Navigating the Net: Conversion, Conversation and Substantive Learning

Kimberly Wallace-Sanders

I read these essays with the direct intention of discovering some fundamental ways to incorporate new media into my courses in Women's Studies, African American Studies and American Studies. The more I read about virtual communities, extended electronic discussions, class web sites and web based assignments, the more I became aware of my own trepidation about mixing technology and pedagogy. Like many of the authors included in this volume, over the past three years I participated in several workshops designed specifically to introduce faculty to multi-media. I was part of the first faculty group at Spelman College to work on a "Multi-Media Faculty Development" grant funded by the Mellon Foundation. Later, I participated in one of the Crossroads Project workshops for faculty at Georgetown University. I learned how to design a web page, create a PowerPoint presentation, scan photographs and pieces of colorful cloth and I learned how to do some very complex searches on the Internet.

To date, I do not have a personal or professional website; I have never mounted a syllabus online and I don't use PowerPoint in my classroom. I am part of a growing sub culture of faculty whose enthusiasm for new media continues to be tempered by fear; we are excited about the possibilities but we don't know where or how to begin. I am relieved to say that several of the essays in *Intentional Media* provide an excellent remedy for what ails us. These are authentic case studies of classroom experiments using computer-enhanced curriculum in American Studies. This essay outlines my reflections about the potential of these approaches to advance the values and goals of progressive pedagogues in interdisciplinary studies.

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

Conversion and Conversation

> It became clear to me . . . when I suddenly found it difficult to feel a sense of shared community with a large group people, many of whom I knew, who shared some of my long term interests. They were not on the Net, you see. These are people who make their lives with ideas, and yet their primary perception of the Net was negative: they didn't see it as a tool they could use to spread information or counter misinformation, or interact with like minded others. Instead they saw it as a new danger. And I reacted as any typical Nethead might-protective instincts to the fore, along with a sort of exasperated alienation . . . .
> Wendy Grossman, *Net.Wars* (2)

Four years ago, in a classic fit of Internet-phobia, I taped a cartoon of a bumper sticker on my office door that read, "Honk if you won't go anywhere on the Information Superhighway." At that time I was teaching at Spelman College where I had to leave my office and go upstairs to the Computer Lab in the Writing Center if I wanted to do email. This was a minor inconvenience, but a vast improvement over the previous year when I had to go to another building on the other side of campus in order to access my email. I remember that there were only two or three people with whom I corresponded by email at that time, so there were many days that I was disappointed to find that I had no email at all. Now, the daily deluge of email makes me nostalgic about those early days of sporadic correspondence. Back then, if I wanted to conduct a search on the Internet I would have to visit the library at one of the large research institutions across town. The great irony here was that I would have to actually get into my car and drive to get to the information superhighway that I claimed I refused to travel upon.

Like most of the authors represented in this volume, my conversion from ignoring the World Wide Web to regularly navigating the net was the result of exploring new pedagogical possibilities. Three years ago, I was teaching a Women's Studies course on nineteenth-century representations of African American women and I wanted my students to learn to combine feminist theory with primary materials. As part of this project, the college archivist (Renee McKinney) gave me a copy of a Library of Congress exhibition catalog called African American Mosaic (1993). We talked about how to make the best use of primary materials in the classroom and she helped

me to construct a draft framework for evaluating the exhibition from a feminist perspective. Ms. McKinney handed me the catalog and said casually, "they've put part of the catalog on the web, you can access it through their site." She was kind enough to ignore my blank stare as she wrote the URL down on a piece of paper and handed it to me. This action produced another blank stare. Our campus had just recently become "net-ready" but we still had to go to the Computer Lab in the Writing center to use the Internet. Ms. McKinney helped me to make my initial venture on the Internet and within a matter of minutes I was staring, in awe, at a screen full of selected visual and print material from the African American Mosaic exhibition. For American Studies scholars like myself who are unreasonably partial to anything that combines text and visual materials in a manner that encourages critical thinking, the Net is seductive in a way that is difficult to resist.

As I scrolled through that site, I was so excited that I could hardly sit still. Even though I still had the actual catalog with me, I spent an hour reviewing that site and taking notes on how I could use it in my class. The greater irony here is that an archivist, one who insisted she was dedicated to preserving primary materials, "by any means necessary," had introduced me to the ephemeral world of cyberspace. Although I was not able to implement a web-based assignment for my class that year, I thought my conversion to "Net-head" was complete. But as the authors in this volume make clear, new media conversion is a process, not an event. In this sense, my learning has followed John McClymer's eloquent observation about the experience of learning in general: "Learning . . . is recursive. You make several attempts, study the out comes, make adjustments, examine those results, and so on. Often you wind up going back to some early step, the only you thought you already knew inside and out, and start over. The process constantly loops back upon itself" (217).

I learned a great deal from the authors here who candidly shared conversion experiences. Mary McGuire's essay actually begins with her admission that, "In the winter of 1996, I made the quantum leap from graduate student to lecturer and from computer idiot to computer geek" (333). In addition to being converted or transformed from "computer idiot to computer geek", these narratives convey various experiences of being converted from one state of mind to another. Through their classroom experiments, they move from naive assumptions to profound understandings about how PowerPoint, email, listservs and virtual communities can be used most effectively to teach American History and Culture.

The conversion from one state of mind to another usually entails asking questions in a different way. Instead of asking: who in their right mind would further complicate the overwhelming of task of teaching - of teaching interdisciplinary courses, from a feminist and global perspective — with computers? The authors ask more multi-layered and interesting questions about how information technologies can "*facilitate* organization, communication, and collaborative production to enhance the classroom learning experience" (Benmayor 178). Mary McGuire grapples with the deceptively simple question that is at the heart of all of these essays : "Am I doing anything that changes qualitatively the learning experience of my students for the better? Can we really consider the Internet as a source of knowledge valuable in the college classroom"(335)? McGuire also takes up the issue that I faced at Spelman:

> How can you ask a student to do an assignment on-line with on campus computing facilities are inadequate and dial in access is slow and difficult to connect. How do you address the needs of the nontraditional students who has never used a computer . . . It is important to recognize that, far from democratizing knowledge the Internet may simply be reasserting and recreating the boundaries of knowledge, but on slightly different terms. (337)

Sarah Robbins and Ann Pullen make a more direct connection between the questions they asked of themselves as teachers and their goals with using technology in the classroom. "We saw ourselves teaching *with* technologies rather than *through* them, so that we neglected in pre-planning and during much of our teaching to ask ourselves hard questions about how the technologies we could be employing should/would change the ways in which our students the objects of study in the course as well as their own processes of learning" (116). I was delighted with their model of a feminist, computer enhanced "conversazione", clearly designed as an informal yet challenging site of collaborative teaching and learning. Both their underlying belief that models of learning are evolutionary and that the best models provide a basis that can be continually updated, and their dedication to "collaborative teaching and learning that is technologically enhanced," provide an excellent model for twenty-first century education.

In hindsight, I realize that my own experience with attempting to use the African American Mosaic site in the classroom would prob-

ably not have been successful. However, I would have directly benefited from Robbins and Pullen's description of a "Site Visit Assignment" that appears on their syllabus. They ask incisive questions about how the students findings from a site visit are connected to what is studied in class. More specifically, they ask, "What strengths and weakness did you perceive in the site you visited, in terms of it serving as an accessible and useful source of information about Women's work? What changes might you make in the site to make it 'work' better as a source of knowledge about Women's work"(134)? One of the real successes of this case study as the impulse to place new media on a historical continuum with other "technologies."

This material complements the document by Randy Bass called "Culture and History as Electronic Text: A Lexicon of Critical Questions" which I read during the Crossroads Workshop. Here, Bass offers a lexicon of critical questions for analyzing cultural material on the Web. The lexicon suggests a list of significant questions about electronic texts, for example: What audience(s) does the site address? How does the site construct its authority and authorial presence? How are the primary historical and cultural tests render electronically?" These questions are invaluable for designing a critical framework for implementing web-based assignments.

Intentionally Learning about Teaching

"I do not want to insist that somehow technology provides the key we have lacked to unlock our students' minds. I do want to insist however, that it has enabled me to rethink what I am doing as a scholar and a teacher" (McGuire 336). I'm always eager to hear someone else's thoughts on teaching. Each September I find myself asking the kinds of questions about teaching interdisciplinary studies that are endemic to the field itself. I have constructed some very specific notions about feminist pedagogy, teaching with a global perspective, and taking a broad cross-cultural approach in using interdisciplinary theories and methods in the classroom. I talk with my tenured colleagues about teaching, I interview professors who have won teaching awards, and I read my course evaluations carefully for clues to on how I might improve my teaching. I spend hours with other junior faculty indulging our addiction to gourmet coffee and talking about teaching. We discuss how we teach, what we teach, why we keep teaching even after those disastrous classes when we skulk back to our offices convinced that

we are suited to any other type of work in the world: marine biology, podiatry, tree surgery, anything but teaching.

These essays are in the spirit of these real-time "java" sessions; they are packed with wisdom about the practical side of using technology to enhance our teaching of American Studies. William Bryant writes that using computer technology to teach American Studies is most productive when the technology can provide opportunities that are otherwise unavailable, such as when virtual communities provide viable opportunities for students to engage in dialogue about their own culture with students from other cultures. In Bryant's case, this was critical since the theme of "community" was central to his American Values course and virtual communities were a way to extend that theme into new territories. This was especially pertinent for me since I am now teaching a section of a similar course called American Identities at Emory University. The short-term goals of the American Identities course seem almost identical to Bryant's "American Values" course: "to initiate a critical dialogue on American culture." The American Identities course is one of two lynchpins in Emory's undergraduate Interdisciplinary Studies program, it is taught by both full time faculty members and graduate students in the Institute of Liberal Arts.

Bryant's move to introduce virtual communities from Hong Kong and the Netherlands into his U.S classroom is a provocative way to apply the meanings of the word "dialogue." By integrating his students "home grown perspectives" with those of international students, Bryant's hope was that moving the dialogue into an international, virtual context, would be an effective way for his students to forge conversations with students outside of the United States. Bryant writes, "incorporating internationalist perspectives into the study of U.S culture is a way to begin re- conceptualizing the boundaries of America." Here he expands upon the points made by Desmond and Dominquez in "Resituating American Studies in a Critical Internationalism" about creating new paradigms of "critical internationalism in American Studies by building upon internationalist perspectives."

Bryant's case study makes a persuasive argument for us to note the difference between a "cross-cultural approach" based on "comparing cultures using concepts and discourses from the United States" and actually bringing different perspectives into dialogue through the virtual classroom. His experiment in virtual communities raised the issue of boundaries, privilege and access in significant ways.

For example, my students come to understand that their partici-

pation in global culture, like the participation of their international colleagues rests upon English skills, education, and access to technologies, institutional and economic resources. Mary McGuire's use of instructional technology in her course of U.S. politics and citizenship also investigates how boundaries move in and out of focus in new ways. She elaborates on this point when she writes: "Do I still believe the Internet in the classroom will let me, with my students, cross those boundaries that traditionally keep the power and control and production of knowledge in my hands? Yes, I do. But it is important to recognize that, far from democratizing knowledge, the Internet may simply be reasserting and recreating boundaries of knowledge, but on slightly different terms" (338).

It is not easy to know how to negotiate the kinds of boundaries that appear and disappear with electronic discussion. I have been "flamed" by students who would never be as rude in person. My solution is to print the email out and insist on an extended conversation with the student. Sometimes I ask them to read the email to me and they are shocked by the difference in what they wrote and what they thought they wrote; invariably, the communication between us improves.

My students tell me that the Internet is the very first resource they use when writing papers and completing research projects. They are empathic about the advantages, "It's so fast and everything you could want to know is right there." Several of these essays point out that one of the perils of web based instructional technology is the conflation of "information" and "knowledge." As I re-assess my own fears about introducing more technology into my classroom I know that this dilemma is part of what keeps me on the "access road" of the Information Superhighway. One of my fears has been that it might be hazardous for me to combine the risks inherent with computer-based instructional tools with the sacred issue of "constructions of knowledge."

By listening in on these conversations about instructional technology, I am able to better evaluate and make an informed decision about the risks I'm willing to take in the future. I am not alone in my anxiety about what can happen when great expectations meet technological deficiency. Perhaps the most useful information I was able to gather from these essays is how using web-based instructional tools can supply a richer sense of how we think about and implement our courses. Teaching is never going to be a risk-free venture. Haven't we learned the most from the risks we were willing to take in our scholarship? I will certainly be more daring in my own classroom now that I have a better idea of how (and

why) its useful to take this particular journey on the Information Superhighway.

Works Cited

Bass, Randy. *Culture and History as Electronic Text: A Lexicon of Critical Questions*. Georgetown University. 1999. http://www.-georgetown.edu/bassr/511/lexicon.html.

Grossman, Wendy. *Net.W*ars. New York: New York UP, 1997.