

24 Electronic Conferencing in an Interdisciplinary Humanities Course

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Debbie: Hey guys! How was your day off? I hope you stayed warm. I hate this weather. . . .

John: Hi group. I hope this alias thing works because I don't want to have to do it again. By the way this is John writing to you. . . .

Anne: Hi everyone, I guess if you get this message, it means our alias worked. This whole thing would be more fun if we could write to each other about anything, instead of having to write about this class. So, what are you doing this weekend? . . .

—First e-mail entries, 21 January 1994, IAH 201¹

In *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, James Carey maintains that “the study of culture can also be called the study of communication, for what we are studying in this context are the ways in which experience is worked into understanding and then disseminated and celebrated” (1989, 44). In this chapter, we share a discussion about the use of asynchronous, small-group e-mail assigned in an undergraduate humanities course. Focusing on communicative strategies used by one six-student group, we suggest that this e-mail, by encouraging the students to participate in an intellectual conversation of their own making, helped them create a culture of learning that blurs traditional boundaries between private and public, personal and intellectual areas of thinking and writing.

“The U.S. and the World” was inaugurated in fall 1992 as part of our new general education program. This required course spans the history and culture of the United States from the 16th century to the 1980s and asks students to place themselves, their culture, and its history in a global context. From the outset the course has been one that invites (and depends on) multiple perspectives as well as multiple media. Taught by graduate teaching assistants guided by faculty mentors from various disciplines in the College of Arts and Letters, the course enrolls some 3,000 students per semester in paired sections of thirty students each. Two or three times per week, students view twenty-five- to thirty-minute videos produced specifically for this course. The videos mix voices, visuals, and formats; some involve panel discussions, others a single scholar. Students encounter not one authoritative voice, but many, and even these voices are mediated by primary readings: letters, diaries, personal narratives, legal documents, fiction.

The class is writing-intensive and includes a variety of formal and informal writing; but, unlike courses that teach writing or that introduce students to disciplinary discourse, this course uses writing as a way of coming to terms with the material. In asking students to engage in a dialogue between past and present, the course draws on WAC insights about the importance of personal connections and the role of utterance and speculation in active thinking and learning (e.g., Fulwiler 1989; Fulwiler and Young 1990). The use of e-mail, an adaptation of “common” or “team” journals (e.g., Graybeal 1987), fits with the active learning pedagogy we wished for this course.

Working in four- to six-person groups, large enough to provide multiple views yet small enough for efficient reading and response time, students are asked to “engage ideas” and “talk” to each other weekly via an alias on their university e-mail accounts.² We encourage students to write two or three screens, but instructors do not, generally, participate in the conversations. The e-mail is also worth 15 percent of the grade, which suggests that we’re serious about the value of this activity.

JM: I think there are real differences between e-mail and team journals. Besides changing the medium from handwriting to keyboarding, which could disadvantage some students, the biggest difference, and advantage, is the way it changes communication. Pushing “send” distributes their words to everybody in their group and the teacher. In team journals, students still seem to be writing for the next person, in a linear sequence.

MC: And there’s the informality—the conversational language but also the “errors” in spelling, punctuation, and typos. They’re almost part of the medium. But I think there’s more potential for agreement and disagreement on e-mail, too, which means students are faced with considering not only what, but how, they should write. There’s a real audience, and there are real risks involved in sharing and responding.

JM: Plus, some of the students have to get used to the technology as well as each other. Those first messages look like so much “blather,” but notice that the class becomes a topic very quickly, too, although in resistance: Anne would rather write about “anything, instead of having to write about this class.” They’re beginning to build a context for themselves that includes both personal and academic areas.

KG: Then there is that moment where they realize they’re no longer supposed to be just getting acquainted and deciding about their semester project [to write editorials] but are supposed to be discussing the content of the class. Suddenly the whole thing takes on a different frame, a different tone:

John (2/9): Hey guys . . . Did all of you read the book? I’m just asking because we have to write things about class to one another on e-mail as part of our grade. Is it just me or was it hard to keep track of who was who in the book. It seemed like they were switching characters every line or so. Otherwise I don’t really have too much to say.

KG: I wonder if the teacher didn’t say, “You know, it’s time now to start talking about the books.”

JM: Whether she did or not, what’s significant is that you get this *group* concern with it.

RH: And John suggests, “I don’t write about books very much!” But his question is to the group here, not the teacher.

MC: To me, John seems uncertain about what’s appropriate for this medium, in this context. Maybe it’s as much an issue of how as what, an I-don’t-know-how-to-start-talking-about-this-intellectual-kind-of-stuff, because later on he does introduce topics and share opinions. Anne’s the one who’s shown the most resistance: the videos and readings are “boring” (2/2); she can’t find topics for her editorials (1/27, 2/2); she doesn’t know where the museum is (2/3); she misses meetings (2/9). Yet she’s the one who introduces gender as the first “academic” topic, and she does so before Antonio reports checking with the teacher:

Anne (2/9, 17:54 EST): Hi Everyone. . . . Anyway, I read Charlotte Temple and I really liked it. . . . This period of history is usually not very interesting to me, so I was kind of surprised at how much I enjoyed the story. Maybe I will choose an editorial topic somewhere along the lines of women’s lives in the Revolutionary War era. This is really the first idea I’ve had so far, but knowing me, I could change my mind. . . .

Antonio (2/9, 19:30 EST): Hey what’s up . . . I talked to Mrs. N, John, and she said that all we have to write about is what we either do in class, like watching videos, or talk about our group projects.

KG: Anne’s always surprising herself—or us. She worries about topics, yet she always comes up with quite interesting comments. Maybe she doesn’t expect that what interests her will be in the frame of the class.

MC: Or the group. “I could change my mind” suggests that she’s testing how the others might respond. And notice that Anne really expands gender as a topic after Debbie’s support.

RH: Debbie and her capital-letter messages—are these part of the role she takes on as the group-facilitator? She’s always telling others about meeting times and deadlines:

Debbie (2/11): HEY GUYS! SO WHAT DID YOU THINK ABOUT CHARLOTTE? PRETTY INTERESTING WOMAN. IT SEEMS THAT WOMEN’S ROLE IN SOCIETY HAS ALWAYS BEEN PRETTY PITIFUL. I CAN NOT BELIEVE THAT IT DATES BACK TO THAT TIME THAT WOMEN WERE TREATED INFERIOR TO MEN. (EXCUSE ME FOR BEING A WOMAN, GUYS). . . . GRANTED, SOME CHANGES HAVE DEVELOPED BUT GUYS HAVE SOME MERCY ON US! !@#\$\$%&* I DON’T REALLY THINK WE NEED TO MEET THIS WEEK

. . .

Anne (2/14): . . . I read Debbie’s message about Charlotte Temple and I agree with what she said. . . . Lots of times young girls age 15 or 16 are forced to marry old men in their 40’s or 50’s. . . . The subject of how women are treated carries over from Charlotte Temple to the reading for today about Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. . . . For men who liked to control their women, these advocates were a big threat to them. . . . I’d be interested to hear what you guys think of all this, especially what Tony and John think. . . .

JM: What struck me is how much this goes along with what Bakhtin (1981) defines as dialogue. There are utterances, and you never know how they’re going to shape what follows. Anne pops up with this stuff that’s clearly a concern of hers that’s not articulated anywhere previously. All of a sudden here it is, and all of a sudden the other people in the dialogue have to address it and move what they’re dealing with into what she’s defined:

Antonio (2/15): . . . I think Anne mentioned the idea that women back then were sometimes married with men who were at least three or four times their age. That’s still true Anne. How about India. Women in India, don’t get to choose. . . . I’m not a sovanistic pig, so don’t even think about saying that ok, guys. I think John understands at what I am trying to say. I hope I didn’t bore you guys with what I wrote.

John (2/15): . . . I have been reading what you guys have had to say, and I think all of you really know what you are talking about. My opinion about Charlotte Temple is that she was very oppressed. . . . Sorry Charlotte, but back then it was pretty impossible to live out those hopes. Not that I agree with that, but that is the truth about how things were. . . . I probably sound chauvanistic, but I’m not. That is just the way I saw the story. . . .

JM: So what interests Anne becomes a part of the cultural frame of the group. As soon as she shares her comments on gender, the two guys in the group say that they’re not chauvinistic.

MC: They begin building on each others' views, but it's risky. They invite, even plead, for support. Especially Denise, but I also think about Antonio's "sovanistic." He doesn't know how it's spelled, but that doesn't stop him from trying to communicate. They're taking risks and sharing views that I don't think they would, or could, in class.

JM: And something else this speaks to: providing a vector to move the dialogue and shape it into something else entirely. We don't know if the teacher here has asked anything or not to prompt this response. What's remarkable is that, if indeed that push did occur, there's been a similar push from Anne, from her experience outside of class, to refocus the field of discussion.

KG: Right. What seems to happen is that they have to develop each other's views not a teacher's question. Questions can set a certain frame out of which students tend not to wander.

JM: Questions become almost coercive—you *will* respond.

RH: But they can also be invitations, and then there's another aspect to this—the differential of power, and gender. It's different if students or teachers do the asking.

MC: And not-responding gets noticed, too, which may be related to the hedging in here. Hedging allows room for change and adjustments, creates a safe "out" while maintaining the relationship. In that first gender message, Anne creates a safe place by stating that she might change her mind about gender as a topic worth writing about. It's similar, I suppose, to Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of "face" in politeness strategies, but there's an intellectual dimension here. By inviting the others to respond, she seems to be negotiating the way topics will be developed as well as her own interest in them. She wants to hear what the others will say. In contrast, Debbie's, "guys, have mercy on us" is a plea to Antonio and John.

RH: Debbie's message also closes off the conversation: too bad our society hasn't changed; that's the way it is. There's nothing to discuss. She tells us what we already know.

KG: It seems to me that there's this other frame operating in this piece, this kind of "male-female" understanding, which is partly Anne's assumption that Antonio and John are going to think differently from the women. But then, when she's invoked with their "not chauvinistic," they're working, all of them, to signal their openness to discussion on a polarizing topic.

MC: Thinking about Bakhtin and dialogue: Antonio's partially agreeing with Anne but also shifting and expanding her views when he mentions "India." He shares his own knowledge about gender, but moves the ideas across geographic and cultural space.

JM: These four here, from Debbie through John, you can really see the development of a culture, if you take that as a culture defined by the process of communication. Anne agrees with Debbie, but Debbie has put the topic for-

ward in such a way that it's difficult for anyone to respond. Anne then makes this invitation to dialogue to Antonio and John, both of whom take her up on it, particularly when Antonio pushes John to join. The dialogue is going, and it's expanding, it's moving outward.

MC: In information and in time, which is an interesting development, because one of the safe places here is to leave gender conflicts as "back then," as John does.

KG: Yes, and "India" works in the same way—"out there."

MC: Right, a different cultural space but in current time. They're building connections. Anne presents gender issues as having a history, including specific references to readings—Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. But Antonio states that the problems are "still true." That's an important cultural move. By shifting the topic away from a static "back then," he's positioning their lives in that history: *We are a part of that.*

RH: It's also interesting that the other two women in the group didn't participate in that gender discussion, but they do explain: Tasha's been busy (2/16) and Jane's had a problem with her alias (2/16). And, after that, both of them write consistently and actively, starting with the following week's discussion about slavery. And it's John who introduces the topic. He's catching on to this:

John (2/21): . . . Mrs. N proposed what I thought was a very interesting wuestion today when she asked us wether we aould allow ourselves to become slaves. . . . I came to the conclusion that I would rather run away

KG: And they all begin to agree and disagree more strongly. Look at the way Anne and Tasha actively oppose Jane's suggestion that slavery helped create "character":

Anne (2/23): Hi Guys, It seems like we all have pretty strong opinions. . . . Jane was saying that there were some good things to come out of slavery. I really disagree with that and I disagree with her reasoning. . . . minorities encounter prejudiced people often, just in terms of everyday experiences. This is my opinion on the matter, so anyone can respond with their views.

Jane (2/25): I'm glad everyone has something to say about slavery, but no one seems to be getting very deep into the issue. You all seemed to misunderstand what I was trying to say. . . . Slavery DID happen and nothing can change that. In no way do I mean. . . . Write more. . . .

Tasha (2/25): Hey guys, . . . At this point I would like to agree with Antonio. . . . I hope we are not just talking about the wrongs of today and spreading peace and respect to all races. It starts with us and an individual examining our situations. . . .

MC: Their messages also became longer over the semester. Anne's first messages are five and ten lines long, her gender discussion is twenty, and her last message is thirty lines. She notices that the others' are writing more, too, but

what's important is the way she addresses these "academic" topics now. She adds specific content information, and with no hint of resistance:

Anne (4/22): Since Jim and Fred both decided to write a book this week, I have a lot to respond to. First about Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights movement. . . . Now, about the Cuban Missile Crisis. . . .

MC: This reminds me of Kurt Spellmeyer's (1993) notion of common ground. By sharing views and negotiating positions, these students seemed to reach some common ground of communication and trust—that their views would be respected, at least as worthy of discussion. And the hedging and the "chit-chat," which seemed so non-intellectual, actually allowed them to develop that ground.

JM: Victor Turner (1977) calls that a "liminal space." It's that risky "in-between" area where communication, and so culture, and learning, can develop. E-mail can provide that.

RH: I agree, but I don't want to lose sight of the teacher's investment in that culture either. As with any assignment, students can choose to cooperate or not regardless of the direction, or freedom, a teacher gives, and there are issues to consider. On a practical level, using e-mail groups requires advance planning. How easy will it be for students to access and use e-mail? If it's too difficult, valuable time will be lost. Another consideration is the teacher's time. Keeping track of the messages doesn't take long, but teachers also have to decide whether or how much they will be involved in the e-mail groups. Maintaining "screen silence," as the teacher did with this group, can make us question what we're doing and why. Then, there's evaluation, which is always thorny but becomes even more so if students seem to be engaging in so much "chit-chat." Clearly, traditional criteria that work for a final draft in hard copy have to be modified if we want to support an intellectual conversation that involves the give-and-take of communication.

MC: That reminds me of another benefit, or maybe mixed blessing, of this e-mail. It helps me reflect on my own practices and expectations. That's the benefit of discussions like this one, but using e-mail provides ongoing feedback. As I read the students' weekly messages, I can't help but think about what's working or not working in the class, where disagreements or problems are occurring. I can see my values reflected as well as my failings. That's positive, but not always comfortable.

John Fiske suggests that the "art of being in-between" requires appropriation (1994, 36), and part of the development of a culture of learning is the appropriation of the discourse of the educational community by the learners who use it. Not all groups function as smoothly or engage discussion as regularly as these students did. However, students who actively engage in e-mail discussions can be expected to turn the experience to their own ends, and not necessarily in ways that coincide with what the teacher had in mind. E-mail seems to facilitate such appropriation since it is done outside the teacher's di-

rect control, but, in turn, it challenges us to understand the way communicative strategies, as well as our own practices, can make such appropriation possible.

Notes

1. Student excerpts are presented verbatim, edited only to conserve space; ellipsis dots represent omitted materials. Student names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

2. All MSU students have Internet e-mail accounts provided through their technology fee. Computers connected to the Internet are also quite readily available on campus. For this class, we have each student create an "alias" in his or her e-mail program comprised of the addresses of other group members and the teacher so that everyone simultaneously receives a copy of each message. A listserv—e.g., Schwartz (1995)—or a locally networked system with communication software could also allow student e-mail discussions. However, the number we would need makes listservs impractical. In addition, we believe that the size of the e-mail group is important. Larger groups would make the amount of time spent reading and responding prohibitive, or at least discouraging, and provide fewer "safe places" for students, especially younger undergraduates, to become comfortable with each other while writing about academic, intellectual, and often socially sensitive issues.

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