Women's History, African-American

Course(s):
History 209: Women in United States History

Context:
200-level elective that fulfills general education requirements for Social Sciences and University-wide writing requirement as well as electives for History majors and minors and Women's Studies minors; -- Mid-size (7,000) public university with 1/3 student body resident on campus and 2/3 commuting.

Intentions:
--to use electronic discussion lists and electronic archives to foster specific forms of historical literacy, i.e. narrative interpretation and narrative construction; --to enhance students' abilities to construct nuanced narratives about the social relations of race, gender, class, sexuality, and region in America.

intensive classroom implementation, I had a clear sense of the potential of new media to deepen interdisciplinary investigations of history and culture. The challenge in this second year of classroom implementation and experimentation would be three-fold. First, I wanted to articulate the specific contribution that teaching-with-technology makes to our collective understanding of historical cognition. Second, I wanted to use new media to sustain the cyclical process of teaching described by Diana Laurillard and elaborated by Randy Bass (Bass 10). Third, I wanted to invite students to elaborate (and not merely inhabit) the architecture of "Women in U.S. History." Course architecture, as Randy Bass explains, is "the total structure of a course, its materials and its knowledge, as it exists in the instructor's head" (37). Some students, as Bass observes, come to inhabit the architecture of a course, as it unfolds over the course of a semester. I want to investigate the ways in which new media encourages students to collaborate, with the instructor, in articulating the architecture.

The composition of the "Women in U.S. History" class (a group of especially mature, savvy, intellectually curious students) made the course an ideal "laboratory" for this teaching-with-technology trial. Fully half the thirty students in the class were preparing themselves to teach at either the elementary or the secondary level; they brought an interest in critical pedagogy into the classroom. Juniors and seniors comprised about three-quarters of the class. Some students brought a specific interest in women's history to the course; however, most students enrolled in this 200-level course because it fulfilled one of the following graduation requirements: 1) General Education distribution requirement for Social Sciences, 2) university-wide writing-intensive course, and/or 3) an elective for History majors and minors and for Women's Studies minors. Since more than two-thirds of the students were using the course for General Education credit, the range of majors was very wide: Psychology, Anthropology, Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education, Biology, Art, Nursing, English, Marketing, Communications, Ecology, and Special Education. This disciplinary diversity meant that the students were well-poised to experiment with and to elaborate the architecture of "Women in U.S. History."

I deployed new media resources and technologies in the women's history class deliberately, but discretely, at crucial junctures, in order to address particular pedagogical, philosophical, or practical problems or possibilities as they arose in the course of the semester. Having taught this particular class several times before,

I was able to anticipate, well in advance, some of the challenges that students would confront in an expansive survey that began with "Gender and the Conquest of the Atlantic World" and that ended with "Riot Grrls and Third Wave Feminism of the 1990s." For example, I elected to set up a web-based discussion forum that the class could use, either synchronously or asynchronously, to "process" a relatively rigorous set of readings. Conscious of the limitations of a night class that met once a week and that attracted a number of commuting students, I intended to employ electronic discussions as a complement to in-class, face-to-face discussions. The mixed discussion format, I hoped, would help us all find some kind of balance between the competing claims of coherence vs. multiplicity (see this volume's introduction) as we made our way through a variety of different kinds of texts. I had also warned students at the beginning of the semester that I might, at appropriate intervals, supplement our announced schedule of activities with some technology-enhanced exercises. Beyond the use of a class listserv and some web-based inquiry exercises, though, my use of new media was more pragmatic than premeditated, more incremental than comprehensive. Thus, I will assess the accretion of discrete applications of technology in the first unit of the course, a three-week "case study" of women's social and political activism of the 1960s and 1970s. I will also speculate about the ways in which technology-enhanced teaching transforms the triangular student-text-teacher relationship.

Although this analysis might be productively pursued from several angles, this essay will focus on the following questions:

> *How did the use of new media shape (or re-shape) the ways that students encountered and interpreted the various texts in the course?*

> *How did the use of new media enhance students' capacities to construct narratives of historical change?*

The questions above imply certain pedagogical intentions. I would like, however, to be more explicit about my general teaching strategies, to establish them as a baseline of sorts, so that I can explain and assess more precisely the consequences of using new media on student learning.

General Pedagogical Intentions

Firmly persuaded that the historical enterprise is, at its heart, about narrative, I insist that all students, at every level, become "practicing historians"—that they engage in the art and the science of historical investigation. I organize my classes around three particular dimensions of historical literacy. First, I require students to acquire, appropriate, and generate *knowledge* about specific historical personalities, events, and forces, i.e., to demonstrate accuracy in defining and describing significant historical concepts, facts, and details. Second, I strive to help all students to develop and/or refine their capacity for *narrative interpretation*, i.e., for deep, slow readings of a variety of texts, for the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize historical evidence. In my courses students engage in the authentic tasks of historical investigation through inquiry-based instruction in which the close reading of primary and secondary texts plays a central role. I try to cultivate my students' historical literacy by presenting them with carefully-chosen (and often contradictory) sets of readings, expecting them to reason their way through the readings—individually in preparation for class and in small and large discussion groups during class. Third, I expect students in my classes to gain and/or refine competency in *narrative construction*, i.e., the ability to effectively convey, in either oral or written form, historical knowledge and reasoning to a wider audience.

My basic strategy is rather simple: to expose students, in a systematic and, I hope, thoughtful way, to a variety of contradictory narratives and to use the varied locations of the class to analyze, probe, interrogate, reconcile, and ultimately synthesize these narratives. In the women's history class, I wanted my students to develop their abilities to interpret and to construct nuanced narratives about the complicated ways that social relations of race, gender, class, sexuality, and region "work" in America.

Making Knowledge

Interjecting a few simple web-based exercises among the first day's activities intimated to students that technology might play a role in our individual and collective efforts to make historical knowledge. Moreover, the opening search exercise immediately heightened the complexities of acquiring, appropriating, and generating knowledge about the historical experiences of women in the United States. I generally begin the first class each semester by

asking students to write down everything they already know about the subject under investigation. I suggest specific categories for them to consider (i.e., people, places, events, ideas, organizations, and dates). Some students scribble furiously while others look anxiously at nearly blank pieces of papers. After students compare their lists with each other in small groups, we compile a composite list of keywords on the blackboard and assess our collective knowledge, noting emphases, repetitions, and omissions. This exercise usually establishes several points of departure for the rest of the semester. It convinces students that they already "know" something about women's history even as it alerts them to the multiple points of entry to the study of women's lives.

In the days before I dabbled in new media, I would generally hand out my syllabus at this point, reminding students that the paths of inquiry (the various topics, texts, assignments) on the course outline represented some, but not all, of the possible avenues of investigation. This past semester, however, we trooped into the lab where I introduced them to the basics of web searching and asked them to use the terms that we had previously identified as keywords for their searches. The ensuing discussion was lively as students recounted, with amazement and anger, what they found and did not find on the web about women's history. The relevance of the 150th anniversary of the 1848 Seneca Falls convention duly noted, students still wondered why there seemed to be so many resources on the history of suffrage and so few on the history of reproduction. Class ended with students interrogating, individually, the online syllabus for the course by addressing a series of questions on a handout I supplied. Students left class pondering the multiple sites of knowledge-construction: their own individual and collective information about women's history gleaned from schooling, reading, films, TV, etc.; the variety of web sites, ranging widely in content, quality, and orientation; and the syllabus. I left wondering how I would use selected information technologies to encourage learning that was "discursive, adaptive, interactive and reflective" (Bass 10).

Incorporating technology during the first class meeting served several significant purposes. The keyword/web searching exercise encouraged students to learn to navigate the web. The online syllabus review exposed the architecture of the course as contingent, in part, on student willingness to assume responsibility for making some choices about coverage and material. Eager to understand how students were positioning themselves in this "course-under-construction," I asked students to articulate the knowledge they

were making about women's history in an essay that incorporated their reflections on the first day's in-class exercises (individual brainstorming, small and large group discussion, web search, and syllabus review) as well as their assessments of three short essays by Gerda Lerner, Gisela Bock, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham on the evolution of women's history (see both Lerner, Bock and Higginbotham).

This ambitious assignment immediately exposed students to one of the central tensions of historical interpretation: the difficulty of constructing a coherent narrative that includes multiple voices or perspectives. The results were familiar. Some students sacrificed coherence in their efforts to incorporate the perspectives of various essayists or to address the various sources of information about women's history. Others jettisoned multiple perspectives in their attempts to achieve coherence. While I know that students frequently find this initial assignment difficult, I have stubbornly resisted reducing the number of perspectives that I asked them to ponder and assess. In fact, by incorporating the web search, I have actually added another source on women's history to the already complex mix. I have begun to rationalize my reluctance to give up the range of texts by offering students increased choice over what they will read, employing the "no one reads everything, but everyone reads something" approach. Extending the range of perspectives in this fashion, I realize, means that I have to devote more rigorous attention to helping students move from the careful analysis of a single document (or other source) to the thoughtful synthesis of many different documents.

Interpreting Narratives

During the second and third weeks of class, which were devoted to a case study of women's activism during the civil rights era, electronic discussion lists prompted students to deepen their analysis of individual readings and resources even as it stimulated them to intensify their synthesis of a wide range of divergent and contradictory texts. I asked junior and senior history majors to coordinate email discussion groups of between eight and ten students. The coordinators' task was to pose a set of questions that would encourage students to link the two common readings-Jo Ann Robinson's memoir, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, and another essay on women's activism-with the previous week's essays on the evolution of women's history. Three email discussion groups formed around the essay students elected

to read: "The Role of Black Women in Civil Rights" by Anne Standley, "White Women and the Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement" by Alice Echols, and "Gender Awareness Among Chicanas and Mexicanas in the United Farmworkers of America" by Margaret Rose.[1] Students recursively returned to re-examine the central texts of the case study. They frequently reviewed the familiar texts (the memoir and the essays), but brought new questions and/or new texts to their recurring investigations. Importantly, the small email discussion groups served as a "rehearsal hall" where individual students practiced their reactions to course texts before sharing their interpretations with increasingly larger and more diverse communities of inquiry.

Selections from the national online "Women's History Forum" provided a model of scholarly online discussion for students in my class.[2] I forwarded Gerda Lerner's introductory comments to the forum, posted Friday, September 11, 1998, to my class on Saturday and passed out hard copies in class on Monday, September 14th. Having initiated their exploration of women's social and political activism with excerpts from Gerda Lerner's *Feminist Studies* essay, the students were eager to compare and contrast Lerner's assessment of "the state of the field" in 1975 with her more recent analysis posted on the electronic forum (Lerner, 1998). The inauguration of the "Women's History Forum" was certainly fortuitous for my class's exploration of the evolution of women's history. Introducing students to "live" scholarly debate via hard copies of postings from various H-NET listservs is analogous to other time-honored tricks of the trade—bringing in excerpts from yesterday's *New York Times* or showing clips from last night's PBS documentary. While all three resources are "hot off the press," the excerpt from the national listserv contains the promise of interactivity in a way that neither the newspaper nor the video clip does. This interactivity represents the "value added" by technology. The prospect of a real audience inspires students to reply promptly and productively. For example, I forwarded Carl Schulkin's request-"What I need most are recommendations from experienced survey teachers regarding readings in Women's History which have engaged their students"-with a brief preface "What kind of presentation of women's history would have engaged you in high school? Would you recommend any essays or documents in *Major Problems*? What about Jo Ann Robinson's memoir-[would that be] good for high school students?" (Schulkin). Schulkin's request encouraged students to assess Robinson's memoir from yet another vantage point and prompted Maureen, a prospective secondary social studies teacher, to reply:

> I feel that Robinson's account would work wonderfully in [a] High School Curriculum. This document is something that every American needs to be exposed to. There are too many people that know too little about women, especially African-American women and "their crusades for justice". It is about time that high school students have the opportunity to learn about movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, through a woman's viewpoint" (McGinley).

Even though Gerda Lerner is not invoked directly, Maureen's response can be read as a reply to Lerner's injunction to create a "truly universal history" that is grounded in the recognition "that women have been essential to the making of history" (Lerner 8). The implicit reference to Ida B. Wells ("crusader for justice"), moreover, suggests that the student is searching for other historical figures whose lives may be compelling for high school audiences. Schulkin's query drew Maureen into a national network of scholars and teachers engaged in women's history. Furthermore, it prompted her to synthesize her own high school experience, her coursework in U.S. History, and her field experience as a pre-service educator to formulate a rich and reflective response.

We were fortunate that the national online discussion on incorporating women's history into the broader historical narrative paralleled our class discussion for most of the semester.[3] Admittedly, national online discussions might not always coincide with an instructor's schedule of readings and discussions. Even so, instructors intent on interjecting a wider range of scholarly opinion than that offered in course texts can selectively direct students to the archives of threaded discussion available, for example, at various H-NET sites. An international consortium of scholars and teachers, H-NET creates and coordinates over 100 free electronic, interactive newsletters ("lists") edited by scholars in North America, Europe, Africa, and the Pacific (H-NET). A collaborative enterprise, H-NET currently has over 90,000 subscribers in over 90 countries. Involving librarians, archivists, teachers, scholars journalists, and lawyers, H-NET is "serving to reconnect scholars to a broader educated public" (H-NET). A short-term subscription to the H-Women listserv or to the "History Matters" forum might have been an advantageous addition to my class. In fact, some students followed up on my suggestion that they might want to subscribe to the "Women's History Forum." I did not, however, require a sub-

scription. I preferred to select pertinent postings and either forward them to the class listserv or incorporate them into discussion. While the cameo appearance of these online scholars was a useful complement to the printed texts, I wanted to use electronic discussions to emphasize the students' encounters with the texts.

I set up the email discussion groups to address several specific pedagogical and practical problems in this course. The primary pedagogical issue was how to cultivate, in students, the habit of rigorous and consistent interrogation of ideas. The practical challenge, heightened in a class that met only once a week, was one of momentum-how to sustain a dialectic tenor in the class that encouraged recursive, rather than episodic, learning. Additionally, I anticipated two major benefits from the use of the course listserv. First, I expected to use it to reorganize a series of relationships-between students and course texts; between the teacher and students; between and among students, and last, but certainly, not least, between teacher and texts. Second, I reckoned that I could employ it to rearrange the various learning spaces in my course and to reorganize the relationships between various class sessions.

What evidence is there that the email exchange reshaped students' encounters with the various course texts? Generally, teachers and other students have limited access to other student-readers' encounters with texts. Since readers read texts in relative privacy, these encounters, whether intimate and profound, or impersonal and superficial, remain largely hidden. Class discussion and written assignments afford teachers mere glimpses of the significance of these meetings. Inviting students to share, via the class listserv, their individual reactions (questions, doubts, observations, conclusions) to texts transforms what had previously been essentially a private matter into a public act. As the following dissection of the email exchange demonstrates, the consequences of this transformation were, perhaps predictably, uneven. Students entered the now-public dialogue about texts with varying degrees of comfort, skill, and interest.

For example, as might be expected, the sophistication of the initial questions posed by student coordinators varied. I had directed student coordinators to submit several different kinds of questions for small groups to ponder: 1) questions that would help readers get at the heart (or thesis) of the individual essays on women's social and political activism by Standley, Echols, and Rose; 2) questions that would prompt readers to compare and contrast women's social activism in civil rights, women's liberation, and union mobilization with the activism described in Robinson's memoir on the

Montgomery Bus Boycott; and 3) questions that would lead readers back to the short essays on "Defining Women's History" by Lerner, Bock, and Higginbotham. Some discussion coordinators asked relatively discrete questions related to a single essay:

> What were the contributions of the Chicanas and Mexicanas in the farmworkers' boycott efforts? Would it [the boycott] have been effective without them?"

> What were some of Gerda Lerner's views on the presence/ absence of women in historical writing and texts? Do you agree with what she had to say? Do you believe that changes need to be made in studying American history?" (King)

Others put forth more complex queries which invited students to compare and contrast how historians have assessed social movements that occurred in different eras:

> [Evelyn Brooks] Higginbotham states in her essay that 'The shared acceptance of the dominant society's normative gender roles forged the link between black and white missionary women and permitted their cooperative work through religious and educational institutions...' Do you feel [Alice] Standley [author of "The Role of Black Women in Civil Rights"] would take the same viewpoint? Why or why not? Give evidence. (Sheppard)

The wide range of questions elicited a variety of responses, however. One student maintained:

> I basically agree with what she [Lerner] has to say, including the fact that women can not only be looked at as victims of oppression, but also as contributors to society. I also agree...that we must not only look at "women worthies," but rather all the women in the world. (Burns)

Entering this asynchronous conversation a bit later, another student elaborated:

> History needs to be analyzed with a 'female-oriented

> consciousness' in addition to the traditional 'male-ori-
> ented' consciousness...thankfully, changes have been
> made in studying American history but still more needs
> to be changed…there needs to be different standards of
> evaluation. 'Historical significance' must be interpret-
> ed in new ways rather than just the traditional ways.
> (Haverstick)

While some students gravitated toward the more theoretically-oriented questions about how historians conceptualized and interpreted female agency, other students focused their observations on the historical "action":

> The Chicanas and Mexicanas contributed a lot of time
> and effort to the farm workers' boycott. Many families
> had to move from small farming towns to large
> cities...relocating families was hard to do, but without
> the Chicanas and Mexicanas the boycott would not
> have been effective. (Burns)

> The women in the campaign did a lot of campaigning
> and background organizing. They helped the boycott
> get running while the men handled the public informa-
> tion about it. To me it seemed a little like the early years
> of Clinton's presidency. Hilary seemed to do a lot of
> work for the President while Clinton got the credit for it
> since he had the connection to the public. (Rossano)

As these excerpts suggest, the email exchange encouraged some students to "rehearse" their interpretations of the readings in the relative intimacy of a small group. By focusing on a particular reading and by responding to a specific question, students established individual points of entry for the subsequent in-class discussion. Some used the listserv to express confusion or lack of understanding, while others employed the electronic discussion space to ask questions and to advance analyses.

Using a class listserv to extend the discussion space of the classroom beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of our three-hour meetings on Monday evenings reshaped the teacher-student-material relationship in several significant ways. Facilitating a public dialogue about the texts that was presumably richer and more complicated than private and solitary readings, the electronic exchange restructured our relationships to the course texts and

to each other. First, the distributive power of the interactive listserv reinforced my expectation, articulated on the syllabus, that "we create knowledge through thoughtful conversation." The class listserv gave all of us more time to process and apply the insights and questions of Lerner, Higginbotham, and Bock to the rich descriptions of female activism provided by Robinson, Standley, Echols, and Rose. Students who coordinated the small discussion groups and those who engaged in the online discussion assumed, more often than not, a more direct and more authoritative posture toward the texts they were reading. Yet, as I pondered Bass's observation that technological tools do not always serve as engines of *productivity* but as engines of *inquiry* I could not avoid confronting the many questions that the use of the listserv raised (22).

Clearly, the online dialogue encouraged and enabled students to ask both subtler and more complex questions about texts. In this instance, students asked questions about specific texts, but, as the comment about standards of historical evaluation suggests, they also asked questions about the nature of the historical enterprise. For example, some students endeavored to apply Gisela Bock's various dichotomies (e.g., public v. private, home v. work, equality v. difference) to the particular dynamics of the various movement campaigns. Others invoked Higginbotham's insights about the interplay of racism, sexism, and classism in their analyses of gender relations *within* specific organizations and movements. As I contemplated the asynchronous email exchange, I realized that I would have to make my own set of strategic choices about the purpose and the format of the upcoming in-class discussion.

Intent on intensifying the "public" dimension of the knowledge that students were producing in their small email discussion groups, I asked the groups to summarize their observations and questions about the specific texts that they had read for the rest of the class and for the two guest speakers that I had invited to class. In other words, I asked the students to use their reading and discussion on civil rights, women's liberation, and the farmworkers' campaign to establish the context for the visitors' presentations on the role of African-American women in the Northern civil rights struggle. They were to use the knowledge they had generated to help frame the dialogue with the class guests by rehearsing their conclusions and by posing questions for the speakers. The oral testimony of the guests, providing yet another level of layered learning, would then become an additional source/resource for students in their efforts to construct narratives of female social activism that were alert to nuances of race, region, and religion (Beard).

As the students presented their summaries and posed questions, a recurring theme stood out: the prevalence in the various movement organizations-the Women's Political Council, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the Students for a Democratic Society, and the United Farm Workers Association-of women's "behind-the-scenes" organizing efforts. How could women do so much work, students wondered, and receive so little credit or acknowledgement? Perplexed and vexed by some of what they had read, students were eager to interrogate the two guests about gender relations within the African-American struggle for freedom and equality. They listened, in shocked sympathy, as the two women recounted their experiences as some of the first African-American students to integrate what had previously been all-white schools in Philadelphia and Texas. As the guests turned the conversation toward the present-day prospects of interracial cooperation and collaboration, some students shifted uneasily in their seats. Unwilling to hear cherished ideals of gender solidarity challenged by relentless demands of racial solidarity, a few retreated into a stony silence. My efforts to encourage students to voice what I perceived as their reservations or opposition to the speakers' perspectives were of no avail. Though the class ended on an upbeat note with some students lingering to talk with the guests, the waters had obviously been troubled. Furthermore, captivated by what was, by turns, illuminating and upsetting conversation, we had not explicitly addressed Jo Ann Robinson's memoir, one of our important tasks for the evening. I left the class wondering what I could pull out of my technological toolbox to restart what seemed like a stalled conversation.

Hoping that the class listserv could help to "jumpstart" our flagging conversation, I sent out a posting to the entire class which asked students to respond to several questions. First, I asked students again to compare/contrast the strategies of the Women's Political Council in Montgomery Bus Boycott with the strategies of the Chicanas and Mexicanas in the UFWA, the white women involved in SNCC and SDS, and the other African-American women involved in Civil Rights agitation. Second, I called upon them to consider how Robinson's memoir challenged or confirmed what they had previously learned or believed about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Civil Rights movement, African-American female activism, and/or feminism. Finally, I invited students to share their reactions to the panel; I solicited both their thoughts and their feelings about the discussion (Weis). The first

two questions, essentially reformulations of the questions posed the previous week in the smaller email discussion groups, encouraged students to return to the earlier texts and to re-read them in light of the panel discussion. The third question about the panel asked students to reflect on yet another layer of complexity; the role of oral testimony and the significance of memory and historical consciousness.

Again, the class listserv, like the smaller email discussion groups, afforded students space to "practice" their efforts to reconcile contradictory perspectives and sources. Students could elect to enter the online analysis of women's social and political activism from at least three entry points (i.e. questions). For example, Lindsay returned to a question posed earlier on the email discussion groups about the similarities and differences between the various movements:

> I chose question #1, how the Montgomery bus boycott associations of women were similar to the Chicanas/Mexicanas, white women during women's liberation, and black women during civil rights movements. I think a surrounding theme to all of the pieces of literature was the way women remained private with the matters. They all took care of the leg work behind the scenes, while the men posed more of a public position as they made decisions and provided information for the public. (Rossano 17 Sept. 1998)

Although Lindsay does not refer explicitly to Gisela Bock's "public v. private" dichotomy in her posting, her interpretation is clearly informed by both online and in-class discussion of this course text. Applying theoretical perspectives like Bock's to the nitty-gritty details of the UFWA and Montgomery boycotts represents the kind of complex historical analysis that I encourage students to undertake. Certainly, students can engage in sophisticated historical comparisons without recourse to electronically-enhanced conversation. However, as Russell Hunt has argued, such computer-mediated "written discussions" combine "the flexibility and interactive engagement of oral conversation" with "the power of written language" (Hunt). The conjoining of oral conversation and written language has obvious constraints. Even so, the use of computer-mediated communication in this course certainly allowed students to propose, revise, and extend ideas about female activism with ever-increasing complexity and depth that would have been hard

to match without the enhancement of technology.

Some of the students' deep and complex responses, reconciling oral testimony from the panel with printed primary and secondary sources, resembled written essays, as the following excerpts indicate:

> However, these women soon had roles similar to their female counterparts in the other organizations; the Chicana/Mexicana farm workers boycott, the white women in the SNCC and SDS, and the African-American women involved in the Civil Rights agitation. This role was primarily behind the scenes. Yet there were a few strong women in the Montgomery bus boycott and there were African American women involved in the Civil Rights agitation that overcame the sexist male leadership of the SCLC and other African American groups fighting for Civil Rights. These women were mentioned as an inspiration of the white women that emerged from the SNCC and SDS to engage in their own civil rights movement, only civil rights for females. It was also interesting in the article on the African-American women involved in the Civil Rights agitation how it discussed the struggle of African American women in deciding whether they should follow the civil right's agendas of their African American male counterparts or their white female counterparts. Generally, most women were more concerned about racism than they were about sexism. This can be seen in Jo Ann Gibson Robinson's memoir on the bus boycott in her refusal to criticize the male leadership for their apparent sexism and in the discussion we engaged in with Barbara and Funmi. (Haverstick 17 Sept. 1998)

> I also did not know that churches played such a factor in the boycott. The churches and ministers were the center of the boycott. These were the meeting places and the ministers often were involved in the negotiation processes. After reading the memoir I wondered what is the role of church in many African American communities today? Funmi talked a great deal about the minister of her church and about her association with church. Has this continued to be a general meeting place for many movements? How has it changed?

> Because I am not a religious person, this interested me.
> I had never thought about the role a church might play
> in movements such as the Civil Rights movement. (Tate)

Predictably, the preoccupation with what many perceived to be competing claims of racial and gender solidarity surfaced as a nagging question:

> After reading this book and listening to Barbara and
> Funmi speak in our class, I have realized that I need to
> reevaluate my views on the civil rights movement and
> feminism.   I can now see how it must be difficult to be
> an African American women (SIC) trying to stand up for
> her rights.   What do you put first, race or gender?   For
> Funmi it seemed to be an easy choice.   Can women of
> all ethnicities come together and fight a struggle for
> equality under the feminist flag, or must they first find
> equality within their perspective ethnicity?   The reading
> has left me with many questions but I have also gained
> many answers. (Sheppard 17 Sept. 1998)

White women like the student quoted above were forced to rethink their presumption of the prominence of gender as a primary category of personal and political identity.   While this rethinking could have been prompted by a solitary reading of Robinson's memoir, as Laurie suggested, it was provoked, in a rather pressing way, by the face-to-face encounter that took place during the in-class panel discussion. Robinson's memoir, as many students testified, was an extraordinarily compelling narrative. However, the "live" oral testimony of Funmi and Barbara possessed a powerful immediacy that the printed version of Robinson's oral memoirs lacked. The class listserv enabled Laurie (and others) to retain, in a fashion, what Hunt has identified as "the flexibility and interactive engagement of oral conversation" even as it enhanced "the power of [our] written language" (Hunt).

As the length of some of the previous excerpts suggest, asynchronous programs (bulletin boards and listservs) generally encourage exchanges that tend toward written discussion. Synchronic programs (chat rooms or MOO sites), on the other hand, often mimic the quick back-and-forth of oral conversation. The complexity and sensitivity of a specific topic-the apparently competing claims of gender and racial solidarity, in this case-prompted both long, reasoned reflections and short, visceral reactions. Thus, a few

students like Laurie (above) deployed the class listserv to deliberate the relationships between the various forms of evidence on female activism.

"Real time" programs can, on occasion, facilitate extended commentary (like that provided above by Laurie and Trish) while asynchronous software can foster short and seemingly synchronous exchanges. Michele's more affective reaction to the panel initiated a series of quick, conversational exchanges:

> They only thing that bothered me some about what they talked about was Funmi mentioned being a Nationalist. I agree that one should support their race, and that whites will never totally be able to understand what Afro-Americans have faced, but I didn't really agree with how she said she didn't want anything to do with whites who want to join in and be a part of her cause. I would think they would want whites apart to gain their perspectives and understand then. America is made up of many different types of people and I feel it is all our duties as Americans to try and get along with everyone and try and understand their ways of life. I think this helps us all live a little more at peace with each other. I also didn't agree with how she said Afro-Americans cannot be racist because they are minority. Yes, overall blacks are the minority in this country but I could go to the city and I would be the minority and have Afro-Americans be just as racist. I think I need further explanation on that one. (Petticofer)

Several factors may have prevented Michele and other students with similar sentiments from expressing disagreements with Funmi in a "public" way during the panel discussion. They may have been inhibited by a culture that demands deference toward elders. They may have been moved by a sense of hospitality that requires compliant civility toward guests. They may have been constrained by a racial etiquette that positions young white female students as "novices" and mature African-American women as "authorities" in matters of race. They simply may not have had time, in the course of the in-class discussion, to formulate and articulate responses to the points of view presented by the class guests. I may never know, in any kind of comprehensive way, which particular constraints stymied students and prevented them from publicly expressing the reservation or opposition to the speakers that I sensed. Again

though, the class listserv came to the rescue. It provided an apparently "private" arena for the articulation of dissent and disagreement deemed, by some students, to be inappropriate (or too uncomfortable) for the "public" forum of the classroom. The oral testimony of the class guests then became another "text" for students to interrogate. Several classmates responded quickly to Michele's plea for more discussion of the perpetually perplexing problem of racism. A few, like Michelle, expressed a similar sense of frustration with Funmi's analysis:

> It did bother me that Funmi did not want any 'whites' to help out. When African American people act as if the white people are all to blame, and that they show no prejudice. I think that the fault can be put on all races. So at the same time I left the class feeling informed and a little angry...Even though I was bothered by this I would not hesitate to listen to either one of them again. (Koch)

Another student jumped into the discussion to justify Funmi's explanation of racism; she interjected a structural analysis that redirected the dissection of race relations away from seemingly simple interpersonal conflict:

> The way I understood [Funmi's] remarks was that African Americans can behave just as ignorant and bigoted as any number of white people; however, they cannot be referred to as racist. Her argument was that in order to be racist, one has to belong to a race that has power over another race. (Sheppard 20 Sept. 1998)

As I lurked on the class listserv over the weekend and observed students choosing different points of entry into the increasingly complicated conversation about race, power and political mobilization, I wondered how I might "wrap up" this introductory investigation on women's social and political activism and move toward the more conventional chronological examination of the history of women in the United States outlined in the original syllabus. The case study on the Montgomery Bus Boycott had been effective: students identified important historical questions and practiced various methods of historical inquiry. The initial "rehearsals," heavily mediated by electronic communication, were quite promising, but

raised several significant pedagogical questions for me. In a particular and pressing way, how could I use the upcoming in-class session to resolve and/or reconcile the various interpretive "paths" that individual students had chosen to pursue in their readings and in their online conversations? Could I juxtapose the various "texts" and "takes" on women's social and political activism that had been elaborated over the past two weeks into a compelling and coherent meta-narrative? How could I avoid an episodic treatment of the Montgomery Bus Boycott ("O.K., we've finished that topic.") and sustain the turn toward a recursive investigation of women's history?

These pedagogical dilemmas are not unique to a technology-enhanced course. Teachers committed to a constructivist approach constantly confront these kinds of questions in their classrooms. Technology transforms our experience of the triangular teacher-student-text relationships. For example, the use of interactive technologies in "Women in United States History" clearly altered the scale of students' relationships with historical texts (Bass 20). The electronic discussions provided me with unprecedented access to the nuances and valences of students' encounters with the different texts. In other words, the class listserv allowed me to observe, in a detailed fashion, how students were using various kinds of historical evidence to construct knowledge about women's social and political activism of the 1960s and 1970s. This more intimate comprehension of how students understood Jo Ann Robinson's contribution to the bus boycott or how they perceived the similarities between civil rights agitation in Northern and Southern communities forced me to re-frame the architecture of my class. Pondering the multiple paths that students had traversed in the "out-of-class" electronic discussions prodded me to re-formulate the relationships between individual class sessions and to reimagine the kinds of intellectual work that I expected from myself and from my students.

Rethinking the connections between *choice* and *coherence* was central to this reformulation. I knew, for instance, that my choice to assign Jo Ann Robinson's memoir would set students up to challenge the received narrative about the Montgomery Bus Boycott that positioned Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. as the central protagonists in the drama. While I might foresee some of the kinds of comparisons that students might draw between the Woman's Political Council in Montgomery and the UFWA or the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, I could not, as the email discussion demonstrated, anticipate all of them. Even though I could depend

on the visitors I invited to the class to present vivid stories about the black freedom struggle in northern cities, I could not divine the details of those stories. Nor could I, in any definitive way, direct my students to derive any particular conclusions from the array of accounts about female activism. Students deliberated discrete descriptions of activism from multiple sites. Small email discussion groups and the whole class listserv sparked deeper examinations of texts during in-class discussions while H-NET lists brought the class into the center of "live" scholarly debate. Interviews from electronic archives, together with the panel of class guests, enabled us to expand our conversation to include increasingly diverse communities of inquiry. Neatly tying up the multiple threads of these often divergent discussions was challenging, to say the least. Some students were ready to synthesize what they had learned while others were eager to examine even more perspectives.

Seeking to segue from the case study on activism to the conquest of the Atlantic world, I turned once more to my technological toolbox. To those disposed to bring the study of activism to some kind of closure, I recommended that they post brief evaluative summaries of our collective investigation to the "Women's History Forum." To those intrigued (or troubled) by PanAfricanism and Black Nationalism (issues that had not come up in the reading, but had been broached in the panel), I suggested the online interviews of Kathleen Cleaver and Angela Davis that were part of PBS Frontline broadcast "Two Nations of Black America" (Cleaver and Davis). The reports of those who read the Cleaver and Davis interviews ("All they talked about was race!") revealed the continuing challenge of understanding the frequent and fluid tensions between race and gender solidarity. How, students wondered, can we comprehend the complex ways in which race and gender seem to "work" together in some instances and, yet, at other times, seem to contradict each? The students who chose to post summaries to the "Women's History Forum" were equally stymied, but for a different reason. While the former wrestled with apparently intractable issues of race and gender, the latter struggled with the technical challenges of subscribing to the forum. In both instances, more careful "framing" of the Web-based activities would have probably resulted in more productive uses of the technological tools. Clearer and more comprehensive instructions for subscribing and posting to the "Women's History" forum and more thoughtfully-posed questions for the online interviews would have helped immeasurably. Offering an expansive range of intellectual choices to students in the women's history class made it possible for them

to act, in some ways, like "practicing historians." The creation of open-ended assignments must be balanced with rigorously-prepared instructions. Precisely-stated intentions and directions serve as a scaffolding which enables students to inhabit, and even to elaborate, the architecture of a course-under-construction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the set of technological tools helped me to establish a dialectic tone in the exploration of the case study of women's activism and to engage some students in a critical and creative reflection of the course texts in between class sessions. I was pleased that most students managed to maneuver through the multiple questions/points of entry and to participate, in some fashion, in the electronic effort to "construct knowledge through thoughtful conversation." Lest I appear the overzealous convert, however, let me temper my enthusiasm by offering the following questions and reservations.

The variety of live, print, and electronic oral testimonies (juxtaposed with other print sources) provoked sustained and fruitful debate about the roles played by women in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Clearly, the online exchanges reshaped students' engagement with the course texts, leading them, in most cases, into a deeper and more thoughtful analysis than is generally possible within the spatial and temporal limits of a 3-hour, once-a-week class meeting. The use of email discussion deepened this process of critical reflection for some, but not all students. Some students continued to be "readers" while other dared to be "writers." It is difficult to develop a precise profile of the "writers" who adeptly availed themselves of the advantages of the electronic discussion lists, but I can hazard a few guesses. Some "writers" were seasoned students whose college careers had already exposed them, in some substantive way, to "the practice of the scholarly argument: well-articulated, factual-based writing with appropriate references" (Akers). With little apparent effort, they adapted scholarly habits and practices that had worked well for them in conventional classrooms to an electronic environment. Other "writers" had already taken one or several technology-enhanced courses; they came into the classroom already conversant with the etiquette and expectations of class listservs. Still others were quieter, more thoughtful students who contributed reasoned responses on their own time schedule to the electronic conversations, but who generally remained quiet, active listeners in face-to-face discussions.

What about the "readers"? Can they be easily distinguished from the lurkers or the lost? While electronic discussion lists may simplify the instructor's task of recognizing, remembering, and rewarding classroom "participation," such devices also provoke a rethinking of what "counts" as class participation. An engrossed and engaged (albeit quiet) student is obvious in a face-to-face environment, but active listeners are harder to distinguish, in online conversations, from those who simply are not participating at all. Strategies for engaging the listening, the lurking, and the lost include distributing responsibility and authority for posing guiding questions and preparing reflective summaries. Thus, while class listservs and other types of discussion fora deepen some students' comprehension of course texts, these technological tools seem to distance other students from more intensive investigations of texts.

While some students may still get "lost" in virtual discussions, threaded and archived discussion fora (as opposed to simple email-based discussion lists) make it easier for all participants to follow the trajectory of the electronic conversation and for an instructor to monitor the frequency and quality of each student's participation. Archived and threaded fora promote "the power of the written word to support extended and engaged discourse" by making it possible for participants to move easily from *structure* (accessible archives) to *discourse* (flow of past and present of each message/context).

As many other practitioners have already noted, new interactive technologies are simple but powerful tools for reshaping the architecture of the classroom. These technological tools transform the triangular relationships between students/text/ teachers. Electronic discussion lists, ranging from small email-based discussion groups to whole class listservs to national online fora, give students practice writing about complicated and contradictory texts. Extending the range of primary resources available for student research, web-based archives increase opportunities for novice learners to act like historians. The role of the instructor in these resource-rich teaching environments shifts from primary interpreter of privileged texts to organizer and lead researcher of collaborative inquiries. In moving away from assignment-based instruction toward project-based research, instructors contend with philosophical, pedagogical, and practical limitations of "the course" as a basic unit of study (Bass 38-39).

Notes

[1]See Gibson Robinson and Garrow, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*. Also see the additional essays, found in Chapter 15 "Political Activism and Feminism in the 1960s and Early 1970s" of *Major Problems in American Women's History*, which included "The Role of Black Women in Civil Rights" by Anne Standley; "White Women and the Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement" by Alice Echols; and "Gender Awareness Among Chicanas and Mexicanas in the United Farmworkers of America" by Margaret Rose.

[2]The "Women's History Forum" was organized by Pennee Bender, multimedia producer and coordinator for the "History Matters" Web Site for the American Social History Project. Gerda Lerner moderated the forum for the month of September 1998.

[3]Serendipitously, the History Matters forum on "The American Revolution" started the weekend before my class examined the impact of the revolution on various groups of women in the United States. Students were able to compare and contrast Gary Nash's introductory comments with analyses of the revolution put forward by Joan Hoff Wilson, Mary Beth Norton, and Jacqueline Jones in Chapter 4 of *Major Problems*.

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