"Thinking Together"

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The word "computer" comes from Latin roots. The "pute" part of computer means to think, as seen also in the words repute, and reputation, and putative. The "com-" part of computer means "with," so that the whole word means "to think together." And computer companies have traditionally celebrated this *thinking* in both human and mechanical forms. As early as 1915, even before his company was called IBM, Thomas Watson honored this etymology by giving his business the motto "Think." In its ads for the new iMac computer, Apple invites Americans to "Think Different." I am also in favor of thinking, and of thinking differently—even deviantly. But when it comes to computers, I think the motto of American Studies and allied disciplines probably ought to be "Think Again," in part because there seems to be more thinking going into the manufacturing and marketing of computers than into the cultural consequences of computers.

In this essay, I would like to "think again" about learning and technology in the American Studies—and in America. I want to celebrate the thinking—different, deviant, and deep—that appears in these provocative essays. I would like to consider how the professions and pedagogies embodied in these courses reflect and affect the traditions of American Studies. I have a couple of thoughts about the connections between these experiments and an emerging scholarship of teaching in the academy. Finally, I will play with a few ideas about the ways that Americans may be literally *in-formed* (or formed within) by the Information Age.

What does it mean, for example, to use a technology which, for many of our students, is associated with computer games? What does it mean to use a technology that promises increased speed in a society that is speeding to potential disaster? How are hyperlinks connected to the ways that people think? What habits of mind are formed by people who click their way through a syllabus? Are the changes wrought by computers epistemological as well as educa-

WORKS AND DAYS 31/32, Vol. 16, Nos. 1&2, 1998

tional? What does it mean to use a machine that administrators admire mainly for its efficiency in a setting devoted to the complex inefficiencies of learning and personal growth? Is it possible to convince skeptics that "wired" is not just an alternative spelling of "weird?"

I. Intentional Media: Thinking Together

As a creative reader of these essays, I'm particularly struck by their thoughtfulness. Even though the word "computer" is etymologically "thinking," it is not always the case that discourse about computers is thoughtful at all. Many Americans have adopted the whiz-bang utopianism of computer ads and computer magazines. But these essays are whiz-bang wise, because they help us to "think again" about the things we do not generally think twice about. I have learned a great deal from these adventurous professors. In some cases, I have found specific techniques and assignments that I can use in my own teaching. But even more importantly, I have learned how good teachers think about their teaching—even without computer applications.

These essays are thoughtful in several different ways. First, they are thoughtful about applications of technology, and about the limits of such applications. Because adding technology to a course forces us to reconsider the goals of the course more carefully than a mere switch in readings does, these essays foreground issues that should probably permeate our thinking and conversations everyday, even for traditional courses. These teachers know that their subjects are not history or literature or Women's Studies, but the particular people who show up in their classes. They know that success will be measured by how well the human subjects in their classrooms engage with the academic subjects they encounter. When new technologies help to engage and empower students, they are the right stuff; when they do not, they are just, as Thoreau said of railroads, "an improved means to unimproved ends."

These essays confront the big questions of education by considering the broader purposes of what we are doing. They help us to ask: What is this assignment for? What is this class for? What is education for? What is college for? What in the world is it good for? What good is it for the world? Such questions lead to bigger questions, one of which is "What are people for?" Everything we do in our classes is an implicit answer to this question, so it's important that we consider it carefully, as many of these essays do.

Second, these essays are thoughtful about *student* thoughtful-

ness. I have often said that the primary product of college ought to be thoughtfulness, and these essays pay attention to how and why students *do* think. They consider student capabilities, interests, and learning styles. They consider epistemological questions and learning theory in the process of contriving ways to enhance students' thinking skills. Often, as in John McClymer's insistence on recursive teaching and multiple points of entry, these techniques would work well without any electronics. Other essays are explicit about the collateral learning that intentional media can catalyze—as in the "links of association" and "trails" implicit in a web annotation assignment, for example. I am especially impressed by the essays that link new technologies with feminist and progressive pedagogies. They tend to treat students as whole persons, and not just as a brain in a body.

Some of the courses described in these essays even enhance thoughtfulness in an additional sense—helping students to develop skills of consideration and compassion. Many of them are explicit about empathy as a way of learning. Students exploring oral history with Rina Benmayor are learning how to feel with someone else. And students in the class on "Race, Gender and Justice" and "Aspects of Asian American Culture" also learn a lot about imaginatively getting out of themselves and into someone else's skin. In a multicultural world of complex identities, this is a useful skill.

A few of these essays even suggest that this complex thoughtfulness—reflective, recursive, reflexive, compassionate—ought to extend beyond the bounds of the classroom. In a society that sometimes tends to identify the life of the mind with the life of the classroom, these teachers extend academic mindfulness into the so-called "real world"—the place, for most students, where their ideas will eventually be applied and extended.

In general, the essays show how many ways there are to do things right. They make it clear that there's no single recipe for success, unless the recipe reads "Assemble ingredients that will nourish *your* students. Think hard about it, and cook until done." Nothing works in every context (sometimes nothing works, period). At a commuter school, an email discussion can intensify community, while at a residential college, the same list might compromise the more common face-to-faceness of community exchanges. Nothing works the same in *any* context; some students will thrive on pedagogies that cause frustration and failure for other students.

These essays also show the success of failures. In several instances, faculty (and institutional) failures have been a significant part of the learning experience, both for the faculty and for their

students. The litany of failures is impressive. There are not enough computers for students. Students with their own personal computers have distinct advantages over students who must rely on public access. We didn't take enough time to teach students how to create web pages. We forgot to teach students how to *evaluate* web pages. A particular assignment did not translate well to cyberspace. Another assignment was too vague. The links did not work. The web is full of garbage. Some of the garbage on the Web is composed of commercial term papers. Too many Web sites are big on illustrations and small on analysis. There was not enough technical support. Students needed good examples of listserv responses. Students do not like to engage in "crosstalk." They saw the computer assignments as unnecessary busywork. My colleagues think I am wasting my time. Sometimes even I think I am wasting my time, since this is much more time-intensive than I imagined. The administration has not figured out how to foster this work.[1]

Despite these failures (and sometimes because of them), these teachers have succeeded in educating their students, and now, in these essays, the larger academic community. This is because, as Neil Postman suggests in *The End of Education*, error is essential to education. Postman agrees with John Dewey that we learn by doing, but he contends that "we learn far more by failing—by trial and error, by making mistakes, correcting them, making more mistakes, correcting them, and so on. We are all in need of remedial work, all the time" (Postman 117-28). And one of the beauties of education is that we can, if we are attentive, learn by other people's mistakes, which, it seems to me, is one of the purposes of a collection like this.

II. The Mediations of American Studies

American Studies are an institutional computer, an intellectual pattern of thinking together. An interdisciplinary field established to figure out why we act like Americans (and, in the process, to find out exactly who "we" is), American Studies have long exhibited traits that make it a good home for "intentional media."[2]

These essays express values consonant with the best of American Studies, past and present. For me, the primary hallmark of American Studies is its celebration of what Gene Wise calls "the connecting mind." From the 1930s on, people in American Studies have tried to connect different disciplines, to connect past and present (and sometimes the future), to connect theory and experience, to connect different types of Americans, and to connect stu-

dents and their society. Even before computers, practitioners of American Studies thought in hyperlinks. Henry Nash Smith and John William Ward and Alan Trachtenberg approached the West and Andrew Jackson and the Brooklyn Bridge as if they were preparing web pages.

Today, American Studies are still in the business of connections, often with computer applications. The Web is an apt metaphor for one new technological system, an intricate system of interconnections. At its best, the Web fosters what historian Charles Rosenberg calls "an aesthetic of complexity," a deep appreciation for the critical interconnectedness of learning. A good web page can be multi-causal, multi-cultural, multi-perspectival and multi-media. Even in simpler forms, the new technologies can help us with the business of connections, sometimes to classic writers, sometimes to each other. Henry Nash Smith's American Studies classic, *Virgin Land*, is available on the Internet. Email gives us connections across the campus, the country and the world. Email can *save* time in responding to each other, and it can *shift* time with its asynchronous connections.

A second signal characteristic of American Studies has been reflexivity—thinking again about how we are thinking. As interdisciplinary scholars in a departmental universe, we have had to be self-conscious (and at times defensive) in ways that our intra-disciplinary colleagues have not. At least since 1957, when Henry Nash Smith asked if American Studies could develop a method, we have been debating the question. In 1979, Gene Wise identified this reflexivity as characteristic of the field. In his wise and wonderful "Some Elementary Axioms for an American Culture Studies," Wise argued that

> In knowledge as in the economy, our root problem now is not *production*, but *ecology*—which means more conscious concern for making fresh connections among existing things; more looking outward to the wider consequences of our information; more serious attention to questioning why we're doing what we're doing, and through what forms; more effort given to structuring all this productive activity into humanly manageable forms. (517-47)

It would be hard to imagine a field more lively than American Studies in the last half century, as practitioners have continually asked themselves why they are doing what they are doing, and in

what forms.

In her 1999 American Studies Association presidential address, Janice Radway continued this tradition of reflexivity, speaking in favor of another American Studies value—inclusiveness. Radway challenges us—as American Studies scholars have for decades—to reflect more carefully on the meanings of the word "American." If we still follow Crevecouer in asking "What is this American, this new man?" we now problematize the category of "American," inquiring how our differences make a real difference in our commonality. The essays in this collection, about courses in Women's Studies and Asian American Studies and African-American literature, suggest the multicultural richness of American Studies. They point us clearly in the direction of what we might call "recombinant USA" (See Radway; Kerber; Kessler-Harris; Lauter; Limerick; and Washington).

This reflexivity also makes American Studies particularly open to the possibilities of a scholarship of teaching. When we teach American Studies to American students, we implicitly demand reflexivity, a consideration of just how and why we are Americans, and what that means—historically, sociologically, economically, politically, and morally. But, as Wise suggests, we can also demand it of ourselves in our pedagogical practices. Teaching is essentially the practice of structuring scholarship into manageable forms. We can ask ourselves, as these essays surely do, why we are doing what we are doing, and how the forms make it more (or less) humanly manageable to our students.

A scholarship of teaching can also help us to find ways to value and evaluate this work well. As Ernest Boyer suggests in *Scholarship Reconsidered*, colleges and universities need to recognize that there are many ways to contribute to our disciplines and communities of discourse. Original research is just one kind of contribution. But the synthesis and circulation of knowledge are also essential elements of a profession's development, and we need to find ways to make the reward structure cognizant of these contributions. Our institutions need to consider this sort of course development as a regular part of faculty development, and offer money and time to help faculty prepare for such teaching (Boyer; See also Mechling).

A third characteristic of American Studies is its rootedness in experience. In one of the first manifestoes of American Studies, "The American Scholar," Ralph Waldo Emerson set out a program for American Studies.

> "I ask not," he said, "for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar; the low. Give me insight into today, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and gait of the body—show me the ultimate reason of these matters . . . and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order; there is no trifle, there is no puzzle, but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench."

In the first generations of American Studies in the twentieth century, people like John Kouwenhoven, Alan Trachtenberg, and Henry Nash Smith studied things as diverse as the beer can by the highway, the Brooklyn Bridge, and dime novels. In his "Elementary Axioms," Gene Wise suggested that "despite massive institutional pressures to see it otherwise, the first and final base of American Culture Studies must be not in the departments of academe, but in ongoing experiences outside" (531-32).

Many of the essays in this collection also celebrate these vernacular, popular, and populist strains of American Studies. Many of the courses do this by asking students to think about themselves as cultural productions. Ivy Schweitzer sees her Women's Studies course as "an application of critical paradigms to personal experience and what I call 'the micro-political climate' of the campus communit." (350) Barbara Ewell sees her task as "helping students learn what they already know," (102) which roots her work firmly in a vernacular, popular context. She then challenges students "to see beyond their accustomed—and often very narrow—perspectives" (108). Other courses examine contemporary forms of popular culture. Kathy Walsh uses Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* as a special focus for her inter-class conversations. A couple of courses ask students to think about "riot grrls." Still others invite students to search for other forms of vernacular culture in non-academic web sites.

The rootedness of American Studies in experience has contributed to a fourth characteristic of American Studies, its public and purposeful character. While some scholars in American Studies have been happy to be ivory tower intellectuals, others

have maintained a rich tradition as public intellectuals. They have insisted that the questions of the discipline can never be merely academic. The founders of American Studies often engaged in the politics of culture. In reactionary times like the Fifties, they were usually not activists. But they tried to establish a democratic past and a pragmatic tradition that would be usable in contemporary American culture. Leo Marx was not the only Marxist in early American Studies. A second generation in the Sixties used American Studies as a home for the study of people ignored in the consensus paradigms of the Fifties. The current generation is even more explicit about the politics of the academy and the ways in which the formulations of scholarship can be connected to social change.[3]

Several essays in this collection follow this tradition of public engagement. Many of them study grassroots social movements as a way of bending the universe—or at least a part of it—toward justice. This explicit emphasis on justice seems new to me, but well within the radical traditions of American Studies. Explicitly linking "intellectual discourse, community activism, and social justice," (293) for example, Melinda de Jesus uses computer links to show students how they can—if they choose—change the situations they are studying. Mary McGuire asks students to assess sources of information from outside the academy in order to understand the production and politics of knowledge. Rina Benmayor considers her wonderful oral history project a "form of action research, in which memory and the investigation of the past is connected to community efforts for social change" (190) Her students interview other students, especially first-generation students, using their stories to create communities of memory, but also to create an archive of information useful for helping university administrators understand the people they serve. And the web allows these and other American Studies students to "go public" in ways almost unimaginable before. The "Open Discussion" of Dartmouth's Women's Studies course is a particularly lively example, with its open invitation to anyone to join in conversations about the issues raised in the course.

A fifth characteristic of American Studies is its approach to information overload. Gene Wise's "Elementary Axioms" is particularly useful for its insistence that, in a cultural context of information overload, scholars need to be intentional about what they teach, why they teach, and how they teach specific topics. Wise suggests that practitioners in American Studies should look for "dense facts" in the culture—"facts which both reveal deeper meanings inside

themselves, and point outward to other facts, other ideas, other meanings." Many of the courses described in this collection employ dense facts. Kathy Walsh uses *Do the Right Thing*. Gabrielle Foreman and Donna Maeda use Barbara Krueger's *Love for Sale*. Almost any course imaginatively using Web sites is relying upon dense facts, using hyperlinks as a way of pointing to other facts, ideas, and meanings. Although it is possible to describe dense facts in text, it somehow seems easier to show their density in hypertext.

A final important characteristic of American Studies is its playfulness. Gene Wise's final axiom reminds us that "scholarship is a serious business, but we must not take ourselves too seriously. We should remind ourselves that 'play' of mind as well as work of mind is necessary to understanding." Play, says my dictionary (playing with my expectations), comes from a root meaning "to take up one's promise or responsibility." But it also means "to move lightly, rapidly, or erratically; frisk; flutter." And it also means "to have fun, amuse oneself." Or "to make love playfully" (foreplay and afterplay, I guess). Or "to perform on a musical instrument." And "to perform on a stage." This means that American Studies works best when it plays. We take up our responsibilities as scholars and teachers by playing with ideas, and by playing with pedagogies that communicate this playful process to our students. In many ways, all of these essays play out the rich possibilities of teaching with technology. And this imaginative playfulness makes it easier to recognize the open-endedness of our play. When American Studies work best, as in these essays, we find ourselves with both descriptions and prescriptions for further play. I, for one, am ready for the challenge.

III. Unintentional Media: The In-formation Age

The essays in this collection focus, as the subtitle suggests, on "Learning and Teaching in the Culture and History Classroom." They focus—by design—primarily on the transformations of a course and its teachers and students, and not so much on the broader transformations of American life. But it is also useful to consider the systemic transformations—ones outside the classroom and the college—that may accompany teaching with computers. Computers can "assist, facilitate, or enhance" our work as teachers, but they have other significant effects as well. Some of these effects are physical, some are mental, some are moral, and some are social. Computers are the main technology of the information age,

so it is important to consider how they literally in-form us—how, in fact, they may form us from within.

When Americans use the word technology, for example, we usually mean specific tools for accomplishing some present task for some future benefit. But a technology, as Langdon Winner points out in a beautiful book called *The Whale and the Reactor*, is a complex reality, part of what Robert Bellah calls "the problem of invisible complexity." "The things we call 'technologies'," Winner says, "are ways of building order in the world. . . ." The issues that divide or unite people in society are settled not only in the institutions and practices of politics proper, but also, and less obviously, in tangible arrangements of steel and concrete, wires and semiconductors, nuts and bolts" (Winner 28-29). Cars and computers, for example, make many things possible, and many other things improbable. There is a politics of cars and computers and widgets, and it is built right in, wired into the standard operating procedures that govern the use of these tools. Technologies are as political as the Democrats and Republicans, and often more effective, because we don't suspect them of anything.

Many of the authors of these essays are, in fact, suspicious. Melinda de Jesus says that "we need to delve into this area and *define* its parameters before the technology itself defines our discipline *for* us!" (306) Such caveats and cautions are important, but it is important to remember, too, that other people—and not just technology—are working with implicit goals for technology that may undermine or complicate our pedagogical aims. We can see many of these goals in the culture's most common images and assumptions about computers.

The marketing of computers and computer products, for example, offers us what we might call decontextualized information. In computer ads, most of the time, what we see is what we get. But what we do not see is what we get too. Computer and software companies sell us speed, accuracy, accessibility, efficiency, convenience, connectivity, and a kind of fashionable modernity. They tell us that, with computers, we will be competent, confident, and ahead of the competition. In many instances, technology is portrayed as the magic that will make less into more. We need not appropriate more money for needy people, because technology will streamline services. We need not worry about our class sizes, as long as we supply students with more computers. We need not worry about the technological fix we call global warming, because there will surely be another technological fix.

Computer ads reinforce ideas of technological utopianism, and

more basically, of progress. At the same time, they reinforce ideas of technological determinism and of cultural lag. We repeatedly hear that technologies are "shaping our future." In higher education, we are told that our job is to prepare students for the 21st century, and often that means a century driven by computers. The concept of cultural lag assumes that technology powers not just machines, but people and their culture, and that education and other cultural institutions are caught inevitably in a game of catch-up. The future is manufactured for us by the same people who make appliances and cars, and it is sold to us with advertising like the old GE ads that claimed that "Progress is our most important product." Historian Thomas Hine notes that these ads helped GE define progress in terms of style changes, and in terms of "the marketing of new products for which nobody had been clamoring but for which a market niche might be carved out." GE's synoptic slogan suggested that products and progress were virtually synonymous, and that "the sum total of GE's research, manufacturing and marketing would constitute progress" (Hine 59). This formula, in which products effectively become our most important progress, is essentially the commodification and commercialization of human improvement.

But while these computer ads show us some things, they obscure others. They do not, for example, show the system shutting down, the program's refusal to open a file, the hard drive crashing, the virus infecting a disk, the power failure, the printer jam, the in-your-face interface, the instant obsolescence of today's software and hardware, or the accidental deletion of a day's work (on an older system, I once deleted a whole book). We also do not see so-called "side effects" like obesity and atrophy and muscle strain and carpal-tunnel syndrome. The culture of advertising—and ours is certainly a culture of advertising—teaches us to focus more on *desired effects* than on *side effects*. But as a character in Marge Piercy's futuristic novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* points out, all of them are equally effects (Piercy 275). Side effects are just the ones you can't sell, like disorder, disruption and disease. It is important to remember that computers are a means to an end, but not just to the end we have in mind. This is the law of unintended consequences, and it is quite consequential in thinking about things, as Edward Tenner has suggested in *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences*.

Computers are not just a visible technology, they are also what Neil Postman would call an "invisible technology," a tool so familiar we take it for granted (Postman 1992). Computers are pro-

grammed, but programmed computers also program us, because we must learn the standard operating procedures of computing and computer culture. We may get carpal-tunnel syndrome, but we are also in danger of getting a peculiar syndrome of tunnel *vision*.

Sitting in front of screens all day, for example, affects the way we look at the world. In his brilliant book, *The Age of Missing Information*, Bill McKibben explores the impact and implications of continuous TV viewing. "What I'm talking about," he says, "is what happens when you see an ad, over and over, for small Ritz crackers pre-smeared and pre-stuck together with peanut butter and sold under the slogan 'No assembly required.' What habits of body and mind does this, in concert with a hundred other similar messages, help produce? And how do these habits differ from the habits, the attitudes people got from the natural world?" (McKibben 21). Although no assembly is required, it might be useful to assemble a few thoughts about some of the habits (and habits of mind) associated with our computer culture.

First, computers reinforce the indoorness of American culture. Although Americans admire what we call the Great Outdoors, we spend about 98 percent of our lives in the Great Indoors, where most of our computers reside. Computers reinforce our engagement as American "sitizens"—as people who sit—and sit, and sit. They connect us to the virtual world but screen us—almost literally—from the natural world. The time our students spend in email chat rooms on the environment is time they are not spending in the environment.

Second, computers add to the information overload of American life. KPMG has capitalized on this problem in a recent series of ads. "Never before has so much technology and information been available to mankind," boasted an ad in a recent [September 7, 1998] *Fortune* magazine. But it continued, "Never has mankind been so utterly confused." It is ironic that one of the main problems of the Information Age is that there is too much information, and not enough wisdom. Computers are better at accessing information than at assessing it. Humans still do that, but, if I'm at all representative, human memory *de*grades while computer memory *up*grades. Fortunately, as James Thurber once said, "It's more important to know some of the questions than all of the answers." One of the most important things we can know, in fact, is what we do not need to know. But that takes wisdom, and no amount of information guarantees wisdom.

Computers, like television and programming such as MTV, also affect our sense of timeliness, reducing it from days to hours to

minutes to seconds to nanoseconds. My son tells me that our computer is too slow, although it is faster than anything that existed on earth a quarter of a century ago. Computers are complicit in what the comic strip Sally Forth calls "artificial urgency," the sense that we need things done immediately, if not sooner. A recent *Time* [August 17, 1998] ad asks "Remember what it was like before there was overnight mail, voice mail, and e-mail? You actually had time to think." The ad, of course, does not contend that anybody actually *did* think, but at least there was time for it. Now, we rush to meet the deadlines artificially imposed by the speed we have created. People fax us a complex question at ten o'clock and call for the answer at 10:30. This is what one critic calls "reverse adaptation," a process in which *we* are compelled to adapt to tools we originally adopted for specific purposes. Reverse adaptation is the situation in which the tail wags the dog. It is when inventions become the mother of necessity. It is increasingly what we might call the "fax of life"—f-a-x, of course.

These issues are important in education too. Two of the attractions of computers, for example, are speed and efficiency. Computer advertising, which is omnipresent in American society, always hypes the newest and fastest computer chips. But what exactly are the benefits of speed and efficiency, and for whom? How will the presumption of speed affect our task of teaching students to read slow? What does it mean to read *Walden* efficiently? Will students take hypertexts to heart in the ways that some of us have taken books to heart? Is a bookmark in our computer files the same as a favorite book on the shelf at home? Even if speed and efficiency are compatible with the acquisition of knowledge, how are they related to the development of wisdom?

Fourth, as computers enter the workplace, they help to redefine our definitions of work, and especially of good work—a topic worth considering any day. Surveys of future job availability tell us that people who do data entry and systems analysis and information technology will be increasingly employed in the future. And many of us begin to believe that good work consists of eight hours keyboarding at a workstation in a cubicle culture. Americans who have objected to the alienation of the industrial assembly line have accepted the new assembly lines of word processing and data entry and coding. Although computers can complement good work—IBM was honored recently for being one of the best places to work in the country—some computer workplaces are not a good fit for human beings.

To some extent, this is because computers encourage a peculiar

sense of conversation. We have chat rooms online, but not in many of our own homes. In most American middle-class homes, the family room, for example, is not the place where the family *chats*, but the place where the family listens to the *chatter* of TV. Computers make it easier to have more conversations with people on the other side of the world, but they take time that could be devoted to conversations on the other side of the room. The pleasures (or the compulsions) of email mean that even I often email the person in the office next door. Computers facilitate communications worldwide, but make it no more likely that we will have anything intelligent to say.

More broadly, sitting in front of computer screens all day also affects the way we live (and the ways we no longer live) in the world. This cultural screening affects us in a variety of ways. Until the faculty at St. Olaf all got computers a few years ago, we used to gather at each other's desks, or in the hallways. We used to go for coffee. Sometimes we still do. But not as much. We have new tools for working. But they are not what Ivan Illich calls "tools for conviviality," tools that call us into conversation and community. They are not like a porch, or a deck of cards, or a cup of coffee. They are efficient at the tasks we buy them for, but they can also be efficient at eroding what sociologist Robert Putnam calls "social capital," the care and concern for other people and public issues that come from face-to-face conversations (See Illich; Putnam).

Americans also like computers because they are fast, efficient and accurate, and these characteristics enhance productivity. But what is productivity for? What does *it* produce? Computers do make individuals more productive, but they do not necessarily make organizations more productive. The individual who can use a computer can do many things more efficiently with it than without it. But the labor saved by computers is often offset by the other people's labor involved in manufacturing the machine, research and design, acquisition, training, tech support, software, upgrades, security, and medical complications. And the labor saved by computers does not mean we perform less labor; we simply do more labor more quickly for more hours. Sometimes, too, we do less productive labor. It used to be that writers were mainly interested in the clear *expression* of their ideas. With computers, they can now spend as much time (or more) on the effective *presentation* of ideas. Instead of revising the prose, they often fiddle with fonts and formats. As a result, it sometimes feels like I read more essays that *look* good than really *are* good.

Even when we are more productive—and we are—we seem con-

fused about the purposes of productivity. Since 1948, the productivity of American workers has doubled, which means that we have had the choice to work less or to consume more. We could have chosen the four-hour day, the 20-hour week, the six-month vacation, or a sabbatical every other year. Instead, we have chosen to consume twice as much, with all of the ecological consequences of that consumption. Is that a productive result of productivity?

Seventh, Americans like computers because they save time in multifarious ways. Computers are called a labor-saving device, but we are, on the average, working longer hours since computers were added to the workplace. How does that compute? Were we trying to save our time to work more? Work, it seems, expands to fill the time available, because our employers downsize the workforce and upsize the work that each computer-assisted individual is supposed to do. People in computer ads are *having* the time of their lives, but real people using computers are often *spending* the time of their lives. We are doing work more efficiently, but we are also spending time earning money to buy new hardware and software, spending time learning each new system, spending time calling tech support, spending time reading spam and other email, spending time killing time in chat rooms, or mastering the intricacies of Minesweeper or Tetris or Doom.

We conventionally think of time-saving devices like computers as a good thing, but E.F. Schumacher (author of *Small Is Beautiful*) offers as his first law of economics that "the amount of real leisure a society enjoys tends to be in inverse proportion to the amount of labor-saving machinery it employs" (Durning 47). When the English first encountered Indians in New England, they considered them lazy because they worked, as most hunter-gatherers do, only fifteen or twenty hours a week providing for themselves, with the rest of the time spent in leisure, in community festivals, etc. (Cronon 47). This is what Marshall Sahlins calls "Zen affluence," having much by wanting little. But we are the descendants of the English, because we allot a great proportion of our time to work, and very little to socializing or social issues (Sahlins 1-2).

Eighth, for many of our students, computers are mainly associated with fun and games. They have grown up with Nintendo and computers, and they are used to the eye candy and instantaneous satisfactions of these games. It may be good that students report that computer-assisted courses are "fun," but it also may be problematic. In his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, media critic Neil Postman contends that entertainment values are increasingly coming to dominate, not just American entertainment, but educa-

tion, religion, and politics too. I do not want to embrace the Spinach Principle of Education (if it tastes bad, it must be good for you), but I also does not want to embrace the reverse (if it tastes good, it is good). It is clearly not the case that education needs to be boring, but the mere fact that classes are fun is not enough to justify them (See Postman 1985).

Ninth, the aura of new technologies can sometimes cause us to despise and discard older—but perfectly functional—ways of doing things. It is important to teach our colleagues and our administrators about the value of intentional mediations in the classroom. But it is also important not to de-value the work of our colleagues who are *not* teaching with new technologies. Too often in higher education, we adopt the culture's perspectives on progress and planned obsolescence, and condemn perfectly good topics and pedagogies with the all-American epithet "old-fashioned." If Socrates were teaching at an American university today, he would have a hard time getting tenure, but he would still be doing good work with our students. We need to make sure that all the hype about hyperlinks does not overshadow the other conversations—personal, public, virtual, virtuous—that are also at the heart of higher education

In this section, I do not mean to suggest that the application of new technologies is inevitably injurious, but it is inevitably problematic, as all pedagogy is. Intelligent and intentional applications of media can avert most of these problems—in specific situations. But even when our applications of technology achieve exactly the results we desire, they have probably achieved other results that we had not even contemplated. That is exactly why we need collections of essays like these—to narrow the gap between intentional and unintentional media.

IV. Conclusion: Thinking Again, One Last Time

Let me be clear. I am not opposed to computers: I composed this essay on a computer, I taught a course on the Mall of America using the Web; and I am planning to use WebCT in a course in the fall. I am decidedly not opposed to technology. But in a society of technophiliacs, any questioning of technology can raise questions about a person's commitments. I am committed first and foremost to the humanization of human beings, and to any technologies that are appropriate to that goal. Computers can help us with that task, as so many of the essays in this collection demonstrate. But we need to keep these texts, and the texts of our classes, within the

contexts of American culture. We need to remember that computers are a fact of life, but also a "dense fact" of American Studies, so we need to maintain the reflexivity of our "connecting mind" as we venture into the new world of intentional media. These essays are a great beginning. I look forward to annual editions of this project.

Notes

[1]For an account of my own failures, see James J. Farrell, "Mall of America: America of the Mall," *Radical Teacher 55 (1995):29-33.*

[2]I am consciously treating the term "American Studies" as both singular and plural, because it captures the creative tensions of the field(s). This may be grammatically confusing, but confusion itself comes from Latin roots meaning "a flowing together," which is exactly the image I hope this singularly plural construction conveys.

[3]For a good history of this tradition, see Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* and also George Lipsitz's "'Sent For You Yesterday: Here You Come Today': American Studies Scholarship and the New Social Movements."

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