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ABSTRACT

An intensive college English Literature course provided a special learning opportunity through its innovative reading and writing assignments. From the beginning, students learned by individually selecting, finding, and reading texts and writing descriptive reports intended for class sharing and interaction. The final project involved a formal essay synthesizing learning across the semester, and these essays were posted on a class Web site. By organizing student writing in this manner, the following kinds of learning are likely to occur: (1) student understanding of explicitly defined course subject matter will be deepened; (2) students will gain understanding of the creation, preservation, and exchange of knowledge; (3) student writing and reading will improve; and (4) student familiarity and comfort with computers and networks will deepen. Such course organization creates a situation in which writing serves social and intellectual purposes and the personal and developmental needs of students. (EF)

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Collaborative Exploration in Public: Writing, Reading and Learning Through Written Transactions

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St. Thomas University
presentation for
STLHE 2000

{<http://www.BrockU.ca/stlhe2000/>

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In this short presentation I want to introduce the situation in which students produced a range of working texts for a course in Restoration and Eighteenth Century Drama and Theatre, to look at some of the kinds of learning I hope this context affords, and to examine a few texts which I think offer me some evidence that the learning is occurring. I want to make it clear that I'm not offering this way of organizing a course as a model; rather, I'm using it as an example to help us look at some reasons to think that re-examining some of the tacit assumptions we make as teachers about the function of written text in learning might help us reconsider our own practice. Re-examining those assumptions might lead to many different ways of changing our practice, which might not look at all like this particular course.

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I also want to make it possible for anyone interested to go deeper into the organization of the course, my ideas about the kind of learning I'm hoping to promote, and into the student work which was created as part of this process. To that end, this page exists both as a handout at the conference and as a Web site, offering a gateway to the course materials. To pursue the student work on line, however, you will need to contact me individually by email to get the user ID and password necessary to access the Web site, as I agreed with the students to restrict access to the site until we're sure it's finished.

First, then, here is a quick outline of the way the course was organized and conducted. (More information is available directly from the public course Web site, which includes an extensive course description and all the daily "prompts" which orchestrated the students' work.) Like any other course, this one was unique: this one perhaps more markedly so because I arranged to teach a six-credit course in one term, by commandeering two back-to-back time slots. This made the course significantly more intensive than usual, and gave us long class meetings if we needed them. Students in it were mostly, though not exclusively, English majors or honours students. I choose this class as a source of examples because the students' general facility with writing makes it easier to see the changes in their approaches in response to changes in their rhetorical situation.

The important issue here is that from the beginning of the course the way students learned was individually to select, find, and read texts (whether historical, scholarly-critical or original playscripts) and to write descriptive reports on them intended to share their learning with the rest of the class. In other contexts (e.g., Vipond & Hunt, 1988; Hunt & Vipond,

1991), I've stressed the extent to which this sort of sharing is dialogic; here I want to highlight that, in John Dewey's sense, such writing can be the vehicle for a transaction -- an event which changes both participants, and which -- again as Dewey insists -- cannot be understood out of, or translated from, its immediate context (Dewey & Bentley, 1949; see also Rosenblatt, 1978, 1985) .

Their first assignment was to go to the library and spend a few hours finding a book (using a list I distributed, which included a range of anthologies drawn from my own library and on two-day reserve at the library; I also suggested some ways of finding and choosing among texts from the library's collection), reading its introductory or background matter, and writing a report on it. This report was printed, photocopied and circulated in class, and time was taken in class to read them. On the basis of this reading, students focused their individual lists of "priority questions" they most wanted to answer, and spent another class session in the library. By September 22 we had done two cycles of this cycle -- research, publication, reading and new research -- and were moving toward collecting the individual reports on an internal Web page. A good example is Kyla's report, in which she pulls interesting and useful tidbits out of a day's work, focusing, fairly clearly, on what will be of interest to the rest of the class (and, not at all incidentally, paying very little attention to the formalities of essay writing conventions). At that point we started moving toward establishing a canon of plays worth looking at, and assembling an accumulating list of who had read and written about which plays. Here again, the best reports exhibit an informal style which invites the reader directly into the process (Ashleigh, for instance, on Aphra Behn's *The Rover*, or Veronica on

Congreve's *Love for Love*, both address the reader directly -- but by this time in the course most people were doing that).

At this point, I began assigning the most interactive portion of the course, which involved everyone asking at least one question "designed to elicit further useful information from the writer" of each report -- and those who wrote the reports reading the questions, and if they seemed relevant and answerable, responding to them. This process developed as additions to the original reports, and can be followed in Ashleigh's report, where there are links to questions from others, and then a set of responses to the questions.

This process, with variations, continued for the rest of the term. Individuals reported on plays, read plays recommended by others and responded to their reports, and pursued individual research projects on particular issues. (We also did some other things -- for instance, groups presented reports to the rest of the class on certain plays which also involved staged readings of scenes). The individual reports normally went through a cycle including an original proposal (read by others and discussed in class), a report on a short -- usually a week long -- research project, questions on that report by others, and an opportunity to respond to questions. A useful example of this whole process can be followed by starting with the proposals for the week of November 10-18, looking at Veronica's proposal to find out more about the music used in productions of the time, and then go to her report on that investigation

The final assignment for each student was to produce what I called "A synthesis of your learning for the course, essentially a guide to what you've done and an attempt to help a reader see a pattern of understanding about the theatre and drama of the Restoration and eighteenth century." These syntheses make up the main page of the final version of the course Web site. These syntheses represent a move to a much more formal style -- one quite different, I think, from standard "essay" style, but still more formal, and conscious of a much wider audience, than the gee-whiz style of, for instance, the play recommendations. Leigh's, for instance, begins with a focal statement summarizing the main point of her learning through the term, whereas Kaveri organizes hers as a narrative, beginning in September and going through the list of plays.

I expect, as a result of organizing student writing in this way, that a number of kinds of learning should be more likely to occur (listed here more or less in order of their centrality to the explicitly stated aims of the course):

- Student understanding of the explicitly defined subject matter of the course will be deepened in various ways:
 - information about the period, the context of the texts, and their relations with that context, will be more deeply processed
 - understanding of the texts themselves will be enriched by experience of their connections with a real world
 - understanding of the nature of literature and its function in the world will deepen
- Students will grow in their understanding of the nature of knowledge -- how it's created, preserved and exchanged
 - library research will become more sophisticated
 - awareness of the structure of scholarship -- periodical indices, online indexes, catalogues, journals and edited collections -- will deepen
- Student writing will improve
 - in fluency
 - in sensitivity to audience and purpose, and thus in flexibility
 - in awareness of the importance of presentation (and thus, where appropriate, in mechanical correctness)

- Student reading will improve
 - in responsiveness
 - in awareness of the dialogic nature of all texts, in sensitivity to authorial intentions and such devices as irony
 - in flexibility (students will develop in their disposition, and ability, to adjust their reading strategies to text, situation, and purpose)
- Student familiarity and comfort with computers and networks will deepen
 - Awareness of the nature and potential function of electronically mediated texts will be extended and deepened
 - Understanding of the status of texts on the Internet and World Wide Web will become more sophisticated

Browsing through the students' work and reflections on that work over the course of the term offers, I believe, some suggestions (though no conclusive evidence) that such is occurring.

It's important to remember that over a period as short as thirteen weeks it would be remarkable indeed to see significant growth in some of these areas. It is my intention here not so much to offer evidence as to advance the argument that handling text in this situation is likely to have such effects.

Students do, however, periodically have an opportunity to write a reflection on what they've learned (this is part of the process of generating a course mark, and as such these documents are not public, but are read by me, and serve more or less the function of examinations). I've selected a few examples which suggest to me the kinds of learning that may be going on.

Veronica, for instance, offers a remarkably thorough characterization of the way in which understanding the historical background of the period actually plays a role in reading, understanding, and feeling. More specifically, perhaps, Amanda describes something she came to understand, through her work and that of others, about the nature of stock characters and conventional genres and how they worked; and later draws a conclusion based on her

own reading of Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* and a colleague's report on a feud between Dryden and another critic. Kaveri explains an insight about the way understanding what went on backstage might affect how you understood the relationship between the plays of the time and their audience, whereas Kyla questions some fundamental assumptions of conventional English study, based (I think) on a growing awareness of the role of context in all reading and writing.

Leigh's explanation of the role of the computer network in her strengthening awareness of her writing as situated, rhetorical, and hooked inextricably to readers seems a centrally important observation to me, and one it's tempting to connect with the amount of public writing (and reading of the public writing of others) she'd done during the preceding weeks. Matthew describes the way in which sharing the considered, written views of others about plays affected his own reading of them, and Tyler, more generally, characterizes the impact of the entire process of sharing information and ideas with others, moving, in a paragraph, from a model based on acquiring and disseminating information to one in which information and ideas become strategic and productive.

It is of course true, as it always is in teaching, that these students' abilities (and dispositions) to articulate these ideas might have very little to do with the situation I put them in and supported them through. But there's enough here to convince me, at least, to continue trying, as much as I'm able, to put students in situations where their writing serves social and intellectual purposes which make sense to them, and serves their personal and developmental

needs -- where, that is, writing serves as the vehicle for authentic academic (and intellectual and social) transactions.

A final note: this course used electronic networks and online writing. It is, however, not necessary, in order to put students' writing into dialogic transactions, to go online. I believe it's easier, but this can be done with handwritten hard copy if necessary.

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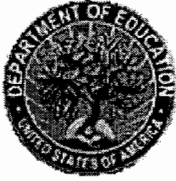
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