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## Basking in a Blue Glow?: Technology and the Humanities Classroom

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# Basking in a Blue Glow?

## Technology and the Humanities Classroom

**A**t a workstation in a campus living center sits an 18-year-old whose face appears to emit a blue tinge from the many hours he has spent basking in a computer screen's glow. He cannot imagine trekking across the ravine to the library with so much intriguing information immediately available at the click of a button. A world away, an adventurous 78-year-old learns to use the computer her children gave her, so she can communicate more easily with family living in cities as distant as Houston, Chicago, and Hong Kong. She has mastered email but is afraid to venture onto the Internet, explaining that the Internet "ruins peoples' lives." An unnamed "they" will "steal your money, show you pornography, and lure you into lurid chat rooms."

While our MTV generation students by and large embrace new technology (lines are longer at the campus email terminals than they are at the Commons' Taco Bell), most humanities faculty approach technology and teaching as warily as my 78-year-old friend eyes the Internet, and for good reason. We are, after all, not purveyors of fast food. In many ways we see society's obsession with speed, ease, and convenience as contrary to what we value. What could be any less speedy, easy, or convenient than reading a challenging novel and struggling to understand how the writer crafts her work, what the author says about her world, about humanity, and what meaning these words have for us as individuals and as a society? Joking that part of my job is helping to make

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the world safe for literature, I try to spark my students' intellectual curiosity, to show them that vast, intriguing world (past and present) which is theirs to explore. I want them to experience the thrill of discovery when they learn about the world, and in the process, themselves. As students in liberal arts classes think, write, and speak about a world of ideas, they become clearer thinkers and more articulate speakers and writers, as well.

So what does this life of the mind have to do with a life online? Technology has added a new, richer dimension to my classroom, helping me to achieve these goals. Computer-generated slide shows, the Internet, class bulletin boards and chat rooms have all transformed my courses, providing new possibilities for reaching an increasingly challenging audience.

### Images in a world of words

Along with many of my colleagues, I am most comfortable in a world of words. The feel of the printed page is concrete, tangible, reassuring. The look of fresh print on a stark white page pleases our eyes. Our students, though, do not always share our love of the word. Theirs is the generation of the image. Many of our students come to us having logged thousands of hours watching such shows as MTV's "Real World" and music videos, characterized by vivid color, fast movement, and quick cuts. We greet them with a black-and-white world, which moves rather slowly and painstakingly. I began using computer-generated presentations in the classroom as a way to help students better understand a world very different from their own, by adopting a strategy that is very much a part of their lives.

To teach Pope's poem *The Rape of the Lock*, for example, I use contemporary words, music, and images in a computer-generated slide show to illustrate the eighteenth century aristocracy Pope lampoons. Many of the images come from Internet sites; others I scanned from print sources. Students laugh at the hairdo complete with a fully rigged frigate or the hairstyles that incorporate

waterfalls and gardens, coiffures so elaborate hairdressers had to stand on scaffolding to finish their work. Students grin at the corsets and paniers, enjoying contemporary accounts from newspapers that charge these inventions were employed to keep "saucy men" at a distance. Caricatures of the elaborate ritual "the toilette" help the class see that Pope, too, satirizes the shallowness of an aristocracy known for ostentatiousness. The students bring to the literary text a deeper understanding of the context from which the poem emerged because they have seen with their own eyes images of that world. My goals have not changed: I am still asking students to read carefully, to think through difficult material, and to understand the significance of what Pope does, but I am better preparing my students to undertake these tasks.

In some cases, the supplementary images were originally an integral part of the literary experience. For example, etchings from a William Blake archive on the Web let students read *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* with the illustrations Blake originally created to complement his own poetry. In other cases, I use the computer shows to more easily explain complex issues. With modernist literature, for example, students typically have a tough time "getting the point," as they say. When I began teaching, I would explain that, spurred by devel-

opments in everything from psychology to physics to photography, modernist writers realized there is more to reality than meets the eye. The tidy little story with a neat ending no longer accomplished the writer's goals. Rejecting what Hemingway called "straight go ahead plot," these writers rendered the complexities of "reality" by experimenting with language and narrative techniques, presenting multiple perspectives, and blurring the distinctions between subjective and objective reality.

In class, I would point out countless examples in the literary texts. Students would dutifully memorize my list of the characteristics of modernism and repeat it at exam time, somehow still not quite comprehending what a major shift in thinking modernism represented. Students now better understand the narrative experiments undertaken by modernist writers when I show them the same techniques employed by Impressionist, Symbolist, and Cubist painters, as well as by composers like

Stravinsky. Students see in the onscreen canvases the same techniques and preoccupations they can now see more clearly in the works we read. In addition, most students are intrigued by the interconnectedness of all these different facets of history, science, psychology, art, and music. They no longer experience the modern aesthetic as a quirky peculiarity of literary history but as a worldview pervading all dimensions of the early twentieth century. Students still dutifully memorize my list of modernist characteristics, but now the list means something more tangible to them!

### **Moving Megabytes—Information at your Fingertips**

Although the Internet can never replace the library, I continue to marvel at what is available so easily online. Recently, for a chapter I am writing on *Finnegans Wake*, I needed to consult an esoteric, 50-pound, multi-volume compilation of Irish manuscripts, *The Annals of the Four Masters*. Not only was the complete work online, I could also search it electronically for the specific theme that interested me. Previously an interlibrary loan request could take several weeks and some dollars to fulfill. Gleaning relevant passages would require several more weeks of skimming the printed text.

Practically every text in the public domain appears as an electronic text on the Internet. This semester, for instance, my Honors Eurociv students can find every text required for the course online. Just a click on the etext button from the syllabus homepage and voila, instant text! In my experience, the texts have been at least as accurate as published versions. Students often still choose to purchase longer works (I would too and advise them to do so), but the money saving option is there.

In addition to the electronic text links, I have created a "tools page" for students. This list connects students to reference works available online: *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, *Roget's Thesaurus*, *Webster's Dictionary*, *Strunk and White's Elements of Style*, and the *Modern Language Association's*

*Guide to Citing Sources*. Grand Valley's new library page also offers a treasure of resources, including discipline specific research guides. I provide links to my own writing handouts on thesis statements, development, organization and coherence, sentence revision, and mechanics. If students are particularly enterprising, they can send questions about grammar to an online writing center, which will answer the queries by email within 24 hours. Just as my courses have been changed by the easy access to a wealth of material online, student work has benefited as well. With these resources so readily available, students consult them who otherwise would not find the time in the mad dash to finish an assignment by the deadline. Students who don't consult the writing aids sooner, often find them later. In conferences this semester with students who did poorly on the initial paper, I noticed that every student came with the graded paper as well as a printed copy of my online handouts applicable to that individual's writing problems. As a result, the students were better prepared to discuss what went wrong, why, and what to look for in drafts of future papers.

Electronic texts online provide primary readings for a course as well as reference tools. But, you may ask, how much of an impact do etexts actually have on the classroom? After all, there still are bookstores, libraries, and photocopies. With each semester, I find myself using more and more illustrative texts from online in a way that is similar to my use of the images. Just as with the images, the texts help me to recreate a world rather distant from our own and recreate it by bringing to life the voices of the past. In many cases, I have found materials on the Internet that I would not otherwise know existed.

When I teach Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, a Victorian novel about industrialization and urban life, I include supplementary texts from the Sadler Commission testimony about factory conditions, child labor, and sanitation, as well as excerpts from Queen Victoria's diary gushing about that paean to industry, the Great Exhibition of

1851. This version of "in their own words" brings a chorus of voices from the past into the classroom, leading students to a more sophisticated understanding of Gaskell and her world. When I teach Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, I bring to class a series of letters describing his lecture circuit across the U.S., including one in which he details his reception onstage in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Students are startled to think of Twain addressing their ancestors right here, as startled as they are to imagine a world in which the writers of the day are the leading intellectuals and celebrities who can make a difference in society.

### **Conjuring Conversation— Interactive Software**

It is ironic that a medium which many fear will isolate individuals can actually help us to communicate more effectively and in more meaningful ways. Probably among our most difficult challenges as teachers is to entice, provoke, and cajole our students into expressing themselves. Intellectual exchange is at the heart of what we do, yet classroom discussion rarely comes easily. Everything, from midwestern culture to student culture, works against us. Our students are pleasant, polite, and passive. Even when they hold strong opinions on a topic that matters to them, many students are reluctant to assert themselves. Some fear others will think they are too outspoken or too smart. Some, young women in particular but not exclusively, feel they have nothing important enough to say. Others fear they will say the wrong thing and risk marking themselves as someone who doesn't belong (a particular concern of students from working class or minority backgrounds). Others are just introspective types who come to their own ideas through a longer process of reflection. A day or two after the discussion, these students

know what they think and would be ready to reveal it, if only the class weren't now onto a completely different topic.

Email discussion groups and software such as WebCt with its mail, bulletin board, and chat rooms hold out real promise for promoting class discussion, perhaps, in fact, more promise than a professor's encouragement or designating a substantial percentage of the grade for "preparation and participation." When I began to use email discussion groups, I realized that students who initially never said a peep in class could roar like lions online. A certain amount of anonymity, or distance, it turned out, could be a very good thing. In fact, those who were initially silent in class gained enough confidence through electronic postings that they were able to speak in class by the end of the semester. The magic, though, does not happen on its own. The same principles that guide us in the classroom apply to the electronic classroom. Teachers need to read the postings and respond to them with encouraging words as well as constructive questions that will push students to think analytically, to develop intellectually, and to make connections between their own world and what they read in ours.

Two years ago, Fran Kelleher, a history professor, and I developed a semester-long writing assignment for our Honors Eurociv class; we dubbed it the Voyager Project. Forced to flee plague-ridden London in the 1660's, students took on historical personas, writing letters home after their voyages across the globe. The class combined historical research with creative writing to detail what the world was like in their assigned locales (Africa, India, the Caribbean, Russia, for example). An initial letter detailed the voyage, and subsequent letters explained changes over the centuries as subsequent generations succeeded the pioneer voyagers. The letters were posted on the Internet, and students responded to each other's work through email, noting parallels with their own assigned regions as well as making connections to the work we were doing in class. This assignment helped us to put historical and liter-

ary developments in Europe into a global context that otherwise would not have been possible. We effectively extended the reach of our classroom and expanded our syllabus substantially without adding hours and credits to an already full slate. The students learned a great deal, enjoyed creating their letters and reading others'. They also took pride in the fact that their letters were on the Web for all to see. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, a number of the students led family members to the computer at home to view their work.

Interactive software has the potential to create opportunities for learning and communication that would not otherwise exist. A couple of years ago, fellow English colleague Carol Winters conceived of a series of discussions called "Teacher Talk," a terrific support group for our graduates who were new teachers. These events generated a great deal of interest, but scheduling presented difficulties. Using WebCt, I put together an online forum for our alumni with a bulletin board, email, chatroom and links for educators. Teachers can arrange in advance to meet particular colleagues in the chatroom for "real time" conversation or post queries to the bulletin board seeking feedback from anyone who later logs on. If Carol, or any of our English education faculty, wants to hear feedback about some aspect of our curriculum or facilitate a discussion on a topic such as the MEAP, she can post a notice of the upcoming event. Anyone interested can log on to the chat room and participate in any part or all of the session. Later, a transcript of the discussion could be posted for anyone who missed the event.

### **Online with the Show**

So far I have focused on technology as it enhances a traditional classroom. Many faculty, particularly in the humanities, worry that online courses threaten academe as we know it. In electronic discussion groups faculty describe their worst nightmares, envisioning administrators toting up in accounting books the tuition dollars received and low overhead expended with online courses

enrolling thousands. The mad rush of some proprietary schools to create online degree-granting empires reasonably fuels such concerns. Businesses, such as "Real Education," (great name! What, then, are we?) shoehorn faculty course material into their own course templates (and, rumor has it, claim copyright in order to resell that material to other schools as original content).

The University of Phoenix advertises an MBA, as well as several other master's programs and will begin an online Doctor of Management program starting in early 1999. The California system offers a full complement of online courses from its regional campuses, and the Western Governors University (WGU), a consortium of western states conceived several years ago by their governors, recently opened its virtual doors, acting as a broker to bring together course providers (universities or businesses willing to pay a \$10,000 fee) and students. A *Chronicle of Higher Education* article recently pegged that opening as more ballyhoo than boom since only 75 students nationwide enrolled. WGU claimed this as a good sign, believe it or not—students are "serious" about the school, they say, waiting to find out more about WGU before enrolling.

I have serious doubts about how high quality a totally online degree can be, or how committed to "real education" a strictly moneymaking venture might be.

Any quality class requires a structure and content shaped by a knowledgeable faculty member, as well as significant opportunities for class interaction and feedback. If a course is nothing more than lecture notes dumped online and assessment by computer-scored quizzes, students are getting little for their tuition dollars. What would distinguish such an endeavor from a diploma mill? A course that is more than a heap of notes and multiple choice exams requires a significant expenditure of a faculty member's time for development and instruction, making it no longer an entrepreneur's cash cow.

72 | An online course can serve useful functions. I am currently teaching GVSU's first completely online course, *British Writers II* (a survey of writers from the 18th century through the 20th), with 21 language arts students in Traverse City. I designed the materials for the course myself, aiming to replicate as closely as possible the best qualities of the traditional humanities classroom. Students have an online "syllabus" page, which outlines the reading for each week. By pressing on the etext button, students can get the week's reading online. The "Go to Class" button takes students to a "Welcome to Class" page which provides background materials for that week's work. Buttons on this page include a "To Do" checklist, as well as information about what the critics say, key or unusual quotations, discussion

questions, literary terms, historical context, biographical information, internet links, and literary gossip. In addition, I use software called RealPresenter to convert my PowerPoint lectures with narration into self-running "movies" on the Internet.

Students respond to discussion questions or tackle assigned projects individually and within designated study circles. Class members post their work on the course bulletin board; other students and I respond to the postings. So far, postings have generally been quite sophisticated and thoughtful. Sometimes students meet each other or me in the class chat room. Here the talk often digresses from the course work to any and everything else, just as in real conversation. However, this digression is good too, adding an important human element to the work. I try to create an enthusiasm in the class by interjecting my own sense of humor in my postings, as well as in course materials like the "literary gossip" feature. I also create animations as "prizes" for work well done. The first student to post a bulletin board response to the reading found the next time she logged on an animated card that read, "Bravo, Brave Brenda"; one flower grew to a screen size bouquet. Students' postings on *The Rape of the Lock* became an annotated version of the poem for all to see. Any Web page visitor can click on the student's name in the margins of the poem to find a detailed explanation of that particular section written by the student. The class nominated annotations they found most helpful, and the "winners" logged on the next day to see their prize, a 19<sup>th</sup> century watercolor illustration of the Baron snipping Belinda's lock of hair, precipitating an attack by a legion of sylphs.

All of this, however, takes a tremendous amount of time. It is now the final week, and I have sent to these students 946 emails and posted nearly 600 bulletin board responses. Students are getting individualized instruction that takes me about an hour per week per student. The students are also spending more time on the course than they would in a regular class: their

class discussion appears in some 1300 bulletin board postings. All of their work and communication has to be done in writing. There is no such thing as a simple question that can be answered in a few seconds at the beginning or end of class.

In return for their effort and mine, the class is getting a course pretty similar in quality to one I offer on campus, one affording even more individualized attention. Initially I assumed that I could not know this distant class as well as students I meet every week. Quite the opposite has been true: the medium encourages people to be much more expressive. As my Traverse City class responded to the literature we read, they revealed a great deal about their fears, hopes, and dreams. Shaw's play *Major Barbara* provoked a discussion thread about class and oppression, highlighted by the students' own experiences working to put themselves through school. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* precipitated a discussion about human nature and the existence of evil in the world. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* had these students pouring their hearts out on the question of whether teachers can make a difference for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is easy to see, though, a potential for online classes to be rather pale imitations of the real thing. The larger the enrollment, or the more limited the involvement of a faculty member in shaping the content or interacting with students, the less likely the course is to accomplish those goals we think are essentials for the humanities classroom. There are also some students for whom this kind of course might provide a recipe for disaster. If a student is not very mature or well motivated or cannot follow directions well, the student will struggle with the format, although one could argue that those characteristics do not bode well for success in a traditional classroom either.

Overall, the online course has a role to play in higher education, but faculty, not entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, need to determine what

that appropriate role is. We must insist that online courses we offer meet a standard equivalent to our on-campus courses.

It is crucial that we explore the world of technology just as we expect others to explore our world of ideas. Technology offers exciting possibilities to help us teach our students in a way that sparks their intellectual curiosity and accomplishes our goals for liberal arts education. Technology can enhance our traditional classrooms and let us take those classrooms on the road. In my seventeen years of teaching, I have not encountered anything that has so much potential to transform our disciplines, our students, and us. These technological innovations are not passing fancies. We cannot afford to dismiss technology as irrelevant to our disciplines or to our classrooms. We must bask a bit more in the blue glow, grab hold of those pulsing pixels and shape the future of the humanities classroom in a way that maintains our most cherished traditions and values. ♦