

Crossing Cultural and Spatial Boundaries: A Cybercomposition Experience

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INTRODUCTION

"Real diversity emerges from the students themselves and flourishes in a collaborative classroom in which they work together to develop their ideas and test them out on each other" (Hairston, 1992, p. 191)

The above quote from Maxine Hairston's article *Diversity, Ideology and Teaching Writing* describes her view of a truly diverse and multicultural freshman composition classroom. This is the kind of classroom environment my students and I are striving to create. As a student who was educated in a teacher-centered and highly regulated environment, I did not have an opportunity to experience such collaboration in an academic setting till I started doing my graduate work in 1994. It was then that I took a class on the social impact of information technology offered by the MIS department and had an experience that made me question my own views, as a student and as a teacher. Among the various projects and papers we were required to write, prepare and present in the class, the one that intrigued me most was a project involving long-distance team work. The essence of the project was to join a group of two people situated in two other universities -- in Boston and in Florida, as far as you get possibly get from Tucson -- and spend three weeks writing a paper together that was later to be presented at a three-way video conference. It was the first time that I had to meet, choose and collaborate with people over e-mail; people whom I did not get a chance to see or even to talk to until the time of the final presentation (and then, only on the TV screen). Nevertheless, we managed to coordinate our research, writing, revising and editing efforts, and even divide the presentation between ourselves -- all over e-mail. I think that it was then, during the three weeks of the "distance-teaming project", as our professor referred to it, that I got my first sense of the power of the Internet and all the unlimited (and still unexplored) possibilities it can offer.

The aim of the proposed study is to look at the possibilities offered by the Internet in terms of transforming traditional teacher/student roles and authority structure in a college composition classroom, as well as illustrating some possibilities of collaboration between students from different cultures. Last semester, I had a unique opportunity to help my students to establish such collaboration through a listserv project that united 50 students: 25 American students and 25 international students coming from places such diverse as China, Norway, Sweden, Singapore, Hong Kong, France, and Turkey.

My teaching goals

One of the first issues I always discuss with the students at the beginning of a new semester is that of the importance of development and use of their own voices in their compositions. I believe that the most effective writing occurs when there is a dynamic balance between thoughts and feelings, analysis and reflection, representation of facts and the author's own interpretations of the information presented. Such balance can be achieved when the writer's voice is heard clearly and saturates all levels of his/her writing. However, in some cases, the writer can choose to be intentionally anonymous and then the prose will be voiceless:

... the directions on a box of frozen vegetables, for example, are not intended to reveal anything about the writer. He is only an undifferentiated voice. He is supposed to write prose that is factual, precise, bland, controlled. Completely impersonal prose of this variety, however, is difficult to write for any extended space because essentially it requires the writer to mask himself completely. (Irmsher, 1972, p.13)

I believe that one of my main teaching goals is to help my students "unmask" themselves as writers and thinkers, develop their own unique style of writing through finding ways to express themselves and include their voice in their writing. At the same time, I believe that writing is a mirror of mind and soul, and voice in writing can only be developed if the writer is functioning in an atmosphere of diversity and appreciation of contributions of others to classroom conversation. There are different ways to establish such atmosphere in the classroom, and listserv discussions are just one possibility.

Before analyzing the students' views on electronic communication, it is important to define the goals of the listserv project. One of my main goals for this project was to get the students exposed to other people's cultural knowledge, writing styles, viewpoints and ideas. Another goal was to make their writing more meaningful and geared towards a real audience of their peers as opposed just their teacher, as well as to shift the purpose of their writing from fulfilling the assignment to sharing views with other people. Still another goal was to provide the students with an opportunity to read more and to broaden their outlook on various issues by looking at them from multiple perspectives. My top priority in this project was not achieving grammatical correctness but sharing thoughts, ideas and perspectives. Besides, as the Internet generally is a very democratic form of communication, I was hoping that this project will teach the students to become more independent, to rely more on themselves and each other, and not look up to their teacher to make all the decisions.

Social construction of knowledge

Historical background

The idea of using peer groups as a learning tool in the classroom and, more specifically, to improve writing, is not new. Historically, writing groups have existed since at least 1728 and have proven to be an effective tool for improving essay quality and the intellectual level of the participants. Back in 1728, Benjamin Franklin became one of the initiators of mutual improvement societies -- "groups of people outside academic institutions who shared their interest in enhancing intellect but had to rely on themselves to create opportunities for fostering it" (Gere, 1978, p.32). Although the mutual improvement societies formed by men and women differed, they shared many common features, the main one being a considerable interest in writing (Gere, 1978).

The establishment of these societies in 1728 began a tradition that is still very much supported by composition researchers, teachers and theorists. Although the goals of mutual improvement societies were quite wide, ranging from developing "the intellectual sphere of young male clerks and apprentices" to liberating women "from domestic isolation" (Gere, 1978, p. 47), the main purpose remained the same -- to promote self-education of their members. Today's groups, like their predecessors, encourage and enable individuals to improve their writing and are based on the same idea of tendency toward egalitarianism of knowledge and cooperative problem solving.

Academically, peer groups were used at least as early as 1895, when the Knights of English Learning, a society that emphasized the discussion of students' work, was formed at the University of Minnesota (Maclean, 1895, 157-58). "During the same period, students at the University of Illinois were allowed to submit in their required rhetoric and theme-writing classes compositions produced for 'the various college societies' (Dodge, 1895, 73), and this extracurricular writing was taken as seriously as any produced in a class. The approach used in literary societies and writers' clubs was later adapted to and incorporated into the classroom environment. In 1870, over a century ago, "teachers struggling with large student loads turned to writing groups lighten the burden" (Gere, 1978, pp.14-18). However, at that time writing groups were mostly used in creative writing classrooms, and closely followed the system adopted by literary clubs and societies. Today the situation has changed, as the issue of peer groups in any composition class is receiving more and more attention.

Writing as a social act

Although writing is often portrayed as a solitary activity carried out by a hermit away from the eyes of others, from the distractions of every day world in a remote and an isolated place, such depiction only shows us half the picture. While it is important to spend time alone while writing, it is at least equally important to interact with others on different stages in the writing process. In other words, I believe in the social definition of writing. A detailed explanation of this term would require examination of sociological, political, philosophical, scientific, literary, rhetorical, linguistic, and psychological theory that lies beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will give a brief explanation of the social nature of writing in connection with theories of collaborative learning and language development.

I believe that writing fits in the sphere of collaborative learning well because writing involves a dialogue between writer and context during which the audience is defined and the purpose is established. The act of writing can be successful only when it complies with the conventions of discourse accepted by a given community. To learn about these conventions and the acceptable discourse, writers need to use it in the kinds of conversations that occur in collaborative learning. Writing groups help the writers view their writing from the perspective of the audience, as, to an extent, collaborative writing blurs the distinctions between the writer and the audience and force the writer to think more consciously about his/her purpose and context.

The social nature of writing and the social genesis of language have been argued for by such theorist of language development as Lev Vygotsky. For Vygotsky the source of language lies outside the individual, and instead of being a transition from asocial to social language, egocentric or inner speech is a continuation of socially and environmentally oriented language development. "Development in thinking is not from the individual to the socialized, but from the social to the individual" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 20). In Vygotsky's view, language follows a similar pattern of development; its origins are social, and "internalization depends upon the interaction of small groups of individuals engaged in concrete social interaction explainable in terms of small group dynamics and communicative practices" (Gere, 1978, p.83).

The perception that inner speech constitutes one of the stages of language development has been explained in a fundamentally different way by another prominent language researcher Jean Piaget that led to a view of the writing process as a highly individual activity. He states that language begins within the individual and must ultimately stay there. For Piaget writing is a highly individual activity, the aim of which is to become less dependent upon others. Piaget views socialization only as a component necessary for the development of the egocentric speech. Piaget's theory emerges from Cartesian epistemology, as demonstrated by its separation of individual and society, its description of development as hierarchical progression, its focus on the nature of individual thought, and its characterization of knowledge as a fixed entity. The whole tradition of cognitive psychology based on Piaget's work is Cartesian in its description of individual's ways of knowing (Gere, 1978).

Even though the theories proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky view language development in general and the development of writing more specifically in very different ways, their views can be seen as complementary rather than contradictory, as they emphasize the two different aspects of writing -- the individual and the social. These two aspects are equally important in writing and have to be incorporated in any writing process in order for it to be successful.

Writing groups and peer reviews in the modern composition classroom

A more recent return of peer groups in the composition classroom was initiated by work of such teachers and researchers as Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, and Donald Murray who pointed out the effectiveness of student interaction for improving the quality of writing and developing the students' skills as critical readers and independent thinkers. Peer group work and peer reviews in a writing class are helpful both to the reader and the writer, as they help foster critical reading skills that are not generally used by freshman students when reading professionally written texts (as they take their quality for granted). Gillam (1978) states that there are three main benefits of peer reviews: (1) they promote a "'thoughtful' reading, one in which the reader reads like 'a writer composing a text'" (Gillam, 1990, p.99); (2) they help the students generate "language about language, creating a vernacular to be internalized for the members' future use" (Gillam, 1990, p.99); and (3) they help the students to develop confidence in their capacity to learn from one another and for themselves.

The reading-writing connection cannot be overemphasized -- and the best way to reinforce is not only asking the students to read and respond to their classmates' work, but evaluate their own performance as critical readers. "How would you describe yourself as a critiquer of your classmates' paper? What do you do well and not so well?" (Marting, 1991, p.129) -- this is one of the questions included in a peer review in the composition class taught by the author of the article. I believe that it is very important to ask the students to reflect on their skills not only as writers but as reviewers, as it makes the students believe that their comments are valuable and, helps them become better readers and better writers.

Electronic interaction as a new dimension of peer group work

The idea of sharing messages and exchanges viewpoints via a public forum has been around since the times of ancient Greece, where citizens used to gather in specially allocated places for such public debates. In modern society, meetings at such public places have become less of a viable option, and, as a partial substitute, computer-mediated forums have emerged. Chat rooms, moos, listservs, electronic conferences and various distribution lists (see end notes for definitions) are a few of examples of such electronic gathering places set up for various purposes: from recreation to information exchange, and from cooperation in scientific research to business decision making. Despite the different goals and purposes behind these groups, there is one important commonality -- egalitarian sharing of ideas and viewpoints, hearing other people's voices and positioning yourself among the multitude of personalities and opinions in the ongoing discussion.

In the classroom context, computer networks provide a new dimension to peer group work and class interaction, they open new possibilities and create new problems. It is important for classroom teachers to decide how information technology can be integrated in a composition classroom. Are computers just reinforce traditional notions of education (teachers talk, students listen) or can they be

used to enhance and change classroom environment and interaction? One view is that computers promote social construction of knowledge, as a lot of peer teaching goes on, students spend a lot of time writing, class becomes more student-centered than teacher-centered, opportunities for collaboration increase, etc. (Hawisher and Selfe, 1991, p.59).

The study of a computer-mediated communication experience of "basic writers" at the University of Illinois conducted by Colomb and Simutis (1996) indicates that in the course of the project the students experienced a sense of learning, reading and writing as "growing out of their collective activity" (Colomb and Simutis, 1996, p. 205). Therefore, the students "became a community of inquiry which they recognized as having a substantial, though peripheral, relation to a larger community of learners" (Colomb and Simutis, 1996, p. 205). I believe that this result points to one of the most important aspects of classroom computer-mediated communication projects, as such interaction allows the students to become less dependent on the teacher and develop a sense of self-esteem as writers and readers. One of my own students commented that posting journals to his electronic small group (as opposed handing it to the teacher) increased his motivation to write and increased his interest in reading other people's thoughts on the same issue.

Computer-mediated communication is a powerful tool, and, as teachers, we need to be aware that electronic conferences change the power balance in the classroom and may provide more opportunities for power play in the classroom that may contradict our notions of good teaching. In her study report, Murphy (1997) states that the students have to be more active participants in the (virtual) classroom discussion and "may not remain an anonymous member of the class often mistakenly thought to be engaged in learning simply by physical presence" (Murphy, 1997, 244). However, what is the nature of students' participation in a listserv monitored/read by the teacher? Are the students writing in open and sincere way if they know that the teacher is one of the recipients of the messages? We need to be aware that instructors who are a part of electronic conference have power that "exceeds our expectations or those of students" (Hawisher and Selfe, 1991, p.63), and students tend to self-discipline themselves in accordance with what they believe the teacher's expectations are. How can we create a comfortable electronic environment for interaction?

We need to consider our role as teachers and as researchers in these computer spaces, as well as of the overall effects of the introduction of technology into the classroom that stretch far beyond the electronic domain . We need to think carefully about our goals in setting up these electronic conferences and decide on the most productive uses of this technology to further our goals for the class. Hawisher and Pemberton (1991) believe that "the role of the teacher-researcher is particularly valuable in computer/writing research" (Hawisher & Pemberton, 1991, p.79), as we are connected to our classroom and the students in ways that outside researchers and observers are not. This connection enables us to be better observers and more effective researchers.

Research questions

General research questions: What are the students' attitudes about electronic interaction?

Specific research questions: What are the students' attitudes related to posting journals to their electronic small groups?

THE STUDY, SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

This study's objectives -- to observe electronic interaction between the members of the classroom community and to consider such interaction from multiple perspectives -- suggested an ethnographic approach. Data consisted primarily of participants' own words (in a brief survey and follow-up interviews with selected group members), as well as of classroom and listserv observations (used mostly to establish, observe and describe the broader context of interaction). "Informed consent" was achieved through explanation and the consent form.

In the beginning of the semester, I asked the students in both classes to set up an e-mail account and subscribe to our listserv. After exchanging initial introductions and locating students with (preferably) similar topics, the students formed groups of 6-7 people, about 3 from each of the classes. After that, the actual project started that involved exchanging journals in small groups. As I received the messages, I sorted them by groups and saved them in electronic folders. Group formation and group interaction in this project is interesting, as each group has members >from both classes, which means that each member interacts with half the group both in class and over e-mail and through e-mail only with the other half. Besides, half the group are US students, and half are international students.

Researcher role

In this study, the role of the researcher was that of a participant observer and, even more importantly, that of a classroom teacher.

While there may be certain confounding variables related to such a dual role of teacher and researcher (such as the issue of students' openness and willingness to give honest answers), I believe that the advantages outweigh the possible drawbacks. Teachers (as opposed to outside researchers) are able to "observe activities in the classroom on the regular basis" (Hawisher and Pemberton, 1991, p. 79) and gain insights that outsiders do not have. As teachers conducting research, we are able to notice subtle changes in the classroom dynamics and "discover the reasons why these changes occur" (Hawisher and Pemberton, 1991, p. 79). Classroom teachers have the unique opportunities for close observations, detailed case studies, and longitudinal research that can ultimately lead to better teaching and learning.

Data collection and analysis

The first set of data for this study was collected from 47 students of the two freshman composition classes I am teaching (101 and 107) through an informal writing assignment conducted early in the listserv project. I chose an open-ended question format over a structured survey to give the students more flexibility in their answers and to provide an opportunity to express their own ideas, and to avoid imposing any preconceived notions of listserv interaction that I might have had. My main purpose in conducting the initial survey was to find out the students' initial reactions and impressions of e-mail interaction. At the beginning of one of our class periods, I asked the students to free-write for about 15 minutes about their experiences with the listserv and electronic small groups. I believe that the results of the survey can be used to address the general research question: What are the students' attitudes about electronic interaction?

In the beginning of the project, all interaction was conducted over the general listserv. At that point, the interaction mainly consisted of participant introductions and discussions related to forming electronic small groups. I printed out all messages and kept them in the "general listserv" file for further analysis.

Later in the semester, the students formed electronic small groups, and most interaction was transferred from the general listserv forum including all students to small groups of 6-7 people. The content of small group messages differed greatly from initial listserv interaction, and was mostly restricted to comments on readings and essay topics. To facilitate the process of data analysis, I created seven additional files, one for each electronic group. Since the amount of messages was over a 100 per week, I kept most messages in electronic files, and printed out only files from the three focus groups selected later in the semester.

After collecting interaction data from the listserv and (electronic) small groups (see Appendix I), I conducted interviews (see Appendix II) with participants of the three (out of seven) focus groups. I chose the groups that were especially effective (i.e. mainly because they were formed early in the semester, were relatively independent from the teacher and posted messages on time), believing that these best-case scenarios would provide the clearest lens for observing the patterns of interaction and exploring the optimal possibilities for the use of a listserv in a composition class. These interviews were conducted at the point in the semester when most e-mail assignments were completed. I waited for quite a while before I conducted these interviews, as I wanted my students to get as much experience as possible with the listserv project and be in a position to provide intelligent reflection on the experience. I felt that the three groups were equally effective in their listserv interaction and equally interested in the project. I chose one group to use in this research report, to avoid repetition.

Initial survey results

One of the main goals of the listserv project was to provide an opportunity for the students to expand the discussion beyond one classroom and to extend the learning community to both classes. Another goal was to make the assignments more meaningful by creating a real audience of peers for the students as opposed to restricting the audience to the teacher. I believe that electronic discussions help the students learn to rely on each other more, and not depend solely on the teacher for answers and comments. The listserv also provided the students with an additional opportunity to share viewpoints and to learn more about each other's writing styles. The following comment from a 101 student provides a broad perspective on the use of the listserv in a composition classroom:

Working on the listserv has been very helpful because *you are able to see different viewpoints and concerns of others as well as provide your own insights. This project has broadened my viewpoints and has allowed me to think more critically about myself and others.* The other people in my group have also been actively participating... Using the listserv is fun and exciting. I enjoy reading other people's messages. It definitely helps me to learn a lot more about the issue since *all of our ideas are collaborated. I have learned to critically evaluate the opinions and viewpoints of others;* and that it's easier for me to communicate when the audience is more similar in age. My writing tends to be more expressive (101).

During the initial survey, a number of important issues related to the use of electronic discussions came to the fore. One of the points that a number of students both from 101 and 107 commented on was the feeling of anonymity arising from Internet communication.

Some found it to be a positive factor that aided in communication:

I've learned that once we take away our colors, accents, and anything else that would separate us in a physical world everyone is really similar (101).

It is fun using the listserv and sharing ideas with people, making friends. One of the important things when you are talking to someone is to think what you are expressing is making him/her feeling uncomfortable or you are feeling uncomfortable when expressing your ideas. But when you are talking to people in e-mail groups, you don't know all the people you are sharing ideas with. So, *you can express your opinions independently and more comfortably* (107).

Others viewed the same feature of electronic interaction differently, and commented on a certain feeling of discomfort stemming from communication with unfamiliar people:

...the feeling that the people on the other end aren't really substantial -- for the most part I have never actually talked face-to-face with any of the members. Because of this it makes it hard to actually think that they are real in a way. (101).

Internet makes people isolated. Every time you send e-mail, you just face a computer instead of a real person, this may make people feel isolated -- talking to a computer (107).

On a more optimistic note, a number of students commented on the positive role of the listserv for getting to know each other's views, thoughts and writing styles.

It has helped to link people from my classes together, and *allows us to exchange thoughts while we get to know one another better* (101).

I learned more about my classmates than I would have without the listserv (101).

I found that it is very effective forming an e-mail group. A lot of students who are shy and quiet can express themselves through the e-mail much better and easier. *We are able to make friends and get to know our group members easier and faster. This helps us, the foreign students, who just started studying here, break the ice and learn how to socialize* (107).

Electronic interaction was viewed by a number of students as an additional opportunity to express their views for students who may not be very outspoken in the classroom :

I have learned that *some of my classmates open up more over the listserv* (101).

I've learned that communicating with an unknown person is fairly easy once one makes the initial contact and that communicating with a group of people is fun (101).

A number of 107 students commented on the importance of electronic interaction as an opportunity to do more reading and writing:

... this can really increase our frequency of reading. Besides, many people like to receive e-mail, so they will read the essays and messages happily... (107).

I find it rewarding to read the journals of the American students. It not only gives me their point of view as Americans, it also gives me an idea of their writing style and grammar (107).

I think that this kind of communication is amazing because I can talk with somebody else about the English class, the essays, etc. *These experiences have changed my way to write my essays.* Now I know the opinions of people writing the same assignments, so this clarifies many things in my mind. This helps me to write a little bit better (107).

To summarize, I believe that the students' attitudes to electronic interaction are generally positive, as it allowed them to see viewpoints of their peers, gave them a chance to read more, to learn more about other students (including the ones they haven't met) and feel more comfortable exchanging opinions both on the listserv and in class. On the other hand, a number of students expressed a certain level of anxiety, mostly related to the novelty of the electronic interaction experience, especially while exchanging messages with the students from the other class without knowing them outside of cyberspace. From these responses, it seems that the 101 students stressed the importance of the listserv mainly as a means to increase interaction and to share ideas with each other, while 107 students focused more on the role of the listserv as an additional tool to practice English, both through reading and through writing. This difference in the views of the two groups of students is not surprising, but rather expected, considering that 101 students are native speakers of English, and 107 are not.

Electronic interviews with select group members

Participant descriptions

In order to better understand the students' responses, it is important to create a mental picture of the participants. To keep their portraits as authentic as possible to the electronic interaction situation, I did not provide physical descriptions from an outsider's (my) perspective, as this is something that does not happen in electronic interaction. Instead, I asked my students to describe what they would like to share with their cyber colleagues, and the following are their responses.

K.R. (female, 101): I am an average girl who lived in many states in my 18 years of life. I was born in Southern California and I lived there for 9 years, I also lived in Hawaii for 4 years and my mother, stepfather, and little brother still live there, I also lived in Florida for 4 years and I have an ex-stepmother (my father died) and half brother that still live there, and I also lived in Flagstaff, Arizona for a year and a half before moving to Tucson in August. In Flagstaff I lived with an aunt and I loved it. I have had a string of bad luck in my life and I have experienced a lot of things that most 18 year olds would not ever expect to encounter. *As for what I look like... I don't find that to be important.* I am a strong and very independent individual. I live my own life and I am set on what I want in life.

S.S. (female, 101): *I would describe myself as a lover of the fine arts. I love going to museums*

and looking at classical artwork and architecture. Of course, this is because I'm an art history major. I love watching people interact, which is why I like doing some black and white photography in my free time. I like seeing the human race in its most precious moments. Also, I love Arizona more than any place I've lived in, and that is a lot of places. I need to be where the weather is warm and the people are relaxed. My favorite singer is Tori Amos. I think her music is so beautiful. It's like a mixture of classical and modern music. I have a mom, dad, younger sister, and younger brother. They all live in Princeton, New Jersey, right now. I'm a pretty independent person anyway. I want people to know I am nice, and only want to please. I hate creating any conflict, which is why I mostly stay quiet in large groups. I like smiling and brightening someone's day with it.

N.R. (male, 107): *I am from Sweden,* and I am here for one year as an exchange student. I study business here to broaden my law degree. I am 23 years old, and I am a male. I like to travel, scuba dive and visit auctions.

M.B. (female, 107): *M, Swedish, 26 years old, blond* (not everyone in Sweden is blond), interested in traveling, sailing, skiing, going to country auctions. I have studied for 3 years at the university and plan to graduate in 2 years. I will then be able to teach in government and policies and business in a Swedish high school level, ages 16-19. *When I meet with my friends on weekends (in Sweden) we usually get together and eat good homemade food, drink tasteful wine and talk until the morning hours. I also like a good movie (anything but really violent films).*

J.W. (male, 101): *Describe myself? Hmm... Tall, dark, and handsome. Just kidding. I would like people to know that I am from Phoenix, I love English and writing, I'm far from tall, I've dark hair and eyes. Beyond that, I hope they get the impression that I am friendly and hard-working, and have a good sense of humor... I guess I left out the fact that I was gay, even though that was clear from my first message on the listserv. While I have no problem with people knowing, and I am comfortable with who I am, I don't want people to judge me on that fact alone without seeing the bigger picture.*

As I was reading these descriptions, I was surprised as to how much I learned about my students. I realized that despite my conscious efforts to get to know my students over the course of the semester, a significant part of their personalities remains unknown to me. These introductions made me aware of the extent to which a specific context of interaction (in this case, the classroom context, and teacher-student relationship) limits our view of each other. The picture I create of each student is usually based on their opinions of issues we discuss, their choice of essay topics, their general class participation and classroom persona and, to some extent, their physical appearance. As opposed to such image created by an outsider based on limited and sometimes superficial features, electronic introductions allow the students to present themselves in a way *they* would like others to see them. The students' "electronic" portraits seem to be more authentic, as they can emphasize the most important aspects of their life and personality that are not necessarily obvious to a casual observer.

What are the students' attitudes related to posting journals to their electronic small groups?

A number of students (especially those who, by their own admission, are novices at using computers) commented that this project was useful to them in terms of learning to use e-mail, practice uploading and downloading files and learn about possible problems and pitfalls that can occur when using technology. However, from my perspective, learning to use computers was a secondary purpose (or, rather, a prerequisite) of this project, therefore, I will not focus my analysis on students' responses related to their use of computers.

The most frequent comment regarding the use of electronic small groups for posting journal assignments was related to the change of audience from one teacher to a group of peers that made the assignments more meaningful:

K.R. (female, 101): The difference about posting journals to an email group even though they do also go to the teacher is that I think *students are more open about things. It is like they are just talking with other students around their own age so it's easier.* So in that sense I think it may change our writing style.

M.B. (female, 107): My experience with the listserv project is that it has been functioning very good. It has been very *interesting to read the American students points of view in many of the quite controversial topics we have dealt with and also the other international students views.*

I think the idea about posting the journals on e-mail is a very good idea because the topics we have dealt

with in class are very interesting and the *reason for writing these journals is not only to show you the teacher that we can write but also to share our opinions and learn about other students ideas.* This makes you reflect over your own ideas and also to maybe reconsider your opinion and make it even more persuading.

S.S. (female, 101): My general impression of the listserv project is that it might be useful in some ways. *It was interesting to read other people's journals and essays, to see how they think. It always opens the mind to read other people's opinions.* The only bad part was trying to set the thing up. Having little computer experience, it was hard for me to figure things out even though now I see it is kind of easy. And heck, it saves paper!

J.W. (male, 101): Overall, I thought it was a pretty neat project. *It was cool to get to know one another (especially those in 107)* even though our interaction was not face to face.

There is a big difference between posting our journals to the listserv as opposed to handing them in during class. For one, we had the opportunity to read each others responses to the questions that were asked. *This allowed us to "hear" each others thoughts on the issue as well as see other people's writing style.*

A number of students commented on the effects of the seeming anonymity of electronic communication on their interaction styles. Some, such as K.R., found it easy to communicate with unfamiliar students, while others, such as S.S., felt intimidated about sharing their views with a group of people:

K.R. (female, 101): I think the listserv is a very good idea. It gives you a chance to communicate with people that you normally wouldn't communicate with. *You can be open about things and not really worry about what these people think of you because they don't really know you at all.*

S.S. (female, 101): Having to put journals on the group made me keep my true feelings a bit more quiet. *Knowing many people would read it, instead of just a teacher, I was reluctant to express my stronger opinions in fear of being ridiculed.* Of course that was probably just me. Everyone else was fine with it most likely.

Quite a few students noted the difference between conventional written journals and e-mail journals, stating that e-mail assignments are a different genre of composition: very informal, closer to spoken than to written speech:

N.R. (male, 107): I work more with journals I have to turn in, but I guess I only have to be used to hand in things over the net. I believe I have one language when I am using the net, more like if I was speaking not writing. My motivation is perhaps less when I do assignment over e-mail. One explanation could be that I think that you read e-mail as I do (which I really don't but I think you get my point). I do not spend much time reading something posted to my e-mail, I read it and that's it. So my "feeling" is that the receiver doesn't read the message as if he would have it on paper.

Conclusion

Computer networks add to the controversy of peer group work, as issues of gender, group formation, personality factors, leadership acquire a new dimension over e-mail due to reduced social cues, such as "age, gender, race, ethnicity, status and mood" (Eldred and Hawisher, 1995, p. 335), and a different context for interaction that can change the overall dynamics of classroom interaction. According to Colomb and Simutis, "the case for computer-mediated communication (CMC) in writing instruction has to be based not on visionary claims about CMC as an all-purpose tool for automatic teaching but on specific accounts of how and why the technology has helped teachers and students to achieve specific goals" (Colomb and Simutis, 1996, 203).

This study is my first step towards my own understanding of the potential and place of computer-mediated communication in a composition classroom. I believe that, even though my paper does not answer a lot of important questions about electronic interaction in a classroom, the results of this pilot study are useful for evaluating the role of computer-mediated communication in the composition process and for asking more questions about electronic interaction. Some questions for future research may include the following: Can traditional theories of group interaction be applied to electronic groups and, if so, to what extent? Is the electronic discourse environment different in terms of authority structures from the classroom environment and, if so, in what ways?

END NOTES (Definitions from PC Webopaedia)

Chat room -- a virtual room where a chat session takes place. Technically, a chat room is really a channel, but the term "room" is used to promote the chat metaphor.

Chat -- real-time communication between two users via computer. Once a chat has been initiated, either user can enter text by typing on the keyboard and the entered text will appear on the other user's monitor. Most networks and online services offer a chat feature, but it is not widely used because it is easier to communicate by telephone, and messages that aren't urgent can be sent by e-mail.

Listserv (similar to distribution list) -- a type of electronic conference in which e-mail messages from individual members of the group are forwarded to all other members simultaneously.

MUDs -- Multi-User Dungeon or Multi-User Dimension, "an immersion of oneself into an addictive world of magic, monsters, and whatever else one's imagination can create" (Dali Mack's MUD Page).

MOOs -- Mud Object Oriented

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