THE MYSTERIOUS TERRITORY OF DISTANCE LEARNING

by Evelyn Beck

In the year after her young daughter accidentally drowned in a backyard swimming pool, Michelle rarely left home, a small trailer in a desolate dirt parking lot off the highway leading out of town. Instead, she spent every day at the computer, creating a website memorializing Sarah, her lost daughter, and corresponding electronically with old friends and with the new comrades she found through an Internet support group for grieving parents.

A former student of mine, Michelle had since become a close friend, and I worried about her constantly because, despite the best efforts of many, she rarely budged from her trailer, for being around people suddenly frightened her. So I backed off, instead becoming part of the online community that helped her through that immensely painful year. She responded best to direct references to Sarah, and I remember how moved she was by a poem I e-mailed: William Wordsworth's "Surprised by Joy," about the writer's shock that he was able to forget his daughter's death, "Even for the least division of an hour," when he'd been momentarily "beguiled" by a simple pleasure.[1]

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Following the first anniversary of her child's death, Michelle finally ventured away from home by enrolling in a computer class at my college. While cheering her courage, I also recognized that she owed her survival to the love and support of a vital "virtual" community.

This understanding has, in turn, influenced my teaching. In the mid-1990s, intrigued by the application of technology to instruction and by our administration's leap into the mysterious territory of distance learning, I taught my first distance course on a one-way, closed-circuit television network broadcast to the six county centers in the college's service area. A year later, I taught several courses on the newer, two-way TV system, which not only allowed students to see the teacher but also let the instructor at last glimpse the remote classrooms.

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Next, I taught a course delivered to students on videotapes, a decidedly ho-hum experience, and in 1999, ready for what seemed the next, natural, evolutionary step, I volunteered to develop and teach Piedmont Tech's second Internet course, English Composition II. Today—by choice—half of my six-course teaching load is online.

I'm far from alone. A report by International Data Corporation projects that in 2002, 85 percent of colleges will offer distance education courses to over two million students, a quadrupling of enrollment since 1998.[2] But teaching online is still such uncharted territory that, like pioneering distance educators everywhere, I wonder how best to create a meaningful experience. Most of my effort has been directed at trying to re-create online the kind of community that fosters learning in the traditional classroom. While I've discovered that some kinds of interaction can morph into an online version, others can't. More importantly, I've begun to understand the Web's opportunities for a new level of interaction and support.

Teaching in the face-to-face classroom is simpler in many ways. I can offer immediate encouragement and clear up confusion, based on such physical cues as slumping posture or puzzled looks. Or I can direct students sitting across from each other to participate in a group exercise. To accomplish these same tasks online is challenging. Encouragement must be composed and then launched into cyberspace, confusion runs rampant even with the most detailed written instructions, and I am often not aware of students' frustration or misunderstanding until after they needed my help.

"I'm sitting at my computer and crying," a frustrated student moaned in a bulletin board posting that I didn't read until two days later. As for group activities, they are possible online but logistically difficult, especially for students who signed up for online classes because their tight schedules demanded flexibility.

And yet the online environment has many pluses. It's a truer democracy in which everyone participates more equally than in the traditional classroom, where some talk and some don't. And because participants have more time to reflect before jumping in and because a sense of anonymity promotes risk-taking, student responses tend to be much more thoughtful. There's also more contact with some Internet students because of a frequent exchange of e-mail.

E xperience helps instructors working online understand these advantages and disadvantages, as does the sharing of pedagogical strategies. Still, struggling

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to do a good job in a new milieu is daunting. How can I tell if I'm taking the right approaches? Is good teaching good teaching, no matter where it happens?

Ralph Gomory, president of The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, thinks so. He told an assembly at Yale University, "We have learned that ALN [Asynchronous Learning Networks] can be done in a wide variety of styles, text-based, video-based and everything in between and that all these styles can work (or not work). It is still pedagogy that counts."[3]

Most research suggests that students can and do learn just as much online as they do in a regular classroom. "Distance education is just as effective as traditional education in regards to learner outcomes" and "distance learners feel they learn as well as if they were in a regular classroom," according to a report from the National Center for Education Statistics.[4]

Indeed, my own experience supports these and many similar findings. After three years teaching online, I have to agree that students complete my Internet classes with grades comparable to their on-campus counterparts and that their writing shows an equally insightful level of literary analysis, though they are slightly more likely to withdraw along the way, in part due to technological issues.

But comparable grades are only part of the story. I want to create the kind of community online that so often forms in traditional classrooms, the sort of place where students and teacher learn from each other, not

just during formal lessons but throughout the experience of each day's class. And I believe I am finally learning how to exploit the strangely more intimate nature of the faceless electronic medium.

Blakely, a student enrolled first in one of my regular classes and then the next semester in an online class, showed me the potential of the virtual environment. Always smiling, his brown hair barely visible under an ever-present baseball cap, Blakely maintains a positive attitude even though a diving accident left him a quadriplegic at 17. He enrolled at my college at 20, following three years of recovery and readjustment.

Unfortunately, and despite the support of campus staff, multiple problems arose in our face-to-face class. Most troublesome, the classroom was on the second floor, and during a patch of icy winter weather, the elevators stopped working, leaving Blakely and his mother, who regularly accompanied him to class, stuck downstairs for several classes. A few days later, the weather eased and the elevator started functioning again, but then, during a subsequent class, a bomb threat emptied campus at the same instant that snow started to fall, and Blakely's mother panicked that we might not be able to get him downstairs. We did, but these problems proved so frustrating that we finally swapped spaces with a class in a first-floor room. However, we quickly discovered that in this older, smaller room, Blakely's wheelchair could not fit between the smaller rows, and the desks were too low to accommodate him.

In addition, the new classroom was extremely hot as well as infested
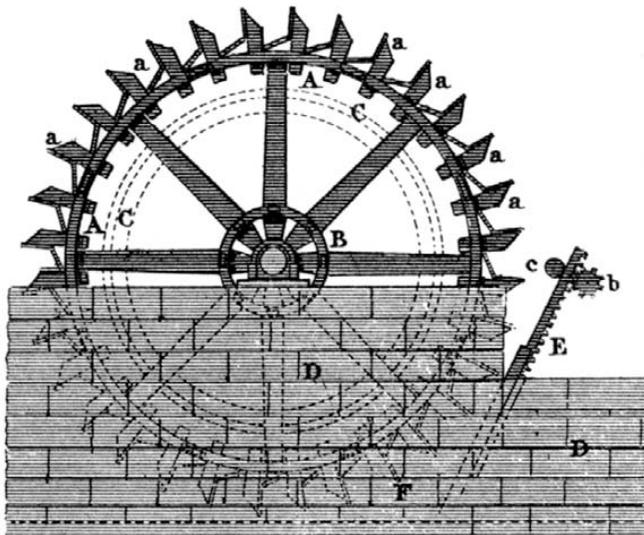
with ants, leading to some vocal complaints by other class members who somehow weren't aware of the accessibility issues of the previous room or else did not care. Even as things finally settled down, Blakely's awkward entrance into the room each day drew unwanted attention to him, not to mention the fact that no other student came to class with his mother. Only when Blakely's writing talents emerged and when he grew brave enough to share his writing with the class did he become—as much as possible—just another student.

The next semester, Blakely registered for my Internet English Composition II class, and his experience online seemed quite different. Even though he shared the results of his accident in a posted introduction during the first week, his wheelchair was no longer a focus of every interaction.

Much more quickly and more powerfully, he became his written voice, someone whom other students felt comfortable cheering or

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chiding, depending on his comments. He became Blakely the country boy instead of Blakely the quadriplegic. He became the guy who loved tiny Clinton, South Carolina, and detested big cities, the young man who simultaneously appalled and amazed the environmentalists among us by describing how he still managed to go hunting with the help of an ingenious contraption rigged by his uncle that allowed Blakely to pull a rifle trigger by breathing into a straw. We focused on his abilities rather than his disabilities.

From Blakely and Michelle and other students, I have come to believe in the importance of creating an online community, and I have identified three elements vital to its success in my own classes: Encourage the sharing of personal information, promote the exchange of knowledge, and conduct these interchanges publicly.

An online course can invite immediate affinity in a way a traditional class cannot. On opening day, for example, if students sitting in a room together are asked to share their personal stories, most will shyly volunteer only their major and where they live. Online, however, because students do not feel the pressure of responding quickly, and because they're not facing their classmates, the revelations are quite startling. As one of my current online students told me recently, "I miss being in a classroom with all these interesting people, but in a classroom, I wouldn't know all these things about them."

I kicked off my semester's English 102 class by summarizing my education and work and family background and by admitting that I dreamed of writing a novel—no great revelations, but my tone was familiar and inviting. In response, my students were also forthcoming, and the depth of their comments seemed to inspire a thread of thoughtful self-introductions.

For example, Kimberly told us about her recovery from an automobile accident that involved learning how to walk again. She wrote, "My accident certainly slowed my life down a lot. It also allowed me to kind of sit back and listen to those around me, my son especially. He was my little hero through the whole ordeal." She explained that having to quit her job as a hairdresser caused her to fill time by volunteering at her children's school, leading to a new career goal of becoming a teacher.

This kind of story-telling at the start of the semester inspires trust, invites confidences, and creates a group history.

A flood of revelations from classmates followed. Candi posted next, saying, "I, too, have a story that explains my journey to this place in my life," then wrote about caring for her husband's grandmother and discovering that her daughter faced a serious illness as well. When her grandmother died, Candi says, "I felt an intense urge to begin my life."

Fellow student Lynn responded, "I know where I want my life to go, but it took a long time to get on the right road" because she had to drop out of school due to her own child's illness. Samantha then shared her struggles raising a daughter born with a cleft lip who had undergone multiple surgeries. Shanita wrote, telling us that her 18-year-old brother had been killed last summer in a police chase, leaving behind two babies who would never know him.

This kind of storytelling—so generously offered in the very first week of the semester—inspires trust, invites confidences, and creates a group history. Caleb J. Clark, a professor of educational technology at San Diego State University in California, says that personal exchange is a must for building online learning communities:

> I believe the sharing of personal narratives is the most important part of any online learning community. . . . Personal narrative is the sun that makes communities grow; the little stories of our lives, the things we tell our mate when they ask, "How was your day, dear?" Personal narrative is vital because it builds identity in a bodiless place, and provides understanding and support circles.[5]

These revelations allow students to see each other sympathetically and create a bond. They establish the bulletin board as the site of real sharing and interaction so that by the second week, when the purpose of posting is to respond both personally and analytically to the assigned readings and to each other's responses to the literature, the task is neither alien nor intimidating.

Current research agrees. A report by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), *Distance Education: Guidelines for Good Practice,* confirms that "the most important challenge facing distance education is the need to develop a rich level of personal interchange between professor and student and among students themselves."[6] These findings are further supported by a report produced by a faculty seminar at the University of Illinois about online teaching and learning; it concluded that interaction was a key component of distance education and that it was a factor in helping students to think critically:

> *The personal interaction really does seem to stimulate critical thinking...students weave personal insight into provocative literary and social analysis.*

> High quality online teaching is not just a matter of transferring class notes or a videotaped lecture to the Internet; new paradigms of content delivery are needed. Particular features to look for in new courses are the strength of professor-student and student-student interactions, the depth at which students engage in the material, and the professor's and students' access to technical support. Evidence of academic maturity, such as critical thinking and synthesis of different areas of knowledge, should be present in more extensive online programs.[7]

In conclusion, said the report, "online teaching and learning can be done with high quality if new approaches are employed which compensate for the limitations of technology, and if professors make the effort to create and maintain the human touch of attentiveness to their students."[8]

The personal interaction really does seem to stimulate critical thinking. In their exchanges, students weave personal insight into provocative literary and social analysis. One of the most memorable discussion threads in my online American literature class last spring analyzed racism in our culture as reflected in the speeches of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Many students described personal encounters with racism, from the young woman whose boyfriend silently sulked in a

restaurant where he had been slighted to the student whose family refused to hate the white men who'd murdered their Black grandfather on the square in the nearby town of Abbeville.

Students then used these experiences to consider how progress is achieved. They debated whether African-Americans should exhibit the fortitude of Booker T. Washington, who urged, "I believe it is the duty of the Negro. . . to deport himself modestly in regard to political claims, depending upon the slow but sure influences that proceed from the possession of property, intelligence, and high character for the full recognition of his political rights,"[9] or whether they should fight aggressively for "ultimate assimilation through self-assertion, and on no other terms,"[10] as W.E.B. DuBois long urged.

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Almost all students found Washington's conciliatory tone and dignified humility more appealing than DuBois' strident fury, but after looking more closely at the two men's arguments, many conceded that our society had ultimately followed DuBois' lead, though whether this was a positive or negative development incited much disagreement. Furthermore, students addressed the larger issue of what stimulates change and what role writing and speaking play. In discussions later in the semester, the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X elicited even greater excitement and surprise because the speakers' names and ideals were so familiar, yet their specific words were not.

The students' ability to think critically about these issues is very important for successful education at a distance. Another report "warns of the dangers of distance education courses that focus on teaching facts rather than helping students to develop a broad understanding about issues and multiple perspectives."[11] An online bulletin board where students feel free to share their own experiences and insights is an excellent way to assist students in developing this kind of open-minded, wide-ranging perspective. The report reminds us, "Education, among other things, is about broadening intellectual horizons, relying on facts and reason when confronting life issues and learning to listen to others and defend ideas by the force of argument."[12]

Deep knowledge involves much more than passing a competency test, the report states: "It does in fact require time—time in the same room or in cyberspace—with teachers and other students chewing over ideas, hearing contrary points of view and defending conclusions."[13]

An interchange like the one in my American literature class allows me to observe the students learning from each other. It's a good example of how in a thriving community, all the members both give and take—even when the community is an academic one in which the teacher is usually viewed as the one who presents information and the students as those who absorb it. This outdated model doesn't work with today's student-centered educational focus, where the teacher has become more of a guide and facilitator, and it certainly acts against the strengths of the online environment.

However, students need nudging to believe that their input is important. I encourage them to post SOS requests on the bulletin board so that whoever arrives online first can respond, and typically in the first week or two, someone confused about the syllabus will ask for clarification and then quickly receive several replies about upcoming assignments. Others pose simple technical problems, such as how to attach a document to an e-mail message or how to remove old bulletin board postings from the screen, questions which one or more classmates can quickly and easily answer. Clark says:

> One of the hardest things to do in any online community is to get people to give information. One reason is that people just don't naturally think their way of doing things has value, when in fact it is the very heart of a community's value! This is especially true in online learning communities where the exchange of information is key to keeping students coming back. . . . The give and take of good information is essential for providing value in any online community. Online learning communities need to provide an environment that gives members value for participating.[14]
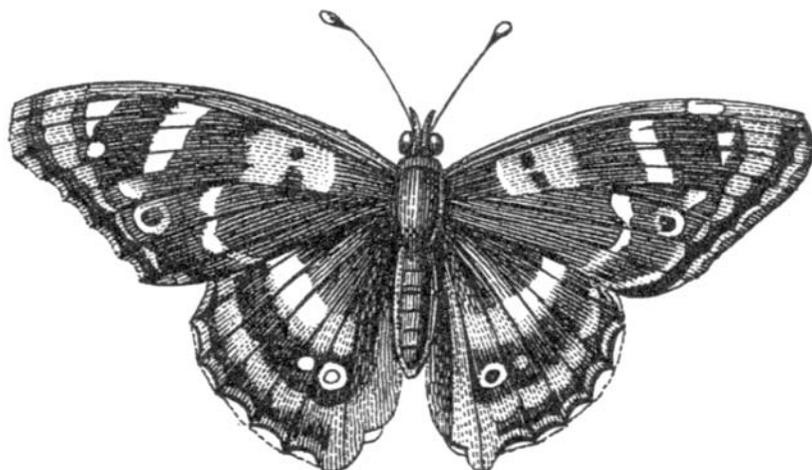
Not only must the students be allowed to show their expertise, but the teacher can and should ask for help from students as well. Perhaps it's asking for some detail in the reading that has been forgotten, or maybe it's seeking a volunteer to post an essay draft—or sample stellar essay—online. Students need to know that the learning process flows in two directions.

The building of online resources for future students is as important as the sharing that takes place during the course of a semester. I've done this in a number of ways, from a course website that included student essays written directly for an Internet project, to student websites that are linked from my course homepage, to an idea bank to which students can submit topic ideas or helpful website links. Students feel great pride in knowing that others will read their work, while the pressure of writing for a wide audience inspires greater effort.

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As a teacher, I take immense pleasure in seeing how students' research often leads them to the work of former students. For example, I continually see references to an essay written by one of my students five years ago and posted online comparing the system of gods in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* to the Catholic Church's hierarchy of saints. Students encountering that essay have found it an aid in suppressing their own ethnocentric instincts, and some have used it as a springboard to further research about Ibo religious beliefs—essays which have also landed online in an expanding network of student-written analysis.

Despite how the Internet has transformed our society, the change to a knowledge-sharing culture is happening more slowly than the technology that allows it. I recently interviewed an executive at Hartford Technology Services Company, an information technology consulting company in Connecticut, who tried to get his employees to share their expertise with one another through an online internal expert network. But the change was difficult, he said, because "in the old days, knowledge was considered to be power. What people knew they tended to retain."[15] To compel the change, the company has had to reward employees with public praise and with such catalog merchandise as lava lamps and gas grills to break them out of the habit of stockpiling savoir-faire. The payoff, though, has been an overall increase in individual knowledge and an energized team spirit that has boosted workplace morale.

I, too, initially resisted making public almost all communication exchanges in my Internet courses. For the first few years teaching online, I held back. I posted weekly on the bulletin board, just as my students did, summarizing their comments and reminding them about the next week's assignments. Students who had questions would e-mail me privately, and I would respond in kind. But then I started to think about how that kind of interchange might play out in a classroom. If students in a traditional class received information only through what I announced or in response to their individual questions, they'd miss a lot. So much incidental learning happens in conversations before and after class and in questions posed by one person but answered by addressing the entire class. Plenty of students in a traditional class are the equivalent of those online lurkers, too shy to enter the dialogue but listening and learning intently from the information swirling around them. My online students needed that kind of access to information.

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As a result, I now encourage students to post questions on the bulletin board, and for those questions not answered by others, I post a public response. If I get a question via e-mail, I answer it on the bulletin board, too, unless the matter is private. I also post computer tips periodically as problems arise. I worried at first that I'd inundate students with too much information, but they seem to crave it, as if I were dropping supplies to island castaways.

I also have started inviting my students to begin each posting with a quick personal summary of their week to foster the kind of chatting that takes place before the start of face-to-face classes. I modeled what I wanted by telling them that I'd run in a one-mile race one weekend, beating out only those few runners in worse shape than me, including a woman who was eight months pregnant with twins.

While I don't want personal chatter to overwhelm the intellectual goal of the bulletin board, a few personal tidbits add interest and humor can serve as an icebreaker, just as they do in the classroom, where the first minute or two might allude to the latest national news or students' plans for an upcoming holiday. The result of encouraging brief online conversations is that many students now visit the bulletin board more often, making the class a more integral part of their life rather than a once-a-week chore. And it infuses a bit more spontaneity into the dialogue, a welcome

addition to a nonspontaneous asynchronous environment.

Perhaps all I'm saying is that I've found it worthwhile to work hard at making the virtual environment a little more friendly and a little less isolated. Consider the case of Seth, who enrolled in my online world literature course even though he didn't own a computer and in fact resisted technology as a matter of principle. A young man with long hair and an engaging smile, Seth did all of his work for the class at school, frequently stopping by my office with questions, especially about his research project. Though quite comfortable on the virtual bulletin board, where he was our class' most gregarious contributor, Seth couldn't bear to transmit his essays by e-mail, preferring to drop off paper copies. One day, when I reminded him yet again that I preferred electronic submissions, that this was after all an Internet class, he responded with the nicest compliment I've ever received from a "virtual" student: "But Ms. Beck, you're real to me." nea

ENDNOTES

[1] Wordsworth's sonnet was first published in 1815, three years after the death of his daughter, Catherine.

[2] Kriger, 2001, 5.

[3] Gomory, 2001, 142.

[4] Lewis, 1999, 6.

[5] Clark, 1998, 8.

[6] "Distance Education: Guidelines for Good Practice," 2000, 8.

[7] "Teaching at an Internet Distance: The Pedagogy of Online Teaching and Learning," 3.

[8] "Teaching at an Internet Distance: The Pedagogy of Online Teaching and Learning," 1.

[9] Washington, 1998, 942. Originally published in 1901.

[10] DuBois, 1998, 955. Originally published in 1903.

[11] Kriger, 2001, 22.

[12] Kriger, 2001, 4.

[13] Kriger, 2001, 21.

[14] Clark, 1998, 5.

[15] Telephone interview with Bob Lucas conducted 22 August 2001.

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