Risk Taking in Cyberspace

"A poor teacher can be replaced by a CD ROM. A good teacher cannot be replaced with any technology."
— TIM VON HOFF

Members of the SVSU Epiphany Team gathered last week to work on a conference presentation. As we were sharing some of what we are doing in our classes, we began to realize that the inclusion of technology in our teaching has required us all to take new risks.

Epiphany Project group members are, from left, Carol Wolfe, Lynne Graft, Robert Lane, Sally Cannon and Diane Boehm. Not pictured is Leslie Whittaker.

Sally Cannon

In my freshman composition course this fall, I had decided to use e-mail for small group work, dialogue journaling, and class related communication. Instead of teaching the students the rudimentary things I knew about e-mail, I required my students to attend the e-mail workshop that Nancy Samolewski so graciously offered. As a relative newbie to CAI (computer aided instruction), I did not feel I had complete mastery of e-mail, and I was grateful not to have to take up class time introducing students to it. My students attended the workshop faithfully and picked up enough information to get into their e-mail account and compose and retrieve messages.

Then came their first peer response workshop in the computer lab. After working in groups, responding to their peers' rough drafts of a summary assignment, I asked them to e-mail me, summarizing the feedback they

had given each group member. I also asked them to cc their group members, so that each member would get another "take" on the advice given.

The only problem was that the students didn't know how to cc multiple people. And neither did I. And so, as they started calling me from their computers, looking (up) to me for some help, I found myself in the awkward and somewhat embarrassing position of having to tell them that I (ahem) didn't (ahem) know. Intensifying this embarrassment was the realization that it was no doubt an easy thing to do, and I began cursing myself for not trying it out before class. Somehow, I realized, I had been using e-mail for over a year but never needed to cc anyone. Most of my messages were replies to others or messages composed to one individual.

I knew that if I had had a minute or two, I could have figured it out, and finessed my way out of the situation. But instead of fudging through and saving face, I decided I had no choice but to admit my ignorance. Thankfully, the students did not gasp or guffaw, but continued on at their computer stations trying to solve the problem. One student quickly figured it out, and began sharing her discovery with those around her, and in very short order, the whole class (including me) knew how to cc several people.

In retrospect, it was an important moment in the class. Openly admitting that I didn't know everything about the software and technology we were using forced the students to take responsibility for their own learning. In a small way, I suppose, it helped to

Risk Taking *"Make them do it and they will do it..."*

further decenter the class, that is, diffuse my authority and encourage students to take ownership themselves. In traditional classrooms, I work to give students a voice, to make them active participants, to create a collaborative community. So why in the computer lab with my freshman students did I feel the pressure "to have all the answers"? feel embarrassed to have to admit my ignorance? I suppose it has to do with my comfort level in one setting and the lack thereof in the other. I suppose it has to do with the nagging sense that I am not a technician and that things can happen with the computer system that are beyond my understanding and control.

Whatever the reason, my adventure with e-mail reaffirmed for me that I do not have to be an expert with every application I use. It reaffirmed that taking risks—on the part of the instructor and the students—is essential to learning.

P.S. For readers who are also e-mail newbies and want to "cc" more than one person: type name, hit enter, backspace to same line, insert comma, and type next name.

Bob Lane

For the past year, I have thought about, but ultimately rejected requiring my students to utilize the Internet for classroom assignments. My concerns were twofold. First, I felt insufficiently skilled at "surfing the web." As a computer novice, I can perform the necessary maneuvers for word processing, and I am in the larva stage of using e-mail. Second, I was skeptical that my students would be able to successfully navigate cyberspace, and I did not know how to help them. Thus I avoided the web.

Over the summer, it struck me that I expect my students to locate information in the library without my direct assistance. Perhaps I should presume that if I require my students to use the Web, they will do so. To paraphrase *Field of Dreams,* make them do it and they will do it. So, this semester, I

simply required that students use the Web, trusting that they would "educate" themselves. Via trial and error, collaborative help, or testing the patience of the lab assistants, they fulfilled my expectations. Perhaps I risked overestimating the resourcefulness of my students, but they performed admirably. This is one assignment in which I learned more than my students.

Carol Wolfe

I originally thought that I just entered into new ventures with my students with a modicum of thought about the success of the outcome. In past instances, I "knew" the outcome would be positive because I would "manage" the process so that all might experience success at some level.

I've been considering this at great length and I've decided that I generally do not risk without first having a "vision" of the wonderful things that will happen if my students and I do a task together as a learning community. I think it is important to have a vision, especially when you are coordinating something that involves learning and teaching (my bias). My sense is that I have a habit of thinking about only the "wonderful" things that will happen for my students and I end up dealing with the realities that confound the process. As I think about this further, my dissertation title includes the words "The Vision and the Reality..." So when I think about implementing "my vision" for my students, often students suffer the reality (as I do)... and because I tend to be too intense about learning in my course (I'm told), I lose the "wonderful" in the reality.

Reflecting more deeply, however, my students' e-mail dialogic journals about power and culture in schools, what it means to know one's content, and what knowing content has to do with teaching it to diverse students, publish their struggles to understand more about becoming effective educators. In the process many develop, reconceptualize, or strengthen their personal "visions."

Diane Boehm

My resident adolescent likes the term "control freak" to describe parents who restrict their children's ability to make choices. (The implication, of course, is clear—no control freak parents needed in his life, thank you.)

The control model has long been standard in many classrooms; the teacher controlled when and where and how learning took place. The teacher was the indispensable supplier of knowledge, the student the empty vessel needing to be filled.

Cyberspace has dissolved this model. Perhaps one of the unique characteristics of our time is that many of our students know far more than we do, at least about technology. For those teachers who saw themselves as the indispensable supplier of knowledge, this can be unsettling. The first time our students tell us things we didn't know about formatting a document, or develop a graphic we didn't even know was possible, or find a web site with research information much more current than the sources we are familiar with, we may feel as if we have lost our authority, both in our own eyes and in theirs.

But when we are willing to risk sharing control with our students, some exciting things happen. We become learners with them; we demonstrate the power of lifelong learning; we become what Mary Field Belenky in *Women's Ways of Knowing* calls the "midwife teacher." We are no longer the all-knowing physician who anesthetizes students so they can painlessly give birth; we become instead the supportive coach who assists students to develop new patterns of learning that will prepare them to succeed in the Information Age.

Lynne Graft

As the technology component of my courses becomes greater, I cannot ignore that my student's responsibilities and obligations have increased as well. In fairness to them I have tried

Breaking the Attitude Barrier

■ **Diane Boehm**
Writing Program Director

Performance and outcomes have become buzzwords of the '90s. Legislators and taxpayers mutter, "About time." Teachers speculate, "It's just another fad; if we ignore it, it will go away." Students shrug—they see outcomes on every report card.

A recent newsletter outlining emerging trends in higher education points out how far-reaching this emphasis on performance has become:

> Today's schools are re-conceiving the idea of quality. Quality used to be considered in a quantitative sense—the size of the library, the percentage of faculty with doctorates, endowment sizes, etc. Quality was defined in terms of what the school is.
>
> Now quality is being defined in terms of the students' performance—how well they learn what we promise, how well they perform on the job, how well we provide student services. That doesn't mean abandoning a concern for libraries and credentials; it simply means that we don't know how much good they did until we are sure that the student learned something because of these factors.
>
> — *Concordia Chronicle*

These standards for performance are not likely to go away—nor do I think they should. I believe we can and should use them to reflect on what we do. But we need to tie our standards to our goals as educators, to those things we consider most important in what we do.

If then the quality of student work is becoming the measure of a university; if indeed we teachers are to be judged by how well our students learn; if we wish to demonstrate successful student performance, an immediate question comes to mind: *in what context do students learn best? And how do our performance standards influence what they learn?*

This question quickly leads to another, which for me becomes quite personal: *what do I need to do in my classroom so that my students will become proficient writers?*

Researchers in writing in all disciplines over the past two decades have learned a lot about what *doesn't* work. People whose writing history I know corroborate the research. Take my husband, for example. When he attended Ohio U. in the '60s, the university had universal standards for student writing: 0 errors, A; 1 error, B; 2 errors, C; 3 errors, D; 4 errors, Failure.

Did the standards "take"? Were they a good assessment of student performance? Were the outcomes the desired ones? These standards certainly made a lifetime impact on my husband. Since the only thing that mattered to his writing instructors was correctness, correctness was what he gave them. He wrote short, simple sentences, Dick and Jane style, to avoid any potential problems with complex clauses or semicolons; he used only words whose spelling he was sure of, whether or not a word was the best choice for the context; he wasted no time struggling for meaningful, individual expression; he took no risks when writing. As a result, he found no satisfaction in writing and, even now, writes because he must, not because he enjoys any part of it.

A non-traditional student in my Technical Report Writing class last year shared a similar experience. Instructors years ago had meticulously pointed out every flaw in her writing; one of them had gone so far as to tell her that unless her writing improved, there was no point in considering graduate school. For 20 years she believed she was a poor writer. Even when I told her I found her writing to be clear, well-organized, and insightful; even when other students in the class sought her out to give them feedback, she dreaded writing and still finds it hard to break her avoidance habit.

I expect these long-ago teachers believed they were holding students accountable for high standards of performance. But were they helping students to learn? Did they motivate students to take the next step in their personal development, to expand their thinking, to be engaged with their learning and writing?

Few of us do well those things we hate. When teachers make them hate writing, students are not likely to write well. They too will avoid it as much as possible, and give minimal effort when they are forced to write. "High standards" aren't enough. We must find appropriate standards that reflect what we value, and then help students to meet those standards.

Because of bad experiences with writing instruction in the past, many students' negative attitude toward writing creates a barrier which interferes with their learning to write well. Some of them equate writing with following rules; they may have had years of grammar drills, in spite of all the research demonstrating that teaching grammar teaches grammar—not writing. While knowledge of basic grammar may serve them well for editing, it will not help with all those writing tasks that preface editing—conceptualizing ideas, clarifying purpose, analyzing audience, getting words on paper, re-visioning a draft.

Likewise, many students still stop to fix every error on their first (or only) draft, though researchers have learned that premature editing causes writer's block and short-circuits the development of ideas. Many students haven't learned to revise, even though we know that it is the amount of revision that separates novice writers from polished writers. Never mind what scholars like Mina Shaughnessy, Mike Rose, or Nancy Sommers have discovered. As their teachers drilled and shrilled, the students concluded that they were poor writers, destined to remain so.

Now the task is ours. Before we can begin to help students develop as writers, we must first surmount these negative attitudes which create a barrier to learning. How can we do this? What teaching strategies will motivate the outcomes we desire?

A first step is to be engaged in our students' writing processes. Assigning writing is not the same thing as instructing writers. Rather than being merely the judge of the final product, we need to help students develop the processes that will help them to write well. Feedback which guides student

Attitude Barrier *"Error-free text is not my ultimate goal..."*

revising is a useful teaching strategy; feedback on the end product only often engenders resentment: "You're the teacher; if I wasn't doing it right, why didn't you help me?"

We need to identify strengths (or at least potential strengths) as well as weaknesses when we give feedback. Every student has something of value to say, but many lack the experience or strategies for shaping the varied kinds of writing demanded in college or the workplace. Writing is a way to think on paper—not a special activity for the talented. We learned how to do it through lots of practice, with affirmation when we succeeded and suggestions for improvement where we needed it. Our students need the same.

We need to establish useful performance standards and then design meaningful, logically sequenced assignments which provide sequential learning experiences and stimulate higher order thinking skills. The ubiquitous end-of-semester term paper assignment may actually reinforce past unproductive writing patterns (e.g., "encyclopedia pastiche," papers written the night before they are due), rather than stretch a student's ability to think and communicate in new ways. Carefully constructed assignments targeted to outcomes generate better writing.

What outcomes do I expect? Do I want my students to be able to spell accurately, write grammatically correct sentences, punctuate properly? Of course. Careless errors are a discourtesy to the reader. But I want something *more*. I want to break down the attitude barrier. I want them to care about what they write, to feel satisfaction when the ideas in their minds translate into meaningful words on a page, to write with confidence and enthusiasm and insight.

Error-free text is not my ultimate goal. Dick and Jane prose may be devoid of error, but it is also devoid of substance and soul. In fact, I might even choose to forgive a few errors temporarily, knowing from research and my own experience that errors may actually increase when students face higher order thinking/writing tasks.

What do I really want? I want my students to know that power in writing comes not from following rules, but from transcending rules. It comes from writing so well that the reader forgets all about rules, completely caught up in language which connects mind to mind, writing which opens new ways of thinking, words that enter long-term memory, subtly but permanently changing our database.

I like to be there when it happens.

Language Learning and Educational Technology

■ **Anna R. Dadlez**
Professor of Polish

As an instructor whose native language of learning is not English, I would like to add my modest remarks to the thoughts and opinions expressed by the writers in the *Literacy Link*.

Given my own experience of language learning, I can say that one of the most important elements in my motivation to master or at least to acquire the rudiments of a language was the attraction it held for me as a key to the wide vista of human experience in all its intriguing aspects. People, especially young people, need beauty and inspiration in life, and that requires language as a totality of content and form, as both the vehicle and the end in its all-embracing manifestation.

In my Polish high school, to which I often return in my thoughts with deep gratitude, we were given the best examples of Polish literature to read, and I do not remember that anybody worried about our being able to understand each word or phrase. The attraction of the great writers was considered powerful enough to encourage bold attempts to absorb as much as possible of their fantastic array of thoughts, arguments, descriptions. Hence, the content and the language stimulated each other, became inseparable and internalized by us, something which shaped both our minds and personalities and our ability to express.

Similarly, in learning a foreign language, one cannot become acquainted with it without accepting it as one's own. How often in my undergraduate years in England did we youngsters from Central Europe hear our instructors tell us that we did not think English. Strange as it seemed to us at first, it soon became obvious that language and thinking are inseparable and that the possibilities of expressing one's thoughts are unique in each. And writing frequently helps students to figure things out. It is not simply a process of putting on paper their already developed ideas; one can develop ideas by writing about them.

Those of us who agonize over essay exams in subjects other than English must pay attention, above all, to content. The meticulous correction of both content and form is a double burden few of us can undertake in large classes. There is no doubt in my mind that a student cannot achieve a grasp of, for instance, history, without the ability to think, to analyze to criticize, and to render his/her opinions comprehensible in a fluent, personalized language.

Finally, one must recognize that an unsophisticated use of language, restricted both in substance and vocabulary, brings with it the threat of boredom, the most efficient killer of any intellectual endeavor. A sole reliance on computer-dependent instruction precludes the tailoring of educational material to the needs of the individual student and deprives the student of the inspiration a good teacher may provide.

This of course does not mean that educational technology is not enormously helpful in teaching, only that it is no replacement for the flexibility of a teacher; at its worst it may leave students in a sterile environment deprived of imagery and emotion. Although we should provide students with the skills necessary to use computers to adapt to the new globalized economy and politics, teacher involvement, perhaps better expressed as "human mediation," is equally or possibly even more important as the key to successful education.

Risk Taking *"The real issues of equity and fairness do not escape me..."*

consider what these changes mean in terms of their time, their accessibility to computers, their learning styles, and their frustration levels. I have tried to balance these potential negatives against what I believe are overwhelming advantages over what I could accomplish without computers. To not consider these issues carefully begs for disaster.

We all know how much faster we can do our work on a computer, but many students actually spend more time if they come to us with no keyboard or word processing experience. I have had to weigh just how much of that is my problem and how much is theirs. My private opinion is that it is theirs.

The reality is, however, that some of them can write in pencil faster than they can type with a computer. And those who are truly phobic at the beginning of the semester are always behind, needing instructions when another class is ready to file in. So classes must be planned differently than before, with understanding that time is a management issue for all of us.

For me, I run the risk of not doing all that I want to, not getting as far as I want to or did before, because of the intricacies of e-mail, distribution lists, electronic data bases, Internet research, Website evaluation, and the necessary time needed for students to acclimate to the electronic environment. All of these activities have tremendously expanded the way I teach composition, but the risk is that I may not be able to balance my act.

Accessibility is as crucial as time. I have had to ask myself how much I can expect my students to do, knowing that our labs are full and that many do not have computers at home. But I have found them to be very ingenious, using public libraries, younger siblings' high school accounts, boy/girlfriends' and parents' accounts to do their work. I have not lowered my expectations, and they always meet the challenge. I have not ever been under-

standing, I'm afraid, of the students who want to fulfill all their university responsibilities on two days on campus, and have told them emphatically that they need to build library and lab time into their schedules. There is some risk of fallout the first week of school, when they learn what the syllabus really means. I encourage them to find another section if they need to.

The real issues of equity and fairness do not escape me. The potential for marginalization of students who may already be marginalized definitely exists. I am obligated to bear that in mind and balance rigor with fairness. Is there a risk that a student will be halfway through the class and not be able to finish because his schedule will not allow him enough computer access? Yes, unfortunately, there is.

I worry about losing the student whose learning disabilities are such that computers present formidable challenges. Reading on-line is not yet a normal literacy for many students. Everything about it is different. For some, just the movement of the screen presents impossible frustration. These students do not confide in me their problems; I must be aware that they exist and look for them. If the fun of keeping an on-line journal has become a nightmare, I need to find out. Computer assisted instruction is not

necessarily for everyone.

Frustration is not reserved for the learning disabled. We all experience it eventually. Students usually make it apparent. I invite them to my office to log on to their account on my computer, and we then discuss their problems, usually with e-mail management. After these private sessions I notice a much more relaxed attitude and fewer problems. Again, it takes time to discover the floundering quiet ones who don't complain, but could be lost.

On a professional level, I run the risk of alienating colleagues who do not like or want to use computers. They may have the mistaken notion that I am hopelessly over the edge, bitten by the bug of technology. They may mistakenly think I know more than I do and be afraid to ask me their "foolish" question, or think that I have abandoned traditional modes of teaching. They may think that because I am happier teaching in various parts of the room, that I have no respect for the podium and lecture, when in reality I still occasionally use both. I am aware that while I love the flexibility the computer affords me in my teaching, I run the risk of alienating those who have not tried it. Of course, there is always the chance my enthusiasm will rub off and they will choose to join me in this risky business.

What to Do?

■ **Bob Lane,** Political Science

Over the summer, I reflected on how to better encourage students to come to class prepared. By that, I mean having students complete the assigned readings, and be able to discuss the reading in class. Understanding that linking whatever strategy I chose to grades would enhance the likelihood of success, I wanted to minimize the time demands for additional grading. What to do?

Absent a metaphysical revelation, I decided to ask Diane Boehm, Director of the Writing Program. She suggested something that has

met my dual goals of improving student preparedness without adding to my grading obligations.

Entry Cards

At the end of class, I hand students a 5x7 index card, and assign them something to write about. (For example, describe a worker who receives a fair wage.) I collect the cards at the beginning of the next class. (I do this 4-6 times during the semester, and each card is worth five points.) I do not allow students who were absent the day the card was

What to Do?

(Continued from page 5)

assigned to make-up the assignment. Not only does this encourage regular attendance, it also simplifies the grading, for the cards I collect in class are the only ones that count.

So far, I am quite pleased. More of my students are coming to class having read the assignment, and I have more students participating in discussions. In addition, I spend about twenty minutes grading fifty entry cards, so the time demands are quite minimal. I do not give the cards a rigorous reading, nor do I agonize over the points given. If the card is "in the ball park," it receives the full five points; if the card is glaringly insufficient, I grant two points. The simplicity of the assignment dictates the simplicity of the evaluation.

Of course, there are infinite ways to adapt entry cards to serve individual needs. Given the success I've seen this semester, this type of assignment will be a regular part of my teaching repertoire.

the SVSU *Literacy* Link

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