Beware of Geeks Bearing Gifts

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What is most striking to me about this selection of essays is the diversity of educational situations and pedagogical goals they reflect. I take this to be reflective of American higher education in general, rather than something peculiar to American Studies and the related fields represented here. Of course one explanation for the heterogeneity of these courses is the fact that they represent such a wide range of disciplines (or interdisciplinary enterprises) including English, history, women's studies, and Asian American Studies, as well as American Studies itself. Leaving aside the essay about high school, the courses described range from ones taught at community colleges to major research universities, from open admissions public institutions to elite private ones. My suspicion is that comparing these courses is a case of not just apples and oranges, but of a whole basket of different kinds of fruit. If it remains true that individual institutions continue to teach knowledge organized in terms of trans-institutional disciplines, these essays suggest that the character of the knowledge and the learning differs radically depending on the site. Because the chief role of higher education in America is credentialling—and not the teaching of particular skills, information, or ideas—there is little reason to expect that the B.A. will mean the same thing from institution to institution. It would be reactionary to insist that it should, but these conditions make it impossible to evaluate the group courses presented in these essays on the same scale.

But the differences in the goals of the courses under discussion are not entirely—if even mainly—explicable in terms of institutional location. One might expect that an elite institution like Dartmouth would produce courses with the most traditionally disciplinary goals, but Ivy Schweitzer's women's studies course is among the most overtly political of those presented here.

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Schweitzer asserts, for example, that "Students, like teachers, have to *unlearn* [the] false separation that dichotomizes their experiences and tells them—to take a sensational example—that marital rape is a 'private' activity inappropriately dealt with by the courts . . . " (351, emphasis in original). Conversely, Tracey M. Weis of Millersville University (formerly Millersville State Teacher's College) offers a course with the most disciplinary goals. She requires "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, [she] strive[s] 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" (250, emphasis in original). Weis's course also has a political agenda, one assumes, since the title of her essay is "Using Electronic Discussions to Interpret and Construct Narratives of Women's Activism," but the course goals are ones that any historian might share. Schweitzer's course reflects the activist orientation of women's studies, the knowledge formation (discipline? interdiscipline? movement?) to which it belongs. What defines the course as undisciplinary is its lack of emphasis on the production of knowledge.

Schweitzer's essay also illustrates one extreme of another axis on which these courses might be arranged. Her course is offered as much to realize a particular pedagogy, as it is to teach any particular content. Thus, her course is designed to "actualize some of the basic goals of feminism and feminist pedagogy. . . . Web assistance . . . materially augmented the empowerment of student voices, and freed them from the sometimes-inhibiting presence of authority figures. . . . [C]reating the spaces in which people can find their voices is one of the major goals of feminism and feminist pedagogy" (349). In other words, the goal is for students to interact in the course in a particular way, rather than for them to learn how to do women's studies. Other courses that share this orientation include those of Robbins and Pullen, and Ewell, who also seek to implement feminist pedagogy, and of Butler, who chose the themes of her course, "Race and Gender in American Culture" because they related to her pedagogy. These contributors to a greater or lesser extent make pedagogy not a means but an end, and they are mainly interested in the web as tool for reaching that end. Other contributors take both pedagogy in general and the web in particular as a means to teach students something else: concepts, informa-

tion, skills. Clearly, Weis fits in this camp, as do de Jesús, Bryant, McClymer, and McGuire. This more traditional conception of pedagogy puts the web and other new media to a different sort of test, asking not whether it merely changes student-teacher dynamics, but whether it actually enhances students' learning.

The degree to which the web figures in the courses described also varies considerably. In the majority of the courses, the web is used to supplement the traditional classroom. Two of the courses, however, were taught exclusively online. Barbara Ewell's courses, "Southern Literature" and "Southern Women Writers" were offered online to part-time adult students. Susan Butler's "Race and Gender in American Culture" was also intended for nontraditional students. One advantage that the online course clearly has for these students is ease of access, the same advantage that correspondence courses have had. Since the Internet provides the possibility of much more frequent exchange than does snail mail, online courses must be regarded as superior to these. What is less clear is whether online courses are equal to, much less better than, classroom courses. Ewell claims that "the Internet seems an exemplary space for decentering education, for creating learning communities," (100) and her citing of feminist critiques of technology in general rings hollow as a caveat. Ewell claims that her experience with online teaching showed that "Electronic media are in the end simply tools that we can use to enhance our teaching. The experience and wisdom of the instructor, not only in providing information but in structuring ways to assimilate it, are still entirely necessary" (111). This position is certainly correct, but Ewell's essay doesn't show why. While the essay does reflect on the differences between on-line and classroom courses, it leaves one with the impression that the Web is an adequate substitute for the classroom. Thus, I'm not convinced by her assertion that "The administrators' dreams (and teachers' fears) that the Internet will do away with instructors are as illusory as the notion that printed books would destroy all authority" (111-12). It is true that online courses like the ones Ewell describes require a live teacher to interact with the students. But if the course materials can be designed by a senior faculty member—or perhaps purchased rather created in house—then one can easily imagine adjuncts being hired for miniscule compensation to provide such interaction. We faculty must insist that universities call online courses what they really are: an inferior alternative to classroom courses.

As a whole, the essays in this issue do not help to make this case. The repeated assertion that the Internet is the ideal space in which

to practice the pedagogy of empowerment suggests precisely the opposite. Several essays cite the work of the influential radical pedagogue, Paulo Freire, whose work critiques what he calls the "banking model" of education wherein the teacher deposits information into the student. It is hard to disagree with the inadequacy of this model, and in fact, almost no one does. In the humanities, discussion-based classes, which assume a dialogic model, have been the norm since at least the 1960s. Freire's "banking model" is thus a straw man. But by identifying it with the traditional classroom, contributors to this collection discredit the classroom as a learning environment. It is ironic that the web would be cited mainly for its promotion of dialogue, since the web itself is nothing more than an information bank. A web site is a place where someone—and in the case of educational web sites, that someone is almost always a teacher—has deposited information. The student's job is to extract the information from the site instead of (or in addition to) extracting it from printed materials or lectures. The web may democractize access to information, but it doesn't promote dialogue.

Older electronic technologies such as email and list-serves are means by which dialogue can take place. But are they better spaces for dialogue than the seminar table or the even the traditionally organized classroom? Schweitzer claims that "There are enormous advantages from a feminist perspective to doing away with the traditional, physical classroom as the privileged site of academic instruction where a masculine ethos has, for a long time, held sway" (353). The idea is that men, as linguists like Deborah Tannen have shown, typically dominate arenas of physical conversation such as the classroom, but electronic media allow all people to interact as equals. Having taught using email and electronic bulletin boards and having a great deal of experience with list-serves, I find this claim suspect. Men dominate these spaces just as much, if not more, than they do face-to-face conversations. But even if we grant that some women and other disempowered students find it easier to contribute to discussions in cyberspace, is it a good thing to encourage these contributions at the expense of encouraging participation in classroom conversations? Since it is unlikely that electronic communication will completely replace physical human interfaces, shouldn't we be teaching students how to have power in those settings?

I'm not sure exactly what Schweitzer means by "masculine ethos," but I suspect it involves hierarchy and competition. Hierarchy will always exist in any space, physical or electronic,

where there is a teacher. Schweitzer herself admits that she does "not want to give away entirely the authority of expertise, experience, or evaluation of students" (352). The reality is that teaching presumes at least a temporary imbalance of power, one where the student—in higher education, of her own free will—grants authority to the teacher for the purpose of obtaining knowledge in return. The teacher's goal is not to permanently dominate the students, but to give them the ability to have authority in the knowledge domain of course. Such authority presumes that not all opinions are equal and that the intellectual world is structured by differences in the legitimacy of arguments. Intellectual competition is thus the rule. A feminist utopia might lack competition, but our students are unlikely to experience that world. Feminists have to compete, like everyone else, to make their ideas legitimate. The nurturing classroom may help prepare students for such competition, but unless students also experience the challenge of intellectual engagement, they will find themselves at a disadvantage in the less nurturing environments they will face outside of the academy. In a society where universities increasingly see their mission as keeping their student-customers satisfied, classrooms where students' ideas are tested are, I fear, increasingly rare.

Even if we grant that creating a nurturing pedagogical community is at least sometimes a worthy goal, it is not clear that cyberspace is likely to promote the development of such a community. A recent joke—circulated by email, of course—says that it is a sign that you have had too much of the 1990s when "You chat several times a day with a stranger from South Africa, but you haven't spoken to your next door neighbor yet this year." A widely publicized study by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University suggested that people who spent a great deal of time online tended to become depressed (Kraut et al). Other research shows that when people attempt collaboration by email alone, they are much less effective than those who have face-to-face interactions or even telephone contact (Galegher). This evidence suggests that electronic communication can augment face-to-face interaction, but that it should not replace it. There is a danger that in Internet intensive courses with traditional classroom meetings the inferior electronic conversational currency will drive out the superior currency of face-to-face interaction. If courses are to foster communities, they must do so in real space.

If the Internet may not be the best way to implement a dialogic pedagogy, it is even more suspect as an environment for disciplinary training. Mary McGuire's essay is especially valuable because

it raises this question reflectively while the other contributions seem simply to exemplify the problem. McGuire challenges some of the claims for the "democratizing" effects of the Internet by noting the vast differences in access to technology among different institutions. But where she is most impressive is in discussing the problem of assessing online information. The essay argues that students in her history courses at the University of Michigan were "able to grapple with the assessment of sources of knowledge" (340). Assessment of sources is a task which students in history, literature, and allied fields must learn. The Web's vast variety of sources would seem to make it an especially good environment in which to learn this task. McGuire's experience suggests that, while many students came to recognize the problem and some developed strategies for solving it, "the very accessibility of the Internet source too often led to an uncritical acceptance or rejection of the information based purely on the student's personal position on the topic" (340). Moreover, she notes that one way students came to assess sources was to privilege those on the Internet over all others, pointing to "one of the uglier undersides of using the Internet as a source of knowledge for a generation almost instinctively suspicious of scholarship and the academy. The Internet's very accessibility legitimizes it in ways that scholarship's inaccessibility prevents" (341-42). Earlier in the essay, however, McGuire seems to accept this state of affairs, when she acknowledges that she came to feel that the academic articles she had assigned in addition to the Internet were unnecessary. The lesson here, I think, is that trying to entertain students often distracts both them and their teachers from difficult but important intellectual tasks. When the medium becomes the message, other messages get lost.

A number of essays regard the diversity of sources and perspectives on the Web as its most important advantage. Chris Lewis, for example, describes the goal of his teaching as "to awaken students to the fact that traditional history books are wholly inadequate and incomplete. The World Wide Web is a perfect example-as-opposite for this because it instantly makes available an endless array of multiple, competing perspectives on American culture and society" (309-10). There are two issues raised by this statement. The first is whether a critique of a disciplinary tradition is a useful goal for an introductory course. In the early days of Carnegie Mellon University's theory-based English curriculum, we had an introductory literature course that aimed to question the canon we had assumed our students took for granted. What we discovered was that most students had little or no sense that there was a canon.

Given our culture's general lack of historical knowledge, I can't imagine that his students have a much better sense of traditional history texts. Secondly, is it likely to be a successful strategy to present students with an "endless array" of perspectives, or, would it be more effective with beginning students, to limit competing perspectives to a more manageable number? William Perry's research suggests that most beginning university students are ill-equipped to deal with an unlimited multiplicity because their basic intellectual orientation is to assume that authorities have the right answers to most questions.

In light of this, one might assume that using several texts that present differing interpretations of events might be more effective. Lewis explains that he had tried a number of combinations of American history texts without finding any grouping that served his ends. When he started using the web, however, his "students soon discovered that the web links and resources that [he] provided for each class discussion more often than not provided better, more interesting, more stimulating material than the general course readers [he] was requiring" (313). Like McGuire, Lewis found that his students stopped reading the print materials, in his view proving "the power of the Web to interest students in the larger questions raised by my American Studies Introductory course" (314). But given the questions McGuire has raised, why should we assume that Lewis's beginning American Studies students were able to judge that the Web sources were better? That they like the Web better than they like textbooks tells us nothing about whether they come away with a better understanding of American culture or better critical thinking skills. Lewis asserts that they do, but he offers no evidence to support that claim.

While most contributors insist that the Internet serves mainly to free us from the bad old constraints of low-tech teaching and communication, McGuire observes that Web sites are both liberating and limiting. Because "Web sites are *intended* to be more graphics (and audio) intensive, as well as layered in linked pages" those elements are privileged over text (343). Far from being just another style of presentation, this limited use of written language has an effect on what is communicated. While pictures can communicate a great of deal of information in an instant, they are typically unable to present the subtle discriminations that are the substance of most academic work. The discipline of art history depends on slides and other reproductions, but the knowledge it produces is discursive. And if such a heavily visual field has required discourse, it is hard to imagine that the much more textual fields of

history and literature will not continue to do so. By depending heavily on the web for teaching, you deprive students of access to that discourse and to the kind of intellectual work it enables.

Another essay in the group provides a telling instance of the failure of the Internet to enable the careful distinctions that academics have traditionally tried to help their students learn to make. Ron Buckmire, Gabrielle Foreman, and Donna Maeda describe a student's "highly original webpaper that effectively used the visual possibilities of the web to reflect on how we as a nation assign meaning to language" (326). They call this student's use of visual links "particularly successful." The site is described as follows:

> Wendy writes that the Pledge of Allegiance boasts that we are "one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." She goes on to comment that this was "very ***true*** if you were a white **male** during the time the pledge was written. Everyone else who was living here [was] {sic} not included in the "all," {sic} for they, African-Americans, Native-Americans, and women were thought of as chattel, savages and subordinates." Wendy uses different fonts and colors to communicate the power inequalities she questions in her paper. Green is the color she assigns hypertext links which are, of course, underlined (as indicated in the above excerpt). Wendy deliberately makes "**male**" purple and larger than the other words in the sentence, for instance, as is "**true**" (which is green though not a link), a word she clearly wants her reader to question as a neutral concept that is larger than life in our received notion of American democracy. Wendy's links are purposefully shocking. When one clicks on "white" an image of Adolph Hitler's disembodied head appears on a black background with the linguistic marker Hitler in large letters at the foot of the photo. When one clicks on "male" the very same image of Hitler appears again. (326-27)

I have quoted at such length so as to preclude the complaint that I have represented the site unfairly. The basic historical point about the Pledge is, of course, correct as far as it goes. One would want to add, however, that white working class men did not have full access to liberty and justice, and that the Pledge was used in schools mainly to Americanize white working class immigrants.

The web site doesn't explain anything about the history of the pledge, however. Rather, its links equate both men and whites with Hitler. This is not critical thinking; indeed, it is only by courtesy that we can call it thinking at all. Imagine if a student with a right-wing political agenda had constructed a site in which the word "black" was linked to an image of Sambo, or the word "woman" to the image of a prostitute. Such links would surely be criticized (correctly) by these teachers as racist and sexist, yet they don't seem to be able to see that this site commits the same kind of intellectual error of gross stereotyping. Given this webpaper's lack of subtlety, it is hard to imagine that the instructors' gloss on the student's highlighting of the word "true" is correct. The point is that we don't know because the student did not present an argument, something which web sites, unlike papers, do not typically feature. The same is true for the Hitler links, which could perhaps have been explained and justified discursively. As they stand, they simply seem to express the student's ignorance. Moreover, this student's work is not something merely submitted for a teacher's reading and judgment; it is published for anyone to see. The existence of this site calls into question the wisdom of encouraging beginning students to publish their work even if it helps to encourage their interest in producing it. Students should not be forced to have their mistakes made available to the general public.

Students can be expected to make mistakes, which is why we faculty are employed to teach them. What is shocking about the Buckmire, Foreman, and Maeda essay is what they are willing to accept as "successful" work. This returns us to the issue I raised at the start of this response: the vast differences in undergraduate education in the United States. While Buckmire, Foreman, and Maeda claim that one goal of their assignments was "to strengthen writing and thinking about 'justice,'" (321) their essay presents no evidence to show that the assignments achieved this; on the contrary, it strongly suggests they did not. These teachers seem far more interested in developing Internet skills than in developing critical thinking. Other essays offer equally suspect goals for college courses. For Kathleen Walsh, "the prime pedagogical objective" of her use of the internet to connect her class in Oregon to one in Brooklyn "was that students begin to see that there is more than one way ('our' way) of looking at these matters" (172). The objective itself is important, but it is intellectually minimal. Perhaps Walsh simply failed to name the other objectives of her African American literature course, but as it is presented to us, the course seems mainly designed to demonstrate the fact of cultural diversi-

ty. Should that be sufficient for a course that carries college credit?

As a whole, the group of essays presented here suggest that the internet is as much a threat as it is a benefit to college teaching. At a minimum, it distracts students and teachers from the traditional content of undergraduate education, the skills of critical reading, writing, and thinking. In the worst case scenario, the Web may come to displace large numbers of full-time tenure track faculty, as "distance learning" is offered to non-elite students as a cost-saving measure. The web can be a useful tool, but only if it is used to augment discursively centered teaching. One of its greatest benefits is easier access to published texts, a feature neglected by most of the contributors here. Instead of telling students that finding a Web site is just as good as reading an article, we need to insist that students learn to read arguments. Prose enables thinking that is disabled by pictures. Moreover, I find no evidence to support the article of faith, widespread in these essays, that the Internet can democratize the classroom, much less society. Far from Schweitzer's claim that "the web has the capacity not merely to challenge, but to change the structures of power in the classroom and, perhaps, the world at large" (349), the reality is that the Web reflects perfectly the social status quo. As a technology deployed mainly in the service of the market, its overall impact is to encourage consumption and passivity, not resistance or critical analysis.

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