Finding Voice through Computer Communication: A New Venue for Collaboration

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In “The Sexual Politics of the One-to-One Tutorial,” Carol Stanger proposes that the primary role of the writing teacher is to “marshal” the support of the peer group, the “single most powerful force in undergraduate education.” Stanger’s interest in the peer group is in response not only to the teacher who abuses the podium but also to the teacher who relies extensively on the student-teacher writing conference. Stanger describes the limits placed on the student writer in the presence of the teacher who, perhaps unconsciously, holds before the student an ideal text, “a composite of the male canon” (16).

This critique of the student-teacher writing conference raised questions for me about my work with adult students at SUNY Empire State, where the one-to-one tutorial was the primary mode of instruction. I initially lauded this conference, particularly because it enabled me to become personally engaged with the wide range of students who attended the College: the mid-career employee, the unemployed worker, the single mother, and the isolated housewife. Stanger’s rereading of the student-teacher conference, however, caused me to pause. I recalled how frequently a student’s assignment was accompanied by an apologetic note concerning the writer’s lack of knowledge about composition. Embedded in the note was the belief that I, as the teacher-authority, could fix the student’s writing. Though I was pleased with the student’s respect for my so-called power, I came to realize that teaching writing was about giving power to the student, not to the teacher, and that though the student-teacher conference had value, peer response might also be important for adult students who had come face to face with oppressive hierarchies. Indeed, these non-traditional students appreciated group study, but such study was infrequent, for classes in the traditional sense denied instruction to many adult students whose lives were complicated by job, family, location, and/or disability. These students needed a different mechanism for peer interaction.

Thus, when the College announced its commitment to offer classes through computer communication throughout New York State, I seized the
opportunity to explore the new venue of collaboration with students in composition. My own experience in recent graduate study—study that I had postponed because of my own family and work responsibilities—also propelled me to investigate a medium for peer collaboration. Like my students, I understood the satisfaction that came from achieving a goal delayed by life circumstances. Furthermore, in my graduate study I had felt an emerging confidence as I participated for the first time in collaborative writing groups that encouraged students to value the writing of peers and to integrate life experiences into reflective efforts. Through this study I became sensitive to the limitations of impersonal, hierarchical, traditional education, most particularly to its limitations of women's voices. I related to the dilemma of Goulston's university education in which she transferred her "private domestic skills quite effectively to the classroom" in order to please her "mostly male professors" by "grasping and admiring their ideas." Though she excelled in the written contest, she, like uncounted women before her, denied the development of her own self and voice, continuing to think that everyone knew more than she did (20). After experiencing the benefits of more ameliorative educational structures, I was even more motivated to find a solution to my students' isolation.

Thus, I turned to the computer as a completely new venue for the teaching of writing. This technology would enable students to share their writing and thoughts with peers, despite their irregular schedules and distant locations, for, by its very arrangement, it offered a new organization for learning. I proceeded blithely, undaunted by Selfe and Wahlstrom's prediction that when "technologies join groups of people together, they do so in a way that...modifies, in a way we simply could not consider beforehand, the nature of human interaction and the ways humans construct and contend with their world" (294). These promises led me to investigate the contributions of the computer to writing study, to determine whether its unique type of collaboration might redefine the writing classroom with more horizontal, open structures of communication enabling adult students to learn from others as they developed their writing style and their own voices.

The computer system permitted me, as well as students, to log on through modem connections to the College's mainframe computer from office or home computer at any time of day or night. With asynchronous connection, students and I used the computer not as an ancillary support to classroom instruction, but as the primary mode of learning. With a topical organization, the conference program Caucus provided a transcript of all transactions including large- and small-group interactions. The Caucus program was set so that all participants had access to transactions of the permanent small-groups, even though members of those groups were the primary respondents. In addition, students had access to electronic mail (E-mail) for private student-teacher conferences. Even with the caring environment that emerged through Caucus, students needed the home base of E-
mail for additional direction, instruction, nurturing, and even friendship, particularly students like Kathleen, who later declared that E-mail was “the greatest thing since sliced bread.” Excited by the computer’s flexibility that would accommodate the constraints of adult students’ complex life circumstances, I turned to the design of the composition curriculum.

The Curriculum for Collaboration
The curriculum focused on the familiar cultural institutions of family, education, and workplace. I asked students to respond to professional readings through a large-group “discussion” and to prepare a response writing based on these readings for small-group peer review. Among the readings were Walker’s “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Glaspell’s “Trifles,” Rodriguez’s “The Achievement of Desire,” Rich’s “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” and David Noble’s “Automation Madness.” The large-group discussions and individual response writings were stimulated by the general questions I proposed that prompted students to examine their own experience in relation to the readings. Such public reflection seemed particularly important for adult students who had been denied reflective dialogue because of the business of daily living and the isolation of life circumstances. Building upon their response writings, students wrote three compositions relating to the cultural institutions under study. As with all other communications, these compositions were transmitted through the computer network. I entitled the course Writing for the 21st Century, not only because of its frontier medium, but also because of its focus on the development of voice of all participants no matter how diverse or different they were in the panoply of our multicultural world.

In shaping the course, I was guided by many feminist voices. For example, following Schuster and Van Dyne’s “woman-focused classroom,” students were encouraged to uncover gender biases relating to authority roles masked in social institutions; to assume authority by giving approval and validation to their peers; to value experience by understanding its sources; and to work together in a caring community (168-69). I extended these basic principles to include Schuster and Van Dyne’s sixth stage of curriculum change: namely, a “transformed, balanced curriculum” that raises questions about gender issues of women and men and reflects how these issues intersect with class and race (16).

I was also guided by collaborative composition theory, particularly the composition models of Kenneth Bruffee and David Bleich. For Bruffee, “the matrix of thought is not the individual self but some community of knowledgeable peers and the vernacular language of that community” (777). Through collaboration with peers, students construct knowledge together as they become familiar with the discourse community of the academy. While Bruffee relies on collaboration to aid his students in learning the language and forms of the academy, Bleich introduces collaboration to examine
language and experience of students outside of the classroom. Advocating the use of the classroom "to create freedoms outside school and to reduce the adversary character of otherness" ("Book Review" 45-49), Bleich urges teachers "to abandon the idea of literacy as a trainable skill and... to establish the principle that attention to literacy in any of its aspects entails simultaneous attention to the community, the culture, and the process of language socialization" ("Reconceiving Literacy" 25). Bleich's collaborative model recognizes differences such as gender, race, and class; seeks authority for each member; and works toward change as students begin to understand the social relations embedded in their language experiences. Though Bruffee's social construction of knowledge undergirded Writing for the 21st Century and his focus on the craft of academic prose was apparent, Bleich's collaborative model with its emphasis on social relations was primary in informing the subject matter for the course. Consequently, the course asked students to examine social issues in a collaborative context, with the aim of empowering each individual to use his or her own language confidently and sensitively.

Connecting through Computer Communication

In most cases, students and I met for the first time through computer communication. Eight adult students enrolled in the first composition course, and thirteen students enrolled in the course that followed, in all thirteen women and eight men. From their initial messages and later collaboration, I learned that jobs meant bread and butter for these adults. Five students worked at large industrial companies in accounting, systems analysis, and computer programming. Several students worked for smaller businesses as service engineers and secretaries. Three held civil service jobs as librarian, social service counselor, and traffic engineer. Also represented were two factory workers, a proud community-college professor in heating and air-conditioning technology, a part-time bank cleaner, a part-time private accountant, a telecommunications employee for a company in California, and a woman who owned and operated a farm with her husband and supplemented that business with secretarial work. All students lived within eighty miles of SUNY Empire State's Rochester location. Only one student, Maggie, depended on the College's computer and modem. The ages of the students ranged from twenty-six to fifty. Their outside interests varied from studying the Tarot and writing novels to participating in church activities. Most students had put these aside, however, in order to work toward college degrees that would enable them, as Gary put it, "to stop pulling wrenches."1

The prior education of students was as diverse as their occupations. Renee stopped school in the ninth grade, later receiving her GED and attending community college. Charlie, defying his school-librarian mother and "dictionary toting, professional journalist father," confided, "I dropped out of school the day I turned sixteen to become a good-for-nothing-hippie-bum-musician." Patti had attended a well-known college in the Northeast
but had returned to the area when her mother died. The disparity in the education of students' parents was similar. In an interview, Clint shyly revealed that his mother completed only sixth grade, while Patti and Kathleen reported their fathers had taught part time in local colleges.

Early on, students connected through their writings about life experiences, tributes to personal heroes, and cultural perspectives. After reading Walker's essay, each of us listened with empathy to Maggie's tribute to her own mother:

Even with the odds of being a Black woman in the South in the early sixties, my mother managed to raise five children, the remainder of the original fifteen, plus three grandchildren alone [that is, with her husband, she raised ten children, and, on her own, five, in addition to three grandchildren]. ...

Although we did not have the extra things we wanted, we still had most of what we needed and also a sense of pride and dignity. She instilled in us a sense of self worth and endurance. Although during that time it was common for a Black child to be degraded and scorned, I always felt as though I was as good or better than the next person.

My mother died with more than enough earthly property to suffice, but in the eyes of our society, she was just a poor woman who, because she hadn't an over abundance of money or was not recognized by anyone of position, was not considered a hero. She was my hero although I realized that a little late in life. Black women have always been expected to shoulder the burden of housekeeping, child rearing and anything else that went along with keeping a home a satisfied one.

Not only was she expected to make her own home happy but oft' times she was a hired hand in this trade. She showed me an inner strength through all of the trials in the life of a Black woman, equaled only by her inner peace.

Maggie's experience mirrored the ways in which race, class, and gender intersected in her own life. That Maggie could name this experience in the presence of peers contributed to her own sense of authority.

Students reflected upon cultural issues both in their permanent small groups and in the large group where the entire class engaged in discussion. Their writings and "conversations" supported Freire's contention that a word when uttered in the context of reflection and action has the power to "transform reality" (75). More similar to talk than the traditional academic essay, this written computer communication also illustrated Donald Rubin's belief that talk "at its heart" is "an exuberant affirmation of self . . . affirmation of our own fundamental human identity" (1).

The words that crossed the screen each day lured me more deeply and personally into students' lives than in any traditional college classroom I had known. Connections grew as gender and authority issues loomed in the discussion of Walker's work. Though Clint had named his mother a hero for opening their home to thirty foster children and for helping him deal with the "unbending German attitude" of his father, he was not so generous in his "reading" of the whole of Walker's essay. He claimed that Walker "overstressed the slavery part." Mike also showed little connection with the process of change when he questioned the sainthood status Walker gave to early American black women. For Mike, Walker "comes on a little strong."
He added, "While she is going on about the injustice done the women of that time, she reminded me of all the other liberal types whining away about things that can only change with time." Mary reminded Mike about the status of the slave Phyllis Wheatley: "These people, regardless of how comparatively well they treated her, bound Phyllis by law in servitude for the purpose of labor. She was a S-L-A-V-E. She did not own herself. ... Would you feel well treated if your were a slave?" Lori, having just gone through a series of job changes, reminded us that "although slavery and the mindset of 'barefoot and pregnant' may be gone, some careers are reserved for men and others for women." Seeing these words on the screen had more impact than hearing them fleetingly and partially in a classroom, for they were indelible, there to be referred to again and again, to be dissected and digested.

With such different views expressed about Walker's writing, I realized that this form of interaction was a new and exciting way of bringing diverse people together to share experience and "hear" each other. Even in their difference, Chris' peers empathized with her experience. Responding to Noble's critique of hierarchical management at the workplace, Chris shared with classmates her struggle to cross the line into management, a step, according to Noble, that "would have taken a tremendous leap of imagination and, indeed, an act of courage" (77):

From my experiences as a worker at the bottom of the line, this concept from Noble's "Automation Madness" struck the strongest chord within me. Anyone who has worked at the lowest level of unskilled employment knows this unspoken truth. . . .

Just as I was gaining an in-depth understanding of the company's methods of inventory control and the software used to do it, they pushed me out and gave the job to someone who was far less qualified than I to do the job.

Chris recounted other conflicts on the job:

My situation is a clear example of management's reluctance and even inability to cross the class lines established when I was employed initially as an entry level production worker. Throughout my interview with the company, management was fully aware of my educational pursuits and career goals. They knew I was vastly overqualified for the position which I was hired. I proved it to them repeatedly and was rewarded for my efforts through open recognition. Yet they were unwilling to promote me across the class line from production to lower management.

Such sharing reminded me of the greater depth of intimacy made possible by this new venue of collaborating. Earlier Chris had named her experience in the culture of the family so closely intertwined with the culture of the workplace:

In my life, I felt that my ex-husband wanted it both ways. He wanted both a traditional wife and one that would share the economic responsibilities of the household. ... I was supposed to work and bring in a paycheck, plus keep the household up and get the meals and laundry done--on time. ...

Working as a cleaning lady in a private home [when her husband was unemployed], ... I felt my own contrary instincts struggling to get out as I pursued the most menial of
tasks to buy food and pay utilities. As I vacuumed and dusted this beautiful home, I wept in frustration. I knew that after I had worked to earn the money we needed, I would be expected to go home and do the same chores at home. I felt selfish in my need to put my thoughts on paper and angry that my husband refused to understand how driven I felt by this need.

With three credits left toward her bachelor's degree (each earned in the midst of health and financial problems) Chris, like other students in Writing for the 21st Century, looked forward to the support from peers. Indeed, students like Chris thrived on the opportunity to share their heretofore unspoken feelings.

This sharing of experience reminded me of the image in Brodzki and Schenck's text *Life/Lines*. According to Bree, the lifeline image of these authors connotes both a dependency on others through its reference to rescue and to communication links, yet also suggests the palmist's naming of the facts of one's life through the lines of the hand (ix). This dual interpretation of lifelines aptly described the tension present in Writing for the 21st Century. Class members offered lifelines as they reflected upon each other's writing and, at the same time, named and rethought their own experience relating to cultural institutions. Through this interaction, students were acting out Deborah Brandt's contention that "literacy learning requires intensifying—not subordinating—reliance on social involvement as a basis of interpretation in reading and writing. It requires a heightened understanding of how human beings create reality together" (6). The validation of peers encouraged Chris to rethink her own experiences of home, education, and workplace—experiences shaped by the power of patriarchy—and to deepen her own lifelines as she gave expression to issues of gender and authority that she had known so well. Chris agreed with Renee, whom she quoted in her final paper: "We are in the grips of a system without a heart."

The lifelines embedded in these multilayered communications influenced us all—speakers and listeners, writers and readers, reaching out in communication, developing through the interface of computer text a new consciousness. One small group, Group Three, made up of two women and two men, dramatized fully the development of thought from this unique way of communicating. As with other groups, these students were responsible for giving feedback to each group member's writings. For the first time, female students sensed a new freedom to speak directly and honestly to their male peers. This freedom is seen only rarely in face-to-face classroom situations where quick rebuffs, body-language, or aggressive statements tend to stifle female students' enthusiasm to speak out.

**Developing Thought through Literacy Events**

From the beginning, Group Three exhibited energy and enthusiasm for trying to understand each other's views relating to the curricular themes of family, education, and workplace. Issues of gender and power surfaced early
as female students spoke directly to their male peers. Ray, an electronics technician and a father of two children, established himself as a male sensitive to women's issues, even though some participants soon recognized that his language belied his stated position. Mary, a young secretary in a small business, had already communicated her sensitivity to injustice by speaking out in the large group. In Group Three, she showed sympathy for older women who had been restrained by cultural assumptions. She introduced the group to her unmarried Aunt Sue, now a "hero" in Mary's eyes despite early prejudices Mary had learned in childhood:

> When I was a child... in assisting my mother with holiday preparations, I would count the number of expected guests on my fingers. My family would take up six fingers, Aunt Sally's family would take up five, Aunt Kathy's four, but Aunt Sue only took one. I thought her strange because she was single, as if there was something terribly wrong. Didn't she want to marry? Couldn't she find a husband?

Mary enlarged this initial response writing for her first composition, describing her aunt's achievements. Later, she wrote an E-mail message to inform me that she was sharing this writing with her aunt.

Discussions in Group Three turned to issues of language. Gary, a service manager, acknowledged his awareness of women's changing roles but remarked that he found himself "taken aback" when he read a line with reference to "her" instead of the normal "he." The subject of language was renewed in response to Marilyn's writing. When questioned about her use of the word "pity" to describe feelings about the male characters in Glaspell's "Trifles," Marilyn, a service technician for a large corporation and an eighth-grade valedictorian ridiculed for being a "welfare kid," explained, "What I really felt was anger and disgust, but pity seemed to tone it down." Continuing the group's inquiry about language, Ray questioned Gary about his use of the term "white trash" to describe the local people in his first job as a migrant labor foreman: "Gary, although I think I got the drift of what you were trying to say about the different ethnic groups that you worked with, I don't agree with the way you said it. ... You should probably avoid making negative generalities about ethnic groups."

Diverse life experiences continued to raise consciousness about gender and authority issues. In a message to his group members, Gary revealed that his service job had given him a different view of women in the workplace from Mary's more optimistic picture of young professional women today:

> Mary, ... the majority of women I see in the workplace still have the menial jobs. Assembly lines, data entry, and office help to name a few. When I go to the many job sites I see in a day's time, and I find a plant full of women workers, it clues me that the pay scale is so low that only the disadvantaged are willing to work there. I hope we see more equality in the work force in the future, but I am afraid we aren't there yet.

This example shows again how members were drawn to one another, expressing themselves more carefully and kindly because of the permanent nature of
the word on the screen instead of the usual swiftly spoken response that disappears upon utterance. The group was drawn to Ray’s composition entitled “Men and Contrary Instincts,” as Ray described his own brush with patriarchy:

I know that the capitalist ideal, that the success of a man is dependent on how much money he makes, had an effect on my career choice. In my senior year of high school I was set up to take an audition for the Army Band. I had made the decision that I wanted to make a living as a musician. After listening to many men who had opinions that I respected, I decided that I should learn a trade that would provide me a steady income. I went into the Navy, instead of the Army Band, and learned Electronics. When I got out of the Navy I went into the local Army Reserve Band unit. I guess I really never got over giving up my first choice of careers.

The developing relationships of care and good will in Group Three, evidenced by their careful choice of words, served students well as literacy events became intense. Adrienne Rich’s essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” created the most vehement discussion (and perhaps the most development of thought) as revealed in the following interaction between Ray and Marilyn.

Ray wrote that he was puzzled why Rich thinks women have been unable to write what they truly feel, clearly a hindrance to their writing in his view, yet he concluded with an emotional reaction to Rich’s direct expression of feeling in the essay:

I have a hard time understanding why a woman would choose to hate all men, because of the wrong doings of some men…. People are not going to be inclined to be persuaded by a person who obviously expresses hatred towards them.

Marilyn reacted to Ray’s emotional response. Earlier, Marilyn had revealed her sensitivity to Rich’s view of women’s restrained language, sharing that “men would be shocked to see inside my head, to feel the anger and rage that I feel, but seldom show.” Now, prompted by Ray’s negative reading of Rich and encouraged by Mary to “speak up,” Marilyn replied forthrightly:

Ray, I think you’ve missed the point. Rich doesn’t hate all men. Men are not better writers simply because women choose to phrase their feelings in their writings differently than how they feel. For example, my opening sentence of “I think you missed the point” is certainly less offensive to you than saying how I really feel, which . . . is, I think your response was full of shit. Do you understand the point I’m trying to make? My understanding of your response was that a man is much less inclined to be “persuaded” to change his behavior by someone who says what she really thinks, than by someone who couches her phrases in less offensive ways. Does this tell you why women are less likely to write what they really feel? You have perfectly demonstrated my point.

Three days later, demonstrating again the unique quality of this communication medium that allows time for greater depth of thought, Ray logged on to his computer and clarified his position:
I think you missed my point. I am not criticizing Rich for speaking her mind in this paper. ... My point is that perhaps her perception that she had to write what she did not feel was in error. If she had written what she really felt, her earlier writing would probably have been better.

The next day, Marilyn brought the literacy event to closure: "Ray, well said. I concede." Marilyn explained to me through the backstage of E-mail that she had conceded because she realized that she and Ray had both misunderstood one another and also to let Ray know that she accepted what he had to say as long as he accepted her point of view. She added, "You're very right about having to examine our language. I've come to the realization that I don't always express what I had wanted to say and that some of the points I make are clear to me but not to others."

Honest confrontations such as those in Group Three stimulated students' thinking. That these adult women, as well as men, felt free to speak openly enabled both groups to learn from one another. Despite his earlier reaction to Rich's essay, Ray, in a final evaluation, offered an overwhelming tribute to studying composition through computer collaboration. The course for him encouraged an unusual development of thought that he claimed "well exceeded" his expectations:

I have . . . changed my position as a result of these discussions. I had never given the feminist movement much thought. . . . I spent six years in the Navy in a combatant job field that women were excluded from, and since my Navy days I have worked on an exclusively male work crew. Collaborating with the ladies in our group has introduced me to some of the gender specific problems faced by women in our society and how women view these problems. I have also spent a considerable amount of time as a result of . . . this collaboration reevaluating my personal relationship with my wife. . . .

If I were to get nothing else out of Writing for the 21st Century other than a new awareness of points of view, the collaboration would have been worth while. I believe also that I have come away as a better writer. My work has improved mechanically and ideologically, because of the input of my fellow collaborators.

Group Three continued constructing their own knowledge throughout the final unit on the workplace. Gary welcomed a look at issues of power in this culture: "Workplace and automation, now that is a subject that I can relate to." Ray followed with a composition that, according to Mary, was his "best work." She wrote, "In this piece, your style became more creative, relaxed, and conversational, and the communication is right on target." Though Ray, like Gary, was comfortable with the subject of technology, the courage to tread new ground in seeking to understand Rich's essay remained uppermost in Ray's learning. Through shared writing, Ray, along with others, developed new knowledge and language, all made possible by unconstrained space and time provided by the electronic "classroom."

I saw this unconstrained space, inhabited by men and women, as a possible site for the creation of a new language, called for by feminists such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, a language that would go beyond the nature-culture,
mind-body dualities of the first wave of feminism, an inclusive language that would reflect Minh-ha's vision: "I'd rather make of writing a site where opposites lose their essential differences.... I prefer the heterogeneity of free play in a dice game to the unity and uniformity of dissection, classification, and synthesis toward a higher truth" (48-49). The increased sensitivity to language and to thought that flowed through the layers of networked connections offered possibilities for communicating in the presence of difference. That communication also contributed to more confident voices.

Emerging Voices

In characterizing the development of voice for women, psychologist Carol Gilligan suggests that women speak in a “different voice,” a voice that attends to human relationships in the context of care and connection (18). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule maintain that when these conditions are not present in education, women’s learning is often thwarted and voices are muffled (229). Men too, especially men in oppressive, hierarchical situations, may experience a silencing of voice, though not the double silencing of women who have been silenced by gender and position. A teacher of voice and drama, Kristin Linklater works to free the “natural voice” of actors. Such freeing, according to Linklater, comes from removing tensions so that the actor can speak with both body and mind (1-2). Voice in each of these dimensions emerged in Writing for the 21st Century as adult students responded to classmates through this long-distance, collaboration. Gary, commenting on the developing voice of Marilyn in Group Three, explained that her early writings seemed “strung tight” but that later writings seemed more relaxed and gave readers “some bits and pieces of who is behind the pen.” The ability to reflect, ponder, and refine one’s thoughts, uniquely afforded through the timelessness of computer communication, released tensions of those whose lives had been constrained by patriarchal institutions. This release of tension led to more open communication, to stronger voices, and thus to more honest and direct writing. The emergence of voice in the electronic “classroom” was dramatized particularly by three women: Charlotte, Renee, and Kathleen.

In responding to parts of Rodriguez’s educational autobiography, each of these women shared the common experience of being silenced through patriarchal education—Charlotte through excessive competition that early isolated her from classmates and made her feel unaccepted by her peers; Renee through insensitivity to the unique private experience she brought to the classroom; and Kathleen through “guilt and shame from disciplinary methods” of her authoritarian parochial education.

Shy as a child, Charlotte wrote that, in response to being singled out and praised by her teachers for exemplary school work, she had tried “to sever ... ties with the scholarly world to become more accepted by her peers.” Now as an adult she recognized the limitations of her earlier decisions:
I was probably about forty years old when I first really broke away from my parent's expectations for me. I had lived next door to my parents since my marriage which began shortly after I turned eighteen. I did not go to college and my first child was born before I was nineteen.

Charlotte's response demonstrates the depth of contemplation afforded by asynchronous collaboration. Later Charlotte commented on her developing thought and voice:

I have changed some of my thinking as a result of our readings and writings in this course. I had a sort of "gut" reaction to Adrienne Rich's writing in that I did not like her anger seemingly directed at men, but as I felt that many of you had a totally different reaction to her, maybe I ought to reexamine my own reaction. As I did so, I've been doing a lot of thinking about the repression of women, and as I am in the process, I'm coming to understand where a lot of her anger is coming from. I think that I'll be doing a lot of thinking and a lot of reading about this topic for a long time to come. . . . Probably, one of the big things I'm going to carry away from this course is a realization that it's important to try to see the other person's viewpoint. Not that I didn't know that before, but this experience has helped.

Feeling safe to comment on her own feelings, Charlotte began to develop her voice, a voice that offered strength to her person and that she would use in her writing. Charlotte's voice spoke to me in her final essay on technology and the small farmer. Stimulated by the group's discussion of automation, Charlotte's writing reflected her identification with the land on which she was born, her pride in the life of a farmer despite its poverty that had required her to do secretarial work as well. After wondering about the source of support for the small farmer, Charlotte answered her own question:

The answer to that is the people who farm themselves. They are proud and they are tough. They have learned to live by their wits. And they do what they do for one reason: they love it. They will make it and the family farm will survive. . . . There's pride in working the land—the pride of living and depending in a very elemental way on nature; the pride of looking at a beautiful herd of cows and knowing that you raised them and that you made that herd into what it is. There's the pride of knowing that you looked adversity in the face and came out the victor. . . . The life is hard and we are the better for it.

Noting the "great dignity" that Charlotte felt from the self-sufficiency of farm life, classmates responded with encouragement that supported Charlotte's view of herself. Charlotte's experience, as well as that of Renee and Kathleen, suggests that collaborating through the computer can lead to a more inclusive literacy for adult students in the future.

Injustice contributed to Renee's loss of voice when at age eleven she moved from South America with her mother to the United States and was forced to speak English at school and home rather than the Spanish language of her father, who had been killed by an avalanche in a rescue effort. Renee announced, "I lost that language, and with it a part of myself." Her frustration led to withdrawal from school after junior high school. Only at age twenty-six did she return to school and begin experiences with writing.
Now, at forty, she confided to me through E-mail her struggle with written expression:

I'm struggling with what seems to be a boulder in my path. I have a lot to say but not enough skill to ask the right questions that will release the info. . . . I am feeling very anxious about bringing it all together. Like a hen whose eggs have rolled out of the nest and can't figure out how to get them back in. Why is this so hard?

In response to Glaspell's "Trifles," Renee became more focused by connecting with class members. She explained in a face-to-face interview after the course:

I started thinking my own thoughts like, no that's not what's important to me, what's important is what happened to Minnie. . . . It was really hard for me to see clearly, like rationally, to sort it out in the beginning, so that was a way that I felt shaped, like put back into shape, really sort of had my feathers unruffled somehow by the people in the class and organized internally.

For Renee, collaboration through the computer allowed a special in-between space filled with relaxed time, a site for shaping voice through relationship, a site for responding with mind and heart. That site was a rural home on a land trust, for which payments were made from earnings from her three part-time jobs. Renee explained in an interview that there with her computer she did not feel threatened: "There was enough space allowed, because people were letting me be in my silence and then taking my response in their silence and responding from their silence to me—something like that." Space for thoughtful response grew in importance for these adult students. Their responses helped Renee to view her classmates as "allies" with whom she could connect. Through these interactions, her thoughts "solidified." As Renee grew in voice, she shared her personal response to Rich's poetry:

Everywhere in her poetry I feel her looking at our courage, picking through every star in the universe until she finds just the right one to help get me inside. To help me experience the incredible innate connection I have with the universe and how valuable I am because I can help others to make that connection with the voice that I must learn to use.

Renee demonstrated that she was learning to use that voice: "As I bubble and write I feel a tremendous sense of personal growth and fulfillment in having a place to express deep concerns about what it's like to live in the United States during a time of tremendous change."

The computer connections that enabled Renee's voice to emerge also freed the voice of Kathleen. Initially, Kathleen's independent perspective disguised her struggle for voice. Behind the mask that Kathleen wore in the photograph she submitted for the class was a gifted woman, single, thirty-six, recovering from the abuses of stern patriarchy. Her voice had been muted by a series of family circumstances: a Merit-Scholar brother groomed by a demanding father more attentive to sons than daughters, a dependent
mother turned alcoholic upon the early death of her husband, the first of five siblings to attend public school, and the first to have a failing grade. Such circumstances led to insecurity with strangers. Kathleen confided, "I used to simply not say anything because I felt what I had to say was not very worthwhile or that it wouldn't lend anything to the situation." When she did speak in new situations, her voice quivered like that of a "hundred-year-old person" (E-mail). Since returning to school and enrolling in Writing for the 21st Century, her voice was growing stronger: "The earth doesn't stop and stare at me... [and] my voice doesn't voice tremble." Kathleen's participation told the story of this progress. From the initial sentence of her response to Rich's essay, her emerging voice resounded:

\textit{The Voice of a Person Freed}

I sit here drinking tea out of a beautiful china cup, and my mind races with ideas about what to write. This project seems permission to unleash to an audience thoughts that I would normally share only with my journals. I mention the china because from time to time I look around my apartment at all the things I have accumulated and I feel a sense of pride that I have done it on my own. I am not married, nor have I ever been, because I had always felt that to profess to be a woman liberated from the old ideas of society about the place of women, meant that I had to succeed without the economic assistance of a man.

She continued with a summary of her experiences after being pushed to leave home at the end of her senior year in high school:

I had to be sharp to survive, to get jobs, to meet stranger after stranger in my days on the road. It was not without its tests. In Arizona I was raped and robbed and beaten senseless. I reported it to the police who told me they didn't think filing a complaint was worth my while because I had probably asked for it all and would never get the case to trial. And I accepted that. After all, they were the authorities.

Now back in her home town as a part-time accountant and full-time student, she concluded, "I am excited to be a part of the society of people eager to enter 'an old text from a critical direction' and find out just how I can help facilitate those changes that we are all to benefit from." Bob, referring to Kathleen's writing as the "best piece" he had seen in the network, responded, "Thanks for being in my world and making my education more meaningful.'"

Kathleen herself explained to the group the process that contributed to the authority she received from retelling such experiences: "In sharing the memories with people, I have been able to gather a perspective about them, and I think that occurs as a result of having to separate myself from them in the presentation." For Kathleen, putting her ideas before the group affirmed her thinking. She explained in an interview, "It was a way for me to test my own ideas. If I could present them and argue clearly to someone else then that made me sure of what I felt about things." Excerpts from Kathleen's final composition portray the emerging voice that I felt in her work:
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Speaking With Our Lives

I am in the middle of a vast expanse of opportunity, but without direction, without guidance on how to define my own desire. I was raised by a woman who did not begrudge her own lack of higher education; it was an accepted trade-off for having a family. The most she was able to offer me in terms of advice for my future was to many well. Economic means would smooth over any dissatisfaction I might feel toward the expected self-sacrifice of marriage and motherhood. The underlying suggestion was that a man would provide a life of physical comfort in exchange for submission to his desires. . . .

After two decades of public and voluble revolt against the oppression of women as a gender, we find ourselves at a point in time where we have indeed identified what we do not want, but there is no clear outline of the alternatives, what it is that we do want as a result of these slow and arduous social changes. I find this a frightening place to be, but I prefer this responsibility of finding my own voice to that of having words put in my mouth by someone else. . . .

Our task is to educate ourselves, to become comfortable with the notion that our lives bear witness to worthwhile adventure and success. Our task is to create a language that speaks for us in our own terms. I am compelled to share the ideas by my behavior, by my language, by the way that I listen and do not numbly agree with the assumptions that seep through in ordinary conversation. . . . The quality of life concerns us all and shaping it is hardly some trivial task that can be separated from our lives—it is an aspect of everything we do. . . .

We must all reexamine our priorities and the methods we employ to exist in a world of humanity. This is not a gender special exercise in self-importance. It is an imperative we must adopt to prevent our own foolish destruction.

When I received Kathleen's work, I felt her presence, her voice that had been freed like the voices of Charlotte and Renee. Confirming Stanger's assumptions, peer collaboration seemed to play a primary role in enabling Kathleen to re-claim her voice for the development of her own literacy and that of her classmates.

As part of this process, Kathleen, like others, also relied on the backstage of E-mail. While some students turned to this private communication to test their ideas with me before sharing them "in public," Kathleen used E-mail to extend her thinking beyond the public forum. Together we marveled at the openness afforded by this asynchronous computer communication, and together we shared new learnings from our respective studies, particularly those relating to feminism. Kathleen ended most messages with a quotation such as this one from Einstein: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." For Kathleen, having a thoughtful audience for her reflections seemed miraculous. For me, it was miraculous to be touched by such a responsive student. Several months after the course, Kathleen wrote through E-mail:

I am an independent thinker, and was before joining the writing study. But I was unable to freely share my thoughts with people. The collaboration experience strengthened my nerve, allowing the development of a link between the public and the private. . . . In discussing the sometimes prickly issues we talked about, I felt myself come alive again. Where I had told myself I really didn't care about things anymore, I discovered I had lots of feelings that are vibrantly alive.
So important was the experience to Kathleen, that eleven months after entering her first electronic message and four hours before her wedding, she telephoned and, in a steady voice, thanked me for the experience including the backstage private support of electronic mail. For Kathleen, age thirty-six, exercising her voice in this first marriage meant claiming her own name for the future. With a new-found confidence to speak not only with her writing but also with her life, she demonstrated her earlier statement that this collaborative experience was "a voice for all of us . . . more than the opportunity to verbally express things might have been."

**Freedom in Communicating through Computers**

Kathleen's views represented the freedom so many students had felt and expressed during Writing for the 21st Century. As I considered their positive response, I reflected upon the unique qualities of this collaborative experience. Often in face-to-face classroom discussion, students are cut off by stronger voices, or they compromise their responses in reaction to negative non-verbal cues. The uninterrupted literacy events of this medium encouraged honest interchange facilitated by the freedoms of space and time and by the freedom from physical distraction. These freedoms liberated shyness and gave each person equal footing and self worth to speak completely without interruption, providing a "comfort zone," according to one student, that encouraged growth. With less fear of rejection, students participated in more open, personal communication. Such honest communication created a bonding that led Dave to query, "What kind of classroom could give you this opportunity to know your classmates' inner soul?" The normally impersonal computer, in this case, enabled greater intimacy.

This new kind of classroom developed an atmosphere similar to the small consciousness raising groups depicted in Pamela Allen's *Free Space: a Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation*. That group worked toward "freeing women to affirm their view of reality and to learn to think independently" (8). Collaboration through the computer not only sustained such free space but also extended it. The free space of virtual time added new dimensions, resembling the more human time *kairos*, a time of opportune involvement rather than the measured time of *chronos*. The lack of sequence brought about by students' participation on their own time seemed to free students to focus on the layers of human meanings rather than on the beginning, middle, and end of events. If Carolyn Hill is correct in suggesting that *kairos* time is important for writing (69), then collaboration through this new venue would seem to aid this form of literacy. Certainly, the involvement afforded by this computer medium deeply affected many of the participants.

**Conclusion**

Though collaboration can take place in the traditional classroom, collaboration via computer seems to encourage strong voices because of the freedom of that private yet interactive environment. As the students and I emerged
from this experience, we sensed that the free and unconstrained space encouraged participants to focus singularly on the language of interactions and the ideas represented by this language. As a result, literacy events tended to “stick in the mind,” as one student put it, “even when one leaves the computer.”

The contribution of computer communication to literacy development may be the special free space that affords individual reflection and interactive engagement almost simultaneously. Renee respected the silence surrounding her computer space that provided time for formulating thoughts, and she found support in the lifelines extended to her by peers. Literacy and the development of voice prospered in this dual environment of silence and interaction, an environment that parallels the tensions in the development of thought. Bakhtin points to an inner-outer tension in the development of meaning, a process that occurs in communication with others, through “the layering of meaning upon meaning, voice upon voice, strengthening through merging (but not identification), the combination of many voices (a corridor of voices) that augments understanding” (121). Collaboration through the computer enables the connections for this transaction and at the same time provides the silence and freedom to consider one’s own intention, to develop one’s own voice, not from a sovereign self but from a self freed in the midst of supportive peers. Such learning coincides with the feminist agenda neither to essentialize a sovereign self nor to submit to the postmodern elimination of author.

The study of composition through the computer provides another way to contribute to the building literacy for the twenty-first century. This new venue offers a unique collaborative opportunity, one that allows significant freedom to share fully one’s own considered voice. This liberating quality helped many students to alter old ideas, appreciate others’ viewpoints, and write with truer voices.

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Notes

1Unless otherwise indicated, quoted statements of students are part of the Caucus transcript. Statements identified as E-mail or interview data represent private communications with me.

Works Cited


