Online Learning Environments: Previewing the Online *Agora*

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In the beginning (to coin a phrase), there first was space, and then—much later, of course—humans constructed time. Whether one believes in the Big Bang or 'Let there be light' (or both), the rapid formation and expansion of the universe resulted in space and then, because there were progressive states of space to measure and compare, in time (Hawking). Before the beginning, there was neither time nor space. Once there was space, there could be a before and an after, a now and a then, a continuum for us humans to measure, in ways we have constructed to measure it. Once we humans came onto the scene, we established a more or less natural relationship with space. Space exists independently of us; therefore we do not construct it (as a concept, that is—we do, of course, construct spaces); conversely, in most ways, it constructs us. We identify ourselves by where in space we live: American, Californian, Athenian, New Yorker, Southerner. We develop a sense of place, a sense of where we are, roots. We depend on space to such an extent that time seems somehow secondary to space. We use time to talk about what is happening in space. Before I lived in Washington, I lived in Michigan. When we get to the next town, we will stop for food. IRL (In Real Life), as the computer geeks say, space rules.

Online, however, we find the reverse to be true. Online, we have no space (or if we do, it's inside some tiny integrated chip, far too small, quickly moving, and indistinct to register in our consciousness—*far* too small to hold the interactions we seem to be having online.) But we do have time. Each e-mail message, threaded discussion entry, or chat room comment is stamped with a date and time. Even more to the point, we have before and after; we know when events happen—in absolute and in relative measures—we just can't say *where* they happen with any great cer-

tainty. IRL, we were given space and we found ways to construct time. Online, we are given time and we have to construct space. As we leave the Age of Information and enter the Age of Interaction, we need to stop for a moment and think about what our common spaces—our online *agora(e)*—will look like, what we will be able to do there, how we can build the kinds of environment that will make not only the telling of stories, but also the living of them possible—even desirable. Those online spaces are evolving today, largely in the form of online classrooms, so by looking carefully at those classroom spaces, we can begin to understand what kinds of spaces we need to construct for other kinds of online community.

Over the years, my teaching in online spaces has included courses in which students were invited to compose and share narratives about their life stories, their cultural identities, their experiences with race, ethnicity, gender, and power. It has also included courses in which students at distant locations from each other were invited to collaborate in several ways: providing feedback on each other's essays, sharing their perspectives on education, even defining liberal arts education as practiced by three research universities (Condon, "Virtual Space"). Finally, these experiences have included many uses of cyberspace to extend and enhance the activities begun and/or mediated in the physical classroom (Condon, "Renegotiating Empowerment")—blowing out the walls, as Fred Kemp is fond of calling it.

Of course, as a result of these experiences, I am interested in cyberspace as a place where students can tell their stories. In fact, I believe that we could not prevent these tellings, even if we wanted to do so. To the extent that narrative is a human compulsion (literacy—and literary—studies tell us that it is) and to the extent that cyberspace becomes a space for human socialization (which it has become, in spite of its inventors' misunderstanding of this capability), then the humans interacting in cyberspace will tell each other stories—their own, as well as others'. Cyberspace has already become the locus for self-revelation, for historical narratives, for mutually supportive stories, for politically motivated variations on a seemingly infinite set of themes, and so on and so on.

Early online spaces were fairly primitive—probably as primitive as early methods of telling time by the passages of the sun and moon. Internet Relay Chat, (IRC) for example, allowed very limited gatherings of people online, where they could carry on rapid-fire conversations constrained by telnet's limits on the length of a single IRC message (about three lines of typing). But those con-

versations happened in 'real time' (the more informal term for synchronous communications), if only in a particularly formless type of virtual space. Earlier, various forms of asynchronous communication had come onto the scene. Bob Parnes's CONFER, created at the University of Michigan in the early 1970s, provided what today we would call threaded discussion. As Arpanet became Bitnet and eventually Internet, online communities took several forms. Probably the most common were BBSs, Usenet, and Bitnet mail lists (listservs). All these early forms, from CONFER to IRC to Usenet, took place in time, without any conscious attempt to create space. Certainly the Usenet forum or the CONFER item constituted primitive kinds of space—discussions happened *there*—but they were not generally treated by their creators or their users as such. In commonsense terms, there was no *there* there. Then, in the early 1990s, Multi-dimensional, Object-Oriented spaces (MOOs) emerged from the gaming community to take a significant role in online interaction. MOOs allow for real-time interaction, yet they trump IRC in one crucial respect—the attempt to construct a physical environment (one which is nevertheless rendered as text). Still, the conscious, serious construction of online space had begun. And the ubiquity of the chat room here at the turn of the millennium is evidence for how much we humans appreciate a place where we can gather and interact.

We stand on the cusp. The Internet was created so that scientists in one location could control computers at a distant location and so that researchers could ship data and files among themselves; hence, the Internet has been for most of its life an expression of the Information Age. The Internet's inventors intended it as a method for the rapid transfer of information from one place to another, where people could work on that data independently of each other. They did not envision an online space for interaction. Likewise, the World Wide Web was developed in 1987 by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN purely in order to make file transfer and the cross-referencing of data both easier and faster. As these tools have come into the public domain, so to speak, they have been transformed for use as online forums of almost every imaginable kind. E-mail, as Howard Reingold tells us, was initially an afterthought, an add-on that clearly did not fit the intentions of Net creators (7). Today, according to the New York *Times*, 97% of people who have access to the Net use it not to ship data, but to write "little letters" back and forth. E-mail lists, in the form of listservs, represent perhaps the most populous of online communities now. A quick check of Tile.Net (http://www.tile.net/) indicates that if humanity has an

interest, someone owns a list that addresses that interest. Similarly, with the advent of the graphical Web browser in 1993, the Web, too, entered the public domain, and it has rapidly been adapted to serve our collective need for interaction. Reingold points out that the WELL, perhaps the first widespread online community, did not deliver a service to its users; it delivered users to users (111). Today, AOL's chat rooms serve much the same human need for interaction. Even the historically stodgy New York *Times* not only publishes an online edition, but attaches chat rooms to articles of major or continuing interest. Clearly, humans have a yen for communication, a yen that has moved us rapidly beyond any fears that computers will isolate us from each other and into the position of wondering whether we can cope with the intensive, high-volume interactions that computers allow. As Eric Miraglia points out, we used to turn on our computers because of the work we could do with them. Now, when we turn on our computers, other people are there, waiting to interact with us.

Those interactions are such a powerful attraction that they have overcome the severe limitations of the online environments we use for them. Chat rooms are easy to engage in, as long as the user knows how to use the Web browser that brought him to the space. However, chat rooms are extremely limiting on the affective side. Just where is a chat room? What does it look like? What do the people there look like? Chat rooms demand little of our senses—only sight is fully engaged, and even then only in order to read text. MOOs provide more of an environment (albeit text based), but the learning curve is steep, especially for those who want to participate fully in constructing the spaces. Combinations of MOO and Web seem promising, since they offer visual orientations, graphics that render the space more intelligible for those of us whose limited imaginations prevent our fully participating in the spaces described by the MOO's builders. That chat rooms are ubiquitous on the Web, that MOO continues to be used and developed as a more robust space for interaction, all this is testimony to the dawning of the Age of Interaction, an era in which we use machines in order to extend our human contacts, to interact increasingly in groups, and to develop the ability not just to tell stories online, but to live them too.

What will our online environments look like? As the *agora* for the new millennium takes shape—as we, collectively, shape it—what will it provide? For a clue, we can look to online learning environments (OLEs) to see how the interactive functions of the classroom have been translated online. That will give us some

ideas about what we need in our online *agoras*. Online learning environments are developing rapidly as public spaces where people meet, socialize, work, play, keep records, and so forth. Most of the features of successful OLEs would translate well into public forums for social, political, and casual interactions. At present, of course, even OLEs are in a very early stage of development, but they represent the state of the art in constructing usable spaces for online interaction.

The translation of the traditional classroom into online space has its roots in Usenet (dating, in other words, from the early 1980s), but it came of age with Bitnet mail lists, listservs, and, in the late 1980s, the advent of online conferencing capabilities provided by the Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment (DIWE), by Lotus Notes, by IRC and MOO, and so on. These early instantiations focused on function. They made interaction possible, but primarily by simply allowing groups of users to communicate in text. This early version of OLE presented little or no context for the users. They could not see each other, of course, and the spaces in which they interacted were featureless. The traditional classroom, bare and Spartan as it usually is, nevertheless afforded a rich set of amenities in comparison to OLEs. Still, the OLE quickly provided most of the functions of the traditional classroom. OLEs, like onsite classrooms, provide a place where people meet in order to interact. In both, people basically debrief each other. They communicate what they know, what they've learned since the last meeting, and what they plan to learn before the next meeting. They invite others to participate in that learning. They model effective learning strategies for each other. Classrooms of both kinds serve as a place for bringing together vital resources so that the whole group can benefit from the work of a few. Thus, participants collaborate in exploring a topic by sharing what they know, by linking—or referring—to sources where they might all learn more, and by discussing the topic in its current stage of development. All these features are aspects of the traditional classroom that have been translated online in such OLEs as Daedalus Online, Texas Women's University's graphical MOO (TWUMoo), Washington State University's Speakeasy Studio and Cafe, Utah State University's Syllabase, and many other examples which provide all these features and more.

As we look at this transition, we can see how the new, online classroom partakes of and extends the functionality of the traditional classroom. Clearly, its primary characteristic is interaction, and this has been the case since the inception of the online writing

classroom, in Trent Batsonís ENFI Project. Except for a few instances where such classrooms use video links (rare both because the Net's bandwidth makes video difficult and because the technology is relatively expensive), these are written classrooms (Condon, "Virtual Space"). People gathered online interact via written texts that they exchange very quickly (as with synchronous communication) or more slowly (in asynchronous exchanges). From the beginning of OLEs (see Kemp and Barker, for example), such communication has reached beyond the creators' intentions for file and data exchange. Rather than present each other with *fait accompli*, people gather in order to collaborate. Just as in the onsite classroom, learners bring the products of their efforts into the classroom both in order to share their accomplishments and to seek the help of others in pushing their work further along. Participants in both kinds of classrooms explore topics, but only the OLE is capable of keeping the conversations in an archive, where every word from every learner is constantly available to all the learners. And while the traditional classroom allows learners to share knowledge of the resources they have located outside the classroom, the OLE allows learners to link directly to most of those resources—and as texts of all kinds are reproduced online or co-published in print and electronic form, those direct links will become more useful than ever. OLEs collect all the input from the learners who participate there—their words, their source materials, their performances, and as the technology advances, their sounds and their images as well. Thus, as the learning experience evolves, so does the learning environment. It changes in an observable way each time a learner does something there.

Characteristics of the Online Learning Environment

Interactive: People gather in virtual space in order to interact, to talk, to work, to play, etc.

Collaborative: Learners work together in OLEs to further their individual and combined interests.

Exploratory: Learners work through issues, topics, and processes together in order to progress as individual and collaborative learners.

Cumulative: The OLE records all that learners say or do within that space.

Collective: What the OLE collects it also archives; the whole conversation is available all the time to all the participants.

Evolving: Each action within the OLE adds to and changes the OLE; the participants control the environment because their work *comprises* the environment.

As the millennium winds to a close, OLEs are roughly a decade and a half old. At the same time, public spaces other than the classroom are becoming increasingly important. While most public space is relatively static, reflecting the Information-Age understanding of the people who control them (witness Steve Forbes' gala online declaration of his candidacy for President—in which he revealed a Web site with bells and whistles dedicated to delivering information, not to encouraging interaction), increasing numbers of people are busily interacting in spaces of their own choosing—principally chat rooms. Just as the more robust forms of OLE emerged from MOO and chat, online public forums are likely to follow the same pattern. Over the next decade, we should see an emergence of public spaces where people can experience the same functionality as traditional public spaces allowed, and where that traditional functionality will be enhanced by the computer's ability to promote collaboration, to engage a larger number of participants, to reach across space, and to archive a complete record of what happens in the space.

We can assume that the new *agora* will foreground interaction, since that is the reason people now come to the Net. In this new forum, we will be able to interact widely, synchronously and asynchronously, and we will do so in order to accomplish some goal or task that we hold, individually or collectively. Together, larger and larger numbers of people will be able to explore issues, to work out their differences, to argue, to agree, to voice their opinions, to read about the opinions of others, etc. The public forum will be able to record all that work, all that play, and keep it for the common good. No longer can there be a question about the individual's impact on society: in the public forum, the individual's change will be immediately apparent and literal. The electrons we leave behind us physically change the environment, and the impact our statements make, if the classroom is any indication, will depend more on the value of the comment than on the status of the speaker. Status, class, race, gender will not disappear, of course, but if they follow the pattern of the OLE (Selfe and Cooper; Condon) they will become more fluid, less immediately apparent, and more negotiable in online forums.

I do not mean to suggest that all is rosy in the OLE or that it will be so as public forums move online. What I am suggesting is that public spaces already exist for work and, to some extent, for home (I do not think it a coincidence that we call the 'front page' of a Web site the *home page*). The new *agora* will add what Ray Oldenburg calls the 'third place.' In real life, the third place is the

cafe, coffeehouse, bar, community center, or other place that is neither workplace nor home; the third place offers a site for interaction: conversation, debate, social and political exchanges, and so forth. Howard Reingold argues convincingly that the WELL was (is) such a space (17). However, extending something like the WELL so that it involves the public at large is a formidable task. It is one thing to involve people like Reingold, John Perry Barlow, and Stewart Brand[1] (the list goes on) in creating an online community that can overcome the limitations of ASCII text and non-intuitive interface. That early *agora* may have been accessible to pioneers, but it was not for today's mainstream Netizen. If the notion of the third place is to happen online, then it must, in Oldenburg's terms, be available to the entire community. Many obstacles will have to be overcome if that kind of extension is to happen. Some of these obstacles have already been solved in the better OLEs, which feature highly intuitive interfaces and which demand a skill set that is limited to point-and-click, copy-and-paste. As these interfaces spread, online public space will begin to feel welcoming.

Interface and ease of use are only minor in comparison to at least one other difficulty. An OLE is the ultimate *panopticon*, able to trace every move of every participant, 7/24/365. Classrooms are supposed to be less private, more extensively controlled spaces. Indeed, those of us who attempt a student-centered classroom find that the space is constructed—literally and socially—in such a way that moving the teacher from the center takes careful planning and sustained effort (ironically, the teacher controls this effort at empowerment, too). As online public spaces develop, this lack of privacy—in the form of complete and constant surveillance—will cause difficulty. While students are remarkably frank in the online classroom (Selfe and Cooper; Condon, "Virtual Space"), and while they use an OLE in many ways to rebel against the teacher's control, to establish their own agendas (Selfe and Cooper), still, students are in some ways more careful about what they write in an OLE than about what they say face to face. They are aware that their comments will be on display for their classmates, and that knowledge constrains 'speech' in that environment.

How much greater a constraint will this feature become in the online *agora*? Already, e-mail etiquette, or *netiquette*, tells us not to post any message that we'd be sorry to see on the front page of tomorrow's newspaper—or on the boss's desk (Condon and Butler 53-4). That simple warning precludes many activities that go on in physical public spaces today. How many of us would allow our processes of arriving at a judgment to become public, for all to see?

How many of us would want our casual chattings, little gossipings, flirtations (serious or not), and so on, to be on the record, for all to see?

Privacy, not a feature of the OLE, must become a feature of the online *agora*. Computers must provide some spaces where comments are not date-and-time-stamped, where comments disappear as quickly as IRL speech does, into the air. And the online *agora* must provide other forums where that speech is captured and archived. Think, for example, of the advantages in political debate, in extending the audience for public meetings, in reaching out to placebound audiences. These advantages will propel the development of online *agora*, but those online *agoras* will remain secondary spaces for interaction unless and until we participants can turn off the Watcher at the Gate when we want a little privacy.

As we consider this obstacle to the new *agora*, we should also note that anonymity is not easily achieved in physical public spaces either. As David Lyon points out, we live in a surveillance-heavy society. When you go to a physical third place and buy a cup of coffee, if you write a check or use a debit card in payment, then you leave tracks. Almost anyone with any curiosity can find out where you have been. Recently, I traveled to Northfield, Minnesota. I used my VISA card to pay for my airport parking. I flew, of course, and used my frequent flyer card to add those miles to my account. I was registered into a campus hotel. I was paid for the workshop I offered, which was itself well advertised. During the workshop, I was online with the participants, communicating via my home institution's Speakeasy Studio and Cafe. As if I needed to provide more tracking information, I used a credit card to make several purchases in town. Anyone who really wanted to know where I was for those three days, and what I did, would have little trouble reconstructing nearly my entire trip. The means of surveillance are built into our systems, into our culture. None of this, of course, means that we should ignore the need to protect online interactions from surveillance; I merely suggest that the need for that protection need not and probably will not go farther than the protections we enjoy IRL—that is, we can't worry overly much about the fact that someone can track our movements. What we need to provide is private spaces for private conversations (like, say, the corner booth at Starbucks), and public spaces for public conversations (like the meeting room or the lecture hall).

Using cyberspace for public and private interaction means that this new location is fraught with the same possibilities for consensus and conflict, for interaction and alienation, for kindness and

cruelty to which physical space has proven susceptible. When we invite students to tell their stories in public areas of cyberspace—e-mail lists, Web sites, newsgroups, etc.—we do so in the hope that they will find a broader audience than our onsite classrooms can provide. We hope that our students will learn to write for real-world audiences, instead of writing merely to their teachers and themselves. By inviting our students to share their writing more widely, we also invite them to make their writing more meaningful for themselves, to invest more heavily in it, to learn more about it and themselves through their experiences sharing their narratives. We seek a Burkean parlor in which students' writings take on greater meaning—for the students themselves, as well as for readers—and in which we can experience heteroglossia in all its richness. An online class is not just a writing class. It is a *written* class.

We seek, of course, the same advantages in online *agoras*. We seek to make life richer, to remove some significant constraints on human interaction (time and space, for example) without creating newer, perhaps even more formidable barriers to genuine interaction. As we construct space online, we expose ourselves to a new set of dangers. Reaching a wider audience can mean multiplying the number of readers who are hostile to the content we put online. Being 'out there' in cyberspace, where no one mediates the experience of sharing writing and exchanging responses, can mean that conflicts arise more easily, that writers are more likely to become targets for ridicule or retaliation, even that stalkers can more easily find their victims. The benefits bring with them significant risks.

Why, then, should we construct spaces where people can bring their narratives into cyberspace? See above. Narrative is one of the foundations of the human experience, a human compulsion. Anywhere humans gather, they narrate. One of our new responsibilities as citizens in the Age of Interaction is to help each other make the rhetorical decisions—audience, occasion, purpose, etc.—that we must make if we are to connect with others in this new *agora*, this online marketplace of ideas. We know how to tell our stories IRL in such a way as to furnish ourselves with an acceptable degree of safety and an assurance of being understood reasonably well. We need to learn together how to do the same things in cyberspace. And that will be an interesting story in itself.

Indeed, for my money, the most interesting aspect of narrative in cyberspace is not the stories that will be told there, but the stories that will *develop* there. A MOO session unfolds as a polylog, revealing, by the time it ends, a story complete with plots, subplots, digressions, characters, and dialog. Similarly, to the extent that the

Web is hypertextual, it too unfolds. The Web is the story of this decade: the Internet's killer app which, in only five years, has become the Internet's second most important *raison d'être* (after e-mail). And the story of the Web comprises many other stories, individual and collective, attractive and repellent, significant and trivial. They unfold because the Web provides an environment in which time has meaning, in which we can experience *before* and *after*, the key elements in narrative—and in life. We need to explore *life* online, to gain multifaceted experience there, in order to develop the ability to tell our stories there with something like the confidence and competence we value when we tell our stories IRL.

Here at the end of this essay I have a humbling admission to make. I do not know what the online *agora* will be like—what that space, or those spaces, will be. What I do know is that they are coming, that they are already here in primitive forms and that those primitive forms will develop. In this sense, we have no choice but change. Resistance, indeed, is futile. So I conclude with a call to action, a call to participation. We—teachers, administrators, rhetoricians, thinkers, the kinds of people who read this journal—are, in many cases, already engaged in constructing and using OLEs. We have to be engaged, too, in constructing public spaces. If we don't construct these spaces, someone else will—someone who does not share our experiences, our knowledge, or our values. Only we can promote what we value. We can develop an online *agora* that extends our humanity, our humaneness, online. But we cannot develop such an *agora* if we sit back and allow commercial, economic, and governmental interests to prevail in that space. If we do not participate, of course, we will get the kind of online *agora* that we deserve. But if we do participate, we can get the kind of online *agora* that we want. Here at the close of the Age of Information, we have the opportunity to reform (in both senses of the word) our interrelationships. The new *agora* will be—is already—global, for example. How will we handle that? The Age of Interaction is still a rosy glimmer on the horizon, but dawn is coming. If we're careful, we can greet the day with hope and joy.

Notes

[1] John Perry Barlow founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Stewart Brand founded The WELL. Both have strongly influenced the development of what I am calling the Age of Interaction.

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