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How near and yet how far? Theorizing distance teaching

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Abstract

This article theoretically maps out the larger principles that we must consider when thinking about distance learning. I explore the ways in which students' and teachers' identities must shift in these new contexts. Pointing to the changes that will or could occur when we move writing courses online, I make the overarching argument that Composition Studies needs "a theorized preparation for shifts in pedagogy that distance courses make visible." © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Not long ago, it seemed urgent to alert colleagues to how distance learning might affect composition teaching. Now, however, awareness is hardly needed. I recently found, for instance, 200 Web sites offering an "X [university or college name]@[address]." It probably won't be long before a postsecondary Yahoo it will be only a click away—perhaps at a Learn.com, where one could pick a course in any field, identified by levels of institutions and by discipline, and sorted, perhaps, by percentages of each grade given in the courses. Only two years ago as well, colleagues at the University of Utah and Salt Lake Community College and I agreed that the entirely online Western Governors University (WGU) was a self-parody, an ill-conceived vision of our energetic and thrifty governor. But WGU is now one of many private consortia that advertise programs for students who are treated, for good cause, as valued clients of higher education. Electronic communication within existing courses has become pivotal in many local campus settings, and many institutions are also devising syllabi for, or are already teaching, a thoroughly distanced writing course.[1] At the University of Utah, composition teachers use electronic learning environments to establish

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asynchronous WebCT interactions in at least one of their writing program courses, in a classroom or online, during their graduate careers. In Summer, 2000, the University also piloted four distance sections of writing, one taught by a graduate student who had already taught distance classes elsewhere. Our faculty computer specialist at the time, Alison Regan, was also on the General Education Council of Western Governors University.

This limited list is derived from a much broader set of grant-supported projects (for example, Epiphany) and courses that in smaller measures rely on the tools of distance learning. Taken together, these examples suggest that Composition Studies needs a theorized preparation for shifts in pedagogy that distance courses make visible. We need a way to recognize, and thus perhaps reorganize, our situated cultural constructions of sanctioned teacher and student identities. No one could complete this project alone, which involves retheorizing root metaphors for teaching. But I want to suggest that shifts in schooled identities that will inevitably accompany distance curricula may have a force as powerful as the changes in pedagogic models that attended the earliest college-level vernacular writing classes. Like the institutional exigencies around the inception of Harvard composition, the situations created by distance teaching require attracting new students, competing with expanding and increasingly successful private sources of instruction, and demonstrating that students are spending time and money efficiently. All of these subtextual necessities supporting distance curricula add up to an institutional context that now openly privileges educational competition and speed over leisurely, self-justified courses of study. And this context will, I think, add a new layer of possibilities to teachers' already multilayered and often conflicted self-identifications. Images of students and learners will be complicated as we rearticulate purposes for teaching writing. Distance learning, that is, requires that we rethink specific assumptions increasingly visible *as* assumptions in the landscape around this emerging institutional scene.

These assumptions about our teaching and identities are already destabilized in many results of newly adopted, research-based writing pedagogy. Primarily, however, new distance learning programs in public and private higher education now attract unique scrutiny that casts postsecondary pedagogy as interactive processes rather than certified content. A weekly *Chronicle of Higher Education* report now highlights research, interviews, and new ideas for delivering distance courses, and, thus, endorses this new source of academic credits, content, degrees, and credentials. But these reports also emphasize the institutional implications of distance courses and critiques of human performances by students and teachers. While writing this essay, I heard National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* broadcast a discussion featuring presidents of two major private universities and the CEO of an online corporate college that will, this CEO said, assure that graduates can update their earned human capital.

Such reports are useful in two specific ways: First, they display to wide audiences scrupulous new research into modes of postsecondary pedagogy, a topic generally set aside since late nineteenth-century New England debates about purposes for mass language education. But in bringing up topics like higher education's purposes, results, administration, and content delivery, these reports also direct attention to topics long discussed in Composition Studies. That is, novel attention to distance learning displays much that Composition Studies considers old news about the identity between pedagogic method and learning.

Nonetheless, we cannot claim a *been-there* relation to the pedagogy specific to distance learning, which creates a pedagogic context that easily critiques the preferred *ethos* of composition teachers. That is, students of writing may soon have alternatives to the traditional ethical support of writing classes as they are socialized into conventional discursive practices.

An example of enacting such a context is the Western Governors University's ongoing diagnostic research to predict successful completion of courses. Despite our early expectations that online versions of *X-for-Dummies* would bankrupt Western curricula and faculties, WGU now tacitly criticizes those faculties by taking extraordinarily careful steps to predict results for various modes of teaching and various student profiles. It pilots its courses and their pedagogy, responding quickly to ongoing student feedback. So far, its studies and trial runs demonstrate that if success at a distance is measured by retention, course completion, and content mastery, that success is proportionate to a student's writing and language skills. Adult students who register for distance courses generally have inadequate mathematical reasoning skills, as do eighteen-year-olds nationally. But as WGU points out, although eighteen-year-olds also generally perform poorly in language and writing tests, adults who score highly in these areas are likely to finish, perform well in, and enjoy any distance course (Regan, 2000, March 12). We might infer from this correlation that comfort with independent learning is linked directly to the quasi-autodidacticism always involved in undertaking literate actions. At the least, academic interactions disconnected from shared spaces and times, like acts of writing, require independent action in unfamiliar situations.

But writing is linked to distance in other, more obvious ways. In practice, that is, distance classes require more of students than basic reading and writing. To bring oneself to presence only with written words, either to a teacher or peers, is equally to set the tenor of class discussions and individual exchanges. As a distance learner quoted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* put it, "The biggest challenge. . . is [y]ou have to be the type of person who is comfortable and confident in your work, because the feedback is not immediate" (Carr, 2000, p. A39). Students consistently report the demand for this confidence and its pleasures. As another reported in a *Chronicle* article interviewing seven successful distance courses students, these settings are more difficult to negotiate than expected because "you have to learn everything yourself." This interviewee added that both the customary student nod indicating understanding of a handout and a teacher's answering glance must be consciously expressed on both sides, as punctuation marks without which the handout exchange remains ambiguous (Young, 2000, p. A41).

This demand for explicitness in distance courses hereby brings to mind specific theorizations of texts and of human identities commonly attached to writing. In the first instance, these courses might be said to replay Jacques Derrida's essay (1982) "Signature, Event, and Context" insofar as they make it difficult to ignore that writing only approximates absolute meanings. They demonstrate the claim that context is actually an arbitrary foreknowledge of what texts "mean" by enacting a setting in which explanations between teacher and students are written models for speech, not records of it or its scripts. In this setting for teaching writing, texts are the narrations of clarity and precision that Derrida describes, fictions that never encounter their referents.

But distance writing courses defamiliarize not just writing, but the teacher and student

identities attached to composition courses across their American history. They expose, for instance, the unwarranted hegemony of a historical narrative in which college is a four-year, postadolescent, socializing space between domestic home and public career. They critique treasured templates for initiating students into *the* college narrative, which becomes only *a* story irrelevant to classes where norms reside in the multiple motives of already independent students whose enrollments are physically disbursed. As Baudrillard (1992) framed this sort of unmasking "[w]ith respect to history, *the* narrative has become impossible because by definition it is [only] the potential renarrativization of a sequence of meaning." Master Narratives are recycled myths in any context, but especially in class-based early composition history, whose recycled story of tutorial pedagogies inevitably portrays students as virtual children. Now, however, they actually attend our classes virtually perhaps in pajamas at 4 o'clock in the morning, over coffee or a beer, or by arriving early for work, staying late, or waiting until their children are off to school. They are, that is, all the simultaneously dressed and undressed, public and private, and certainly disbursed narratives that distance learners recount.

As Baudrillard (1992) also wrote, the diffusion and circulation of each event liberates that event, "as it follows its trajectory into the void [where] it has to be fragmented like a particle . . . " That is, as the fragmentation attached to virtual classrooms further detaches events and people from their situated temporal beginnings, cultural groups also will be fragmented, "disarticulated to allow for . . . entry into [new] circuits." In the paradox of essential virtuality that distance classes realize, they may be seen to disarticulate—to *un-state*—conventional assumptions about teaching that make it appropriate to hope that students' practice texts will display more than parodies of a "real" or "sincere" self who controls expressive language. The material situation of distance learning classes shifts teaching to other, equally arbitrary, understandings of what it means for a student to write, toward narratives that diffuse texts and identities across newly unmapped terrains where *communication* is clearly a metaphor. Teachers and students who never share physical space will require these new stories.

We, of course, hope that our common understandings of what we do will retain currency, that the drama of the classroom, even rewritten, will feature characters whose parts we now play. The distance of distance classes seems readily to cast composition teachers as linguistically anxious, current-traditional Fathers, monitors of the already produced text. As discursive patriarchs of both sexes, this character habitually trains the gaze of entitled prestige on what s/he portrays as trans-historically stable textual conventions and *the* student. But distance courses do not so easily value the partner of this leading disposition, a softer, domesticated Freudian Mother who installs initiates' *home* language and who becomes in mass education a nurturing, self-sacrificing facilitator of institutional curiosity about students' histories and dispositions (Miller, 1995). This confidential spiritual guide itself symbolizes visual and aural contacts enabling the sharing that encourages students to favor expression and awareness above following stated rules, imitating conventional genres, fearing fatherly correction, and hoping for the traditionally promised rewards of these self-disciplines. Some already combine these personae in the Big Brother/Sister identity of a moral cultural coach. But that friendly sibling identity can fit teachers of independent distance students no better than the Mother's comforting presence can—at the precise

distance from which final grade reports must come. This familial coach may successfully encourage students to acknowledge simultaneously linguistic and political ignorance and to connect those two separate domains of schooling and community power by equating correctness with consciousness. But in distance teaching it will be difficult to persuade students to believe that the payoff for taking a writing course will be enlightened activist, acumen rather than enhanced textual actions.

The problem distance poses for each of these well documented teacherly identities is that they each require a writing instructor to be certain of superior access to the rewards of writing, yet ambivalent about a students' abilities to share that access. But neither superiority assured by institutional settings nor ambivalence contained in the difference between class discussions and marked papers is easily conveyed in the literalism that distance learning necessitates. As educational institutions compete against increasingly available privatized instruction for student dollars, for attention, and for obviously useful outcomes, it becomes difficult to enforce fatherly winnowing and sifting or to promote self-revelations to a falsely maternal institutional curiosity. And, it is especially difficult to attach the traditionally submissive student identity to the adult status distance students normally occupy.

These difficulties are exposed in *the Chronicle of Higher Education*'s March 10, 2000, report that test scores of students enrolled in Web-based introductory psychology are consistently higher than those of students enrolled in traditional courses, but that the online students "reported less satisfaction than did the students in the face-to-face version" (Carr, p. A48). The report attributed this result to requirements in the Web-based courses for what students perceive as "more work," requirements to write and share their regular responses to study online. That is, they must consistently read and prepare for tests and demonstrate this consistency continuously, as they would in a traditional writing class. But these students at least are not at all dissatisfied with distance itself, with separation from teachers, campus, or peers. They appear to assume that "work," not identity, is at stake in taking classes.

This conjunction of material and theoretical possibilities for reforming common assumptions about our work may appear to be a bit forced and certainly not so monumental as I imply. But it should, I think, stimulate reflection. Like all devoted to service, we protect our self-images in the name of the beneficiaries of that service, the students. The effectiveness of our service depends on both confidence in these self-images and the perceived beneficence of our intentions. Over time, the names we give ourselves become reified, if not fetishized, in hard-won yet falsely certified security about what is eventually cast as unshakable tradition. Writing curricula, textbooks, and instructors portray the duty and the prerogatives of their cultural work as assuring ethical and social improvements. Nonetheless, distance learning is everywhere imagined as outcomes-based schooling. Its students and institutional promoters agree that its chief difference is self-directed movement toward competencies that together comprise a credential, be it an undergraduate degree or a postgraduate mastery of a specialized topic. Distance classes promote the production and evaluation of what we think of as "products," of texts themselves. They do not control or even engage in amorphous "processes" that are often detached from acts of writing and renamed as contributions to heightened individual consciousness. Distance students and teachers do often report achieving close relationships through writing and reading, the sort of attachments that

medieval rhetorics of correspondence and the letters of Heloise and Abelard would predict. But, these relationships have not yet been narrated as those that composition teaching now calls "personal."

The "personal" is also displaced because distance courses make it impossible to ignore issues of duration always attached to education. They overturn humanists' assumptions about the time needed to assimilate a "real" (ethically transformative) education as opposed to mere training, and they recalculate the time needed to obtain an educational credential. Students in distance courses forego the first consideration. Much as *Die Broke* (Levin & Pollan, 1997) tells them to, they assume that real education occurs independently, that fundamental beliefs and civic responsibilities are shaped outside schools, and that the quality of their life is neither formed or supported by institutions. Distance courses, thus, make it impossible to hide the class difference between those entitled to uninterrupted, full-time residential attendance at college, who will become "a [specific institution] Man [*sic*]" and those with neither the desire, financial support, nor family and emotional histories that warrant a postadolescent life hiatus. Distance courses force us to deconstruct the easy opposition of dormitories to parking lots. They emphasize the social coding of these stereotyped spaces.

Distance classes, thus, bring up not only class differences but class formation, both human and academic. If students physically relocate the middle class to off-campus places, curricula would replace the content diffused there. Distance courses propose a productive emphasis on information about particular sorts of texts and guided practice in writing them, an emphasis beyond composition theory's continuing, limiting division of curricula into social-epistemic and expressivist categories. They supercede these categories with a more vivid suggestion that a writing class can be a rhetorical experience in which one prepares for conventionally adept ways of writing. Despite its flat reputation among those who now promote interpretation over production in efforts to achieve the status attached to literary and other theories, this class content directly serves student desires. It sets aside the institutional projects and projections that subordinate these desires to those of teachers and to curricula originally designed to socialize new students into a cultural literacy offered in the name of "humane" learning. Ironically, this new content and the viewpoint of those who take to it resonate with an even earlier oratorical pedagogy, which emphasized imitation to school students to make public, civic, and corporate texts. That old teaching initiated elite groups who relied on immediate contact with their similarly entitled peers for their cultural values and personal satisfactions. But the new, content-oriented curriculum in distance courses portrays education as training for productive, not passive, consumers whose adult desires are herein literally unavailable to academic palace guards.

The primary issue I raise here is obviously that distance curricula, especially in composition, prevent approaching students on the basis of the *ethos* they should acquire from us. It sets aside intimate Socratic education by making learning identical to virtue only when teacher and student share the same class, politics, and expectations about social identities. This curriculum differently requires self-monitored attendance, confident contributions among a group of unseen strangers, and assertive calls for help when it is needed. These are not expectations that students portray a demeanor befitting the old mythology's expectant "good student," but are actions and performances irrelevant to internal identities. Absent

these assertive forms of participation, distance students have high attrition rates, lower grades, and the particular lack of course satisfaction that the *Chronicle* outlines. In sum, distance classes do not socialize students into an academic personae of any sort, but precisely the reverse. These classes socialize a subject matter and its teachers into the diffused antinarrative that Baudrillard (1992) names as "contemporary society."

In that diffusion, writing teachers may appropriately fear for their powerful, crafted identities. Distance classes in writing may be driven by syllabi, not by loyalty to teachers who closely manage their expressive proprieties. They may contain methods of composing, not cultural and social ideas available to interpretative techniques. They may index evaluations of writing to stated criteria, not to a teacher's impressionistic readings. Teachers who succeed because they interact well with students, not because they know strategies for writing better and for practicing them effectively, may find distance curricula unsatisfying and, thus, be placed on the ineffectual end of its success-oriented scales.

To put these possibilities in less Draconian terms, the teacher most valued in these early states of distance learning is at best an innovative facilitator of serious student purposes. That facilitator equates good teaching with expertise in the content of a discrete discipline. But s/he is also capable of critiquing and redirecting the cultural work assigned to particular fields. It has been no accident that students appreciate teachers of physics when they clearly convey problem solutions, but praise teachers of English who present *themselves* as solutions to problems. Each discipline has a story of the good teacher told within a distinct cultural text. But as distance makes such disciplinary narratives more visible, oppositions between a life exterior to schooling and one taken to be within schooling must collapse. Distance classes taken in one's pajamas suggest, in fact, that this collapse has already occurred. At the least, the old cultural story about initiative language teaching requires new characters.

At most, however, inevitable conflation of separate spheres for learning and living, which distance courses represent but do not exhaust, may refocus our views of writing pedagogy. In that case, two fresh possibilities emerge: that we can more loudly claim the credit always due Composition Studies for knowing that postsecondary pedagogy deserves systematic attention, and that we acknowledge the datedness of pedagogy that emphasizes ethically validated results over rhetorically expert ways of writing.

Notes

1. In addition to online writing labs and other resources and the many uses of electronic communication now in force in "traditional" college writing courses of many types, many courses are taught entirely on the Internet or through an electronic learning environment. The following list only suggests the range of places and institutional levels now involved in this way of teaching writing: The University of Texas at Austin, the University of Georgia, Tidewater Community College, Ohio University, the University of Missouri-Columbia and ten other Missouri colleges, Middlesex County College, and George Mason University.

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