Thinking About Thinking About the New Media

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I do not pretend to be an expert on the uses of "new" and not so new media. I know nothing about programming a computer and talk to the techies at my Internet service provider only when it cannot be avoided; and then I sweat with each change they tell me to commit. I could (in a pinch) code material in HTML, and have occasionally done so, but I am sure that doing such work is one of the reasons god made undergraduates. Actually, once I got reasonably good computers (with more memory than I will ever use) set up at my office and at home I have resisted much further innovation; why jeopardize a good thing?

On the other hand, I have regularly used online discussion groups for five or six years now, have required my students to investigate Web-based materials for an American Indian literature assignment, and on rare occasions use presentational programs (such as Image Access) to offer my classes helpful visuals. I can use a Mac machine so cleverly designed that I can spend much of the day writing this paper at the Parador pool on La Gomera and have sufficient power to continue on the ferry to Los Christianos. And like most American academics, email has, for better and for worse, become my primary medium of exchange. I even have a home page . . . so primitive that I have never shared its URL. In other words, like most of the contributors to this volume, I stand in some intermediate position: neither expert nor novice, trying to do the right thing but not always clear what that is, willing to innovate but not always—indeed, seldom—getting it quite right, and not sure whether on occasion I am creating more work for myself than help for my students.

That very intermediate situation is part of the charm and the value of this book. For this is not a collection of experts trying to get those of us shuffling along up to speed—though there are

expert opinions here, and very good ones at that. But most of the contributions represent the efforts of people trying and sometimes succeeding in the effort to apply new media to real classrooms, with all their contradictions, limits, and frustrations. And many of these essays read much the way I feel after a term: some things seem to have worked, others not, and about others still the jury remains out.

Why do it, then? Are there not frustrations and limits enough in the teaching game already? Why add a whole new set of complications? I want to offer three answers to such questions. The brief versions are: first, the new media are here and the question is how to use them well rather than have them use you badly; second, they can accomplish things that older media and traditional pedagogies cannot; and third, their use offers a personal satisfaction akin, at least for me, to what Ginsberg has described as "a sudden flash of the alchemy of the use of the ellipse, the catalog, the meter and the vibrating plane" ("Howl").

Some longer answers, beginning with the last, might run as follows: teaching is a funny occupation. It is not hard to get stale, especially when one is penned in to general education courses taken by students whose primary motivations have more to do with leaping, gracefully or otherwise, through hoops than with appreciating what you have so painstakingly sifted out over the years. Or so, at least, it can often seem. However that might be, as a teacher I find that what keeps me most alive are forms of learning. Sometimes that involves finding out things connected to my own field; sometimes what is involved is following "wherever the way opens," to use the Quaker saying. Getting hold of the technology, or at least bits and pieces of it, has, for me, been a kick. Sometimes a kick in the teeth, when things do not work out. But by and large, part of the fun has been learning a new skill, like figuring out how to run a mimeograph machine in the Friends of SNCC office in Washington back in 1965, managing a translation of Rimbaud in a course with Robert Lowell a decade before, and pasting up issues of *Radical Teacher* a decade later. I find that I discover what I do not know, and what I do, by trying to teach it, so for me, these efforts to apply newly-acquired skills are not only useful but very reinvigorating.

To be sure, what was at stake was not just learning a new skill. Translating might open wider possibilities for graduate work as well as for jobs—and it might impress Lowell. Running the Friends of SNCC mimeo machine had to do with lobbying Congress to pass civil rights legislation and raising money for the cause. And since

Radical Teacher was (and is) a journal devoted to translating social-ist and feminist politics into actual classroom practice, pasting up the articles properly, and copyediting them as well (a task I did for years after helping start the magazine), was a matter of significant intellectual and political weight for me. Learning is best accom-plished and most fulfilling, as Friere has suggested, when it fulfills real needs and not suppositious demands. One must, then, think of the needs, ours and our students', being met by technological innovation. Most of the cogent criticism of technology has had to do with issue of the interests being served in its deployments. Keeping foremost in our thinking about the new media, our and our students' needs as teachers and learners is therefore critical.

As to my second point, consider the ways in which *Radical Teacher*, a journal without any staff, is created. In the beginning, a quarter century or so back, we had it typeset, pasted in corrections after razoring out incorrect passages, and then pasted the whole down on pages marked to show where material went. No, Johnny, the dilosophaurus was extinct somewhat before that. I do not have to say what setting a magazine is like now. In my introductory American literature class I often did use what some might regard as an antediluvian technology, slides, in connection with two partic-ularly troublesome and, for many students, obscure kinds of litera-ture: that of the Native American oral tradition and that of high modernism. Students find the visuals helpful, for example, in see-ing why for the Zuni to maintain a balanced relationship with the earth was, literally, a matter of life and death, or how Pacific Northwest art can take strange and elaborate forms. Now I can use a program like Image Access to project visuals on my classroom screen: the images do not burn out, I can focus in on particular parts, enlarge others, present information along with the image, and in other ways develop a much richer and I think useful pre-sentational strategy. And I am a novice in this regard: I have resis-ted Power Point, today's flip charts, as a corporate intrusion.

Now these kinds of considerations may seem of lesser moment in deciding whether or not to use the new media in one's class-room. And it is probably true that these offer marginal gains, though in some 45 years of teaching, I have learned not to trivial-ize the marginal. Indeed, things that seem marginal may, in fact, be critical to the success of working with the new media. Take, for example, online discussion groups, which, as I say, I have used for many years now. I thought I knew much of what one had to do to make them work. And they can work, sometimes better than face to face discussion groups connected with the large (50 or more)

class I usually teach in American literature. I think, in fact, that they might bear out Alexander Astin's contention that students learn most of what they actually remember from their peers. Online groups lose spontaneity, to be sure, and what is communicated by gesture and body language, but they offer distinct gains. Not the least of them is encouraging students to write, especially to one another, which I think is one of my responsibilities. Additional virtues: reticent students can contribute in ways almost impossible for them otherwise, often comments are more considered than those which pop out in actual classrooms, and when discussions begin, they can be more sustained and substantive than those that often characterize small-group sections. But under what circumstances DO discussions actually begin, much less take off? When you are clear about that, please send me a special delivery letter.

I find myself baffled. Every term, I have five or six such online discussion groups. Almost every term, one of the groups, sometimes two, displays wonderful contributions and often a number of interesting sustained exchanges. Every term, one of the groups is a sure-fire soperific: I read it to cure insomnia. Others are in between. Why? It's leadership, it's chemistry, it's happy (or grim) accident, it is the role I play (daddy looking over your shoulder, confirming, ignoring, inspiring, challenging—none of the above), it is *je ne sais quoi*. I have used a variety of strategies: most recently I insisted that students do two posts for each class in the 14-week semester, one a response to one of the texts they were assigned, the other a response to another student's comment or to the class itself. The students this last term did the posts religiously, and I have to say that some of them were individually quite wonderful. BUT, there were (as I recall) only two or three *discussions* during the entire term among all the groups, and I had over 1300 posts to read, ranging from brief paragraphs to a page or more. Something, in short, fell out of the mix that defeated the goal: did I pay insufficient attention? Perhaps, for I found the sheer volume overwhelming and other projects beckoned. Did I somehow insist too strongly on posts, as distinct from discussions? Might it have been better to have taken on undergraduate TAs to provide leadership to the online groups and regularly to offer their own interactive responses? That may work well but I do not honestly know. What I do know is that if I decide in the future to employ TAs, I will have to work with them so that they can cope with the contingencies of this new electronic environment.

The point of this anecdote is to underline what a number of these essays show: first, that the new media do not offer forms of escape

from the creative difficulties of teaching. The grounds upon which our resourcefulness is played out shift significantly when we use a device like the online discussion group, but the problems of teaching are not dispelled; they are changed. And second, one needs to plan more carefully than I did, trying more systematically to anticipate unexpected results, like students actually *doing* everything you ask of them, or their not interacting in the ways you would have preferred, or their need to be more comfortable than many of them—and us—prove to be in using the new media. The consequences of bad planning or just muddling along seem to me more extreme on this new terrain than on grounds more familiar. To say it another way: one cannot assume real computer literacy, much less ease, among one's students any more than would among one's colleagues. Therefore, one must plan for every contingency, even when everything seems obvious.

Still, we are not at the heart of the matter. The Internet, particularly the World Wide Web, and certain great CD's provide an unprecedented ease in accessing huge amounts of information, images, and other materials. These new media enable us, in ways that were functionally much more difficult before, to provide students with opportunities to be active learners and independent researchers, as a number of these essays wonderfully document. Further, the hypertext environment allows students, both in conceptualization and in presentation, to depart from the artificiality of linear modes of thinking and to bring together in electronic environments, as we actually do in our heads, multiply-linked and diversely-connected elements. There is no question in my mind that hyperlinked Web projects *can* accomplish learning goals significantly different and of greater conceptual validity than those available through the traditional research paper and similar forms. The hyperlinked project does not just offer richer, more vivid and interesting ways of conceiving and presenting material, but it demands significant differences in conceptual framework having to do with how human beings connect and process information and ideas.

The web *can* accomplish such important learning goals. But the question is, will it; or, more accurately, under what particular circumstances will it do so? It is something of a cliché to complain about the quality of information available on miscellaneous Web sites, wherein enthusiasm for a subject can replace accuracy. To be sure, part of our teaching thus needs to become working with students so that they have the wherewithal to evaluate what they find. But that is, in fact, easier said than done, partly because it can seri-

ously divert one from the already-crowded subject matter of, say, an American Studies course, partly because it is harder to apply certain principles of evaluation than simply to identify them. Of course, the same problems have always existed with respect to other sources students use, but obviously materials in a library have been vetted by an entire set of interlocked industries, like publishing, the academy, the review system based in journals, and libraries themselves. Such a system is only being erected online, so it may be some time before students can rely on the highest degree of accuracy, often in the smaller details dear to any good scholar's heart. The problem is not trivial, however, nor is it diminishing over time, since so much more miscellaneous material is being committed to electronic form. In time, I suspect, questions of electronic validity will have to be dealt with, along with other matters of new media literacy, in courses designed for such specific purposes instead of within those committed to other subject matters.

But the problem of accuracy is, I think, of less serious moment than a more fundamental difficulty, which has to do with our own limitations, many of us, as people trained in linear modes of organization, research, and presentation. Few things are more difficult, I suspect, than renegotiating the paths that have led us as teachers and scholars to the intellectual strategies we regularly deploy in our own work and in our classrooms. It is right up there in difficulty with psychotherapy because so much of what we are has to do with how we work. The successful use of the fullest range of the new media, and particularly its hypertextual capabilities will, I suspect, remain a considerable challenge. Which is why so many of these essays offer, at once, a summons and an inspiration.