

**Design, Implementation and Assessment of an Online Writing Program for Multi-age
Students, Grades 9-12**

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September 27, 2000

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Abstract

“I keep the subject constantly before me and wait till the first dawnings open little by little into the full light.” Isaac Newton

This dissertation project reports on teaching and learning of creative writing in the online medium. The problem lay embodied in discovering how technology might be used to enhance student learning in ways not possible in the regular literacy classroom. The study provides an overview of pedagogy and research drawn from current learning theory and applied in the new online context. The use of Empowerment Evaluation generated relevant data concerning the dynamics between the design and implementation of the online program and insight into how participants constructed their own writing community as they worked to understand, develop, and improve it.

Thirty students enrolled in the course with an equal number of male and female participants. The multi-aged student population ranged from grades 9-12. The study reports on the data gathered from the core group of 18 students who were continuously involved over the two-year period of the research study from August, 1996 through May, 1998.

The findings suggest that the online medium provides a learning environment conducive to significantly improving students' writing skills, increased technology skills, networking, online communications, developing a community of learners, and an integrated curriculum based on authentic inquiry. All measures point to the improvement of the students' writing abilities as well as their growth as people and an overall positive learning experience. In addition, the study strongly proves the need for administrative support in such endeavors and the necessity of established policies to guide and protect teachers undertaking the challenge of developing, implementing, and assessing these programs.

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter discusses the background interest for this study, its inception, the questions and purpose statement, the research site, pedagogical approach, and offers a brief overview of the research methods.

This dissertation project began four years ago in 1996. I was interested in discovering the reality, the lived experience, of teachers and students using technology in today's classrooms. I wondered about the promises, the potentials, and the possible pitfalls. Research based on teachers and students using technology in innovative ways continues to expand. We are just beginning to glimpse the potential impact of the medium and how it will affect not only schools, but also the world as a whole. The primary question is how technology may be applied to enhance the quality of the student learning experience and what qualities of facilitation serve that primary goal.

I developed an online creative writing program for high school students ranging from 14-18 years of age. Funded under a larger community arts education umbrella through local schools, grants and endowments, the online program involved 11 high schools in nine districts, as well as two students from overseas, one from Switzerland and one from Pakistan.

The longitudinal research study spanned two years and includes both qualitative and quantitative research data. The scope and focus of the program have shifted dramatically over the course of the study demonstrating the swift nature of change in teaching and technology, including the pitfalls and growing pains experienced in any new field of study or development of a fledgling learning organization.

There are currently 26,000 university courses online and roughly 750,000 students who take them. They include courses at Stanford, the University of California, Los Angeles, and Duke.

(Associated Press, April, 1999. USA Today, p.4). Program effectiveness and the quality of the student learning experience is central to current educational research and development of sound theory and practice in the online medium.

The numbers of computers in schools is increasingly rapidly. Surveys of computer purchases during the 1980's indicated that the number of computers in schools grew from 250,000 in 1983 to over one million in 1985 to 2.4 million in 1989. The number of computers is increasing at an annual rate of between 300,000 and 400,000 machines. If it is difficult to put these numbers in perspective, consider that between the 1983-1984 school year and the 1993-1994 school year, the ratio of students to computers improved from 125:1 to 14:1 (Grabe and Grabe, 1995, p.11).

With computers becoming more and more accessible to students both in their homes and in school settings, it is increasingly imperative that educators, in conjunction with their students, explore and document the possibilities unique to online learning environments. In choosing ways to use this technology, teachers must determine how it can best serve their pedagogical aims. Additional research is needed which focuses on evaluating the use of technology in educational settings. To sustain public support for the use of technology in education, it is important to demonstrate its potential educational value.

As educators, we need to be conscious of honing our talents of observation and analysis, and of critically questioning our choices as we move forward into largely uncharted territories. What works, what doesn't, and why? What can we apply from prior research in other educational forums to this new medium? How do roles of teachers and students shift in the online environment? How is technology being used today and how can we envision future possibilities?

Researchers in literacy education stress the importance of students reading and writing everyday, of writing for authentic purposes, of student-centered curricula, of developing ways of not only reading the word, but the world, and of the constructivist nature of creating meaning through interacting with the printed word (e.g., Freire, 1990; Goodman, 1989; Weaver, 1990). It is imperative to attend to the quality of the student learning experience as they learn to read the word and the world in new ways resulting from the increasingly prevalent use of computers for teaching literacy. Who better to dialogue and demonstrate the impact of the lived experiences of technology in the literacy classroom than students and teachers pioneering such programs together? And without such dialogue, these technologies may be used in ways that have little effect, and today's high expectations may become tomorrow's disillusionment.

We find ourselves in the midst of a cultural transformation. Controversy and chaos walk as companions to change, as does resistance. Media headlines fuel fears about pornography and the Internet. School districts without established Internet policy result in multi-million dollar school computer labs standing empty. Most teachers do not have adequate time or training to know how to use technology in their teaching. When confronting the unknown, some people feel threatened and become paralyzed. Convinced the water is too cold for swimming, they stand transfixed on the shores of change.

I see an example of this fear in a natural context. On a beach in Florida, I watch a father and his three year old son who is afraid of the ocean. The father leads the child to the edge of the water so that it laps just over his small, sandy white feet. The wide-eyed boy looks down intently and jumps from one foot to the other as the water reaches his ankles. His feet disappear, sinking in the wet sand and he backs away a few steps, uncertain. A bigger wave breaks with more force and he tries to pull his hand out of his father's grip. He begins to cry. Two days later, I see him

building a sand castle and playing catch-me-if-you-can with the waves as they break on the shoreline. He is no longer afraid and laughs delightedly. The boy conquers the unfamiliar and plays with newly found confidence. It has taken the patient guidance of his father, trust, risk-taking, and time. These principles can serve to guide educators as we navigate the turbulent waters of the tides of technological change as we evaluate both the strengths and the potential stumbling blocks of the future of online education.

Background for the Study

I purchased my first computer in 1992 without knowing how to turn it on. I enrolled in the first online accredited doctoral program in Transformative Learning through the California Institute of Integral Studies. I learned about facilitating online learning through the mentoring of my instructors as well as through my own personal experiences in online communities, teaching, and professional reading. As the doctoral studies became more involved, I acquired the technological expertise necessary to accomplish such things as downloading files, synchronous and asynchronous communications, Internet based research, and more. Immediately I began applying my learning as a student to my practice as a teacher-educator.

I first applied interactive computer technologies to augment face-to-face instruction at University of San Diego in 1992. In interactive online journals, my graduate students in education courses discussed a range of topics including creative lesson plans, problems with behavior management, worries about finding jobs, and fears about what to teach on Monday.

A "second" class emerged online extending beyond the boundaries of our scheduled bi-weekly meetings. Replacing the common lament after class, "Oh, I wish I would have said that," or, "Why does that person always have to dominate the discussion?" everyone

found a level playing field to share their ideas on their own time schedules and in their own comfort zones. Class connections did not "end" at the sound of the bell. Some students lurked as readers only for a time, while others acclimated more readily and began posting immediately.

Monitoring the natural flow of online dialogue provided me with a valid source of inside knowledge about the primary questions relating to their growth as teachers. This helped me to create a curriculum more attentive to their individual needs. Perhaps more importantly, a true sense of community formed online beyond what I had ever witnessed in traditional classroom settings.

The following year, I added an additional component to online conferencing as part of an undergraduate course at Western Michigan University. My student teachers became email pen pals with local middle school students. Not only did this provide all of these students the opportunity for learning computer-mediated communications in an authentic context, but it allowed teachers to engage with the kinds of students who would fill their future classrooms.

At the end of the semester, the virtual pairs were able to meet and talk about the experience. As a teacher-educator, I was surprised to learn that these "teachers" were often unsure how to talk to the younger students, unaware of the issues which inevitably arise when working with adolescents. School is not separate from life; rather, teen pregnancy, drugs, peer pressures, urban violence, divorce, love, and typical teen angst permeates the writing classroom. Online communications provide a forum for students to talk openly about their sources of "ultimate concern." How we guide students as they explore these most important life issues is an important question to address. My interest intensified in how online education might enhance the

student learning experience. My study began to evolve and crystallize. I submitted original course descriptions to district administrations (Appendix K).

The Purpose Statement

The purpose of this dissertation is to describe my venture into education and technology in designing, teaching, researching, and assessing the dynamics of an online secondary education writing program. The prevailing common denominator in the current literature is the expressed need for further examples of innovative and interactive ways to utilize this new medium in the literacy classroom, for research which evaluates the program methods and effectiveness in developing online learning communities, and for more information which evaluates the quality of the student learning experience as a result of the use of technology based on a particular instructional pedagogy.

My purpose was to demonstrate how to use technology in the teaching of writing and to describe how to cultivate an environment conducive to learning which is meaningful to students' lives both as writers and as people. Through this "thick description" of that journeying, I hope future educators will gain a teacher/researcher's perspective of how to deliver or augment their own courses using the online medium as a primary component and to use evaluation tools which become an integral part of the learning process itself.

My study adds to the field of literacy education, teaching and technology, and program evaluation by describing how I created, implemented, assessed, and sought to understand the levels of empowerment and the dynamics involved in participating in a fully interactive online creative writing community. From this, future educators will gain a teacher/researcher's perspective to create and evaluate such programs and writing communities of their own.

The Questions

"Questions make the frame in which its picture of facts is plotted. They make more than the frame; they give the angle of perspective." Suzanne Langer

This primary research question framed my inquiry:

What are the elements and unique dynamics associated with the creation of a secondary education, fully interactive online writing community which may be used to improve instructional design and delivery of online education?

From that core question arose many sub-questions including: How would the students develop the online creative writing program in conjunction with their teachers? How would students assess and articulate their experiences in participating in an online creative writing community? I wondered what directions the students would determine for developing the online creative writing program? If they achieved those goals, how would they do it? How might they grow as writers? What could be learned to contribute to the creation and development of future programs using technology in the teaching of writing? What levels of empowerment would be revealed? What ripples occur? How might this study shift educators' views about online learning environments and ways of assessing those programs including the students as primary participants? What would be revealed through the application of Empowerment Evaluation that might contribute towards creating future writing programs based in on-line community environments, or as a supplement to existing writing programs? In what ways would students and teachers feel empowered, if at all? How might the online medium serve to enhance the quality of the student learning experience? Also intriguing were my combined roles as program creator, teacher, researcher, and evaluator.

There is a substantial need to document how the use of interactive technologies in the teaching of writing impacts student proficiency levels. Indeed, there also seems to be a need for

understanding the shift needed in exploring assessment approaches in the new writing classroom which integrates technology as an interactive medium.

We must first discover how writers write in this new medium, and how the computer has entered, and inevitably altered, the system that includes the writer, the text, and the teacher of writing. The trick in this research endeavor will be to research questions that transcend software and hardware boundaries, and that, therefore, continue to be useful as the technology evolves (Hawisher and Selfe, 1991, p.143).

My hope for this study was to contribute research towards developing a sound theoretical foundation for interactive pedagogical practice in online instructional environments.

Researcher Assumptions

I have always been a constructivist and critical theorist in my work as a teacher. While there is not a paradigm which encompasses both, I term it critical constructivism. Some of the assumptions I carry as an educator, and which thus affected my work as a researcher, include the following:

- ◆ A belief in systems thinking, or that there is a natural order which emerges as change occurs within living systems.
- ◆ A natural and evolutionary approach to education affected the design and delivery of the program and research.
- ◆ While we create our own knowledge, perspective is greatly affected by socio-historical, political, and cultural influences.
- ◆ Learning is process-oriented and ongoing, not static or mechanistic.
- ◆ A combination of both qualitative and quantitative research allows for a widened frame of reference in regards to research credibility and validity.

- ◆ My research methods were eclectic, combining participatory action with my students, ethnographic description of the online culture, and Empowerment Evaluation as a guiding methodological process.
- ◆ We cannot assume what our students know or do not know, or what they “should” know.
- ◆ As a result of technology and reader/writer interaction with text, the teaching of writing and literacy must reflect a shift in teaching approach which includes what we know about literacy education and assessment, and which needs to be adjusted according to ongoing research and what we learn as we go.

Methods Overview

My primary research tools were varied and combined both qualitative and quantitative measurements. During my doctoral studies for CIIS, I learned an ethnographic assessment method called Empowerment Evaluation (Fetterman, 1993). Empowerment Evaluation, adopted in numerous program contexts including “substance abuse accelerated schools, HIV prevention, crime prevention, welfare reform, battered women’s shelters, agriculture and rural development, adult probation, adolescent pregnancy prevention, tribal partnership for substance abuse self-determination for individuals with disabilities, and doctoral programs” (Fetterman, 1996, p.3) provides a well-established model for program evaluation research, demonstrating how learning organizations can become self-determining.

Designed to foster self-determination and program development, Empowerment Evaluation focuses on improvement, is collaborative, and requires both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. As an alternative to traditional external evaluations, it offers program participant buy-in, program focused goals and strategies, an insider’s perspective of program operations, a tailored approach to program development, a generalizable skill that

can last a lifetime, and a promise of a learning community” (Fetterman, 1994, p.2).

For this project, the students became active participants in the dialogic debate surrounding technology and education. The levels of empowerment spanned the personal, local, state, national, and international fields and impacted policy in many forums. The description of this evaluative ethnographic research approach well suited my interests, questions, and purposes as a researcher.

Throughout the process, my students, colleagues (visiting authors and co-teachers), and I dialogued online to continually refine our understanding and to collectively move the work forward. These member checks allowed for a much richer analysis of the data over an extended two year time period.

Fetterman explicates self-determination in the learning process in a statement stating:

The assessment of a program's value and worth is not the end point of an evaluation-as it often is in traditional evaluation-but part of an ongoing process of program improvement (p. 5). Program participants become part of a dynamic and responsive approach to evaluation where participants learn to continually assess their progress toward self-determined goals and to reshape their plans and strategies according to this assessment" (Fetterman, 1996, p. 6).

Limitations

The study was limited by the number of participants over the two years, 18. In addition, while as the primary teacher-researcher I can trace our learning path, it does not necessarily mean that it is replicable. All learning community dynamics are different depending on the participants. Learning styles, content and delivery choices, working relationships between facilitators, interests, and motivations all affect how these instructional online environments will

evolve. Still, there is much to be learned from our experiences that may be applied to other online programs.

The necessity of the primary researcher to also be the facilitator, part-time administrator, community public relations representative, speaker and presenter, created very time intensive demands. Balancing these roles sometimes creates a conflict of interest. For example, the “teacher” part of me would have liked to relinquish the need for grading students. The “researcher” in me wanted to continually press participants for more information and to delve more deeply into questions of online learning and process. As an experienced teacher, I knew that content was the most important and that allowing the participants to guide their own process was imperative. The “administrator” in me was conscious continually of diversity in the student population, fears surrounding education and the Internet and what that implied, and tentative feelings about pioneering a pilot project as the person in sole responsibility. The intersection of these roles, while it serves to inform this research from a widened and perhaps more useful report for varying audience, disallows for researcher objectivity in the strictest sense. I believe this to be a strength rather than a limitation. What I provide is an emic perspective and a panorama of events from these varying positions. It is, however, different than a highly focused study which might, for example, consider a single question such as Internet use by teachers in the classroom or might compare a traditional face-to-face writer’s workshop with an online group. Rather, it offers a description of the culture created in the online educational environment, what norms and salient features added to the essence of the online learning community and experience. It is the work of a bricoleur.

This overview in this chapter of the philosophical orientation of the researcher, the background of the study, the questions and purpose, a brief methods description, and study

limitations provides the reader with a foundational frame for understanding the research process as a whole. The next chapter situates the study based on a literature review of current research, followed by methods of data gathering and analysis. The final narrative presents the findings and outcomes based on each of the Empowerment Evaluation goals. The last chapter addresses critical questions for the future as well as the continued evolution of the program on which the research was based.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Technology and Education, Literacy Pedagogy, Evaluation

Chapter Two presents a three tiered literature review including teaching and technology, pedagogical practice in the teaching of writing, and program evaluation. The study is situated in the context of current educational theory and how this research project adds to the emerging field of knowledge surrounding online education.

Technology and Education

President Clinton intended for all schools to connect to the Internet by the year 2000 according to his Goals 2000 plan for education. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has been tracking the rate at which public schools and classrooms are meeting that goal. In 1994, 35 percent of public schools were connected. In the fall of 1998, that figure had risen to 89 percent.

According to a recent report from the U.S. Department of Commerce, nearly one-third (32.7%) of all Americans now use the Internet either from home or from outside their home. Although more than half of the Americans who use the Internet from outside their home access it from work, the second most popular point of access from outside the home is the K-12 school (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1999). Over 90% of schools now have some sort of access to the Internet someplace in their building. (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

Fueled by factors such as more widely available and affordable hardware, more user friendly software, and a strong economy that has increased consumers' affluence, the option of taking high school courses-and even acquiring one's entire secondary education-through the Internet is rapidly becoming a reality for increasing numbers of students in the United States.

On the surface, we would appear to be on track to meet the President's target. However, while

the percentage of connected schools is rising, these numbers tell us nothing about the degree to which students have access to the Internet. More importantly, they show nothing of how the Internet is being used to supplement classroom instruction or enhance the student learning experience, if at all. Nor does it address the most important question, in what ways does the on-line medium compare to and differ from the regular classroom, what new possibilities become reality, and what type of pedagogical approach is best suited for teaching and learning via technology.

Simply having an Internet connection is not enough. Speed and types of connectivity, methods of instructional delivery, hardware and software choices, placement of computers in labs or classrooms, how frequently teachers and students use the Internet and in what ways, pedagogical orientation, training and knowledge of teachers all affect how the technology is implemented and the instructional outcomes.

Educational uses of networking have given educators new resources that are valuable but limited in scope. Even though a majority of teachers have still not used the Internet in their teaching, according to a study by Henry Jay Becker (1998) "Internet Use by Teachers", and even fewer have used it in a major way, there may be many reasons for this including the recent development of Internet tools and resources, the rapidity with which technologies are changing, the limited opportunity that teachers have had to see how the Internet can be used in their practice, and the rarity of fast and convenient Internet access. Some teachers who have not used the Internet may be looking forward to a day when they might. How do teachers see the Internet's potential value for them in the near future? The study asked teachers about the value of the Internet in two respects: The value of a teacher computer station with electronic mail access and the value of having WWW access in their classroom. One half of all teachers saw these

resources as essential for their teaching and nearly 90% reported that they would consider these resources either valuable or essential. (Becker, 1998, p.4).

Online virtual high schools currently number only a half a dozen including: Mindquest. a virtual high school for adults and Class.com, delivering 150 high school courses through the University of Nebraska and fully accredited. CyberSchool offers a collection of high school courses taught by regular school teachers with time allotted for online instruction in addition to the North Dakota Division of Independent Study, which provides distance education for students in grades 5-12. Virtual High School offers high school courses in all of the major subject areas for all grades levels through the Ministry of Education and Training in Ontario, Canada.

(<http://www.edsurf.net>)

Riel and Harrasim (1994) define a “NetCourse” as follows:

In this model, all activity occurs online, using computer conferencing or bulletin board systems, or, in a few cases, email interaction. Online class activity resembles face to face classes in many ways: A teacher typically organizes the material, describes the sequence, establishes the pace and determines the reading and other assignments. However online courses are asynchronous and place independent...in online courses students read the materials, log on to participate in online seminars, large and small group discussions, individual or group projects. (<http://whs.concord.org/content/academics/why+NetCourses>)

In Michigan, and in many other states, virtual universities are being created. High school students can sign up for online courses, some for both high school and university credit, and others not for credit. It is similar to former distance independent study courses in that students register online, receive a CD ROM pre-programmed course, and communicate via email with an instructor. Some universities like Stanford, or companies like Microsoft and Apex, are producing

CD ROM courses sold on a per pupil basis to other universities, which some refer to as “diploma mills” in a “commoditization of education”(Noble, 1999, University of Illinois seminar). In a recent criticism of distance learning, Farber (1998) claims that “a mere 25 courses packaged as instructional software, would serve an estimated 80 percent of total undergraduate enrollment in core undergraduate courses...distributed learning involves only a small number of professors, but has the potential to reach a huge market of students” (p. 797).

Increasingly visible through publications and advertising are software packages designed to minimize active student-teacher interactions and creative learning applications, tutoring tools for currently available software, and books of computerized lesson plans reminiscent of former textbooks and teacher's manuals. Some of the published works on the teaching of writing using computer technology focus on descriptions of projects such as creating class magazines and newspapers, designing school homepages, email correspondences and networking with other teachers, students, and authors in distant locations, online (sometimes interactive) journaling, and other often rewarding computer applications (Edgar and Wood, 1996; Hawisher and Selfe, 1991; Monroe, 1993; Wresch, 1991).

Concern is raised over the commercial business as instructional providers. Farber continues: In these cases, a conflict of interest arises between the delivery of sound pedagogy and the sale of educational technology. The implementation of online education shows both promise and peril. Computer mediated instruction may indeed introduce new and highly effective teaching paradigms, but high quality teaching is not always assured. Administrative decisions made without due consideration to pedagogy, or worse, with policies or technology that hampers quality, may cause much wasted time, money and effort of both faculty and students (p. 811).

Unfortunately, while students may in fact perform well on “tests” of the knowledge gained through such programs, this kind of educational approach represents mere rote memorization, and not active learning that impacts the learner in important and meaningful ways. This definition represents an older paradigmatic approach to teaching and learning that does not encompass fully interactive, transactional learning. It represents the more traditional approach of teacher-directed learning and is primarily one-to-many in online communications, or teacher-to-student, and occasionally many-to-many when the students have discussion groups. In many of the online programs I have perused, students earn credits by instructors emailing them a reading and assignment schedule, which is graded and credit awarded upon submission. Dr. Feenberg summarizes the need for expert professors in the “Promise or Threat” article (1998) by concluding:

The best way to maintain the connection between online education and the values of traditional education is through ensuring that distance learning is ‘delivered’ not just by CD ROMS but by living teachers, fully qualified and interested in doing so online...Pre-packaged material will be seen to replace not the teachers as mentor and guide, but the lecture and the textbook. Interaction with the professor will continue to be the centerpiece for education, no matter what the medium (p. 2).

The study done by Jay Becker (1998) found that the Internet “enables teachers to follow a whole new approach to teaching based on a different theory of how students attain understanding or new perspectives on what it is important for students to know”(p.10). In past models, the teacher helped students to master a particular set of skills, facts and concepts primarily by reading the same textbook material, teacher questioning and direct explanation and having

students demonstrate competencies on tests. Becker describes the “constructivist approach” in contrast as:

Teaching involving having students work on complex projects, often in groups, and often with different groups working on different projects. In this model, students learn skills and concepts in the context of using them to do something. These projects follow a constructivist theory of learning that subject matter becomes meaningful and therefore understandable only when it is used in context rich activities. They will, for example also emphasize the students’ own responsibility for designing their own tasks, for figuring out their own methods of solving problems, and for assessing their own work.--all as a means of making the learning tasks more meaningful to students (Becker, 1998, p. 12).

The results of the study conducted by Becker revealed the three major predictors of teacher Internet use was high a correlation between teacher belief in constructivism, connectivity, and computer expertise. Currently however he shows that the Internet is being used primarily for an information resource, for use in lesson preparation, for student information gathering for research and for student projects and publishing (Becker, 1998, p. 20).

Feenberg (1998) reports:

The virtual classroom was a place of intense intellectual and human interaction. Both students and teachers contributed literally hundreds of highly intelligent comments to our computer conferences each month. The quality of these online discussions surpasses anything I have been able to stimulate in my face-to-face classroom (p. 11).

My study adds to the field by demonstrating how a constructivist pedagogy can be implemented online through fully interactive communications with students. The report by the

faculty of the University of Illinois (1999) uses Cobb's definition of constructivism containing two variations:

Cognitive constructivists tend to draw insight from Piaget and focus on individual construction of knowledge discovered in interaction with the environment, and social constructivists rely more on Vygotsky...and view learning as connection with and appropriation from the sociocultural context (p. 12).

The primary question I am asked by other teachers and researchers is: "How do you do what you do?" A constructivist and critical theorist perspective provided the foundation for how I created, developed, assessed, and improved the online literacy program. It focused on the social and interactive nature of learning, of schematic scaffolding, or building upon what we know as we learn through and with others. Professor Bonk from the University of Illinois comments: "Online communication may enhance the goals and tactics of constructivist educational theory" (p.6). This study serves to further document this paradigmatic approach which may be used to enhance the student learning experience in online education. It also contributes to the research, which compares online learning with the traditional ftf classroom.

Literacy Pedagogy

In reviewing current literature addressing the teaching of writing, the use of technology in the teaching of writing, and assessment methods for evaluating both students' writing proficiencies, and on-line community and program development, two overriding issues surface. First, the role technology will play in education, specifically relating to the teaching of writing, is still largely unclear. Furthermore, much more research is needed regarding what may be deemed as a valuable learning experience for the students. "No commonly held vision has ever emerged to show how technology would enhance the educational process" (Roblyer, 1997, p. 56).

What is clear is that as experienced literacy educators, it is important to advance with confidence to contribute what we know to the discussion, and to ask the important questions about the way technology will be included in our methods of teaching writing. Technology is not magic, nor a panacea for all of the current educational challenges. Most important is the dedication and innovative spirit of teachers and researchers in the classroom who will decide how best to use this technology in creating online communities centered on the creative art of writing. As Dave Hughes, creator of Big Sky Net and researcher for the National Science Foundation, in his own online style suggests, "It is ramp-up time in America for telecommunications. And education is going to ride the wave-with all kinds of fools, charlatans, gold counting houses, and clowns trying to get on their boards. It's going to be messy, just like America. But as they say on Walden Pond: Surf's up!"

<http://www.well.com/user/hrl/vcbook9.html>

As educators, it is advisable to avoid the danger of using technology haphazardly. We want to enter into an informed debate about how electronic technology can, and cannot, serve writing instruction effectively. How can we meet the challenges presented by the changing nature of literacy in the electronic age?

Many of the current studies describe the use of computer technology in education as an added component to regular classroom learning environments (Edgar & Wood, 1996; Monroe, 1993; Wresch, 1991). In relation to the teaching of creative writing online, a recent publication, The Nearness of You: Students and Teachers Writing Online, (Christopher Edgar and Susan Wood, 1996) offers multiple examples of teachers integrating technology to teach writing in the classroom setting in innovative and interactive ways. The authors point to the importance of the process of developing programs attentive to the quality of the student learning experience:

Some of the far-reaching claims by technology advocates were coming true- technology was bringing students and teachers together, eradicating distance, helping students learn more effectively. But this was due to the intelligence and effort of the students and teachers who had the courage to dive in, and the wisdom to see that the quality of the work was the important thing, not the hardware and software. The key is to use telecommunications to suit your particular situation by integrating with what you are already doing in the classroom-the antithesis of electronic worksheets” (Edgar and Wood, 1996, p. 257).

Teachers accustomed to teaching writing in traditional ways will be tempted to translate these practices to new learning forums.

The tendency to stress factual knowledge and drill activities, such as worksheets, exists in many situations, whether or not computers are present in the classroom. The factual orientation is pervasive in education. There is a concern that more attention is not given to other forms of learning (Grabe and Grabe, 1996, p. 13).

If we take what we know about ways to teach writing from prominent researchers in the field, we know that several principles are key to promoting student learning. Whole Language theorists and secondary writing educator/researchers (Graves, Donald, 1994; Rief, Linda & Barbieri, Maureen, 1995; Weaver, Constance, 1994, 2nd ed.) embrace the philosophical underpinnings of a constructivist approach to pedagogy. While often mistaken as a “method of reading instruction,” on the other side of phonics instruction, whole language is a pedagogical approach, which embodies what we know to be effective practice in teaching and learning. Weaver states: “...Whole language educators have been influenced by the work of cognitive psychologists and learning theorists who emphasize the roles of motivation and social interaction in learning”

(Goodman, Y.M., & Goodman, K.S., 1989. In Weaver, 1998, p. 334). Weaver continues to address the influence of research on “language and literacy development in natural settings,” leading to the following principles of literacy education:

- ❑ Learners construct meaning for themselves, most readily in contexts where they can actively transact with other people, with books and with objects and materials in the external world.
- ❑ The most significant and enduring learning, particularly of concepts and complex processes, is likely to be that constructed by the learner, not imposed from without.
- ❑ When learning is perceived as functional to and purposeful for the learner, it is more likely to endure. That is, the most significant learning derives from whatever arouses the interest, meets the needs and furthers the purposes of the learner in the here and now.
- ❑ In order to engage themselves wholeheartedly in learning, however, learners must be confident that they will be safe from negative repercussions. They must be free to take risks without fear of being criticized, penalized, or declared wrong.
- ❑ Though there are developmental trends among learners, learning is fundamentally idiosyncratic, even chaotic; the nature and scope of each individual’s learning are unique.
- ❑ Individual learning is promoted by social collaboration; by opportunities to work with others, to brainstorm, to try out ideas and get feedback, to obtain assistance. Social collaboration also offers powerful demonstrations of how others work, learn, act and so forth, which is particularly valuable in promoting the growth of those whose strategies are initially less successful. In short, learning is facilitated by and within a community of learners (Weaver, Constance, 1994, p. 334).

Dr. Weaver purports development of curriculum as a negotiated process between facilitators and students and focused on authentic contexts and sources of inquiry. Direct and indirect

instruction are used according to function, purpose, and needs of the learner. Weaver discusses the role of the teacher as facilitator, guide, mentor, co-learner, and primary role model responsible for creating a community of learners. The teaching and learning process is a negotiated and democratic process.

Addressing evaluation and assessment, Weaver stresses student reflection and self-evaluation and the overall process as collaborative between teachers and students. In addition, multiple methods of gathering data allow for the “complex and multi-dimensional” levels of assessment focusing on process as well as product. Essentially assessment needs to be a contextualized, authentic and collaborative endeavor and one that creates a feedback loop for program improvement and self-discovery, not a system of external measures focused on maintaining the social hierarchy.

All of these principles have informed my work as a literacy educator from the beginning of my teaching career. What became most exciting to me were the ways these pedagogical approaches seemed so well suited to the online medium. Students and teachers are on a level playing field. Archives allow for retrospective analysis and an ongoing portfolio documenting student process as well as finished works. Cross-disciplinary learning and content were a natural matter of course stemming from in-depth dialogue on topics, which were of personal importance to the participants. When Linda Rief, writing teacher and researcher, was asked what she had learned from her students, her reply was:

I’ve learned that students learn the most when they are reading, writing and speaking about things those things that matter most to them. As a writing teacher, my goal is *not* to make them all great writers. It is to make them the best writers they can be in the time that I have with them. It’s my job to surround them with the best models: authors to whom they can

apprentice themselves, books they can lose themselves in, characters who tell them they're not alone, words that make them think and feel and learn. It's my job to provide the structure and time for them to practice writing. It's my job to guide, coach, challenge, and reach them. ...I want them to learn because *they want to*. Because it matters to them. (Rief, Linda and Barbieri, Maureen, 1995, p. 10).

This student-centered, democratic approach guided the development of the online program. Who I am affects how I teach. I sought to discover what was possible in teaching literacy in the transition to the online medium.

Regie Routman in Literacy at the Crossroads (1996) frames "what we can do to provide good solid writing instruction":

Give daily time to writing, find out what students 'ache with caring about,' model yourself as a writer, no matter what the grade level, do some shared writing regularly, encourage students to write in many genres, teach more conventions, be realistic about revision, and model sharing and response. (pp.87-88).

I add to this the importance of avid reading in connection to developing writing proficiency, and also, the inherently social nature of literacy. In addition technology is, in reality, a new literacy, which necessitates shifting our ways of thinking about the craft of teaching literacy and cognition.

In relation to the teaching of literacy, the text-based medium of the computer is ideal. Word-processing capabilities allow for revision including moving whole bodies of text, using spell and grammar checks, changing font type and sizes, pasting and copying from multiple texts, and more. In the online classroom, all communications are written, allowing students the space to pause and reflect before posting a comment. This becomes especially important to normally

"shy" students who hesitate to enter the traditional classroom discussion. Multiple online publishing sources and the ability to create a personalized homepage allow writers to become publishers of their own works. Online networking offers students the opportunity to engage with other writers from around the world and to develop individual and collaborative projects based on mutual interests. Because of the technological ability to collapse boundaries of time, space and culture, a rich and diverse base for teaching literacy in new contexts and in exciting ways becomes possible. It is crucial to consider how students are empowered through the writing process. As we write, we explore and define who we are. Our stories, poems, narratives, letters and communications reveal what moves us, what inspires, what empowers. We not only learn to write, but we write to learn.

Computer technology, many teachers feel, provides much needed help in creating fertile sights for the creation and cultivation of knowledge within classrooms. Such change is all about us. We can see it in the very nature of the discipline itself: in the changing ways writer can now construct and assemble texts using computers, in the changing concepts of authorship and ownership within electronically based publishing environments, and in the changing nature of media and hypermedia. Even our attitudes have changed. Teachers of writing have progressed from skepticism to enthusiastic acceptance, and finally to healthy criticism of what computers can and cannot do for writing classes. The next step must be to plan strategies for the future that are responsive to those changes, that are informed by careful research and by theoretically sound pedagogy (Hawisher and Selfe, 1991, p.2).

As students learn to read the word and the world in new ways, our pedagogical approaches need to reflect these perceptual shifts. To facilitate the transitions, educators must become aware

of how technology impacts students' thinking and learning. Former "knowers" are becoming "users" of information with rapidly expanding resources virtually at their fingertips. Students do not need to memorize information for later regurgitation, rather they need to know how to apply and integrate quickly accessed information in creative ways. We are learning how to design online educational environments which promote creativity, self-awareness, interconnectivity and empowerment. These are not static lessons; rather, they emphasize the fluid nature of reality and serve to soften the barriers between life and school.

“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”

Albert Einstein

Learning Community

The supportive writing community of our online program allowed for a very different scenario for the teaching of writing using technology than one where a student puts in a pre-programmed software disk which asks them to place appropriate punctuation in formatted sentences, or asks them to select which word, a, b, or c, is misspelled. It is also different than the classroom where the computer is used merely as a tool for word-processing and revision purposes, or from the book that offers 30 Lesson Plans for the English Classroom in the Computer Age, (Wresch, 1991). These are not static lessons; this is a community of writers writing to communicate and writing to learn as they seek to create meaning and knowledge in the spaces between them. Those who focus on the benefits to be gained from a networked writing classroom generally stress the interactive learning this arrangement can provide.

A networked writing classroom enhances the social, collaborative, atmosphere (Gerrard, 1989; Sudo, 1985; Weiss, 1989. In Hawisher & Selfe, 1991, p.142). It is precisely this kind of

example, of students actively engaged and empowered to use technology for exploring their worlds as writers that needs to be added to the literature in the field.

Howard Rheingold, author of The Virtual Community (1996), recently described in an item in Brainstorms, his virtual community, and the foundation for developing his online communities as follows:

A learning community also has to be a teaching community. People have to come into it with that openness to notions outside their normal ken, and they have to want to give of what they know in exchange. That reciprocity is not direct but diffuse—that's part of the learning community. Brainstorms (current online virtual community developed from former Electric Minds) was designed from the beginning to be a teaching and a learning community. I wanted a bunch of people I didn't agree with who knew things I didn't know, who would like to weave something together we could all learn from. There are other agendas: I wanted a place to hang out and socialize and meet new people all over the world. And that's where idle chit-chat might seem meaningless noise to one person, but might be vital social glue to another person or to the feeling of the group as a whole (Rheingold, 1999, Brainstorms Online Community, Item: Life Online).

Educators must become aware of the ways technology impacts students' ways of thinking and knowing. The primary question is not so much a matter of the accessibility to the wealth of information available through technology, but of learning how to apply and use the information provided by technology in ways that promote literacy as a means for communication, critical thinking, self-awareness and empowerment. With students often having technical expertise, which surpasses that of the teachers, the climate is set for teachers and students to become co-learners with collaboratively designed goals and outcomes. The very concept of literacy is being

re-defined and transformed, not by the computer which is just a machine, but by those who are actively engaged in using technology in innovative ways.

Rarely discussed is the potential for creating primary on-line learning communities of teachers, students, and authors engaged in writing, thinking, and creating knowledge in an interactive online forum. In essence, the possibilities for classrooms without walls, online campuses on the Internet designed to supplement current literacy programs are largely unexplored and undocumented.

One such study, however, “The Role of Online Communications in Schools: A National Study” (1998) conducted by The Center for Applied Technology, an independent research and development organization, demonstrates that “students with online access perform better.” The study compared the work of 500 students in seven urban school districts, half with online access and half without.

Teachers in the experimental group with online access changed in the use of technology in the way “literate adults use computers-to enhance performance directly in gathering, organizing and reporting information,” as well as for developing “multimedia projects and for creative expression.” The direction of change for the control teachers was from an educational standpoint more traditional. They used the computers as teaching devices to teach basic skills, or merely to reward other kinds of skill development. The researchers state:

To succeed in the workplace, children need to be independent, critical thinkers. They must know where and how to find information, organize it, evaluate it, and then effectively express their new knowledge and ideas. They must work cooperatively in teams. Online communications plays a vital role in preparing children for their adult lives. As we fund and implement these new communications technologies, it is

important to know whether they actually improve student performance. It is also critically important to know what steps need to be taken in the school, the district, the community to support their effective use in the classroom (p. 12).

This project addresses these very questions in the movement from pre-programmed and often fragmented technological applications in the teaching of writing towards a description and evaluation of a program where students and teachers collaboratively created a literacy community housed on the Internet while self-determining their own learning directions. It consists of a leap from former ways of thinking previously centered on computer-mediated instruction towards the realization of creating an interactive online community of learners gathered around the central interest of growing as writers and as people.

The question of what's possible intrigues literacy educators and students embarking on the technological trail. What are the students' and teachers' experiences in learning through this new medium? How do teachers and students co-create online environments and curricula conducive to enhancing literacy skills? In what ways are students empowered through their involvement in online writing communities? Now is clearly the time for exploring and articulating our goals in relation to technological instructional applications in the teaching of writing. Technology is not only about connecting computer systems; it is about connecting people.

Critical Theory and Social Justice Education

“We do not leave our passions outside the door when we come into our classrooms. If we care deeply about social justice, our concerns will become part of the curriculum. What we care about inside and outside of school coalesce.” Maureen Barbieri

During my twenty years as an educator, certain authors have significantly influenced me, among them critical theorists like Paulo Freire, Herbert Kohl, Johnathon Kozol, Augusto Boal, Peter McLaren, Donaldo Macedo, and more. As I read these authors' books and when I met

some of them in person, I felt like I had “come home.” Their ideas of education for social justice activism, for raising consciousness and compassion, for liberatory learning, for radicalism in thinking outside the “system” all resonated deeply within my sensibilities as a person and as a teacher.

Literacy, for Freire, is part of the process of becoming self critical about the historically constructed nature of one’s experience. To be able to name one’s experience is part of what it means to “read” the world and to begin to understand the political nature of the limits and possibilities that make up the larger society” (Giroux, Henry, 1998, p. 12).

Giroux continues in this same article to articulate reasons for including the students’ voices in assessment and program development:

At its best a theory of critical literacy needs to develop a pedagogical practices which in the battle to make sense of one’s life reaffirm and further the need for teachers and students to recover their own voices so they can retell their own histories and in so doing check and criticize the history they are told against the one they have lived. In its more radical sense, critical literacy means making one’s self present as part of a moral and political project that links the production of meaning to the possibility for human agency, democratic community, and transformative social action (Giroux, 1998, p.12).

These educational principles informed my work and influenced the online programs’ curriculum design and evolution. Grabe and Grabe, 1996, aptly describe some of the fundamental changes in educational paradigms occurring as a result of technology in the classroom:

1. Shift in student role from storing information to creating knowledge.

2. Teacher roles from presenting information to guiding student discovery and to model active learning.
3. Content shift from basic literacy to emphasis on thinking skills and applications.
4. Curriculum shift from fact retention, fragmented knowledge and disciplinary separation to in-depth, multi-disciplinary themes, to knowledge integration and application.
5. Social shift from independent learning to cooperative and collaborative learning.
6. Technology shift from skill drill and practice, direct instruction, pre-programmed lessons to a facilitation of exploration and collaborative interaction.
7. Assessment shift from fact retention and traditional tests to knowledge application, performance, projects and portfolios (p.19).

While the authors suggest this is a pedagogical shift due to the introduction of technological media, I have always believed in student-centered principles of education. The shift for me is transferring to the online environment and learning exactly what that entails, and how it differs and/or mirrors my regular classroom teaching approaches.

This paradigm intersects with the pedagogy of Freire, which centers on "the raising of critical consciousness through student-centered dialogue which problematizes generative themes from everyday life as well as topical issues from society and academic subject matter from specific disciplines" (McLaren, 1992). Critical consciousness contains four essential qualities:

- Power Awareness: Knowing that society and history can be made and remade by human action and by organized groups.
- Critical Literacy: Analytic habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking, and discussing which go beneath surface impressions, traditional myths, mere opinions, and routine

cliches...discovering the deep meaning and consequences of any text, technique, process, object, statement, image or situation, and applying that meaning to your own context.

- Desocialization: Recognizing and challenging the myths, values, behaviors, and language learned in mass culture and critically examining.
- Self-Organization, Self-Education: Taking the initiative to transform school and society away from authoritarian relations and the undemocratic, unequal distribution of power; taking part in and initiating social change projects; overcoming the induced anti-intellectualism of mass education. (Peter McLaren 1992. In Shor, Ira, p. 32.)

In addition, Shor delineates Freirean pedagogy as having an "agenda of values for that pedagogy as:

1. Participatory: From the first hour of class, students are asked to participate in making their education by decoding thematic problems. The learning process is interactive and co-operative so that students do a lot of discussing and writing instead of listening to teacher-talk.
2. Situated: The course material is situated in student thought and language, beginning from their words and understandings of the material, relating the material to their conditions.
3. Critical: The class discussion encourages self-reflection and social reflection in terms of how we talk about these issues, how we know what we know, how we can learn what we need to know, and how the learning process itself is working or not working.
4. Democratic: The classroom discourse is democratic in so far as it is constructed mutually by students and teacher. Students have equal speaking rights in the dialogue as well as the right to negotiate the curriculum. They are asked to co-develop and evaluate the curriculum.
5. Dialogic: The basic format of the class is dialogue around problems posed by teacher and students. The teacher initiates this process and guides it into deeper phases. The teacher invites

students to assert their ownership of their education, building the dialogue with their words. They are doing education and making it, not having education done to them or made for them.

6. Desocialization: Freirean dialogue desocializes students from passivity in the classroom. It challenges their learned anti-intellectualism and authority dependence (waiting to be told what to do and what things mean). It interferes with the students' silence, submission, and sabotage, which they learn in traditional classrooms. Freirean education also desocializes teachers from the dull and domineering teacher-talk they are socialized into, transforming them into problem-positors and dialogue leaders instead.

7. Multicultural: The class recognizes the various racial, ethnic, regional, age-based, and sexual cultures in society. It takes a critical attitude towards discrimination and inequality. It examines the culture of dominant and non-dominant groups.

8. Research oriented: This critical pedagogy is based in classroom and community research....It also expects students to be researchers inquiring into problems posed about daily experience, society and academic material.

9. Activist: The classroom itself is active and interactive thanks to problem posing, co-operative learning, and participatory formats. The critical dialogue also seeks action outcomes from the inquiry wherever feasible.

10. Affective: The critical, democratic classroom is interested in the broadest development of human feeling as well as the development of social inquiry and conceptual habits of mind. The problem posing, dialogic method includes a range of emotions from humor to compassion to indignation" (Shor, Ira, 1992, pp. 33-34).

All of these principles were applied in the interactions between students and teachers in the program upon which this dissertation is based. Unfortunately, many classrooms rely on teaching

practices that emphasize the student as a passive learner. The nature of the Internet, with hyperlinks and capacity for interactive bulletin boards, online campuses, email and listserv capacities, and general global networking, offers a clear window for actively engaging students in the learning process. It appears that the tendency may be to use the computer merely as a tool to present traditional classroom assignments, skill and drill practices through pre-programmed software, as opposed to using the computer as an interactive medium where students are engaged in constructing and directing their own learning.

In these institutions, a different educational politics is beginning to emerge. It is one in which teaching models of the past are referred to as instructionist-where teachers instructed and the assumption was that students learned what teachers taught. In contrast, the new model of learning is called constructivist; constructivism as David Loader explains, means 'built by the learner, not supplied by the teacher.' This is indeed revolution (Spender, 1995, p.110).

Deborah Meier also addresses this in her book, The Power of their Ideas, Lessons for America from a small school in Harlem (1997):

The task of creating environments where all kids can experience the power of their ideas requires unsettling not only our accepted organization of schooling and our unspoken and unacknowledged agreement about the purposes of schools. Taking this task seriously means accepting public responsibility for the shared future of the next generation. It's a task for all of us, not just the school people or policymakers or even parents alone. The stakes are enormous, and the answers within reach (p.4).

What we've discovered is that accepting the challenge to break with the past assumes a respect for our fellow being and their capacities that does not come easily or naturally to most of us. We need not only to accept some new ideas, but to

dislodge many of our old ones. It's not surprising that so many families, so many teachers, and so many politicians are looking for an escape, urging us to retreat to an imagined past where everyone succeeded-with their McGuffey readers, teacher-proof daily lesson plans, and desks that faced forward all in a row-or to opt out altogether into their separate ethnic or religious enclaves. We're not accustomed to recognizing the power of each other's ideas; it's easier to take flight (p.11).

Clearly these literacy, technology and education studies demonstrate the need to re-conceptualize our approaches to online teaching and learning and to document how these new virtual classrooms without walls affect student learning performance. It requires applying some of what we know already about literacy education and assessing what works in the new technological medium, what doesn't, and why.

Evaluation

The shifts in the way we frame our understandings of learning, literacy, and technology subsequently necessitates evaluation which can encompass a broader view of program development. The public outcry resounds throughout the media for stricter accountability, better tests, and higher standards in education. Self-assessment and accountability are pervasive concerns in society and around the world, in government, business, foundations, and academe. "Empowerment Evaluation has provided a philosophy, theoretical framework, and methods to systematically address these concerns" (Fetterman, 1996, p.viii). And, with a growing dissatisfaction with traditional teaching and learning systems on one front, and an echoing call for "back to basics" on the other, considerable disagreement persists over the part technology will play in the restructured system. Certainly we will be wise to apply what we know about education and program assessment from current research and literature in the field. Herbert Kohl,

1998, in his book, The Discipline of Hope, responds to the basic skills conservatives with the following:

As I see it, there are at least six basic skills, which encompass all the trivial mechanical skills that people want obedient and passive children to acquire. This way of looking at skills respects the intelligence and moral sensibility of the young. These skills are:

- ✓ The ability to use language well and thoughtfully
- ✓ The ability to think through a problem and experiment with solutions
- ✓ The ability to understand scientific and technological ideas and to use tools
- ✓ The ability to use the imagination
- ✓ The ability to understand how people function in groups
- ✓ The ability to go about learning something yourself and the skills to be a lifelong learner all your life (p. 235).

It is critical to evaluate programs from an informed and shared qualitative and participatory research perspective including the voices of our students. Such an account describes the richness of these programs by documenting growth not measurable by more traditional assessments such as standardized tests. Maureen Barbieri explains: “Our whole country is obsessed with evaluation. Education is failing, we read, let’s have better tests. Let’s have stricter accountability! Higher standards! But as educators, we know this is not the answer” (Rief, Linda, 1995, p. 23).

The value of a cyclical process of evaluation and one focused on providing self-determination in the learning process is explicated in a statement by Fetterman (1996) stating:

The assessment of a program's value and worth is not the end point of an evaluation-as it

often is in traditional evaluation-but part of an ongoing process of program improvement (p.5). Program participants become part of a dynamic and responsive approach to evaluation where participants learn to ‘continually assess their progress toward self-determined goals and to reshape their plans and strategies according to this assessment’ (p. 6).

The use of Empowerment Evaluation in this dissertation project evolved into an integral form of evaluation and subsequently framed the research methodology, which became the driver for curriculum development and established a constant feedback loop for program improvement. In the book, Responsive Evaluation: Making Valid judgments about Student Literacy (1994), the authors Brian Cambourne and Jan Turbill, outline succinctly the need for a more integrated approach to assessment:

- Bring learning, teaching and assessment together
- Focus on process as well as product
- Include the learner and other traditionally ignored stakeholders as part of the process.
- Acknowledge the enormous superiority of the ‘knowledgeable-human-as-instrument’ over the ‘formal test as instrument’
- Be as rigorous, credible and trustworthy as the traditional measurement-based paradigm of evaluation
- Make use of data which were collected while the students were engaged in the learning contexts that teachers created rather than in specifically created testing contexts (Cambourne and Turbill, 1994, p. 10).

This model, termed “responsive evaluation” was pioneered by Stake (1975), and extended and modified by Guba and Lincoln (1981, 1985, 1989). It is a model, like Empowerment Evaluation, which is “theoretically similar to the investigative methods that ethnographers,

anthropologists, sociologists and investigative journalists use to understand, evaluate and develop practical theories which can be used to explain phenomenon they are focused on. It is strongly based on a qualitative approach to research” (Cambourne and Turbill, 1994, p.155).

These evaluation approaches directly coincided with my research design, questions, purpose, and process. I perceived a direct link to my beliefs in a constructivist approach to teaching, learning, and researching. It reflected my beliefs in student centered education, in holistic approaches, to authentic inquiry, to an integral form of assessment with participants as co-researchers. The result is a report that includes a multi-voiced narrative, which uses the participants’ direct comments to support its findings.

Each of these three literature review strands--technology and education, literacy theory and evaluation--serve to inform this dissertation project. The review suggests what is critical to address in creating new learning programs or in augmenting regular classroom environments to teach literacy with the advent of new technologies. Constructivist and critical theory pedagogical approaches seem well matched to the new medium for reasons discussed and supported in the current research on teaching and learning via the Internet. This study fills a gap by providing documentation in the teaching of literacy using the online medium as the primary delivery system in a fully interactive online campus setting and by applying what is currently known about literacy education, and additionally how that may shift as we enter this new technologically enhanced instructional field.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Chapter Three describes qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods clearly situating the choice of research methodology as suited to the study purposes. It continues to describe the project and site development, participant description, and pedagogical approach. It also details the research methodology and more thoroughly frames the use of Empowerment Evaluation as an assessment tool and research approach. “The combination of multiple methods, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, and depth to any investigation” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 2).

Qualitative Research Methods

The aim of constructivist research inquiry is defined by Carr and Kemmis (1986) as: understanding and reconstruction that people, (including the inquirer) initially hold, aiming toward consensus but still open to new interpretations as information and sophistication improve. The criterion for progress is that over time, everyone formulates more informed and sophisticated constructions. Advocacy and activism are also key concepts in this view. The inquirer is cast in the role of participant and facilitator in this process (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 113).

The authors caution that this multi-role function may place unreasonable expectations on the expertise and competence of the researcher. I found that the roles eventually merged. As a teacher, my interest was piqued in what worked, what didn't, and why. I wondered, watched, and asked about how this learning experience compared to and contrasted the “regular school environment.” My pedagogical approach was founded on the same principles as I had used in the public schools, but we were on new ground. I was venturing into a new learning environment as a co-learner with my students.

As a researcher, the questions I formed based upon student empowerment goal statements served to promote a curriculum geared toward an authentic sense of inquiry. The need to balance roles as teacher, researcher, and program administrator indeed placed high demands and were time intensive. However, the challenge became one of passionate inquiry. Denzin and Lincoln describe the a constructivist voice as one of “passionate participant,” as facilitator of multi-voice reconstruction and a critical theorist as of the “transformative intellectual” (Giroux, 1998), who has expanded consciousness and as such facilitates change as individuals become more aware of oppression and are stimulated to act on it (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 115).

The epistemology of the constructivist centers on creating knowledge as a negotiated process of interaction among the researcher and the participants. As both a teacher and a researcher, these descriptions articulated my acclimation to the research methods and pedagogical approaches in the program. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 4).

Trustworthiness includes criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 1985, p. 300). Methods for assuring validity and reliability of data analysis and conclusions for this research included member checks, outside readers and evaluators of writing samples, students as co-researchers, and replication potential. The eclectic variety of data ensured thoroughness of representation and enhanced internal validity and reliability of interpretation. Validity is based upon a coherent construction of the experience-a negotiation of the multiple perspectives of participants in interaction with the researcher. “In a subjective–objective reality the agreement sought between inquirers is not total unanimity, but

the illumination of a common area of inquiry by differing individual perspectives. Validity is enhanced by a diversity of views that overlap” (Reason, 1988, p. 44).

Pedagogical Approach

What’s my Paradigm?

Guba and Lincoln define “paradigm” as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action.” As a teacher-researcher, it was important to bracket the underlying philosophies and beliefs which would influence and guide my interactions with students as a teacher and which created a perceptual filtering to my work as a researcher. The following systems based paradigm explains my perspectives in relation to teaching and learning:

- Knowledge is socially constructed, socio-historically and politically relative. Students will be encouraged to examine their perspectives, become aware of perceptual filters, expand their understanding and appreciation for diversity, heighten their sense of empathy, recognize their interconnectivity in the patterns of relationship.
- Learning is an integral part of life. Academic learning should not be artificially fragmented or devised, and should reflect natural learning more closely. Learning activities should spark the creative and imaginative, not stifle it.
- True learning is intrinsically motivated, learner-centered and directed. Curriculum development is democratically negotiated between teachers and students, is for authentic purposes, is inquiry-driven, and project oriented. Beyond the notion of student-centered learning, the student will co-generate the curriculum based on their authentic sources of inquiry. Teachers will serve as resources, mentors and guides in the process of discovery. Students and teachers will engage as co-learners while teachers also contribute their expertise, primarily through knowing how to ask the right questions to expand the students’

own learning journey, when to respond to a teachable moment, how to balance structural parameters and still honor emergence and flexibility.

- The curriculum is designed to foster the learning of effective communication skills, a strong sense of learning community, and a balance of individual and collaborative work. Cycles of action and reflection integrated into course frameworks promotes students' awareness of their role as learners, thinkers, and creators of their own lives and learning pursuits.
- From the onset, students will be encouraged to take personal interest in accepting responsibility for and demonstrating value for their role as pioneers of this innovative new program. Staff will convey the notion of others who will look to us as models of how to create an online learning program that's effective and positive for the students as well as credible to the larger community. Commitment to the process and motivation to develop oneself as both a person and as a creative writer are essential. Research will be a process of inquiry done cooperatively with, not conducted on, students.
- The program design represents a strong value for multiple intelligences, most specifically the arts. Students will be encouraged to explore varying genres and communicative arts forms and whenever possible to incorporate an integral way of knowing into their work.
- Students will be included in the program evaluation and assessment in an ongoing fashion. Teachers will be responsive to the student-represented experience and will respond to this feedback loop to inform programmatic change and evolution. We will explore the questions: What's possible? What are our learning priorities and why? Where do we want to go from here? It is believed ownership and empowerment in the learning process are fueled by choice and in the ability to enact change. Evaluation is a tool for discovery of our growth as learners and as people. Learning is not linear, but a life long cyclical and recursive process.

- Within a distance learning program, participants must address the text-based medium and its limitations as well as its benefits. Experiential learning components will be integrated as much as possible. Students will be asked to explore ways to overcome the sensory deprivation of the technologically based learning environment. Students in the online course will have the option of deciding if they wish to organize a real time meeting with teachers and/or peers. Students will be largely responsible for planning the gatherings and for deciding the purposes of these meetings. Examples might be for a field trip excursion, planning a group project, sharing experiences, a writing retreat, or just a celebration to strengthen learning community bonds.

The program design and implementation reflect a systems view of learning. Knowledge is fluid, not static. We come to know ourselves more deeply through interrelationship. The process of change or discovery, or transformative learning, is a natural part of human meaning making. Identifying my own paradigm and situating my research within that frame allowed me to recognize how I impact my students' learning experiences. From the beginning, I encouraged students to be attentive to their potential to influence policy through being conscientious and reflective about the ways they helped to co-pioneer this program. As a teacher, I believe schooling should be a democratic process designed to foster self-growth and illumination.

The following two quotes aptly articulate these beliefs:

“Thus the task is not so much to see what no one yet has seen, but to think what nobody yet has thought about that which everybody sees” (Schopenhauer).

“We encourage others to change only if we honor who they are now. We ourselves engage in change only as we discover that we might be more of who we are by becoming something different” (Margaret J. Wheatley).

Background Information and Participants

The research in this dissertation includes data gathered on a core group of 18 students from August, 1996 through May, 1998. All students and parents signed research release forms, (Appendix A), and all but one student requested that any quotations used be accompanied by their real names. In some cases where content of materials were deemed highly personal, or if it is unclear who posted the response as much of the data was transported into separate files, names are deliberately omitted.

The study focuses on the responses of 18 original students who began the program and elected to continue through the second year. There were an equal number of male and female participants. Ten percent of the student population was of African-American and Hispanic ethnicity and the remaining 90% were white, from a range of socio-economic classes.

Approximately ten percent of the students were from rural farm communities. Others were from small inner city neighborhoods and some were from professional parent homes. The multi-age student population ranged from grades 9-12, ages 14- 18, with the heaviest concentration of students in upper grade levels.

A majority of the student population in the program were identified by their schools as “gifted and talented.” 80% of the students had home computer access for the course with the remaining 20% accessing from school computers. Students at school sites experienced frustration with limited access times and privacy issues. Some students had to share a computer in a crowded counselor's office, while others argued with teachers and librarians claiming authority over a single Internet connected computer for a 2,000 student population. To address the technological access equity issue, I received a grant for the second year to purchase computers as loaners for students without home systems.

In the fall of 1996, I created and implemented an online creative writing course under an umbrella arts education program in a mid-western state. Funded through local school districts and community foundation endowment grants, the arts organization included classes in music, theater, dance, visual arts, literary arts, film and video, and our online creative writing course. In the first year, 28 students from 11 schools across nine districts enrolled. In the second year, 68 students participated. 120 students enrolled for the third year of our program.

As this was a pilot program in a community based arts education initiative, I was conscious of wanting to provide statistical results comparable to measures used traditionally in the public schools, as well as a narrative derived from the qualitative data analysis which would provide supportive documentation of the outcomes and evolution of the program. Administrators like quantitative data that can be quickly reviewed and shared with the public. However, numbers do not provide description and can be interpreted in numerous ways. As the purpose of the study focused on providing a description of the dynamics of the program-its design, implementation, and assessment--an ethnographic approach matched well.

The Research Site and Project Development

An Education for the Arts (EFA) program began in 1994. The program was well funded by participating school districts in connection with local grants and endowments. The community distributed information on the program stated:

The design to link schools, community resources and artists is an arts education enhancement program with two major focus strands. 'Excellence in the Arts' programs offer special opportunities for students with exceptional talent and motivation. 'Arts for All' is an innovative plan designed to strengthen arts education opportunities for all K-12 students in the county. EFA complements and enhances the arts education of the nine county districts, rather than replacing local programs. EFA programs provide students with opportunities to

work with professional artists and art teachers in classes at sites around the county-in neighboring districts and outside the schools in studios and performance spaces. Students travel to receive advanced training while maintaining a strong connection with their home schools. Music, theater, dance, visual arts, literary arts, film and video programs comprise the students' integral education providing talented and highly motivated students challenging programs at shared sites across the county (EFA Brochure, 1997).

For implementation for the fall of 1996, the Literary Arts Discipline Committee designed a face-to-face Writer's Workshop component to add to the Education for the Arts curriculum for multi-age 9-12th grade secondary education students. When participating school district superintendents reviewed the proposal for the face-to-face Writer's Workshop, the program director reported they were "less than enthusiastic," believing the curriculum something which could already be accomplished through existing school programs. At the suggestion of the superintendents to explore distance learning technology including voice, video, and data, the director began to explore the possibility of a more innovative design for the creative writing program. The original intention was to have students and teachers interact via a computer listserv capacity, a form of group electronic mail, with the teacher periodically traveling to each school site for face-to-face mentoring of the students' progress in the creative writing process. Students would also have been provided opportunities to "gather together for special seminars, professional writers' workshops, publishers and technological representative's presentations, etc."

Members of the Literary Arts Discipline committee strongly objected to the newly proposed course curriculum citing beliefs that an online learning program could not possibly accomplish the goals established in the original Writer's Workshop proposal which placed emphasis on in-

person interactions and writing seminars with teachers, authors, and peers. The council withdrew their support for the project and members of the Literary Arts Discipline committee resigned.

In May of 1996, I learned of the EFA program and their intention to create an online creative writing program through a friend who is an art teacher in a local school district. This teacher knew of my experience with online learning programs and as a secondary education literacy specialist. I contacted the director who expressed difficulties in finding staff experienced in both online education and in teaching writing in the secondary classroom. I met with the director and discussed design and delivery possibilities. Initially I was going to create the online campus and oversee the teaching of the course by two instructors who had been hired through the local university. After meeting with these teachers, I learned that neither of them owned personal computers nor were connected to the Internet and also had no experience with online communications.

I met with them for several hours and attempted to show them how to navigate online. I discussed course objectives and educational philosophy and asked them to generate a sample curriculum for the course for our next meeting. They returned with a prescribed approach of read, write, post and receive a grade: a traditionalist paradigm which they wanted to transfer from their face-to-face teaching directly to the online medium. I discussed alternatives including project oriented, student-centered, inquiry based possibilities for course delivery.

It became obvious that we held very different notions of teaching and learning which included assumptions about what high school students could and could not accomplish, and how the online environment might serve to promote a different vision of teaching and learning. I shared my concerns with the director and submitted a draft of the potential course curriculum including a statement clearly situating my beliefs as an educator. I wanted to be certain my instructional

approach would be clearly understood from the onset of the program. The theoretical educational framework influencing the design and ongoing program development are pertinent. Theory becomes informed reality only when translated to practice.

Environment and Design

As I reviewed the written course objectives and proposed design, my first reaction was to suggest a listserv function was not adequate to accomplish the vision and goals of the program. I shared my knowledge of the capacity to create a cyber-classroom campus through a computer server company. I had been collaborating in designing an on-line graduate program in Holistic Transformative Education and was scheduled to visit the computer server site for consultation the following week. During that meeting I negotiated possibilities for the creative writing program including service costs, online campus design, implementation, and face-to-face technological training and orientation for students by the company's staff. The server company responded favorably as prior programs had not included young student populations.

The company's underlying philosophy stated their interests were in "closing the gap between the human condition and the human potential and in promoting values of curiosity, candor, cooperation, and creativity in the online community." (Metanetwork brochure, 1997) This particular server company aligned well with my own philosophical frameworks. They agreed to an on-site training session for the students, provided examples of visually attractive homepage designs and defrayed costs to allow the service to be financially feasible for the EFA students within the confines of the program budget.

The district superintendents reviewed the proposal and agreed to hire me as the primary teacher in addition to my responsibilities for creating, developing and evaluating the online creative writing program. I also convinced them to allow me to hire an assistant instructor who

shared a similar educational philosophy. I balanced several roles in the creation and administration of the program.

I designed the original virtual classroom environment to be school-context familiar and inviting including:

The Homeroom for announcements, assignments, collective reflections, technical help, and general question about coursework and program development

The Cafe of the Arts for student-generated conversations and learning community development

The Classroom with individualized student folders for assigned reading responses, writing invitations, peer and teacher critiquing, and general coursework

The Visiting Author's Forum for inviting favorite authors or visitors to engage in on-line discussions

The Student Center for students to explore, develop and share individual or collaborative yearlong creative writing projects

The Staff Lounge as a place for co-teachers to talk and document research reflections

The Conference Room for synchronous chat sessions

The Archives for student collection of year-long process-folios

To clarify some definitions for this discourse, a “conference” represents an area which parallels a regular room in a school: classroom, homeroom, teacher lounge and student café, etc. “Items” are individual topics such as “Assignments” or “Life at the bottom of a soup bowl,” for a more creative example, which when entered reveal a threaded dialogue of “posts,” individual responses to an item title and description. Posts have name, date and time of entry. Participants have the capacity to use an “edit” function to revise a post, and other options such as the “notebook” function that places any marked post into a separate folder for easy access to specific information pertinent to the users’ interests. “Organizers” of conferences are those with facilitation capacity and can edit any post, change the title and description of the item, change

background colors and add graphics, and more. Organizers are the hosts of the forum and have extra capabilities not available to all participants.

As a teacher/organizer, I checked into the main student and teacher conferences on an average of three times per day to read and selectively post responses, to post original writings in my on-line journal, to create new items when so inspired, and to read and respond to my email. Consistent and prompt feedback to students' work encouraged active engagement and allowed me to note important postings related to the research questions. In addition, I was able to observe and document student growth in online communications, student-generated learning directions, individual and collective attendance to reflection during process, peer feedback, and application of newly learned skills.

During the first year students and I discussed organizational influences on ease of response and navigation. Separate items were designated for assignments and questions about assignments, announcements and questions about announcements, for example. This delineation facilitated student process and easy access of important information. The assignment area was not cluttered by questions and unrelated comments. Organizers also mastered the ability to “freeze” discussion items so that other participants were unable to post additional comments — A useful technique in areas like the assignment item. In addition, other items were used for posting weekly updates, technical support, Empowerment Evaluation, and others. Clear labeling of items and careful organization of information allowed it to be immediately accessible and permanently available to all students. This is in contrast to the flow and distribution of such functional information in the physical classroom context. Most importantly, the open and consistent nature of the online forum meant that there was never a bottleneck, never a time when students were not “in the loop” with regard to classroom communications and expectations.

Within each of the conferences, participants had the capacity to create as many items as they wished, with room in each item for thousands of threaded responses. In the first year the 30 students averaged 150 new responses per day throughout the year and reported through the survey data spending an average of one to two hours per day reading, responding and composing online, as well as varying additional time offline.

For discussions by faculty and research reflections, I established an online teachers' lounge not accessible to students. During the research process I posted daily field notes in response to the development of the program. This is also the space where I transcribed taped interviews such as the Empowerment Evaluation face-to-face training session, anecdotal stories and notes about critical incidents in the ongoing formation of our literacy community, questions I had about process as they formed, and more.

New items were added to the conferences stemming from the students developing interests as writers. As time passed, students became more adept at self-organizing and responding to each other's work and questions. The generative nature of the medium contributed to creating multi-voiced, stream-of-consciousness type dialogues. Topics drifted, as in regular conversations. Particular items flowed from a discussion of poetics to politics to physics, creating a learning forum of highly integrated knowledge. This enhanced the development of an emergent curriculum based on students' interests.

My role as facilitator increasingly shifted to one of participant-observer. Collaboration with my co-teacher allowed me more time to balance my roles as teacher and researcher. The online teaching environment offered the freedom for all participants to work as schedules allowed. A major benefit of teaching online is that when I needed to travel for conferences, for speaking

engagements, or for personal business or travel, I was able to maintain continuous contact with students.

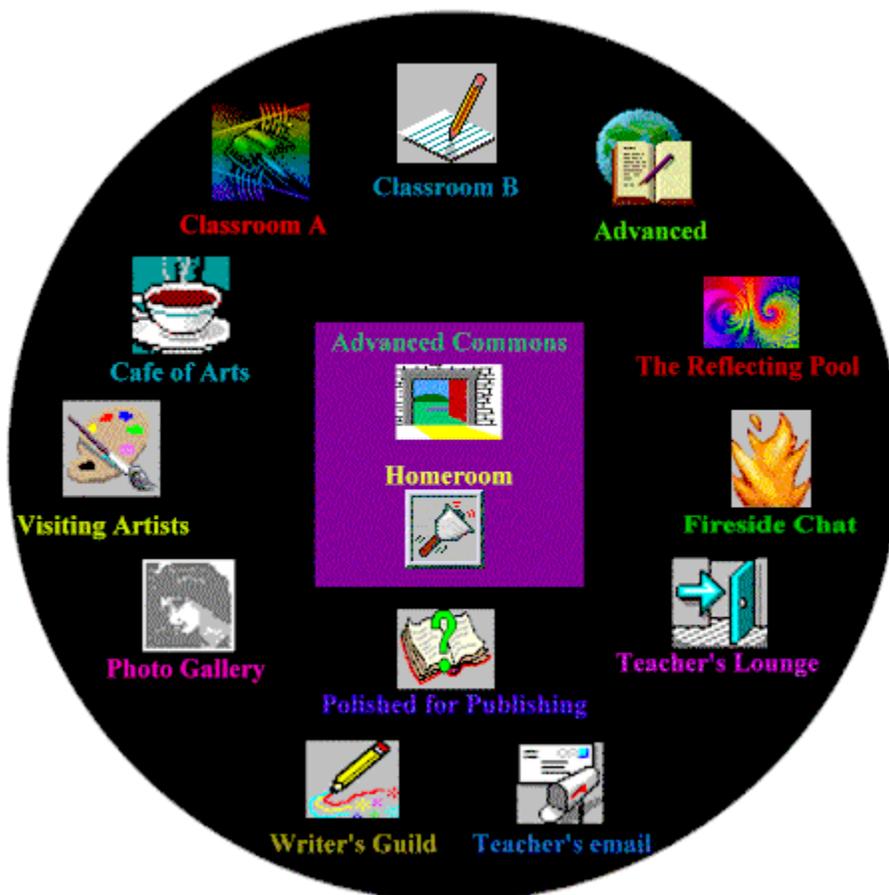
Because the online medium transcended physical boundaries, I was able to invite a colleague from The University of San Diego, Dr. Donna Barnes, to participate as my co-teacher during the first year. She and I had worked together previously with our graduate education students in online interactive forums. We were literacy educators who shared similar views on education. We made a good teaching team.

We also acquired a visiting author and professional writer, Launz Burch, (penname Dirk Flinthart) from Australia, who found our campus through a writer's listserv connection. From the onset of the second year, Launz became a primary facilitator and writing teacher. The personalities we brought to the process and the sharing of task-oriented responsibilities helped to balance the teacher roles in the online classroom. In this sense, it was a team-teaching effort much like you might find in a regular face-to-face classroom. We utilized our strengths and believed our differences to be a plus.

As trust developed and online communications skills improved, students began to move outward into new communities within the server company's online forums. Students explored conferences of mutual interest including: Books, Seasonal Salons, Artist, and Paradigm Shift. The "Metacommunity," including lawyers, artists, photographers, teachers, writers, retired military men, and homemakers, among others, offered students additional knowledge and resources beyond my own capacity. One student commented: "Through the exploitation of this infinite resource, there is potential for infinite growth!" Another added, "The online world is immeasurably vast in its volume of knowledge and information, and no one person can master of

all of it." Six students later did internships in Washington, D.C. as a result of their networking online with the Metanet community.

During the second year the campus design was recreated on the basis of what we learned from the first year. Two of the students and I spent several days working on accommodating our new campus design needs. To manage the growing numbers of students participating online, we created three separate classrooms and cafes, two for new students and one for the advanced second year students. There were also two homerooms: one for beginning and one for advanced students. We added a photo gallery and a project area for posting polished and published works. I struggled with the new design, wondering about whether to have common or separate areas for students to intermingle.



Advanced students participated in the ongoing development of the program by helping re-design the campus, mentoring incoming students, aiding in orientations, developing their own, more advanced curriculum for their second year, and presenting at local, national and international conferences about their work. Most of the students who did not graduate during the first year of participation online, elected to continue the second year prompting the creation of the “advanced” section of the creative writing program. As the creator of the program curriculum, I was conscious of how my initial expectations shifted as students brought their essences as learners into the process. They contributed to generating a much richer curriculum than I could have ever anticipated. The freedom to create and re-organize their program in response to reflections on personal and collective learning fueled diverse learning directions. The students' expectations of themselves and intrinsic motivation as writers prompted them to write stories, discuss literature, share favorite quotes, write collectively and collaboratively, and more.

Some worked weekly on chapters of novels. Poetry seemed to be a community-favored genre. The students' work surpassed anything I might have 'required' them to do. We didn't, for example, fragment the writing process into "units" on story, poetry, novel writing, publishing, or reading and responding to literature; rather, a seamless and integrated curriculum emerged and continued to develop. Primarily I found myself stepping out of their way, observing the paths they chose, how they interacted, how they grew as both people and as writers. The program, and specifically the curriculum development, became a negotiated process. Students readily accepted ownership for co-creating the program. They became a self-determined community of writers.

With that stated, it is, however, appropriate to mention considerations influencing initial program design and curriculum parameters which have allowed the space for the students to create. These included an understanding and attentiveness to:

- A) COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT** to foster student risk-taking in a safe environment based on trust and mutual respect for all participants in the learning process. The online campus was designed to make students feel comfortable and the computer forum approachable. The Welcome Page is colorful and inviting. The names of seminars such as Cafe of the Arts were selected to make the students feel at "home" entering the new learning environment. A community journal and online items such as the Literary Gathering Place, in combination with communications guidelines and discussions, served to foster sense of community. Faculty used email, telephone and occasionally home visits for private correspondences with students surrounding issues such as participation levels, appropriateness of responses in forums, to encourage exemplary work, answer pressing questions, offering technical support, etc. Establishing the environment and nurturing a safe container for students to reveal themselves through their writing takes time. Critical incidents occurred within the community and students were supportive of each other, and at times, brutally honest. Students learned to stand by one another through difficult life circumstances and to dialogue about their differences. As they became more accustomed to the potential for miscommunications online in the absence of physical and sensory cues, they began using qualifying comments like: "She said with a wry smile on her face." The use of humor, a highly apparent sense of empathy, and an air of mutual respect serve to enhance the students' progressively fluid ability to interact as a community of learners. This, coupled with the freedom to self-determine and continually re-create their environment, provided a fertile soil for the seeds of learning to grow and flourish.
- B) STUDENT OWNERSHIP** in developing program directions and encouraging students to be responsible for their own learning. Students developed their own yearlong writing projects.

The Cafe of the Arts was organized and facilitated by the students, as were other individual items in main conferences. Students were informed of research on program and eagerly accepted the responsibilities of determining their learning goals using Empowerment Evaluation as their primary tool. Inherent in student participation in the program was the responsibility for pioneering an exemplary online learning model. Combined individual and collaborative work was intended to promote communications skills, cooperative learning, and self-motivated learning directions. Empowerment Evaluation fostered self-directed learning and ongoing program development.

C) Teachers provided FOUNDATIONAL STRUCTURE and ongoing feedback and guidance along with outside mentors such as visiting authors. Facilitators and peers fostered online communications skills through example in online postings. Teachers limited their responses so as not to color student responses. Teachers attended to being present and to providing consistent, prompt, and encouraging feedback to students' postings. Many times the teachers role consists of knowing when to ask appropriate questions, summarizing and highlighting key learning, and modeling how to offer constructive feedback to individual writers.

D) CONTINUOUS CYCLES OF ACTION AND REFLECTION were encouraged during the yearlong learning process. Students wrote self-reflection papers twice during each of the two years. Facilitators monitored student conferences and posed critical questions to stimulate reflections on process in relation to writing and program development.

Empowerment Evaluation was introduced and used by the students to create purpose statements, goals, and ways of monitoring accountability for achievements.

E) TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE was provided online by Metanet staff, peer tutors, and staff.

Equity of student access to computers for the students was a primary concern. I visited each of the 11 high schools and loaded the necessary software, as well as visiting many students' homes to provide initial technical assistance. Instructors and technologically proficient peers serve as resource guides. Beginning course time was scheduled to allow students time to develop comfort levels in learning the technology. Students were welcomed to phone the local instructor or peers whenever they felt the need for support.

F) FLEXIBLE TIMES were allowed for students to respond to coursework. Teachers recognized the time required to navigate the various message strings, read new postings, reflect and comment, as well as write and post their own original works. Students worked on a bi-weekly schedule with the first week being for reading, composing and posting work, and the second week for responding to others' postings. Scheduling of assigned work remained flexible and attentive to students' needs as individuals and as a learning community. Long term student projects arising through the students' original sources of inquiry allowed for an extended amount of time to develop a project demonstrating proficiency and passion for the creative writing process. Because 90% of our students accessed the course from home, they were free to participate on their own schedules within reasonable timelines. This allowed them to write for as long as they wish without a bell interrupting their process announcing "it's time for science or math class." Teachers were sensitive to the extended amount of time it takes for online communications, especially for students accessing only from school who had limited amounts of time, usually one course period per day at most. These students were observed through the time and date functions of the software and also reported voluntarily going to school early or staying late to have more time to spend in the online campus.

G) MANDATORY FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS were scheduled to augment the online learning experience: The Orientation and training session; a mandatory full group meeting for honoring individual contributions in the online learning community, for survey and pre-writing samples, and for initial Empowerment Evaluation training; and a final meeting at the end of the school year in June to celebrate and share our projects and growth as writers and as people, and to complete final surveys. In addition, students self-organized numerous face-to-face social gatherings to go ice skating, for holidays and birthdays, seeing movies, to plan fund-raisers for class trips, or just meeting after school at someone's house. A group of ten students organized and raised funds to attend the National Conference of Teachers of English Conference in Chicago where they heard notable authors speak about their craft, including the author of their writing text, Georgia Heard. They approached her afterwards inviting her to engage with them online and are mailing samples of their writings to her in response to writing prompts in her book. Some students also read Number the Stars by Lois Lowry, who gave a keynote speech. We also attended the Shakespearean Repertory's production of Hamlet. Students continued to gather voluntarily in real time settings. Several students participated as presenters about their online writing program at local universities and at international and national conferences.

The transactional nature of learning, with students and teachers as co-learners, replaces former transmission models with the teacher as authority and imparter of knowledge. Online learning focuses not only on course content, but on interpersonal relationships. The social, collaborative, and communicative aspects of constructing knowledge are central to online learning environments.

The preceding account of how this program evolved is critical because it demonstrates a necessary shift in our ways of thinking about education of the future. Technology will play a major role in school re-design. Translating old models to new forums is possible, but not in my view, desirable. Change presents new possibilities. We can learn from the past as we move toward the future. But our eyes must stay open to new opportunity for reform of a system of education long outmoded.

As my student, Marta, writes about a "dusty" boy without hope in a trailer park, as one student struggles with depression and thoughts of suicide and his peers affirm his value to their community, I observe how life and learning overlap. Late at night by the flickering light of a computer screen, we reach towards our common humanity, struggle with the chaos of existence, and relish in the love of questions without answers. By sharing our stories, we seek to make sense of a rapidly changing world. Together, we redefine ourselves as individuals, as an online community, as a society. We are all at once teachers and learners--connected by modems, wires, and our artistic natures.

The Research Process

As a researcher, I was interested in observing how this program would unfold through the use of Empowerment Evaluation as a research methodology. This research process well matched my philosophies as a constructivist educator and a critical theorist. It fostered democratic interactions with my students and encouraged attentiveness to education stemming from the students' own learning motivations. My inclinations towards social justice and my belief in education as a foundation towards contributing our voices to raising consciousness, prompted students to focus their second year project on a presentation for the Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Conference in a tribute to Paulo Freire (Appendix H). It is important to recognize how our beliefs about teaching and learning affect content, expectations and achievement of our students.

The Empowerment Evaluation process guided the primary method of ethnographic research. Data reduction, coding and interpretation methods evolved through the Empowerment Evaluation purpose statements generated by the study participants. Charts of statistical data gathered through Empowerment Evaluation, pre and post surveys and tests are graphically displayed and discussed with implications. These conclusions are further validated by student testimonials from reflection papers, interviews, researcher field notes and online archived dialogue items in the outcomes chapters focused on each of the goals. Empowerment Evaluation, as an ethnographic approach to program development, framed my process, and was augmented by various other data sources including:

- **Reflection papers:** During the first year and second year, students wrote three reflection papers, which were posted online in their individual classroom folders. These papers were analyzed based on the Empowerment Evaluation goal coding system. Students were asked to self-evaluate their growth as writers and as people using supportive documentation from their own writing samples in the online forum. Instructions were to review the online archives, print out examples of writing from varying points in their process, and to document supporting evidence of their growth through application of new knowledge.

Directions for this paper were as follows:

This paper should include your thoughts on:

The program thus far and an analysis of your participation in it.

Your growth or lack thereof as a writer and as a person.

A description of your yearlong project and why you've chosen this, its value to you.

A self-assessment of your process and progress and what grade you think you've earned.

Printouts of samples of your work and reflections about your writing process and progress.

A statement of future learning directions and goals.

Anything else you'd like to add in relation to our work here, things you'd like to see be different, things you like, things you are unsure of...etc.

This paper is for you to think about where you are and where you're going. This paper needs to be well thought out and articulately expressed. Use whatever form or length you wish. Be as creative as you wish.

- **Surveys:** Pre and post surveys were administered to and completed by all participants in face-to-face sessions in November of the first year (Appendix B), May of the same year, and the following May of the second year (Appendix C). These surveys were directed toward gaining information about levels of technical proficiency, frequency of writing habits, self-perception of growth, and program development issues. The entry survey (Appendix B) overviewed students' views of themselves as writers and readers. The final survey, (Appendix C), was much more detailed in scope as the researcher became more interested in a wider range of information concerning technology, online communications and learning styles. Some of the questions in both pre and post surveys were worded exactly the same; other open ended questions were added to the final survey and some were more detailed. Data which was not duplicated in both pre and post surveys is charted in a separate chart for further discussion.
- **Field Notes:** The researcher kept a month-to-month online item for field notes and discussions with the co-teachers and online organizers. These online field notes archives

provided the researcher the ability to recall salient events, concerns, and reflections regarding the ongoing development of the program in relation to the research questions and focus. It also was a place to discuss critical incidents regarding the students and the program as they arose. My co-teachers and I also brainstormed ideas about ways to look at the research data, commented on parts of our process as it evolved, and ruminated about what seemed to be working, what not, and why.

- **Writing Sample:** The Michigan High School Proficiency Test, a formal state assessment method was administered during the second formal student meeting and again at the end of the first year. The state designed holistic scoring matrix was used to analyze pre and post writing samples for cross comparison to student self-reported growth or lack of growth as writers. The test has received national acclaim as an exemplary testing measurement and was normed by the SAT Corporation. Pre and post writing samples were rated according to the scale and examples provided by the state for students to gain state certification of proficiency on their high school diploma. Samples were rated by the researcher, three volunteer students in the course, and by one of the original test creators. These ratings were then compared and a final rating established for further internal validity. During the second full face-to-face meeting, students were asked to respond to a writing prompt from the book by Chris Van Allsburg, The Mysteries of Harris Burdick, (1984). Students elected to have 30 minutes to write in response to the pictorial and text prompt:

November 1996: “If there was an answer, they knew it would be there.”(Appendix D)

May 1997: “It all began when someone left the window open.” (Appendix E)

The timed writing was evaluated using a holistic narrative analysis (Appendix F) for evaluating students' performances on the Michigan Writing Proficiency Test as part of the

state mandated test, The Michigan Educational Assessment Profile, (MEAP). As students ranged in age from 9th to 12th grade, the 11th grade proficiency level scoring rubric was selected for assessment.

- **Program archives:** The online medium is ideal for research purposes as all communications are archived and retrievable to the researcher for any length of time. This is especially helpful as memory tends to be less reliable than we often presume. Re-reading archived interactions allowed the researcher to recollect and retrieve important data which otherwise might be lost to time or embellished by memory. Direct quotes from students diminishes the need to speak for, or to Other, participants in the research process and serve to document and support the researcher's data interpretations and conclusions. Students requested that their real names be used on quoted sections. Some items, such as "What makes a piece of writing 'good'?" were copied in their entirety and then coded for analysis.
- I audiotaped two hour long **interviews** with several students asking questions about their perception of the course development. The Empowerment Evaluation meeting was also recorded. After transcription, these were coded for qualitative data software analysis. I also compiled and edited one of the interviews for an article for the International Telecommunications Union, which was subsequently published on CD-ROM (Appendix F). In addition, students were interviewed by local news media, the State School Board, and by Washington Post reporter, Linton Weeks.

Implementing Empowerment Evaluation

Empowerment Evaluation, a method of integral program assessment, became the primary method for organizing the research data. Developed by Dr. David Fetterman of Stanford University and keynote for the 1994 Presidential Address for Educational Assessment,

Empowerment Evaluation combined with other data sources created a multi-faceted approach to program assessment and research. Empowerment Evaluation provided a well-established model for program development and a foundation for developing strategies to analyze the data.

“Designed to promote self-determination and a promise of a learning community” (Fetterman, 1995, p.2), the primary facets of Empowerment Evaluation include training, facilitation, advocacy, and illumination with four complementary steps: taking stock, setting goals, developing strategies, and documenting progress. Weekly questions based on student-centered learning goals provided a continual feedback loop for refining program and curriculum development. Natural cycles of action and reflection allowed students to experience the power of inquiry, of questioning their own understandings and growth as a learning community. Empowerment Evaluation has been used primarily as a program evaluation process designed to promote the promise of a learning community as well as to foster self-determination by creating a program feedback loop with ownership of the process being largely in the hands of participants.

Used as a model of ethnographic research for program improvement, Empowerment Evaluation generated relevant data of the dynamics between the design and implementation of the online program and insight into how participants constructed their learning community as they worked to understand, develop, and improve it. In essence, this approach became useful in explicating how a learning organization becomes self-determining.

Self-determination is defined by Fetterman (1994) as:

The ability to chart one’s own course in life, forms the theoretical foundation of Empowerment Evaluation. It consists of numerous interconnected capabilities, such as the ability to identify and express needs, establish goals or expectations and a plan of action to

achieve them, identify resources, make rational choices from alternative courses of action, take appropriate steps to pursue objectives, evaluate short and long term results (including reassessing plans and expectations and taking necessary detours), and persist in the pursuit of these goals” (p. 8).

Empowerment Evaluation includes participants in the inquiry process, creates a multi-voiced text, is both qualitative and quantitative, and results in an ongoing cyclical process of program improvement and towards levels of empowerment. “This vision of evaluation as the generation of local contextualized insights, as the reflective sharing of new program perspectives, as the telling of diverse program stories, is highly congruent with an interpretivist philosophy and a qualitative methodology” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 538).

The initial Empowerment Evaluation survey follows:

Empowerment Evaluation Form

Rate your experience thus far in the online creative writing program on a scale from 1-10 with 1 being the lowest rating, and 10 the highest. Explain your choices, for example, I rated my experience as an 8 instead of a 10 because...and as an 8 instead of a 1 because...

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Explanation of rating from both high and low end scale comparisons:

Rate each instructor on a 1-5 scale:

1=poor, 2=fair, 3=average, 4=above average, 5=excellent

Rate instructors on the basis of online interactions:

Explain ratings:

Responsiveness to individual and community needs:

Explain:

Level of Contribution to Student Learning:

Explain:

Additional Comments?

What are the strengths of the program and how can we improve? How might these changes be implemented?

Empowerment Evaluation as a Research Methodology

Based on expanding the steps of Empowerment Evaluation, the research process evolved as follows:

- A. Taking Stock: Goal Setting and Rating of Each Goal-This step allows for students and teachers to create a shared vision for the program and curriculum establishing co-ownership in the process.
- B. Inquiry: Refining and Defining Understandings through Sub-questions for each Goal:
 - a. To Grow as a Learning Community
 - 1. How do we want to improve our community?
 - 2. How do we get there?
 - b. To become better writers
 - 1. What is creative writing?
 - 2. What makes a piece of writing good?
 - c. To discover the strengths and weaknesses of technology as a learning medium
 - 1. What's different about online learning as compared to face to face?
 - 2. What recommendations might we make from our experiences?
 - d. To discover more about ourselves through our own eyes and others
 - 1. Who are you?

- 2. How have you grown as a writer and as a person?
- e. To develop an environment where creative freedom can flourish
 - 1. General discussion about the dynamics between creative freedom and the need for structure and facilitator guidance
- f. To learn to give/take/use feedback and critique
 - 1. What are ways to respond to writing?
- C. Summation of responses in online items by facilitators for participant review
- D. Additional questions asked to deepen responses and understandings and for member checks to triangulate findings
- E. Participant review and feedback:. Continued refinement

Researcher Gathering of Additional Data

Although the Empowerment Evaluation process evolved into the primary organizational methodology for data gathering and analysis, I supplemented this with additional sources including:

- 1. Intermittent student surveys to gain additional data and information
- 2. Student reflection papers required twice during the year
- 3. Ongoing field notes
- 4. Archives of communications online
- 5. Standardized testing measure/ pre and post writing samples

These additional data sources allowed for multiple measures, which increased validity of results through triangulation. This is critical to ensure credibility of research findings. The data gathering and analysis process became largely seamless during the two years of the study following this format. During each phase, ongoing online interviews provided additional

qualitative data to further my understanding of the quantitative data. Data was summarized at various points and then posted online for member checks of my ongoing interpretations. In this way, I was able to continually refine and distill the volumes of data collected over the two year time frame.

After being online for two months, students attended a mandatory face-to-face meeting to learn Empowerment Evaluation methods. Students rated the program on a one to ten scale to “take stock” of where they were in their process. I explained this was a tool they could use to self-determine their learning directions as people and as writers.

Students divided into small groups of four or five to discuss answers to the question: “What are our purposes for being on this journey together?” After twenty minutes of discussion in small groups, they reconvened into the larger group gathering around my feet at the base of the flipchart. Students were largely respectful of someone who was speaking and didn't interrupt. Comments often built on what someone else had said and added depth to previous sharing. I attributed this to the unspoken norms that had been established in our online community.

Similar ideas from this session were clustered on a flip chart. The students and I synthesized and prioritized all comments, paring them down to six main goal statements. From this "taking stock" phase, the goals and preliminary ratings were as follows:

1. To continue to grow as a community/family of writer/ 6.84
2. To become better writers / 7.52
3. To discover the strengths and weaknesses of technology as a learning medium/ 6.72
4. To discover more about ourselves through our own eyes and others/6.84
5. To develop an environment where creative freedom can flourish/8.73
6. To learn how to give/take/use feedback and critique /6.16

This method of evaluation and research was particularly fitting for my study because of the way these six goal statements informed my research interests and questions. They clearly stated the primary facets I wished to document in describing the salient features for developing, implementing, and assessing and seeking to understand the primary elements and dynamics of an online creative writing program.

It took over an hour for the students to articulate the purpose/goal statements. We spent a good deal of time working on the wording of the purpose statements, weaving all of the ideas students were offering, crystallizing how we wanted to express our purposes for the program. As the facilitator, I would re-iterate students' comments to ensure meanings were not misinterpreted, asking questions to prompt further reflection on their original ideas. Students numerically rated the overall program in addition to each of their five collective goals.

I posted these goals online following the face-to-face gathering and began asking questions for clarification. For example, for the first goal, "To continue to strengthen our sense of learning community," the students' first rating was 7.2. I asked, "What is a learning community?" The pattern became one of identifying goals, defining those goals and exploring characteristics, discussing how to best reach those goals, summarizing comments from the online dialogues for additional comments, and finally re-evaluating progress in each goal using our original scale.

Students averaged the numerical ratings of each goal on a one to ten scale, with one being the lowest rating and ten being the highest rating. I posted the averages of all the groups' ratings for each item. In my research field notes following this session, I wrote: "The students took control of their future learning directions and we transformed by embracing an attitude of inquiry, of

learning through a genuine source of questioning, and of a wanting to know. Assessment became an integral part of our process today."

During the session, I stressed that developing an exemplary program was a shared responsibility. At the end of the year I posed a question about significant memories and one student responded, "I unenthusiastically woke up early and dragged myself to orientation. Then WOW! I remember thinking, this is amazing! We have complete control over this class. It could go anywhere. We could do anything. The limitless possibilities enthralled me."

During the final 45 minutes of the session I audio-taped the students' discussion about what these ratings meant to the students, what for example did a "5" mean, or a "1?" As a researcher, I was interested in documenting the ways their perceptive lenses qualified and influenced their ratings. For example, as some of the students rated "learning community" as a 10, I commented that this left no room for growth. They did not however recalculate their scores in the group as they felt this was as much freedom as they had ever experienced in a classroom setting. The average of all ratings allowed for continued improvement as a primary goal.

Students and I agreed to continue our empowerment work online and we outlined next steps as follows:

- ✓ Further delineate meanings of purpose statements.
- ✓ Decide ways to improve where we are now in relation to those goals, or determine next steps.
- ✓ Decide how we would monitor and assess our attainment or progress towards those goals.

Students reported they found the Empowerment Evaluation "useful and fun" and said they were looking forward to continuing the process. Throughout the research process, I interviewed students by starting online items to encourage the depth of their thinking in relation to their self-

stated learning objectives. The learning environment fostered self-determination with students holding an equal ownership in their learning directions, the development of the program, and the curriculum.

We were continually distilling data as a collective learning community, refining our understanding as we moved forward, consciously asking where are we now, and where do we want to go? Cycles of action and reflection became a matter of course. In addition, students wrote semester reflection papers in relation to their growth as learners and as people. “There are several overlapping versions of the research cycle for co-operative inquirers. (Heron, 1981; Reinharz, 1981; Rowan, 1981). Each version involves the inquirers moving to and fro between reflection and experience, so that these two poles interplay with each other” (Reason, 1981, p. 44).

Empowerment Evaluation as a research methodology implemented in this study offers other educators a replicable model for how to create and assess future programs. Every aspect of this program, from the original environmental and pedagogical design, to the co-creation of the curriculum, to our reflections on process and our learning, has been democratic. It only makes sense that the evaluation and research process would coincide with this philosophical underpinning. “An evaluator, (or researcher) does not and cannot empower anyone; people empower themselves, often with assistance and coaching” (Fetterman, 1996, p. 5). The levels of empowerment spanned the individual, the online community, our local communities and extended to organizational and political realms in both national and international fields. This is discussed fully in the outcomes section.

My role as a researcher was to gain a holistic and integrated understanding of the experience of participating in an online creative writing program, its dynamics, the themes that characterized

what it was and how it was “done.” This encompassed not just the achievements and writing proficiencies of the participants, but moreso, from an emic perspective how we learned to learn together in an online educational environment, and thus how our program changed and evolved. “Our holistic concerns lead us to a form of theory building and understanding which is descriptive and systemic, what Geertz (1973) would call a ‘thick description’, or Kaplan (1964) a ‘concatenated theory.’ The essential quality of a pattern model is that it creates a dense web of knowing” (Reason, 1988, p. 11).

Systematic Analysis of the Data

1. The data analysis process involved the following systematic process of review and interpretation:
2. Documents for review placed in online files including complete item archives, student and teacher reflection papers, field notes, and transcribed informal audio-taped interviews
3. Data coded according to Empowerment Evaluation goals:

Student goals and complementary codes included:

To grow as writers (WRI)

To develop a learning community where creative freedom could flourish (ENV for environment)

To discover the strengths and weaknesses of technology as a learning medium (TECH)

To learn how to give, take and improve critique (CRI)

To grow as a community of writers (COM)

To discover more about ourselves through our own eyes and others, (DISC)

4. The documents were coded individually both on hard copy and online in the margins. This allowed for pattern searches to compile all statements related to each goal statement in an

online file for review. Pattern searches using QRNudist qualitative data analysis software compiling all text relating to each individual goal.

5. Researcher reviews text for summations and thematic patterns making notes in margins on hard copy printouts and then reviewing and re-coding online.
6. All like comments are compiled into a new document. Researcher writes composite with supporting quotes from participants.
7. Outcomes and salient points listed and discussed by researcher for each goal.

Qualitative Data Analysis Software

The researcher used NUD-ist Qualitative Data Analysis software for systematic evaluation of data. The acronym stands for “non-numerical unstructured data (NUD) and the –ist represents “indexing, searching and theorizing.” The software provided the means for data management including collecting and organizing documents, coding documents, making notes and memos about the emerging ideas and theories, and doing large text searches to compile information under the data codes. This allowed for data to be distilled into more workable forms, where patterns and conclusions could be more aptly drawn as I continued to construct an understanding of the thousands of pages of data.

The tree structured indexing system of NUD-ist allowed me to organize and refine the data by visually depicting the branching connections between the main themes, the goal statements and how those developed and were further delineated. From here the researcher and the students were able to draw collective conclusions through online discussion items yielding further clarification and distillation of data verified by member checks. All data documents were coded according to empowerment goals. This provided a means for interpreting the qualitative data in a more structured and systematic way.

I titled the “root” for my project Empowerment Evaluation. Two nodes, or categories, followed: levels of empowerment and steps of empowerment. Under the levels node, I created three additional branches: individual, organizational and community. Under the steps node, I created four branches including taking stock, setting goals, developing strategies and documenting progress. Under setting goals, the branches increased markedly as this is the area where we focused the six codes for research based on empowerment goals as described above. This cued me to think about coding documents based on the student goals. Each goal was then divided into further categories. For example, the goal of to grow as a community of writers branches to “writer search.” This search scanned all online documents which had been coded WRI and sorts the text under this node for researcher review and seeking of patterns.

I used QR Nudist to code documents, including field notes, reflection papers, and item archives, for each of the Empowerment Evaluation goals. The software allowed me to compile all references to each of the stated goals. Upon review of these qualitative documents, I looked for the thematic patterns and cross-references between data. These included oft-repeated words and phrases, as well as ideas and concepts. NUD-ist facilitates both organization of massive qualitative data documents as well as creative flexibility in regards to formulating and recording ideas about emergent concepts and ideas from the data. It helps the researcher to make connections and manage data and also helps the researcher think about the data in an organized fashion.

Data Analysis Process

Once the documents were coded, the qualitative data analysis software allowed for text searches which recovered five lines in context anywhere the specified code appeared, such as WRI, or anywhere in the text which included the word writing, writer, or any word beginning

with wri. For example, here is a coded sample of the researcher's field notes:

Things they're already doing online that amaze me...totally unsolicited they are:
Commenting on each other's work in honest, helpful ways, and being ever so
supportive of each other's efforts. There is no essence of falsity in their responses, CRIT
but there is wit, truth, candor, insight and expertise.
They are already addressing issues about online communications and etiquette.
They have learned quickly, I think, how quickly this can become a maze and I
have tried also to suggest this to them at this point. The forums escalated quickly, COMM ENV
rising with their enthusiasm. We are still in the swell.
They are designing t-shirts, planning fundraiser, talking about creating an online
homepage for future students and to support the program development(this was
their idea, I swear it!)and the writing they're doing...stories, journaling, poetry, WRI
collective writing, organizational writings, grant application testimonials, organizing
a meeting for a reading at a poet's cafe here in town....They are nearly
self-monitoring already and I am going to begin to step out of their way gradually.
We still have some kids not fully connected..though they're hanging in there.
Email from Helen Walls saying her counselor said the program didn't exist, that
she couldn't access from school, stuck her in Latin for three weeks and changed TECH ENV
her schedule. We had a little chat this afternoon and I also called Jeff twice more..I
never cease to be amazed at the banality..no wonder they're afraid to give the kids
the freedom to learn.they'd make shame of them..they are!! Yippee!
Not to mention the depth of their discussions, God and Spirit and Death and
Darkness and unrequited Love...ah young adults. And their HUMOR! They teach COMM
me to remember what it is to be just out there as who you really are.
I know this is a bit rambling, but had to get some of it on paper. Days are really
busy lately.
Still negotiating contract..
Grant person didn't understand the grant so I had the kids give testimonials..will
send you a copy of that email.
Newspaper article came out today and journalist didn't do a good job of writing.
First sentence is cheesy, "Today's kids are really wired." And second sentence
makes no sense at all. They didn't mention Metanet though I did numerous times
and gave them my yellow pamphlet. Poorly constructed sentences etc...I'll mail it
to you. It is quite flattering though and great picture and quotes from students.
Here's what I'm thinking in relation to data currently.
Quantitative: Total number of postings to date:1222 on September 17, 1996
Student created items:20 as of 9-17-96
Number of responses:700
Teacher created items:44 including student individualized folders in classroom area
Number of responses:495
Ratio of student to teacher postings?
Qualitative:
number of original writing postings:
number of revision writings:
Peer responses to writings:
Supportive
Specific directions
Topics: Religion, politics, writer's block,fund raising, online privacy issues, communication
issues, facilitation issues raised by teachers, research questions, project focus WRI COMM
questions, Add??? These are off the top of my head.
Frank..can you send a printout hardcopy up to the end of September for me and
Donna too of all the postings?
Can you tell me how much time I have been logged on total to Metanet?
1:36) [Seen] 17-SEP-96 13:16 Donna Barnes

Will give data stuff thought...donna

1:37) [Seen] 19-SEP-96 13:19 Ginny Little

More topics: suicide, alcoholic significant others, divorce, school sucks, disillusionment, loss of childhood, anger, love, abortion, communications etiquette and protocol, cheerleaders, stereotypes, darkness, dreams, writer's block, safety, COMM expression.

A pattern search of each goal node was then done for each of the goal statements. For example, a search of COMM linked all references to development of community and synthesized all the data into a single document.

Q.S.R. NUD.IST Power version, revision 3.0.4d GUI.

Licensee: Virginia Little.

PROJECT: DISSERT, User little, 9:34 am, Jul 8, 1998.

(1 1 1) /Goals/community/A Text Search

*** Definition:

Search for 'COMM', no restrictions.

+++++

+++ ON-LINE DOCUMENT: EMPOWER1

+++ Retrieval for this document: 760 units out of 8509, = 8.9%

++ Text units 194-204

14:3) [Seen] 03-DEC-96 14:02 Marta Brill

Sense of community We already have taken great steps in this area through our self instigated gatherings at movies and people's houses. Unfortunately many people don't enter the cafe because they don't have time, patience, etc.

These people really miss out on the social part of the class. If we can get everyone involved that would be another step towards a community. Chicago was a step in the right direction for creating bonds, but a only a small part of the class went. Taking the time to respond to the writing of others creates community as well.

Environment where freedom can flourish: We already have free reign to write in.

*M

++ Text units 234-244:

community does not have enough neighborhood barbeques. HINT HINT! I feel that we absolutely have to get together as a class at least twice a month or more, if at all possible. Environment where freedom can flourish: We are very free when it comes to doing our work. Our environment is a little too free for me. I would feel a little bit better if when we had an assignment that we would have a meeting and

hand it in to Ginny and Donna personally. Just like the way it is in a COMM real classroom. Of course I love the freedom. I just would probably feel and do better if I had a bit more teacher guidance and supervision. To grow as Writers: This is a great way to grow because everyone has a different opinion. Except Red and Kat, I think they share the same brain. No offence! If one likes some thing that one person wrote and another doesn't it is a great way to judge how well you are as a

++ Text units 264-274:

opinion from everyone?

14:5) [Seen] 04-DEC-96 14:37 Emily Jeske (Red)

I think we have a very strong sense of community. We can talk openly

about our problems, make jokes, the kind of stuff that we probably wouldn't do around other people, we do here because we feel comfortable

COMM

with each other. I like it because now I know that there are people out there who are like me. Interested in the same things, talk the same way, think the same way. And yes, there are people who are more like me than others, but I think this is probably the most normal group of people I've ever hung out with. I don't know how much I've grown as a writer. I never notice change in myself,

****Many of my suggestions probably seem redundant or repetitive

352

++ Text units 354-364:

14:7) [Seen] 06-DEC-96 8:00 Betsy Bailey

1. Growing sense of community. I think that we are doing very good in this area. We all know each other well online, but probably not as well off.

I think that for me, I don't have time to go to the Café of the arts COMM

much, so I this handicaps me a little bit in getting to know everybody. I'm not sure how this problem can be fixed, since I'm not online at home, and I think this is the case with some others in our community too.

I reviewed printed documents in whole texts offline and looked for thematic patterns. In many cases, these discussions had been summarized for student review and further distilled. Students and teachers worked to continually refine understanding and interpretations of interactions and data. Students eventually learned to synthesize and post summations on their own, following mentoring of this process online by the teachers. This was preferable as it erased the interpretation and division between researcher and participant perspectives. As an example, the text search for community retrieved the following summation:

In relation to IMPROVING OUR COMMUNITY we rated a 7.2.

To improve the suggestions included:

1. More face to face meetings. Do you have ideas for what we might do in these meetings and how they would be advantageous?
2. The participatory levels are uneven and there appears to be a central group of "hard core on-line gatherers." Those of you who deem yourself part of this central group, why is this so? Those of you who aren't on much, or who don't feel a part of the on-line community, what contributes to this, or why is this? The prevailing COMM DISC attitude is that community strengthens through presence. The suggestion is that everyone needs to spend a minimum of 5 hours per week, comparable to time that we would spend in a classroom for this class.
3. Alternating responses seemed to be a key to deepening sense of community. We will continue this second semester so that you will be responding to different people different times. What about those who don't respond or who do not have anything on-line to respond to?
4. Humor adds levity and fun to the process and also provides insight.
DISC CRIT COMM
5. Trust is deepening with time and through voluntary personal disclosure. DISC COMM
6. We have found likenesses among us and also seem adept at accepting

differences. Critical incidences and debate around items like the "Is there a God," DISC COMM item have strengthened this.

7. We provide a caring support system for community members during difficult COMM times, creating a bond between us.

8. There is a sense of honesty and openness about our community. COMM

9. We have weathered some difficult times and as a result have moved past being "polite," and a pseudo sense of community, to a true sense of community where COMM each feels free to express their beliefs and feelings in respectful but honest ways.

10. We have begun to move outside our own community towards interacting with others which is enlarging our sense of community as well as inviting others to COMM engage with us within our community. This will continue.

11. Question raised about differences in the "kind of community we want" What kind of community do we want? How would we describe our community? How might we want it to be different, if at all?

The quantitative data gathered from the Empowerment Evaluation sessions and corresponding surveys were placed in charts for evaluation. These numerical charts are augmented with explanations and interpretations to qualify the number ratings from additional information gained from online dialogues. Thematic patterns from comparative pre and post numerical ratings and statistics are discussed. This provides a preliminary overview of the survey data. Each of the Empowerment Evaluation goal statements, which served to guide the primary research inquiry, are then discussed in separate chapters dedicated to detailing the outcomes surrounding each goal.

Chapter Four

Quantitative Data Display and Discussion

“I call this the mismatch problem. The world is gray but science is black and white. We talk in zeroes and ones but the truth lies in between.” Bart Kosko

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.”
Albert Einstein

The following charts display data gathered through pre and post surveys, some comparative and some additional responses to questions not asked in the first surveys. Also displayed are numerical data gathered through pre and post writing samples and empowerment evaluation data. The pre-survey was administered and completed at the second mandatory face-to-face meeting which included Empowerment Evaluation training. The second post survey was administered and gathered at the end of the first year meeting. The final post documentation data was collected from the students who completed both first and second years at the end of the second year meeting. Empowerment Evaluation forms were completed at the same time as were pre and post writing samples. Charts display numerical quantitative data. Interpretation is based on observation as well as numeric representations and are validated through qualitative data analysis as well as multiple sources of data to triangulate findings.

Chart One displays the researcher’s, three students,’ and the writing test official ratings from the pre and post writing samplings. Holistic scoring rubric detailed in Appendix F.

Chart Two displays final survey data from end of the first year, May 1997.

Chart Three demonstrates the final student survey ratings from the end of the second year, May 1998.

Chart Four summarizes survey data, comparative pre and post from the first year.

Chart Five shows comparative results of pre and post Empowerment Evaluation ratings from November 96 and May 97, respectively.

Chart Six outlines the goals and ratings from Empowerment Evaluation final session at the end of the second year, May 1998.

Chart One: High School Proficiency Test (HSPT)

Pre and Post Writing Sample Scoring

Response Piece to The Mysteries of Harris Burdick, Chris Van Allsburg, Houghton-Mifflin Publishers, 1984.

November Pre-prompt: “Another Place, Another Time: If there was an answer he’d find it there...”

May Post-prompt: “The Third Floor Bedroom: It all began when someone left the window open...”

Average scores of 16 students-given by a panel of 1 teacher, 3 students, and one HSPT official

Students	Scored by 3 Peers/1Teacher			Scores by HSPT official	
	Avg. Pre	Avg. Post		Avg. Pre	Avg. Post
S1	2.75	2.75		3	4
S2	3.5	3.5		4	4
S3	3	2.9		4	4
S4	2.9	2.75		3	2
S5	2	2.6		2	3
S6	2.4	3.4		4	3
S7	2	2.75		1	2
S8	3.1	3.25		4	3
S9	2.5	2.9		2	2
S10	2.4	3.4		3	3
S11	2	3		2	4
S12	2.75	3.4		3	4
S13	2.25	3.6		1	4
S14	2.6	3.25		2	3
S15	2.6	3.25		2	3
S16	2.75	2.75		2	3
Avg.	2.6	3.1		2.6	3.2

Students responded to a pictorial writing prompt from the book The Mysteries of Harris Burdick in both November and May. Students voted for a 30-minute time frame for this free-write activity. Scoring was based on the Michigan High School Proficiency Test, 11th grade level, holistic scoring matrix. (Appendix F).

An overview of this table shows that three students in the average remained the same in their ratings by the teacher/researcher and peers, 11 improved, and two decreased in their scores. Four students were rated unchanged by the HSPT professional, nine improved and three remained unchanged. Average overall increase of the group was .5-.6. Validity of scoring consistency is

established by the .1 differential between the teacher/researcher scores and the HSPT official scores. Comparative scores were consistently close between individual ratings for each student. The largest gain scored by teacher and students was 1 level whereas the largest gain by HSPT official was three levels. Scores by the HSPT official were higher than ratings by the teacher/students 90% of the time. This suggests that the students hold higher standards than others might outside their writing community.

Within state guidelines, for a diploma endorsement proficiency is deemed a 3.0 or higher. Most students accomplished this level at the end of the first year. Again, these students ranged in age from 9th grade to 12th grade. This state mandated high school proficiency test offers validity to the work of our program by standardized measures. Students writing proficiencies increased from a level considered non-proficient to one that would warrant state diploma endorsement. Quotation from a letter from HSPT official accompanying scoring further validates this: “All of these writers are highly competent by state standards, so this batch was representative of students at the high end of the scale.” The scorer noted that one limitation to the scoring may be the fictional and imaginative content, which for state writing tests, would focus on expository, interpretive, analytical or argumentative. He questioned whether we were responding to the quality of the writing or to the quality of the imagination. I replied that imaginative, creative writing has its own merit and is useful in many real world contexts. The official stated that he scored the papers according to the quality of the prose style in addition to the fullness of their response to the task.

Equally important are the students’ own perceptions of their writing abilities. One of their empowerment goals was to improve as writers. A search of text documents including reflection papers, archives, and empowerment data reinforces the quantitative data. Students

explored the question of how to improve as writers and how to respond to one another in an online item in the homeroom. This is discussed fully in the outcomes section on improving as writers.

Chart Two: Post Survey Data

The following numerical data was charted from post-survey responses in May 1997.

Post Survey Data Post= May 1997								
	org.	content	fac.	peer/rel.	tch/std.	e.e.	port.	ref.
S1	4	5	5	5	5	3	4	5
S2	4	4	5	5	5	3	3	4
S3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
S4	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	4
S5	3	5	5	4	5	3	4	4
S6	4	5	4	4	3	N/A	4	4
S7	2	4	5	2.5	3	3	3	3
S8	4	5	4	4	5	4	5	5
S9	4	5	5	5	5	3.5	5	5
S10	3	5	3	4	4	3	5	4
S11	4	5	4	5	5	4	4	4
S12	4	5	5	5	5	3	5	4
S13	4	5	4	4	5	3	5	4
S14	4	5	5	5	5	3	4	4
S15	4	4	4	4	5	2	3	3
S16	3	5	3.5	5	5	2	4	4
S17	2	4	3	5	4	4	4	5
S18	4	3	5	5	5	4	4	5
T1	3	5	4	5	4	3	3	4
Avg.	3.6	4.6	4.4	4.5	4.6	3	4.1	4.2

	vis.	café	meta.	fff.	comm.
S1	5	5	5	4.8	4
S2	4	5	5	4.25	5
S3	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
S4	4	5	N/A	4.3	4
S5	4	4	4	4	4
S6	3	5	4	3.6	4
S7	4	5	N/A	3.75	4
S8	4	4	3	4.3	5
S9	5	3	5	4.83	5
S10	3	3	N/A	4.5	5
S11	2	4	3	3.6	4
S12	5	5	4	5	5
S13	3	4	5	5	5
S14	5	5	5	4.8	5
S15	4	5	4	4.6	N/A
S16	5	5	5	4.4	5
S17	3	5	N/A	4.25	4
S18	3	4	4	4.16	5
T1	4	5	4	5	5
Avg.	3.9	4.5	4.3	4.4	4.6

Course evaluations

org.-class organization
 content-class content
 fac.-class facilitation
 peer/rel.-peer relationships
 tch/std.-teacher student rel.

Assessment

e.e.-empowerment evaluation
 port.-portfolios
 ref.-reflection papers
 vis.-visiting authors forum
 café-café of the arts
 meta-meta network conferencing
 fff.-face to face gatherings
 comm.-overall community

Survey Rating Scale

1= poor
 2= fair
 3= average
 4= good
 5= excellent

Content, learning community and teacher-student relationships rated the highest all at 4.6 out of 5 possible points. This re-confirms the data gathered through the Empowerment Evaluation data. The primary focus of the program was in developing learning community through content oriented interactions between students and teachers as co-learners.

Peer relationships and the Café were both rated next highest at 4.5. The dialogues in the café allowed students to develop respect for diversity and to establish communication and community norms. The café was primarily student organized and facilitated and covered a wide range of topics. This is discussed more fully in the outcomes chapter.

Next highest, at 4.4, are the ratings for facilitation and face-to-face gatherings. We only met three times formally and many students expressed a desire to meet more regularly as a full group. Frustrations about facilitation came through difficulties in finding co-teachers who were present and who matched the philosophical underpinnings of the primary teacher researcher. One teacher did not acclimate well to the online environment and had difficulties mastering technical difficulties, in addition to feeling stressed by the time intensive online teaching medium, as well as by an overload of personal and professional commitments. The next teacher who had been an effective visiting author, engaging well with students, once deemed “teacher” and paid as such, adopted a severely traditional approach including threatening students with failing grades, coercion and authoritative posturing. My current co-teacher, Dirk Flinthart, is consistent in his interactions, is highly knowledgeable, establishes rapport readily with students, is a full time writer, and also philosophically agrees with my pedagogical approach. We make an excellent teaching team. Students seem to respond accordingly.

Portfolios, Metanet forums and reflection papers were rated next lowest at the low 4 ranges. Many students did not venture into Metanet forums. However those who did found a supportive,

private community of other professionals and artists online. Six students eventually did internships for the Metanetwork Co. and for the National Endowments for the Arts in Washington D.C. A student field trip also included students who had been actively involved in the Meta forums. Students visiting D.C. and doing internships stayed with people they had met through the online community.

Most students were quite creative in the compilation of portfolios and in their reflections. Students did comment about tiring of having to constantly reflect on their process and work, but seemed to be quite proud of their final accomplishments.

Visiting authors scored a 3.9. While students were taken to national conferences such as National Council of the Teachers of English, listened to presentations by known authors and met the author of their text, Georgia Heard (1997) Room to Write, we were all continually frustrated by the lack of authors online. Ms. Heard commented that she feared connecting online as she already felt too pressed for time to write and believed it would be a distraction. While we had a range of visitors from various networking by the researcher, they were too few. It also doesn't help that no monetary compensation for visiting authors could be offered.

Organization scored a 3.6. This reflects the fact that as facilitators it took us some time to discover how to best organize the online forums for ease of navigation and for structure that would best support an organized, and yet organically flexible, learning environment. Such things as separate items for assignments and questions about assignments, and students learning to moderate the amount of chat in more formal items, all served to improve the overall organizational capacity of the learning forum.

Empowerment Evaluation was rated lowest of all in the survey sampling. When asked about this, students reported that they felt like they were asked to reflect too often, that they had

answered the questions quite fully and yet I pressed for more. At one stage a student voiced that she felt we were over-focused on the empowerment evaluation process. This was a key moment. Students demonstrated that they felt a co-ownership in their own learning directions, felt safe to voice their discontent, and knew that I would listen to them. Consequently I suspended the discussions surrounding the goal statements and allowed them to focus more on their writing work, the core of the community.

Chart Three

Survey Data: Student Class Ratings

End of second year/May 1998

S-student

Rating- 1=poor

2=fair

3=average

4=good

5-excellent

	Org.	Con.	Fac.	PR	T/S	VAF	Cafe	Meta	Trips	Pres.	SOM	Avg.
S1	5	5	5	4	5	3	3	N/A	5	N/A	4	4.3
S2	3	5	5	5	5	4	5	3	5	5	2	4.3
S3	3	4	3	4	4	3	2	N/A	N/A	4	3	3.3
S4	4	3.5	5	5	5	3	2	N/A	5	5	5	4.75
S5	3	4	5	4	5	4	3	N/A	5	N/A	3	4
S6	3	4	4	4	5	4	3	3	4	4	4	3.82
S7	4	5	5	4	5	5	3	5	5	5	5	4.64
S8	4.5	4.5	5	4	4.5	3.5	3	N/A	N/A	N/A	4	4.1
S9	4	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	4.64
Total	3.7	4.9	4.7	4.3	4.8	3.7	3.1	3.7	4.8	4.7	3.9	4.8

Course evaluations

Org.-course organization

Con.-course content

Fac.-facilitation

PR-peer relationships

T/S-teacher/student relationships

VAF-visiting author's forum

Café-café of the arts

Meta-MetaNet conferences

Trips-trips

Pres.-presentations

SOM-self-organized meetings

The lowest rating average was for the students' café of the arts. This is primarily a student organized area and although very active, students were initially frustrated by topic drift and sheer numbers of postings which were somewhat daunting before they learned to self-monitor. As this is a chart from the end of the second year, the students commented that the café didn't have the "energy" of the first year café when they were just getting to know each other. The forum became less argumentative with less flurry during the second year as students had

already explored many differences in ideologies through the café dialogues.

The highest rating is course content. Students commented that that they learned a great deal about writing and the varying genres. Writing and creative expression were the core of our learning community and the foundation from which we then branched into other integrated learning forums and goals.

Student teacher relationships, peer relationships, facilitation, trips and presentations were rated next highest. When asked about significant memories of the online learning experience, what most often surfaced were reminiscences of face-to-face gatherings. I believe this is attributable to the fact that we rarely saw each other, and when we did, it was something of importance which brought us together--Jessica visiting from Switzerland, Dirk coming from Australia, presenting the poetic drama to a room full of adults at an international conference and feeling “heard,” for a few examples. We also met periodically at coffeehouses and students regularly stop by my house or each other’s houses-to borrow books, discuss projects, to celebrate a birthday-simply to connect in real time.

Course organization, Metanet forums and Visiting Authors all rated 3.7, above average and close to “good.” Only a few students participated fully in public Metanet forums. Organization improved drastically from the first year to the second and into the third as we learned more about how structure, design and online facilitation impacted learning environment inclusive of both individual and collective needs.

Chart Four: PRE AND POST COMPARATIVE SURVEY DATA

Data is charted to compare responses from questions asked on both pre and post surveys, November 1997, and May, 1998

Pre and Post Survey Data

	W pre	W post	CP pre	CP post	SW pre	SW post
S1	7	7	3	4	4	4
S2	1-2wk.	2-3wk.	3.5	3	4	4
S3	2-3wk.	7	3	3	3	2
S4	7	2-3wk.	3	3	4	3
S5	2-3wk.	2-3wk.	2	3	3	3
S6	2-3wk.	7	2	3	2	3
S7	1-3mos.	2-3wk.	4.5	4.5	2	3.5
S8	2-3wk.	2-3wk.	3	3	3	3
S9	7	7	4	4	4	4
S10	2-3wk.	2-3wk.	2	2	2	2
S11	2-3wk.	7	3	2	3	3
S12	2-3wk.	7	3	4	4	3
S13	7	2-3wk.	4	4	2	3
T1	7	7	4	4	3	4
Avg.	3.89wk	4.25wk	3.14	3.32	3.07	3.18

5/14 increase 4/14 increase 4/14 increase
 6/14 same 8/14 same 7/14 same
 3/14 decrease 2/14 decrease 3/14 decrease

Key
 S-student W-days per week person writes
 T-teacher CP-computer proficiency 1low 5 high
 SW-self as writer rating 1low 5high

Survey Rating Scale

- 1= poor
- 2= fair
- 3= average
- 4= good
- 5= excellent

Experience rating and time put into class

	Exp.	D/W	T online	Time off
S1	9	7	1-2hrs.	.5-1hr.
S2	10	7	1-2hrs.	.5hr.
S3	9	6	45-60min.	.5-1hr.
S4	8	5	45-60min.	.5-1hr.
S5	8	5	45-60min.	<.5hr.
S6	8	5	30min.	.5-1hr.
S7	6	1	<15min.	<.5hr.
S8	9.99	5	30min.	.5-1hr.
S9	7	3	30min.	>1hr.
S10	8	5	45-60min.	.5-1hr.
S11	9	7	45-60min.	.5-1hr.
S12	9	5	45-60min.	>1hr.
S13	10	7	1-2hrs.	<.5hr.
T1	9	7	3-4hrs.	1-2hrs
Avg.	8.57	5.36	63.75min.	3/4hr.

Exp.-overall experience with program 1low 10high
 D/W-days per week on-line
 T online-time per day on-line
 Time off-time spent on class off-line per day

Students reported spending an average of five days a week online working for an average of 64 minutes per day. This was also verified by counting numbers of posts for five randomly selected students and calculations offered by our server company that each post takes an average of five minutes to compose. Students reported spending an average of 45 minutes additional time per week offline with course related work. This exceeds time spent “in class” which generally is a 45-50 minute block per subject. This becomes important information for sharing with governmental bodies who have yet to accredit online courses for high school aged students in our state. They argue that “in class time” refers only to face-to-face instruction. Another comment made by a school board official to one of the students presenting about our program was: “If we teach students to write on computers, they won’t know how to use a pen or pencil.”

Computer proficiency only gained a small margin in self-reports from surveys. Students commented that this is because the more they learned, the more they realized they didn’t know. It was evident, for example, that students gained proficiency in using Caucus software. Some students had not ever been online prior to the program. All of them had personal websites after participation in the course. In this sense, the number reflects a high standard of expectation by the students in regards to their working knowledge of technology. As they learned, they became eager to know more and realized how steep and sustained the learning curve was in this quickly expanding terrain.

Students ran classes for their peers and for myself in html and web page design. Students practiced with graphic imagery to accompany their writing. We devoted a particular online item to technology questions, which became a tutorial lounge of sorts. Whoever could answer the questions did so. Sometimes explanations were offered from varying perspectives based on experience and expertise. We all learned together.

The idea that students did, in fact, gain proficiency in technology is represented in the ratings on the Empowerment Evaluation goals as follows:

Chart Five: PRE AND POST EMPOWERMENT RATINGS

Pre= November 1996

Post= May 1997

Group Empowerment Evaluation Ratings

	A pre	A post	A Shift	B pre	B post	B Shift
Comm	8	7.5	-0.5	6	9	3
Env	9.25	9.25	0	8	9.6	1.6
Wri	7	7.25	0.25	7	8.4	1.4
Tech	8	9	1	5	8.4	3.4
Self	8	9	1	7	8.6	1.6
Cri	7.5	7.25	-0.25	3.5	7.8	4.3
Avg	7.96	8.21	0.25	6.08	8.63	2.55

	C pre	C Post	C Shift	D Pre	D Post	D Shift
Comm	8	8.8	0.8	7	7.5	0.5
Env	8	9.4	1.4	8	9.5	1.5
Wri	6.8	9.2	2.4	6	8.25	2.25
Tech	8	8.8	0.8	6	7	1
Self	6.8	9.2	2.4	5	8.5	3.5
Cri	6.8	7	0.2	7	6.25	-0.75
Avg	7.4	8.73	1.33	6.63	7.83	1.2

	Avg pre	Avg post	Avg. Shift
Comm	7.25	8.2	0.95
Env	8.31	9.44	1.13
Wri	6.7	8.28	1.58
Tech	6.75	8.3	1.55
Self	6.7	8.83	2.13
Cri	6.2	7.23	1.03
Avg	7.02	8.38	1.4

A, B, C, D-groups that rated each goal

Purpose Statements

Comm.-to create/develop our community/family

Env.-to develop an environment where creative freedom/learning can flourish

Wri.-to grow/improve as a writer

Self.-to discover who we are through our own eyes and others

Cri.-to learn how to give/take/use feedback/critique

tech.-to discover the strenghts and weaknesses of technology as a learning medium

To discover the strengths and weaknesses of technology gained 1.55 points of a 10 point scale, the second highest gain overall. Score suggests they learned a good deal about online

learning but felt the gain in technical proficiency was low when compared to what they still wanted to learn.

All averages were above the median of 5 and increases averaged 1.4. Discovery of Self had the largest average gain. This relates directly to the teacher paradigm, which purports that teaching a love of learning as a process of self-awareness and illumination as the core of education. “Educare” in Latin means “to draw forth.” Students learned the value of self-reflection and discovery.

It makes sense that to grow as writers was the next highest average rating gain followed by technology as a learning medium. We co-created the online forum and our primary focus was on content and community as writers. The students became a self-proclaimed “family of writers” and attributed this to many things, perhaps most particularly to the safety and relative anonymity of the online medium. Secondly, creative writing is a highly personalized form of expression. The connections between the writer, the online community and the introspection of art and creativity all contributed to the power of the participants’ learning experience.

The learning to critique rating demonstrates the students’ desire to be able to evaluate each other’s work more proficiently and thoroughly. Discussions ensued about wanting a split screen online so that the original text could be displayed next to the critiqued section for easy review and reference. Students became accustomed to in-depth critiques and their standards did not then allow for cursory comments, rather they insisted on a high level of attention to detail and scope.

Interesting to note is that the smallest gain was community whereas on the survey community ranked the highest at 4.6 out of 5 possible score. I deduce that the students felt a strong sense of community from the beginning of the program and that this was sustained. Students couldn’t necessarily gain much more rapport, sense of trust and comfort than had already been created as

a foundation for the rest of the work in the program. This is evidenced by the student testimonials in the outcomes section focused on this particular goal statement.

Chart Six
Empowerment Evaluation
Student Ratings of the Class
Final/End of 2nd year: May 1998

S-student

Rating- 1 –10 with one being low and ten the highest

	COM	WRI	TEC	DIS	ENV	CRI	PRO	Avg.
S1	9	10	9	9	9	8	9	9
S2	9.5	8.3	7.2	8.9	9.5	7	9	8.5
S3	8	9	8	8	9	7	7	8
S4	9	8	6	N/A	9	5	9	7.8
S5	9	8	6	9	9	7	9	8.1
S6	7	8	8	7	9	8	8	7.9
S7	9	10	10	8	10	7	N/A	9.0
S8	9	9	7	9	9	8	9	8.6
S9	10	9	8	10	10	8	10	9.3
Total	8.8	8.8	7.7	8.6	9.3	7.2	8.75	8.49

Course evaluations

COMM-Community

WRI-To become better writers

TEC-Technology as a learning medium

DIS-To discover more about ourselves through our own eyes and others

ENV-Environment where freedom can flourish

CRI-Give/take/use feedback/critique

PRO-Rating for the sense of learning program overall

Students rated the overall program at 8.73 of 10 possible points. This is a gain of .95 from their original empowerment evaluation rating. The highest student rating was environment where creative freedom could flourish at 9.3. Students reported that they had never experienced such creative freedom in their regular school courses. This was a bit disconcerting to some students who were used to the typical school structure of read, write, discuss, test and grade. To take control of one’s own learning, to be self-motivated was a new experience and a huge shift for most of the participants. This is discussed more fully in the chapter outcomes based on this goal.

The next highest ratings were for growth as writers and for developing learning community online at an average of 8.8 out of 10 possible points. This confirms the primary focus of the online program on content and reflects the teacher-researcher belief that a learning community must be the foundation for encouraging risk-taking as learners which in turn promotes growth.

The lowest rating was for using/giving/taking critique. Students continued to look for ways to improve and refine their ways of responding to each other in constructive ways. As they learned more about the elements of style in writing, their skills in critiquing continued to improve from my observation. Students became increasingly attentive to multiple revisions and on revision as the foundation of writing craft. In the researcher's view, one of the most influential improvements in critique came from visiting author, Dirk Flinthart. As he is a full time writer and accustomed to attending to the ways a piece of writing metamorphizes, his expertise allowed for a much richer response to students' work.

Technology as a learning medium scored a 7.7 of 10. Students had lengthy discussions about online learning in the homeroom and the café. The summary of those dialogues revealed the following:

Strengths of Interactive Technologies

1. Flexibility of work scheduling and freedom to co-create curriculum with teachers and students as co-learners.
2. Safety of online environment allowing space for all to enter-particularly inviting for "shy" students.
3. We get to know each other on the "inside first" without the physical distracters and prejudices.
4. Allows us to transcend physical boundaries in relation to learning resources, i.e. teachers, students and other artists from distance locations, libraries and writer's resources on the Internet.
5. Interactive technologies will be a mainstay for future employment positions in a changing world. Students learn needed online communications and technical skills.

6. Online medium generative and creates a seamless curriculum where we can dialogue about issues which matter most to us.
7. Students balance time online and off-students read and write everyday, reporting an average time per day of one to one and a half-hours on the course.
8. We are writing for authentic purposes: to convey our ideas, to explore who we are, to communicate with others, for presentation of our work, to reveal the ways we read and write our worlds.
9. Individual and collective community balances/everybody engages at their own pace. Self-proclaimed “family of writers.”
10. We have a real and extended audience for our writings-not just teacher response and critique.
11. All communications are written thus honing our writing expertise. Without physical softeners, we learn to carefully construct and convey our ideas.
12. We are free to work without usual classroom distractions (bells, students talking out of turn, scheduled times, etc.) giving us artistic license, time to pause and reflect before responding, ability to revise in response to feedback.
13. Program an example of a way to add to current public school systems through district wide cooperation providing equality and excellence in opportunities for ALL students.

Drawbacks

1. Amount of time required to read, write, post, reflect on everyone’s work. Online communications and education are time-intensive.
2. Technical glitches and constant upward learning curve which can sometimes be frustrating
3. Lack of sensory cues, which can increase capacity for miscommunication

4. Equity of access issues-students accessing only from school at a severe disadvantage.
5. Dealing with the politics of school systems those who don't yet understand the scope and possibility of innovative directions in education including partnerships between business, technologies, education and the arts.

Levels of Empowerment

As discussed earlier, the levels of empowerment are divided into individual, organizational, and community. While each of the Empowerment Evaluation goals and the outcomes are discussed in individual chapters, it is noteworthy to overview the levels of empowerment gained in the three primary strands as outlined in Zimmerman in Fetterman's Empowerment Evaluation:

A distinction between empowering processes and outcomes is critical in order to clearly define empowerment theory. Empowerment processes are ones in which attempts to gain control, obtain needed resources, and critically understand one's social environment are fundamental. The process is empowering if it helps people develop skills so they can become independent problem solvers and decision-makers. Empowering processes will vary across levels of analysis. For example, empowering processes for individuals might include organizational or community involvement, empowering processes at the organizational level might include shared leadership and decision making, and empowering processes at the community level might include accessible government, media, and other community resources (p.4).

Students in the research project spanned individual, community and organizational empowerment levels. As I reviewed their accomplishments and the levels as outlined by Fetterman cited above, I summarized these levels to include the following:

INDIVIDUAL

- Students take ownership of their own learning directions and become self-motivated
- Teachers model online communications and students begin to apply these in mentoring others
- Students begin to imitate responses, which have been well received or seem to work well as a model for effective communication
- Students initially write in response to prompts and/or assignments. They then move into writing for themselves on topics of choice
- Students begin generating their own writing invitations
- Students self-create and re-create yearlong inquiry projects
- Students start their own items of interest online and facilitate discussions
- Facilitation becomes shared from initial more teacher directed beginnings
- Students begin publishing their own work on self-created websites as well as in traditional literary and educational publications

COMMUNITY

- Students create own goals via empowerment evaluation
- Students start questioning and monitoring their own attainment of goals as integral part of process
- Peer tutoring becomes a norm
- Students begin negotiating curriculum directions, offering suggestions.
- Students give unsolicited feedback on directions of course
- Students begin meeting on their own time for project work, writing and socialization

- Students create their own homepages and begin compiling their work for sharing with outside audiences
- Students begin using email for private interactions and support
- Students present at national and international conferences
- Students publish and begin to recognize the power of their voices to reach larger audiences
- Students win awards through various local artist venues
- Students invite visitors into program campus and venture into public Metanet conferences
- Students become employed by technology companies and do internships in outside communities
- Students become politically involved in advocating for technology in education
- Students self-organize and run html courses and webpage design. Teachers shift roles and become learners
- Students hired for local community technology networks
- Students assist in offering technical help rather than relying on instructors
- Students become peer mentors to incoming groups
- Students run orientation meetings for new groups including teachers

ORGANIZATIONAL

- Students help train 85 pre-service teachers from Western Michigan University and participate in orientation. Students continue mentoring and facilitating process online. Students begin teaching teachers.
- Students present to local and state school boards about online education
- Parents write letters to the editor in support of the online program to refute contrary statements made by administrators in local paper (Appendix J).

- Students begin a middle-school online program coordinating with one of the teachers at the school.
- Students are hired by local technology companies
- Students design and create a LEARN-NET site for our local community net
- Students do internships in D.C. for server company and National Endowments for the Arts organization

The following list of awards, publications and presentations by the students exemplifies the extent of these levels of empowerment as the students impacted local, community and organizational forums with their work online and with their voices.

PROGRAM PUBLICATIONS, PRESENTATIONS, AWARDS

Articles published on program:

December, 1996: KVISD Newsletter: *Is it live or is it Internet? Innovative Creative writing class receives grant.*

January, 1997: *New Class Offered on the Web*, Kalamazoo Valley Intermediate School District, Community Focus, Volume 7, number 1.

January, 1997: South County's Commercial Express Newspaper, local for Vicksburg, Schoolcraft and Fulton: *Vicksburg students speak to state board about county wide programs*, p. 3.

January, 1997: Kalamazoo Gazette: King, Nancy. *Breaking the old class barriers*, C5.

February, 1997: Kalamazoo Gazette: *Local students travel to Washington D.C.*, p.7.

March ,1997: The Red and White: *Writing on the Web* by Aaron Webb, student, p. 7.

March ,1997: Rethinking Schools publication: Milwaukee, WI. student poetry.

April, 1997: Little, Virginia. Talking Points Journal: Whole Language Umbrella. *Creative Writers on the Net.*

April, 1997: Kalamazoo Gazette: *Vicksburg students speak to state school board here*, article about students presenting on our program.

April, 1997: National Endowment for the Arts: <http://www.arts.endow.gov> Article: *The Heart of Community and the Soul of the Machine*.

April, 1997: Visited Washington Post with six students for interview with Linton Weeks, technology journalist.

Winter, 1997: Little, Virginia. *The World at Our Fingertips*, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, Volume 15, No.1,

September, 1997: Beckwith, Lisa, Journalist Portage and Kalamazoo Gazette: *No Walls for County's Newest Classroom*.

September, 1997: International Telecommunications Union, specialized agency of the United Nations: CD ROM published article to all represented countries telecommunications representatives. Two articles: one by students dialoguing about program experience, one called *Composing Reality*, by Virginia S. Little

October, 1997: City Life section of Kalamazoo Gazette: *Students Receive Laptops for Internet Class*.

May, 1998: California Institute of Integral Studies, Inner Eye: article on program and development.

June, 1998: University of Omaha, Nebraska. Article on presentation at Theater and Pedagogy of Oppressed conference in the university professional journal.

October, 1999: International Telecommunications Union. CD ROM forum papers. *Life at the Bottom of a Soup Bowl: The Flavor of Online Learning Communities*, by Little, Virginia, as moderator of panel on Learning Communities in the Information Age.

September, 2000: In press: *Defining Moments: Language, Literacy and Social Justice*, edited by Sonia Nieto and Linda Spears. Chapter contribution: *Our Words as Writers create Windows*. Lawrence Erlbaum Press.

Presentations:

April, 1996: Western Michigan University: presentation to graduate students in reading course.

June, 1996: Whole Language Umbrella Conference, Minneapolis, MN: Virginia Little presenter, *A Classroom without Walls*.

October, 1996: Kalamazoo College presentation to student teachers in education course.

October, 1996: Comstock Public School Board: Presentation to board on program

November, 1996: Travel excursion: Chicago, NCTE, students heard authors Jon Scieszka, Georgia Heard, David Small, Lois Lowry.

February, 1997: Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility: Seattle, WA. Presenters: Virginia Little, Donna Barnes, Marta Brill: *The World at our Fingertips, Creative Writers on the Net*. Proposal submitted by V. Little

March, 1997: State Board of Education at KAMSC: Aaron Webb, Virginia Little presenters.

April, 1997: WWMTV 5:30 p.m. news segment about the online program.

June, 1997: Whole Language Umbrella: Seattle WA., Virginia Little, Donna Barnes and students: *Creative Writers on the Net*.

September, 1997: International Telecommunications Union, Specialized Agency of the United Nations, Geneva, Switzerland: Student, Jessica Ott, Teacher, Virginia Little, and parent, Robin Postel, present on online education, varying perspectives.

October, 1997: EFA council members board meeting: KVISD Presentation

October, 1997: Presentation for Technology and Education conference: Lansing, Michigan: *Creative Writers on the Net*.

November, 1997: Virginia Little and six students: presentation to curriculum development committee

March, 1998: Pedagogy and Theater of the Oppressed Conference, Omaha, Nebraska, *We are the Poets: Crossing Boundaries*, Overview of program and focus on social justice, student performance, poetic dramatization of marginalized people and raising of consciousness. Professionally videotaped.

April, 1998. Western Michigan University: 150 educators and Kalamazoo Superintendent, faculty and staff of Education and Technology Dept. Overview of program and future of technology in education. Students did Omaha performance.

May, 1998: Kalamazoo Valley Community College: Edutech conference presentation.

May, 1998: Final Dalton Center performance, Western Michigan University: *We are the Poets*.

August 5-7, 1998. The Third International Conference for Global Conversations on Language and Literacy, Bordeaux, France: *Technology and the Changing Nature of Literacy*. Panel presentation.

March, 1999: National Foundation for the Improvement of Education symposium. Guest speaker on online communications.

March, 1999: Northern Arizona University. Web99 conference. Guest speaker on 21 BEAT St.

October, 1999: International Telecommunications Union, Telecom 99: Geneva, Switzerland. Moderator of panel on online communities in the information age. Panelists include Director of the BBC, Russian director of UNESCO, and four others from Spain, Ireland, UK, and Israel.

Awards:

March, 1997/March 1998: 6 students win Arts Council Awards for short story and poetry selections. Two of these students receive first place scholarship award of \$500 for college tuition.

April, 1998: Virginia Little: Who's Who in Education publication. Nomination by Carrie Schaus.

June, 1999: Jackie Petto wins "Poems that Ate our Ears" local writing contest.

September, 2000: Nominated by committee member, Dr. Allen Carey-Webb for Award of Distinction for exceptional quality of dissertation work.

Chapter Five: Narrative Findings and Analyses

“The real end of science is the honor of the human mind” Carl Jacob-German
Mathematician

The following sections discuss the findings of the data based on the Empowerment Evaluation goal statements using the qualitative data analysis software and then reviewing each goal as an entire section. Each goal is thoroughly discussed in relation to outcomes and implications surrounding the primary research questions. The goals were as follows:

1. To continue to grow as a community/family of writers
2. To become better writers
3. To learn how to give/take/use feedback and critique
4. To discover the strengths and weaknesses of technology as a learning medium
5. To develop an environment where creative freedom can flourish
6. To discover more about ourselves through our own eyes and others

COMMUNITY

“Nature is an infinite sphere of which the center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere.” Blaise Pascal

Goal Statement: To continue to grow as a community/family of writers/ 6.84-8.8

Sub-questions: What is a learning community? How do we strengthen our community?

The growth of 2.4 on the empowerment scale was the largest rating gain. Students expressed a felt sense of the group as a “family” of writers. Their responses to the inquiry questions were varied, frank, and highly interesting, for their insight and for the underlying values which they illustrated. While they may not represent a complete, fully enclosed definition of “learning communities,” nonetheless the ideas have considerable value and are worth closer

examination if we seek to understand what the online learning community of the future must be, if it is to succeed. I have summarized those replies and appended quotes from the participants where appropriate .

Community is organic and group specific, growing and evolving as a whole while core characteristics remain constant in the flux.

It should go without saying that true communities are dynamic, not static, entities. Perhaps the greatest failure of the traditional pedagogy is its inability to accommodate the vital, organic nature of a true learning community. By confining participants into pre-arranged groups and enforcing participation in a range of topics over which the students have no control, traditional schools quite literally force their students into forming their own sub-communities, unrelated to the process of learning. The existence of these sub-communities or cliques — punks, Goths, jocks, nerds, etc — has the potential to be highly disruptive, even dangerous, due to concomitant alienation and antagonism. In other words, the rigid structure of the traditional pedagogy undermines itself, because students are not simple, crisply defined subjects to be filed and forced into learning groups and content without any sense of ownership in the process.

In the highly communicative, wholly voluntary online learning community, able to adapt to the needs of a wide range of participants, such tensions are almost irrelevant. One participant commented:

I don't think there is a specific definition of a learning community. I think every classroom where your purpose is to learn is going to be a community since there are other people involved. We are able to express what our values, beliefs, ideas, and viewpoints are and we all accept each other for them. We are a diverse group of people with one common interest-writing. We've created an environment where we

can learn and be ourselves at the same time, and I think that is essential.

Trust of other members necessarily produces a sense of community.

No definition of community could be considered complete or effective without addressing the issue of trust. A degree of mutual trust may even be considered the defining characteristic of all communities, as it permits members to interact and rely upon one another, so that real avenues of communication and exploration can be opened. Without the usual adolescent hierarchies of class and appearance, an online community can offer a degree of trust which the conventional school paradigm can only look upon, and envy. One student commented:

The thing that sticks out most in my mind is the people I've met and the acceptance I've found here. I've made many wonderful friends who accept and love me as I am, and who will also gladly critique anything I write. I've found an outlet for pent up feelings and emotions, a place to discuss, debate and learn about life and myself.

Another adds:

I think that the whole critical process is enhanced by trust. It's not that you expect back-patting from everyone else, but that you know they will approach anything you post with some respect, instead of just aiming to tear it to pieces. It's much easier to accept true criticism from someone you know and trust than it is from a near stranger. The more you post, the more criticism you receive, the more trust builds, and the more comfortable you feel about expressing yourself in such a public way. I'm much more relaxed about posting very personal thoughts and ideas than I was — or than I imagined I could be — when I first joined.

There is a balance and necessary dialectic between freedom and structure.

There is no question but that the excessively rigorous rule-structure of conventional classes discourages many students, and alienates them from the learning process by destroying the

simple joy of learning. Conversely, some form of structure appears to be necessary for the mental comfort of most students, by providing a motivational framework, a visible set of practices to emulate, or goals to be achieved. The difficulty lies in finding a balance between these two opposing forces, one that will at once encourage students while leaving them the greatest possible freedom to explore and express themselves. Within the virtual classrooms of the creative writing learning community, a high degree of success was achieved in finding that particular balance. Student comments included:

"It is a place that is open, free, and easy to share one's thoughts and ideas. It is structured, but not too much, so that the students and teachers have space to be themselves and not have to conform."

"A learning community is one in which people can learn from and about one another and no one should be afraid to ask questions. The environment should be one of relaxation with nothing rushed or hurried about it."

Yet another adds: "A learning community is one in which everyone can freely voice their own opinions without offending others."

And another student contributes an astute comment: "We can't have complete freedom except within ourselves. Feeling a lack of freedom comes through fear of disclosure."

For this group, interest in creative writing offered the core for community.

Readers and writers in regular school culture are often ostracized, sitting quietly with books and paper in the back of the room. Online interactions allow students to have an authentic audience for their expression. And, as we are all co-learners, students potentially receive dozens of responses to a single piece of writing. Normally shy students, reticent about sharing their work with others, find a place to voice and to refine their art. One student commented:

The biggest thing about this class is the writings. That is what I will remember most. I have printed out so many pieces from different folders to hang in my bedroom and on my locker. I have poems in my folders at school and on the mirror in my bathroom. I have learned through the experiences and expressions of others.

The learning community is self-determining.

Participants expressed a sense of being co-learners. Often when I would sign on, I would find that several students had already responded to a question posed. In developing such a community, it is apparent that at the outset, while the students are still uncertain about their new environment, facilitators guide and mentor the process of online communications. Then, as students take ownership, the line between teachers and students fades.

For example, when several students began cluttering the forums with chattering, the group asked these students to create their own item for socializing. "Kat and Red's Playhouse" opened the next day as a space reserved for humor and frivolity. Students demonstrated their ability to self-monitor their community, establish communication guidelines, and to share leadership as co-facilitators of the learning process.

As we were joined by university teachers-in-training, the high school students had become sufficiently confident and proficient to run the face-to-face orientation and then host the online interactions — quite literally, students were teaching the teachers. It had become "our" program, crafted, designed and re-envisioned as we progressed. One student reflected: "A learning community is where everyone learns from the collective opinions and insights of everyone else. Gifts of diversity and tolerance will make us all better people regardless of what we end up doing with our lives."

The online community fostered an exploration self and was highly social in nature in

an environment which prompted risk-taking.

Participation in an online community is dependent upon communication. If one does not write, one is invisible. There is no equivalent of the silent student at the back of the classroom, simply because such a student is completely non-existent within the framework of the on-line community. Where students are reluctant to participate, it is the task of the facilitator to engage with them, and draw them out until they are equal co-learners within the community. As a matter of natural progression, when the students become proficient and comfortable in the medium, they begin to take over this role of the “official” facilitator as well. The low-risk environment online makes it easier for this natural progression to occur, resulting in a very relaxed, socially comfortable community capable of asking difficult questions of its participants without fear of exposure or derision. As one student stated:

I've been at this for about a month now. If we were sitting next to each other in an uptight classroom, our relationships would be so different. We'd say, 'Hey, what's goin' on? Nothin. Whadja do this weekend? Not much.' Here in divine aloneness and privacy we write our thoughts on God, soul-searching poetry, politics, and all else in the universe. We seriously write. The awkwardness of rejection -fear is all but eliminated, at least for me.

Others added:

"A learning community is like a social community; everyone has to be comfortable. In order to achieve togetherness in a community, a common bond must be achieved."

"A learning community is one in which everyone uses the ideas and thoughts of others to grow as a person themselves."

The thing I love most about this class is the family, the community. I have found through this class to be open and to trust myself. Before this class, I had never written of my own accord. This class inspired me, these people were inspiration, and these wires provided the security I needed to branch out and begin writing. I have since discovered more of myself, my courage and individuality.

The kind of community I want? Basically, one like where I live which epitomizes the small-town ideal. Everyone is on a first-name basis, and though we have that, the basis MEANS something. We are on a first-name basis because we know and trust one another. I want a community of trust and friendship, with no tension or conflict (except of interest).

The very act of bringing students to participate in discovering a viable definition of “community” stimulated the development of that community amongst them, as an emergent property of shared, voluntary activity. The open-ended questions without clear-cut, didactic answers served to create a curriculum and a community based on authentic inquiry. The collective defining of terms and ideologies served to enhance the feeling of online community, of a shared knowledge base. It allowed us to move forward more intentionally as a learning community.

Through this online process of questioning, dialoguing, responding and refining, the students collectively defined a “learning community” over a period of two months:

"Communities bond through common interests and shared levels of participation. A learning community builds trust through respect for multiple perspectives in exploring diverse ideas, opinions and insights, which creates a sense of belonging. Passionate inquiry

and in-depth searching fuel dialogues. This provides a comfort level where people feel encouraged to take risks as learners."

After the online discussion naturally slowed in participation, students stated they felt they had explored them to their full extent. By questioning their ideas further, we were able to develop a deeper understanding of our community and its possibilities. Besides deciding on goals for the year, the students also reflected on ways to challenge those goals. They went on to explore not just what made our class a "community," but how we were affected by one another through interrelationship online. I summarized the key elements of the discussion, refining and distilling the data as we progressed. Now having a workable definition of "learning community" which satisfied all participants, I asked those questions which naturally followed:

1) "What kind of community do we want to create?"

2) "How do we get there?"

What follows is a verbatim transcript from the online archives to give the reader a sense of online dialogue, and at least a limited insight into the nature of the interactive online process.

Facilitator: Suggestions were made to meet more often face to face (ftf). I think this could be done in small groups, as happens often now, but that it should be largely student organized and facilitated, though I might be enticed to join you. Students have discussed possible meetings for collaborative writing and sharing. This also could happen with groups who decide to read a novel together, a combination discussion both online and ftf perhaps? Any comments on these possibilities, or other suggestions for meeting? Those who aren't a regular part of our community, what do you think contributes to this uneven participation level? How do we address this issue?

02-MAR-97 23:41 Katie Givens

An issue is being addressed here that has seemed most relevant to me this entire class, and even a source of guilt and shame. Participation of those who are sporadically involved and not "hard-core."

This class has offered me so much in the areas of technology, community, creative growth, and writing forum/showcase. I feel like I've gobbled up about 80% of these opportunities, and the juice is still dripping off my chin. Several times over the course of this class, I've struggled with feeling like I could never put enough time into this class; certainly not as much as is deserved. Sometimes my priorities were screwed up, most times I was truly overloaded. But who isn't?

Sometimes I think more effort should be made (by other students) to contact others for face-to-face (ftf) gatherings and social events. But then, isn't it my own stupid fault if I'm not on-line when things are announced? When I found out about a group of you touring Washington Post, I nearly turned green with envy. But again this is about MY choices, isn't it? I sincerely hope that I will be considered one of the students who loves participating in and supporting this program, if not being a "hard-core" participant.

04-MAR-97 13:59 Ginny Little Facilitator:

One of the plusses of a program like this is that it allows for ebb and flow. You are one of the core participants in my view, but unlike having to be in "class" everyday, this medium allows us to attend to shifting priorities, and attend to life events when needed, or to be away for a period of time and then reconnect. It is those who have never really entered our community and the loss for us and them that I lament and wonder how to eradicate.

I thought of you and your apology for being non-present for a time, and then Tony's

questioning about the "core gatherers," and how I viewed that, although I do want to clarify it was a student who coined that phrase, not myself. I was reading last night in a book called Necessary Wisdom about systems theory. There is a quote by Georgia O'Keefe: "Still-in a way- nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small-and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time. In our fast food rush up the ladder of achievement, we forget the importance of taking time." The renewal available to us requires remembering the transformative power of pauses and latencies.

The author suggests we take a moment to reflect on the role such things as listening and silences play in our lives and on the place of mystery and the timeless for us. He continues: "Learning to stay more in touch with rightness of time-when to sleep, when to awaken, when to be alone, when to be with others-offers one of the most reliable antidotes to the ravages of 'stress' that so mark our time"(Johnston, Charles, 1991, p.196).

I thought of all of you when I read this again last night and how you are all on such treadmills in your life. It is important to pause, to reflect, to move between cycles of action and reflection, to engage and disengage when necessary. I hope you all know that the space is here for accommodating the natural ebbs and flows of creativity and of our lives.

As a result of this, and many similar exchanges between students and facilitators, we eventually outlined practices which we felt would enhance the quality of the learning community overall. The suggestions agreed on by participants included:

1. More face to face meetings.

To improve and deepen their sense of community, students agreed that more face-to-face gatherings would promote a greater sense of connectivity. As their online teachers lived in San Diego, Washington, D.C., and even in Australia, and some students had other commitments to

jobs or sports activities, they decided that these "meetings" should be self-organized and non-mandatory. Students created an item for planning meetings to write poetry at local coffeehouses, to celebrate birthdays and holidays at students' homes, to share sports events schedules, to announce author readings, and more.

It is interesting to consider this response in contrast to statements made by practically all participants regarding the degree of freedom, trust, and comfort offered by an online forum. There is still a felt need for genuine face-to-face human interaction-hugs, eye contact, brainstorming sessions, audible laughter, physical presence. It seems extremely unlikely that a purely virtual community will ever fulfill the need for simple social contact and shared experience that is so strong in all human beings. We have found that the best learning community is one that combines real and virtual exchange as well as combinations of modalities, ie. Small group or full group meetings, use of chat, email and boards, essentially using all available options to suit particular community communication and connection needs.

2. Alternating responses and establishing rotating peer partners seemed to be a key to strengthening community.

As in real world communities, participants often fall into habitual patterns of behavior. Certain students interact more easily than others. Friendships and alliances form, which can lead to a degree of polarization within the online community. Recognizing this, the facilitators and students agreed to a few simple practices that extended the range of each participant's regular contacts within the community.

One student reported:

Having the class evaluate a new person's writing each week is really good to build the feeling of community. In the beginning, there were only certain people's writings that I would read,

and I didn't get to meet and somewhat understand the other writers that I didn't bother to read.

When I was forced to read the writings of others, I felt like I became more of the community.

3. Humor adds levity and fun to the process and also provides insight.

By virtue of encouraging interaction as equals, and by promoting clear, “natural” communication on topics of direct interest and importance to the students, interactive online learning becomes naturally infused with play. Unlike the traditional classroom, this degree of play poses no threat whatsoever to the authority of facilitators, nor to the implementation of the curriculum.

The lack of space for “play” in the traditional pedagogy is deeply disturbing. All mammal species engage in some form of “play” during their development, and this play represents the major learning mode that permits the development of adult behaviors. Young wolves play at hunting and fighting. Young antelope play at running and evasion. Young children role-play adult occupations. By strictly differentiating “play” from “study,” the conventional classroom creates an environment that is actively and overtly hostile to the true, natural learning processes of children, which are genetically linked to concepts of play, inquiry and exploration.

For me, one of the joys of teaching online is that I am guaranteed to laugh out loud each day in response to postings of participants-their satire, parody, irony, simple sarcasm, outright joking. Even bizarre discussion items such as “Life at the Bottom of a Soup Bowl” or “How to Eat Bugs and Like It” celebrate the social and more light-hearted connection of community.

4. Trust deepens with time and through voluntary personal disclosure.

We had several critical incidents in our community that helped to strengthen our bonds through conflict resolution and creative problem solving. More important than the source of these struggles is the way in which a community learns to navigate the challenges. We had one

student who was suicidal. Another fabricated a newborn child, later posting the child had died of SIDS. Yet another student seemed bent on continually disrupting the forum with aggressive or rude comments.

As an experienced educator, I knew these adolescents were seeking attention, help, or a way to become something they did not believe themselves to be, to essentially draw some kind of personal power. I asked students online: “Have any of you ever pretended to be something you’re not? Have you ever wanted to be the center of attention?” This led the discussions from a place of anger to a place of compassion. Instead of throwing a student out of the program for breach of trust, we provided a place of safety for all to come to new understandings of human dynamics and acceptance of human fallibility.

In cyberspace, there are few, if any, sanctions which can be imposed, short of wholly exiling persons from further participation. One cannot issue fines, jail terms, take away privileges, or enforce after-class detention. Gentle chastising, designed to alert an errant participant to the nature of their undesirable behavior is possible — but if the goodwill of the participant is lost, the value of their participation is also lost.

The job of the facilitator in any classroom is to model appropriate response. In our forum, this was achieved by openly addressing issues and individuals in respectful discussions. Rather than holding tightly to ideas and beliefs, confronting others and engaging in debates that inevitably resemble a ping-pong game with no winner, participants learned to place thoughtful comments into the forums as if placing a bowl in the center of the table to be filled with various fruits of different color, taste, texture.

Disciplinary actions were seldom needed; however, the teacher established a protocol of the following: First, the teacher emails the student in private about the nature of the problem to open

communications for possible resolution. Teachers and students would gently admonish others online in the forums when communications were deemed inappropriate or disruptive. Modeling and mentoring of online communications skills by teachers and responsible students was the most effective approach to behavior management.

In more severe instances, such as when a student began overtly and aggressively discussing suicide, after talking with the student, parents or guardians were notified, school officials were contacted by phone and subsequently in person, and appropriate social service agencies were also notified. Discussions online included most community participants and were closely monitored for respectful exchanges and productive dialogue. As I found in the regular school classroom, one student's difficulties has an effect on the rest of the learning community and may mirror other students' concerns as well. Care was taken to steer discussions away from individuals and towards general values, conflict resolution, and positive problem solving abilities.

Parker Palmer, in his book, Courage to Teach (1999), explains:

As we try to understand the subject in the community of trust, we enter into complex patterns of communication-sharing observations and interpretations, complementing each other, torn by conflict in this moment and joined by consensus in the next. The community of truth, far from being linear and static and hierarchical, is circular, interactive and dynamic. Conflict is the dynamic by which we test ideas in the open, in a communal effort to stretch each other and make better sense of the world (p. 103).

5. We connect through our common interests and simultaneously learn to accept differences.

The student-organized Cafe of the Arts, resembling a village square where people gather to laugh, talk and debate, became the center for community formation. "Those who focus on the benefits to be gained from a networked writing classroom generally stress the interactive learning this arrangement can provide. A networked writing classroom enhances the social, collaborative atmosphere" (Gerrard,1989; Sudo,1985; Weiss, 1989; In Hawisher & Selfe, 1991, p. 143). Students created items on religion, writing in foreign languages, physics and music theory, sharing of favorite quotations and books, worldviews and philosophy, literature circles, and more.

In one particular online Café item, "Is there a God?" started early in the program and continuing to the end of the year, students explored their beliefs on the divine mystery of the unknown with perspectives ranging from Christian Fundamentalism to resolute atheism. The disparity of viewpoints caused some initial discomfort, but eventually students relinquished ownership of these ideas as they learned to honor diversity. By the end of the year, it was commonplace to see comments such as: "Gee, I never thought about it like that." Or, "I may not agree with you, but.." Students later discussed how this first item allowed them to become closer as a community by accepting each other's differences.

These wide-ranging dialogues, for which there is little time in the regular fifty-minute classroom focused solely on mandated curricula, allowed students to discover, articulate, and question their beliefs and values. Students uncovered their underlying assumptions, and as writers, began composing reality. Furthermore, without the ever-present threat of retaliation — either from peers, or formal authority, students felt much more confident about expressing genuine personal opinions, and giving equal consideration to opinions offered by others.

6. We provide a caring support system for community members during difficult

times, creating a bond between us.

As grandparents died, couples broke up, kids got in first car accidents, students expressed their fears, hopes and dreams. The online community provided a place to voice and cry out for help in difficult times. All members felt they belonged and were valued. It is possible to disclose online without the fear-provoking real-world process of standing up in front of a group, of having to watch the instantaneous reactions of others. In the relatively slow, thoroughly considered world of the online forum, participants learned to apply genuine skills of tact and empathy, which created a very powerful community-wide bond.

7. There is a sense of honesty and openness about our community.

We have weathered some difficult times and as a result have moved past being "polite," and a pseudo sense of community, to a true sense of community where each feels free to express their beliefs and feelings in respectful but honest ways. Having the time to pause and reflect about a post, students looked past their instantaneous "gut responses" and their posts became either warmly supportive, or non-threateningly inquiring.

Knowing that the audience to whom one intends to communicate consists of supportive equals, of people who are prepared to ask for clarification and consider what they don't understand instead of reflexively condemning, it becomes far easier to achieve honest, open communication.

8. We have begun to move outside our own community towards interacting with and impacting the lives of others with our writing and sharing about our program.

During the second year of the program, students wrote a poetic drama based on the lives of people in the margins of the world called "We are the Poets" which they presented at the Pedagogy of the Oppressed conference, as well as for local venues. This drama is currently being

published as a chapter in a book titled Language, Literacy and Social Justice, (Laurence Erlbaum, in press, edited by Sonia Nieto). All students published in either online or through more conventional literary outlets. Several did internships in Washington D.C. at our server company, Caucus Systems, who hosted our online campus. Several more are now webmasters for universities or work for local and national technology companies. A significant number won cash awards for their writing through our local arts council. Students learned that their voices and talents had the power to impact others and to enact change in the world. Connections between businesses, arts, education and community continue to expand.

So, how will learning communities be characterized in the Information Age? They will combine current learning environments, schools, organizations, real time communities with virtual extensions. Information is literally at the learner's fingertips. What is needed are new ways of thinking about teaching learners what to do with all this overload of information, how to be discerning readers, critical thinkers, and how to create knowledge rather than just absorb it. And a new global worldview is emerging as a result of the Internet collapsing former boundaries. This sets the stage for future collaborative learning communities that will encourage learners to relinquish tightly held cultural perspectives and learning approaches. Learning communities of the future necessitate new ways of thinking about how we learn, live, work and play, and with whom.

For the moment, anyway, there are still some powerful limiting factors in the development of virtual communities, which must be overcome before we can begin to reap the true benefits of a possible transformation in educational paradigm. Of paramount concern are issues of equity of access. In the virtual world, affluence and computer literacy are the first and most important elements of community building. It is nearly impossible for a person who does not have access to

and an understanding of a reliable computer service of their own to join such a community.

Unless this matter is quickly addressed, we run the risk of creating a new underclass of information-poor citizens, unable to take effective part in the direction of society.

Creative Literacy

“Any medium powerful enough to extend man’s reach is powerful enough to topple his world. To get the medium’s magic to work for one’s aims rather than against them is to attain literacy” (Kay, Alan 1999. In Zen and the Art of the Computer, p.179).

Two inter-related goal statements:

To become better writers / 7.52-8.8

To learn how to give/take/use feedback and critique /6.16-7.2

Sub-questions:

Students explored three questions surrounding these two inter-related goal statements:

What is creative writing?

What makes a piece of writing “good?”

What are ways to respond to writing?

For this group, interest in creative writing offered the core for community.

Online interactions allow students to connect with other like-minded writers and to have an authentic audience for their expression. Students receive dozens of responses to a single piece of writing. Normally shy students, reticent about sharing their work with others, find a place to voice and to refine their art. One student reported:

The biggest thing about this class is the writings. That is what I will remember most. I have printed out so many pieces from different folders to hang in my bedroom and on my locker. I have poems in my folders at school and on the mirror in my bathroom. I have learned through the experiences and expressions of others.

And yet another:

We go about doing things in an ever constructive manner (staying focused on the intent of your writing piece, make sure you take everyone's comments into the picture and follow through on suggestions) This way, we learn the ways of creativity and quality writing.

Since improving writing was one of the students' primary goals, I posed the question:

What is creative writing?

Students defined and characterized their expressive art in the following ways:

Creative writing is the easy and natural expression, and the most difficult chore. It can flow from us like water, or bead in small droplets from hours of labor. It is about abstract ideas or unreal people, and it is the mirror of our Selves. Creative writing is recording the colors, faces, events and feelings inside of me. It is converting ideas into words, taming the flames, and molding the clay into forms palpable on paper.

"Creative writing not only creates a great work but it creates the person who wrote it."

If everyone had their own language of being and their own inner world, creative writing would be the great translator; a bridge that links us to each other. Creative writing is freedom made literal.

To create literally means to cause to exist or bring into being. You are bringing an idea or image into being where there was emptiness before. You are causing a thought to exist for others, where it lived in your mind alone.

These student definitions created a shared meaning base to apply to their work and growth as writers. The students expressed an understanding of writing process as a search for Self, as a window within, and as a bridge to the human spirit of others. At the end of each year, the students compiled a book of their favorite works. Chapter themes included: Worldviews, Family, Love and Relationships, responses to Writing Invitations, works on Being a Writer, and Looking Inside-out. As writers they had ventured into composing and re-creating their visions of reality and their sense of Self; writing became a process of discovery and the central focus of our community.

The following introductory poem from the students' drama, "We are the Poets," demonstrates their introspection about who they are as writers. The students' full poetic drama was first presented for The Pedagogy and Theater of the Oppressed conference in Omaha, Nebraska, March, 1998 by students from the Creative Writers on the Net class. They then presented the performance twice more at the request of conference organizers, once following Donaldo Macedo, featured keynote speaker.

The first introductory piece, "We are the Poets", is an example of Linked Verse, a form of Korean poetry. Each of us posted stanzas online over a period of a month. One of the students then edited the piece into a single poem.

We are the Poets: collective writing edited by Molly McDonald

(Stage direction: Players all stand in varying heights and position, turning toward audience as they recite their stanza and returning to position upon completion.)

We are the poets,
making dreams of sandcastles and skipping stones,
worn carpets and green Converse All-Stars,
the feel of yellow,
omnipotence,
the Everyday.

We paint broad strokes on a canvas,

of colors forgotten in the familiar comfort experienced by most,
of lemonade,
blue bowls,
and purple swirlings in our stomachs,
of snapshots freezing moments in time.

We are the poets,
we set no absolute direction for the reader's journey,
shape no destiny for the path they choose to walk-
we are simply shaping and molding a fluid substance,
not whittling away at stone.

We are the poets,
embodying the strength of words.
Our empowerment of verbs
enables you to command your thoughts-
obey, oppress, rejoice, embarrass, seduce.
Our manipulation of nouns
authorizes your tendency to label-
slut, saint, mother, addict, jerk.
Our reinforcement of adjectives
gives you the freedom to judge-
ugly, skinny, catholic, feminine, racist.
Our pre-meditated deposits of conjunctions
plant seeds of doubt in your mind-
but...or...yet...

Do we use these words too carelessly, too easily,
manipulating them to our whims?
Do we force only our own truth?

We are the poets,
learning to capture words, and tame them,
possessing a clarity of thought,
a clarity of vision,
that transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

We discover complexity in the depths of normality-
the plushness of a blanket,
pearls released from the mouth of a fish,
the glow of a night-light.

We are the poets-
they that create worlds,
destroy universes,
rebuild cosmos,

just to gain understanding,
just to add light to a dark room,
dullness to a bright one.

World and life intermingle with our ink blottings
of late-night-coffee seances,
putting forth an effervescent glow-
the light of freedom, justice, equality, faith,
a light casting a new reflection on the souls of others.

We indulge them with color, energy, and life,
only to set them free in the meticulous world
of shadow and light,
giving them space to wander, explore, discover.
We are the poets.
We live vicariously through characters
with wild hair,
who never wear underwear,
and chain smoke.
Who laugh at their own jokes,
use the backs of their sleeves to wipe their noses,
who are passionate about Tuesdays.
We are the poets.

As virtual communities are currently largely text-based, the ideal for literacy education, those who possess superior skills in written English find themselves in very real position of advantage and influence in the text based online medium. By necessity, the students in the online classroom read and write every day. Students are able to write at will for extended amounts of time on their own schedules, write about topics of personal importance to them surrounding real life issues and struggles, are a multi-aged community of learners, and were self-motivated to explore varying genres.

Each week students composed and responded to writing invitations or prompts in addition to critiquing the work of their peers. An example of a writing prompt is: “Write a poem about color. Use color in each line. You may want to combine with textural words. Become a color.”

Every two weeks we would post a list of critique partners to which the students were required to do an in-depth response. In addition, students voluntarily responded to others in the forum, though sometimes not as detailed as for their peer partners. This balanced reading and response by participants who noted early on that they tended to read mostly the works of people they knew or whose writing they personally favored.

Students quickly realized the powerful connections between the writer and the reader. Multiple voluntary peer readers provided for a range of interpretation and critique. These responses conveyed to the writer how their intended meaning was received by numerous readers, often prompting further revision. As critique became more detailed and students sought ways to improve, I found many opportunities for teachable moments which addressed the conventions of written language. We came to know the value of many-to-many communications, and the importance of collaborative and cooperative learning, through responses from an authentic audience.

Many students commented that "a good piece of writing will make the reader think." One student reflected: "Reading others' writing daily, picking out what worked and what didn't, has helped me in becoming conscious to the needs of my own writing."

As we began our interactions by basing the curriculum on inquiry, questions extended naturally from the students' learning process. The text-based communications accentuated how readers and writers construct meaning and prompted students to refine their writing and communication skills. Students also read four required books--two on writing process and two relating to their writing project interests.

Students experienced varied interpretations to their work prompting revision to clarify their originally intended meaning as the author. However, one student noted, and I also observed in

the first year, that students rarely took time to revise their writing. I attributed this to the students taking mental note through these comments as to what worked in their writing, and what didn't. The attitude toward revision shifted fairly dramatically during the second year when it became clear to the students that the true work of writing is in the revision process. In real life, we rarely find reason to revise our writing, but having people respond to our writing and a community focus on publication encouraged us to refine our work. We wrote because we are writers, and we worked to improve our creative, communicative and expressive talents. Students often realized that not all writing is for polishing and learned to select their "best" work for refining and submitting for publications and awards.

The summary of the discussion in response to "What makes a piece of writing good?" included the following:

- ◆ A good piece of writing speaks to the familiar in a new way and allows the reader to vicariously experience the writer's point of view.
- ◆ A good piece of writing is imaginative and makes use of metaphor and description which creates a visual and sensory touchstone so the reader feels as if they are "there."
- ◆ A good piece of writing doesn't tell but rather shows. Instead of the writer stating, "The girl was sad," saying, "She turned her head away from her parents so they wouldn't see her tears."
- ◆ A good piece of writing evokes emotion, be it sadness, joy, incredulity, a sense of mystery or wonder, anger, whatever.
- ◆ A good piece of writing varies sentence structure so that the reader doesn't become bored with things like "she said, she did, she walked, she wondered." More complex structures and varying structures tend to make the writing more lively and add depth of thought.

- ◆ A good piece of writing conveys a central theme or message that may vary between readers interpretations and yet is recognizable as the point of the piece.
- ◆ A good piece of writing triggers a sense of wanting to share it with others, “check THIS out!” It’s quotable and unique.
- ◆ A good piece of writing is one which makes meaning of an often confusing world, or speaks to injustice, or human experience, i.e. Love, cruelty, culture, society, inter-relationship, etc.
- ◆ A good piece of writing speaks from an authenticity, the writer’s experience and interpretation without use of trite expressions such like “as blue as the sky.”
- ◆ A good piece of writing is one which makes you think after it is finished. Usually it is a piece which has to be read more than once to glean all the levels of meaning.
- ◆ A good piece of writing creates patterns that connect ideas in new ways for the reader, new meaning frames or allows a window to life experiences.
- ◆ A good piece of writing keeps the reader’s interest.
- ◆ A good piece of writing paints images with words.
- ◆ A good piece of writing depends on the style, genre and purpose for writing. Good writing depends on audience.
- ◆ Something is creatively written when it surprises the reader.
- ◆ A good piece of writing stretches the reader’s worldview.
- ◆ A good piece of writing is interesting and meaningful to many readers.

One student commented:

When the writer extracts a piece of herself and smears it on the paper in a shape that tells the world something of her life, her people, her experiences, herself, it is a good piece of writing.

When a piece of writing is good, it touches something true, .the reader or writer hears a bell,

ding, ding, go off inside themselves that says, ‘Hey, I feel this. I’ve felt this. I know this!’ Not everyone may feel the same about a piece of writing, thus not everyone will think the same piece ‘good.’

After students had discovered what elements they believed made a piece of writing “good,” they used this group knowledge to develop an evaluation form to guide their in-depth peer partner critiques:

Clarity: Is the point of the piece clear?

Cohesion: Can you follow the train of thought? Does it make sense? Does it have beginning, middle, and end? Do you feel a sense of closure to the piece?

Tone: Does the tone and use of language match the message? What is the tone? What emotions are evoked?

Mechanics: spelling, punctuation, sentence structures, line breaks?

Use of literary devices: imagery, metaphor, simile, description, believable dialogue, symbolism?

Imaginative/Creative: Is the piece original? Does it demonstrate trying new forms?

Interest: Does it hold the reader's interest? how and why?

Theme: Is the theme or message clear and is it worthwhile?

Publishable: Is this a piece you would recommend for inclusion in our collective works?

Revision: What suggestions might you offer for revision?
What lines are best? Worst? Why?

Each week students were paired with two other students to do an “in-depth” critique and used this self-constructed format to guide their commentaries. This discussion allowed for the students to discover what it is they valued about a piece of “good” writing, and not surprisingly, they touched on most of the more important writing conventions and elements. I subsequently shared

with them a rubric created by a textbook company delineated a similar kind of evaluative process. If I had given this to them first however, they would not have seen the inherent value. It would have come from outside their process, rather than from a need to know to improve their ability to work with each other.

Students summarized suggestions for advancing their ability to critique each other's work as follows:

We should compare our writing over time (this is the purpose of portfolios) Rereading our own work helps us to see ourselves differently over time. To learn about the future, look to the past.

We should attend to critiques offered and apply what we learn from them. Read critiques with an open mind. If we bond with our critics, step outside our work, it helps us to see through another's eyes and grow. Positive feedback helps us to develop confidence in who we are as writers. Critique both what's good and not so great about a piece. Balance responses. Develop attitude that critique is positive not negative and leads to growth.

The best way to respond to writing is to be honest. No one likes to be put down, but it may also be the only way a person will become better. If someone's work really reeks and you tell them you like it, when in fact you don't, that person may never become the person he or she dreams of becoming. Whether it be a dancer, architect or writer, they need to be told what they do well and what they don't. Criticism spurs growth.

Yet another student summarized comments:

- Alternate responses to peer writing partners.
- Take one piece and revise it for publication submission. Show work in progress. This connects to showing a piece in progress as well. (With struggle and work comes growth)
- Demonstrate how we have applied specific feedback to pieces of our work. Critique your own work. Learn to appreciate our own writing.
- Explore different genres. Do more reading and sharing of authors' works attending to styles of writing and what's effective. Idea: thematic units on say poetry, fiction, creating dialogue, setting, plot, theme, etc., unit on critique, unit on playwriting?
- We are moving beyond surface critiques to longer, more thoughtful responses. Be specific in comments attending to literary conventions. Respond from both your head and your soul to another's work.
- It is essential to reflect before responding thoughtfully to a writer's work.
- To attend more to writing and writing process, to attend with more rigor to writing and to have less "chatting." More constructive writing and reading time online.

Very early in the course, one student posted a comment to me online stating: "Ginny, I haven't seen any of YOUR creative writing yet!" That same day I created my own personal online journal and began to write for creative purposes for the first time in many years. I continue to do so on a daily basis, some four years later. At this juncture we became co-learners in the truest sense of the word. Other visiting authors express a similar experience of finding inspiration through the prolific writing and subsequent critiques of the younger students' work. Sharing and critiquing our own work and having students take on this role benefited all of us in the writing and communication process.

In my opinion, one of the most influential improvements in critique came from visiting author, Dirk Flinthart. As he is a full time writer and accustomed to attending to the ways a piece of writing metamorphizes, his expertise allowed for a much richer response to students' work.

As participants engaged from varying cultures and countries, we were able to practice secondary languages in authentic communications with native speakers. Those with limited English proficiency, however, are currently at a severe disadvantage in the structures of on-line communications. This may be somewhat ameliorated in the future with the advance of multi-media technologies.

In addition to the Empowerment Evaluation data for this goal, I administered a pre and post writing sample based on the Michigan High School Proficiency Test. This further verified the growth of the students as writers on a standardized and accepted scale, especially important in convincing administrators of the viability of the program, which invariably comes into question when pioneering new teaching methods which challenge the traditional school pedagogy. The results of this measure are fully discussed in the preliminary quantitative findings.

Equally important are the students' own perceptions of their writing abilities as one of their empowerment goals was to improve as writers. Survey data demonstrated that the students believed they had grown as people and as writers. The highest student rating in a formal survey was course content at 4.9 out of 5 possible points.

The highest post student rating for the Empowerment Evaluation data was "environment where creative freedom could flourish at 9.3" The next highest ratings were for "growth as writers" and for "developing learning community online" at a mean of 8.8. To have environment, growth as writers and learning community as the three highest strands indicates the focus of the

program on course content, writing, and learning environment. The lowest rating was for using/giving/taking critique. Students continuing into the third year continue to look for ways to improve and refine their ways of responding to each other in constructive and helpful ways. As they learn more about the elements of style in writing, their skills in critiquing continues to improve from my observation. Students are increasingly attentive to multiple revisions and on revision as the foundation of writing craft.

There is a substantial need to document how the use of interactive technologies in the teaching of writing impacts student proficiency levels. Indeed, there also seems to be a need for understanding the shift needed in exploring assessment approaches in the new writing classroom which integrates technology as an interactive medium. The data from this research project contributes to the field in just such a way. The results are encouraging.

Technology as a Learning Medium

Many people mistakenly think of the Internet as a destination but, like Zen, it is merely a pathway. As the Zen masters say, 'Don't ask where the path is. You're on it.' In every step and moment, where you go is up to you. We can choose to read the news from across the country, chitchat with a group of far flung strangers, research the minutiae of a government report, go to where our curiosity leads. Never has so much information or such a vast community been available without one having to leave home. Yet all of that means nothing if we fail to develop the basic qualities of wisdom, responsibility and trustworthiness. (Sudo, Philip Toshio, 1998, p. 179).

Goal Statement: To explore technology as a learning medium: 6.75-8.3

Subquestions: How is learning online different from face-to-face?

What are the strengths and complementary drawbacks?

In our program, students initially rated "technology as a learning medium" as 6.8 out of ten and the final rating was 7.7. Students qualified the small percentage gain by stating the more they learned, the more they realized what they didn't know and wanted to learn. A majority of the participants in this study had never accessed the Internet prior to this program. Students had

lengthy discussions about online learning in the homeroom and the café. Those points are summarized with possible synergistic solutions as follows:

The online medium collapses former boundaries.

Teachers, students and other artists are able to connect from global locations and can access libraries and vast informational and people resources via the Internet. Participants have the freedom to work on their own schedules for as long as they wish. We are also free to work without usual classroom distractions (behavior problems, bells, students talking out of turn, scheduled class times, etc.) giving us artistic license, time to pause and reflect before responding, and the ability to revise in response to feedback.

My co-teacher, Launz Burch, accesses from Australia, a fifteen hour time difference. Students are often on at 2 a.m. when Launz is just getting his first cup of tea. I like to work online early in the morning when my energy levels are highest. Students are typically online late at night due to busy school, work, extra-curricular activities and personal interests. The asynchronous nature of the interactive communications software allows for a threaded dialogue which gives name, date, and time of post. Students who are offline for a few days are able to review all archived classroom communications, unlike students who are absent from regular classrooms, miss the day's interactions, and can only complete "make-up work."

Participation levels vary.

Everyday life factors such as illness, personal life challenges, motivation to write, interest in current online discussions and other variables affect ongoing involvement. However, the online environment allows for very accurate observation of student participation, which is not always possible in a crowded classroom situation. While it may seem intuitively more difficult to involve and motivate students in an online class, close examination shows that the reverse is

actually true. There may be more options open to a classroom teacher who wants to involve and motivate a particular student, in the sense that the physical and personnel resources of the school are at hand — audiovisual aids, alternative classes, special programs — but the more effective of these tend to be extremely time-intensive and costly. Conversely, the asynchronous online classroom offers much more time to the teacher for purposes of intervention, and the absolute accuracy of information about student participation allows for such intervention to be targeted with great efficiency. Online, it is actually possible for a teacher to relate one-to-one with many students.

Naturally, teachers must allow for a natural ebb and flow of interactions, understanding the need for occasional withdrawal from the on-line forum for individual reasons. When necessary, facilitators can encourage participation via personalized emails and by positive feedback to initial posts. One student ruminated about the difficulty in returning to the flow of the online interactions after any length of time had passed:

I identified with your comment about the emotional difficulty of returning after an absence from the online community. My problem is I fear my computer after a week of absence, and when I finally work up the guts to find out what huge amount of assignments I've missed, I copy down all the work I have to do and then wait another week or two before I post ALL of it at once. I just feel guilty because I know I have more to put into this class than I give all the time.

One of the facilitators, Dr. Donna Barnes, responded:

The best thing I've found so far is to keep to my getting up at 4 a.m., getting a glass of diet coke and signing on. Doing that without fail seems to make a big difference. I think it's like exercise and putting your seatbelt on...once it's habit and routinized, its easy. But the fact that

absence begets absence and presence begets presence is interesting to ponder.

Online students are responsible for, and must take ownership of, their own learning.

Online, there is no "sage on the stage." Instead facilitators become "guides on the side." The online medium allows for a more equal playing field between students and facilitators. There is no authority standing in front of the room, no "holder of wisdom" doling out lessons to be regurgitated on tests. In the online environment there is the freedom to co-create curriculum with teachers and students as co-learners.

In this kind of classroom, much of the curriculum is emergent, requiring a tolerance for ambiguity. It reflects a more natural life learning process without contrived divisions between math, science, writing, reading, art --essentially all knowledge realms. Facilitators encourage depth of learning through "teachable moments," knowing when to ask the right questions at the right time. Through this process the learning community becomes self-determining. One student muses:

It is hard to say to yourself that you should go to a class everyday with nobody in the room but yourself and the computer. Or when you tell your friends that you have never seen your classmates, or even the teacher. You have to be willing to go with the flow. It might be hard to let yourself go on the computer. But you must.

One of my major epiphanies as a teacher was recognizing the assumptions I was making about students' intellectual abilities and levels. Within the first month of the online course, one of the students created an item titled, "Epistemology." The first introductory post simply stated, "Lets talk about how we know what we know." I was astonished that a sophomore in high school had conceptual awareness of epistemology, a topic I first breached in my graduate level work at university.

In pre-determining curriculum and setting standards for students, we make gross errors in assuming what our students know and what we think they "need" to know. In making these decisions about what to teach and how to teach it, we also make a choice about what we are *not* teaching, i.e., Black history beginning with slavery rather than with the rich indigenous historical culture. In allowing students the freedom to co-create curriculum and to become co-learners, these kinds of authoritarian and misplaced judgments are greatly diffused, and even have the possibility of being eradicated. The online medium is generative and creates a seamless curriculum where we can dialogue about issues that matter most to us.

Online communications are time-intensive as participants are required to read, write, post and reflect on other participants' work.

Active participation and response is necessary. Students who do not post with reasonable consistency are "invisible," unlike the regular classroom where a student who sits or sleeps in the back of the room is still considered "present."

External pressures are minimized online and students feel safe disclosing — especially normally shy students who find face-to-face classroom interactions intimidating. The sense of safety in the on-line environment, being behind the lit screen, allows the comfort, space and place for all to voice. We get to know each other on the "inside first" without physical distractions or prejudices and are able to cross traditional barriers of age, race, class, and geographic locations. However, as online communications are many-to-many, some participants are initially hesitant to post their work knowing "everyone" will read it. Some students may find it difficult to trust those they cannot physically see. This was captured by one student comment:

Being online has a very different feeling I think. You feel safer to share your feelings and more bold to share writings that are personal, yet there is the fact that anyone could read what

you posted. But somehow, just having a name by whatever you posted seems less scary than reading out loud or watching someone read what you wrote.

Technology is a new literacy.

All communications are written, thus honing our writing expertise. Students read and write every day. In formal surveys students reported working an average time per day of one to one and a half hours on the course online and varying offline time. Being a good writer online carries prestige and recognition. The lack of sensory cues may increase the capacity for miscommunication that fosters attentiveness to clarity, creative composition, and audience. One student mused about how the online process of composition affects her writing and communications approach:

I have noticed that my writing style and how I form sentences is much different when I type than when I write. My sentences tend to run on a lot longer and I use more ellipses, for example. Also there's all the emoticons, the smiley faces etc. I'm getting so used to qualifying my online comments and writing to emphasize a point that I want to use it in my regular writing too! I think what happens here is that your style revolves around HOW you say something as much as *what* you are saying.

Authentic inquiry drives the learning forward, a genuine wanting to know.

We write to convey our ideas, to explore who we are, to publish, to create presentations of our work, to reveal the ways we read and write our worlds. We have a real and extended audience for our writings-not just teacher response and critique, as in the regular classroom. Students and facilitators worked collaboratively to create a poetic drama, for example, presented at an international Pedagogy of the Oppressed conference in 1997. Students designed their own websites to display their more polished works, resumes and creative talents. They then held their

own "courses" in web design for students and teachers in the program who did not have these technological skills. While this is not a stated curriculum mandate, it became a natural evolution of learning process which infused all of us with energy for learning new material which could inform our writing process as well as honing marketable skills, and teaching collaborative working relationships.

Long posts are difficult to read online and may affect depth and quality of response.

As one student notes:

I find it a little more difficult to read things online because you are sitting at a table looking at a screen and sometimes its much better to curl up in a warm blanket and feel the book in my hands. My eyes go crossed reading long segments and I tend to scroll through some of them quickly. They lose my interest. That's just me being stubborn to accept change of learning online.

Online learning environments necessitate new ways of thinking about the ways we engage with our students.

Organizational and facilitation expertise in the online medium can help alleviate some of the problems students have with navigating the learning process in the new medium. Unfortunately, teachers and authors with experience in online communications are rare. Traditional teachers tend to attempt to translate former paradigms to online learning environments stressing skill and drill formats, or transmission versus transactional models of teaching. Some teachers resist relinquishing their authority as classroom expert.

This is not to say that teachers do not have a strong sense of district mandated and fundamental skills to be included in the instructional process. Skills in online communications, technological applications and knowledge of how to work collaboratively in this new medium

will increase employability and the ability to navigate the world in the new century. One student reflects on the learning experience:

The opportunity to learn online is much greater than in a normal classroom in some ways. You get to see what everyone is thinking and writing. You learn from what others are doing and what you experience yourself also. In a normal classroom, you'd have to photocopy everyone's writings and hand them out, write down comments and then hand them back, revise and repeat the process. With the computer, all you have to do is push a button.

Not everyone adapts well to the online environment.

Technological problems may overwhelm some people and cause intermittently high levels of frustration or anxiety. Student mentoring online and home visitations help immensely in diminishing frustration levels in the steep learning curve of technology. There can also be a felt sense of loss of "spontaneous" learning catalyzed by energetic classroom interactions. Students miss physical connectors such as hugs, eye contact, and laughter. A combination of face-to-face and online education seems to be preferable in balancing and rounding the full student learning experience.

There is a need for schools to train online teachers, or in the least, include technology and online communications as part of the core curriculum in teacher-education programs. At the same time, teachers must learn how to shift their thinking towards becoming co-learners with their students. Few teachers have experienced the power of the Internet for enhancing regular classroom learning environments.

As our program evolved, and my high school students became more proficient at online communications and facilitation, I used them as co-teachers of pre-service and graduate level students in the university setting. Bringing teachers online with young students allows them to

learn through practice, much like a more traditional student teaching experience. Students and teachers become co-learners in the online environment with the expertise of students often surpassing that of the teacher. This provides excellent opportunities for students to teach teachers. In addition, the use of Empowerment Evaluation served to promote an immediate sense of ownership in the ways the learning process would unfold with participants first taking stock of where they were and then setting goals for moving forward.

We did encounter problems with the politics and fears of the traditional school system.

Administrators and other educators feared the loss of the locus of control in online education. Politics and school systems who fear change can thwart possibilities for educational reform. Additionally, school resources are severely limited and technology costs prohibitive, though declining. Unfortunately, the digital divide continues to widen between privileged and marginalized populations. Equity of access issues are of high concern. In our program, students owning home computers found the learning process much more relaxing with more time to choose when to connect and for how long. Students accessing from school were often in library rather than classroom settings. Time online was limited to less than a full class period or after school. School staff personnel, fearful or perhaps just curious as to what students were doing on the Internet, often looked over students' shoulders. Students were sometimes asked to disconnect to allow other scheduled classes to use the computers, even though the time slot was reserved daily for students in the online course. School personnel often also did not appear to want students using the school computers, expressing a sense of ownership as if they were their own personal work computers rather than for student use. Several times passwords were installed by staff which disallowed students to access the Internet without staff intervention and observation. Some students connected to computers in the counselors' office where noise and traffic

interfered with students' ability to concentrate in an atmosphere conducive to study. We were able to address this issue by purchasing twenty laptops through our district for distribution to students without home systems as loaners for the school year.

Interestingly, an additional positive was that students began using their computers for not just this class, but for other courses and expanded their knowledge of the technology and its potential applications immediately. Word processing, web design, email, interactive communications and online researching all became part of the students' use of the technology as a learning medium.

This program provided an example of a way to add to current public school systems through district-wide cooperation providing equality and excellence in opportunities for ALL students. Interactive technologies will be a mainstay for future employment positions in a changing world.

Online learning fosters improvement of literacy, computer, communication skills as well as such things as multi-tasking. As we demonstrate positive educational applications, it prompts schools to upgrade their systems and to "connect" students to the resources of the Internet and in the end, this must be the true, if unstated, purpose of President Clinton's goal: not just to connect schools, but to connect *students*, through programs like this, into the coherent but distributed life-long learning community which we must become if we are to meet the challenges of the new millennium.

Freedom in Environment

Goal Statement: To develop an environment where creative freedom can flourish: 8.31-9.4

Sub-question: What is the balance between creative freedom and chaos?

The physical environment, including both online campus design and organizational structure, greatly affected the time requirements and frustration levels of participants. The ability of students to effectively navigate the maze of online communications depends largely upon

organization of the forums by the facilitator. Teachers and students learned together as we proceeded. We re-designed and re-structured according to our ongoing reflections, experiences, and Empowerment Evaluation feedback loop.

Because this was a student-based goal, comments and suggestions would be offered regularly along with ruminations about how the physical environment impacted interactions and learning potential. One student commented:

For the beginning of the year a more structured format would be good until everyone is participating and comfortable. Then, it would be ok to journey into the unformatted design. We lost people because they didn't know what to do or where to start and got freaked out by the sheer number of postings. If things started out more basic, perhaps more people would initially contribute and participate and then the freedom we have now would be great and fully appreciated by all.

Initially, the primary focus was to create an inviting and familiar environment with conference names mirroring common school areas: The Classroom, the Teacher's Lounge, the Café of the Arts, The Homeroom area. During the first year students and I discussed organizational influences on ease of response and navigation. Separate items were then designated for assignments and questions about assignments, announcements and questions about announcements, for example. This delineation facilitated student process and easy access of important information. The assignment area was not cluttered by questions and unrelated comments. Organizers also mastered the ability to "freeze" discussion items so that other participants were unable to post additional comments — A useful technique in areas like the assignment item. In addition, other items were used for posting weekly updates, technical support, Empowerment Evaluation, and others. Clear labeling of items and careful organization

of information allowed it to be immediately accessible and permanently available to all students. This is in contrast to the flow and distribution of such functional information in the physical classroom context. Most importantly, the open and consistent nature of the on-line forum meant that there was never a bottleneck, never a time when students were not “in the loop” with regard to classroom communications and expectations.

Here is an archived list of items from our homeroom area:

Title	Author	Numbers of Postings
Online Resources for Writers	Ginny Little	
phone numbers, names and schools	Ginny Little	98
Assignment #3, _Room to Write_ page 121 "Silence"	chris abraham, efa	241
Reflections on process-September 29-Oct.3	Ginny Little	113
Who AM I?	Ginny Little	103
Favorite works, favorite writers and the why of it all!	Ginny Little	190
Contests and Places for Publication/online or offline	Betsy Bailey	102
Empowerment Evaluation	Ginny Little	109
Favorite lines!	Marta Brill	73
Welfare?	Phillip J. Rhoades	107
suggestion box and dialogue about difference	Ginny Little	34
poetic elements for your info.	Ginny Little	83
Travels and Transformations/writing on the road	Ginny Little	86
personal websites	Ginny Little	56
Who published where?	Ginny Little	31
On creating policy	Ginny Little	45
Significant Memories	Katherine Blanke (KAT)	34
Writer's resource page link and ideas	Ginny Little	54
Prose-Writing Resource	Dirk "Man At Rest" Flinthart	13
Playwriting and possibilities	Ginny Little	33
Poetry Readings and Groups	Katherine Blanke (KAT)	43
cycles, action/reflection	Ginny Little	99
Final Reflections	Ginny Little	124

This sample is from the archives from the homeroom of the second semester of the second year. It is interesting to note that the primary teacher or the teaching assistants created 24 of the 29 items. The homeroom area is primarily hosted by the facilitators and is designed for distributing information, for summarizing current project work and for assignment or

announcement updates. It is also a centralized area to discuss design and structure issues such as the item titled: “New Forum, New Visions.” Additionally this area is used for collection of assignments such as end of semester reflection papers and portfolios.

The Classroom area houses a separate writing item for each student to keep their work and revision in a personalized folder and “item.” The Cafés are used for dialogue and are primarily organized by the students. A sample of conference items from the café will be shared and discussed later.

At the onset of the second year when our student population tripled, I struggled with how to accommodate and restructure the design. All students who did not graduate during the first year of participation online, elected to continue the second year prompting the creation of the “advanced” portion of the creative writing program. Advanced students participated in the ongoing development of the program by helping redesign the campus, mentoring incoming students, aiding in orientations, developing their own, more advanced curriculum for their second year and presenting at local, national, and international conferences about their work.

To manage the growing numbers of students with varying levels of expertise, we created three separate classrooms and cafes--two for new students and one for the advanced second year students. This reflects a desire to focus on creating learning community in the beginning and the thought that smaller class sizes were preferable.

Design issues were challenging, for example, whether to have common or separate areas for new and old students to intermingle. I concluded that the café was the area where a strong sense of belonging and community developed for the first year students. I knew that too many postings and new writings to critique in larger classroom groups would be overwhelming based on the experience of the students in the first year and thus decided to separate beginning and advanced

groups at the onset of the second year. Eventually, however, the two beginning groups requested access to each other's writing areas and cafes, which was granted.

The advanced class elected to keep their classroom writing area private as they felt they knew each other better and wished to keep their community separate in this way. They were also concerned with the possibility of being inundated with responses should they open the door to their private writing area. This ownership of design and structuring by the students based on their own learning preferences allowed us to accommodate and honor both individual and community specialized needs.

During this second year we learned that fewer conferences and more items allowed for more ease in navigating the online environment. The reduction of larger conferences made the facilitators' and students' jobs more facile and less time intensive. Fewer conferences meant fewer areas to access and to add to one's personal conference lists. And in each conference, one can create as many items as are needed. Participants also have the ability to "forget" items which they do not wish to contribute to, or which do not spark their interests.

These kinds of software options took some time for students and instructors to learn. Eventually students discovered such things as html (hypertext markup language, a staple of World Wide Web communications) which allowed them to use italics, bold, and color in their posts. Forget this item, or mark all items as seen became very useful in feeling less overwhelmed. In my daily field notes I recounted: "We are just beginning to explore the capacities of the Caucus software including use of graphics, synchronous chats, exploring public conferences and resources on the Web. All of these have potential to improve and broaden the learning experience."

In addition to physical environment and adjustment to the online delivery mechanisms,

at the core of this goal lies teacher paradigm and pedagogical approach. When theory translates to practice, we learn what works, what doesn't, and why. Technology doesn't transform; rather, it's how we apply technology to create new educational environments.

Pedagogical approach based on the paradigm of the teacher-researcher opened the door for creating the environment for freedom to flourish. A letter was mailed home to parents welcoming their student to the online program outlining teacher paradigm:

- 1) True learning is intrinsically motivated, learner-centered and directed. Curriculum development is democratically negotiated between teachers and students, is for authentic purposes, is inquiry-driven and project oriented. Teachers serve as mentors, facilitators and co-learners.
- 2) Learning is an integral part of life. Academic learning should not be artificially fragmented, and should reflect natural learning more closely. Knowledge and content will be integrated and range across disciplines. Collaborative learning will be balanced with individual needs and interests.
- 3) Knowledge is constructed and created by the learner, not supplied by the teacher.
- 4) Reality is relative to perception and shifts according to experience. Experience is how we come to know. Theory becomes reality only when translated to practice.
- 5) Evaluation is a tool for discovery of our growth as learners and as people. Learning is not linear, but a life long cyclical and recursive process. Multi-faceted evaluation measures primarily internal and based on levels of empowerment.
- 6) Research will be a process of inquiry done cooperatively with, not conducted on, students.
- 7) Illuminating and understanding multiple intelligences, socio-historical and cultural perspectives encourages celebration of and respect for diversity.

8) Learning activities should spark the creative and imaginative, not stifle it.

In addition, I provided goals and outcomes of the program to the administration at the onset of the program. Students surpassed these anticipated outcomes by a wide margin, even though I initially believed my standards of achievement expectations to be quite high (Appendix H). This pre-determined set of goals articulated by the teacher-researcher outlines the basic tenets of the program core as follows:

- Establish learning community through asking questions pertinent to the creative writing content in relation to discovery of self. Giving students a chance to get to know each other and become familiar with online forums and technology.
- Establish common language and goals through beginning inquiry based curriculum. Students required to respond to questions such as “What is Creative Writing?”
- Empowerment Evaluation process allows students to take ownership in their own learning and development of curriculum.
- Students begin to establish weekly assignment routines with choices of direction and response.
- Students required to critique and polish works to submit for publications.
- Presentation of work in larger communities.

Initially some students found it difficult to adjust to what they anticipated as regular school structure: assignments given as directives, student response, submission of written assignments, teacher grading and final tests of learned skills. Instead, I began by asking the students to post a response during orientation to the question “Who Am I?”

As time passed and students requested daily updates and assignments, I provided that supportive facilitation. Students were asked to read and respond at least three to five times in the

Café. Additionally, each week writing invitations or prompts were created or selected from writing texts by both students and teachers. Writers could respond to the prompts, or they could select to write poems or stories of their own accord. Peers were then expected to critique and/or respond with comments. Students were also asked to compile portfolios accompanied by reflection papers to self assess their growth as writers and as people.

An example of a weekly assignment posting and summation is as follows:

Thus far this quarter you should have:

1. Written one original response to an invitation per week and done an in-depth response to your peer partner.
2. Engage with visiting authors, Alex Keegan, Dirk, Manal, and Katie. This is ongoing right now, so visit each day in the areas in visiting artists. Next week we'll have a new author, a published poet online.
3. Respond in an ongoing fashion to empowerment evaluation so we can get our goals and ways to achieve them sorted and refined.
4. Some of you are responsible for creating a writing invitation. Each week this will be the case.
5. Visit websites listed as of interest to writers and do a review.
6. There was an assignment this week called Alex's challenge...there is some confusion surrounding this, so don't write a character study for now, but read what has transpired and observe and learn. I will know if you were there by the "who has read what" online software capacity.
7. Participate in the reading circle discussions around whatever book you chose. There's not much activity here and this needs to be more active and in-depth. Exception is The Alchemist discussion, but there are still folks missing from this.
8. um....probably have forgotten some things, but there's a start, and I'll keep up with this now so you know what you need to do.

Weekly assignments and reminders became routine as the students struggled to shift towards taking responsibility for their own work and progress. But it was also simply an organizational task designed to remind, prompt, and encourage. There were always combinations of structured and unstructured writing and interaction. Reading circles, reading and responding in the forums, invitations from visiting authors to participate in other learning activities, exploring the resources of the Net, peer partnering, writing, and revising were all part of the weekly activities.

As students adjusted to expectations and to taking ownership of their own learning process, students began reflecting about what and how they were learning and changing:

I hate all these assignments we've had to do lately. I used to want assignments for security purposes but now I write about an hour every night and find some of these assignments tedious. I think there should be assignments for those who don't write on their own.

Another student commented about the difference from regular school learning:

I am so used to teachers looking over my shoulder at every moment that the adjustment from that to a free environment has been difficult. I see myself as a self-motivated person in most things I do, but in school I have never had to be that way before.

This kind of thoughtful reflection about difference from regular school environment was mirrored in an online interview of our visiting author, later instructor, Launz Burch (penname-Dirk Flinthart), when I asked him "What dynamics do you see at play in the environment?" He responded:

It became apparent to me that much of the actual work of writing was carrying on in the background and my role was less that of an online "question and answer" mentor than that of a Devil's Advocate and to some extent exemplar of a working author. I began to transfer more of my own writing process online and rather than wait for questions, I have tried actively to engage students in what I am doing.

He continued to note the difference in pedagogical approach from the more traditional format and how he and my co-teacher at that time were learning to make the shift along with the students:

It's been interesting to watch the other online teacher who clearly has some idea of the formal teacher student relationship in the more traditional sense, start to transcend that idea. Gentle

peer pressure, especially as exerted by Ginny, seems to be bringing to the fore more of his natural sense of exuberance which in turn makes him a more accessible figure for the students. While I tried to bring no preconceptions to the forum, I must admit that initially I was concerned at the apparent lack of a ‘creative writing thrust.’ Dialogues wandered from topic to topic in a fascinating manner, but only rarely touched on writing process. I worried for quite some time that I wasn’t fulfilling my expected role in this fashion.

This reveals how as the primary creator and facilitator of the program, I trusted emergent structure. But also, I had envisioned the steps of creating the environment from creating community to responding to student needs for more structure, but not imposing it without cause or request by the participants themselves. As a facilitator my intent was to be as “invisible” as possible, while still guiding interactions and creative writing content focus.

In response to comments by regular school classmates that an online course must be an easy grade, one student reflected: “This is not a slacker class but could easily be turned into one. I feel like the only thing school ever taught me was to do as little as possible to get by. Now that I have this incredible opportunity to grow and explore here, it’s hard for me to actually take it. Make sense?”

The following represent excerpts comments taken from online archives relate to this goal statement:

We cannot create greater freedom. Freedom is all over these pages. The students were given a blank sheet. Many students were initially scared of sharing emotions with virtual strangers, but the program is not to blame, only time and the students themselves. It takes time to gain trust.

Completely free is probably something that we as a class can never truly accomplish. The only true place we are truly free is inside ourselves. Other than that we will always face some degree of oppression.

We can't have complete freedom except within ourselves. Feeling a lack of freedom comes through fear of disclosure.

I learned a lot here because I wanted to learn. Part of the problem is students don't know what to expect at first. It's a new class and you can't find 100 people in your high school to ask what you should do or what they did for the class. You have to take responsibility.

In the beginning, when students started items on religion, politics, philosophy and other sensitive life issues, I became a bit uncomfortable as the "teacher." I worried about how this kind of open dialogue might be viewed by outsiders as "inappropriate." I voiced my concerns to the students online and discussed them with my co-teachers. The students vehemently responded that they did not support censorship, wanted to explore these issues which were of high importance to them, and could be responsible in doing so. I acquiesced, though as their teacher I was careful about how I expressed my own opinions and focused on posing questions which I believed could help them move forward in discovering varying points of view. I also made sure that I read all postings in a timely fashion to gauge the appropriateness of the discourse within a "school environment."

Their poetry then began to reflect these deeper social and personal issues. They learned to respect diverse viewpoints, to support and question their own ideologies, and not to hold too tightly to their views, but to inquire deeply and thoroughly. One student reflected:

Although writing is the primary focus of this class, I don't believe it is the greatest gift. I have been exposed to lots of writing and done lots myself but the life skills that I have learned I believe are more valuable to everyone here. Gifts of diversity and tolerance make us all better people.

And yet another:

I feel like there's a lot of freedom to create in this course. There has been some discouragement from using profanity; there was a time when people got tired of Red and Kat filling up space in seemingly every item, but our whole crew went though that and 'shaped' their behavior so that they had their place (the playhouse) and then the rest of us didn't have to read their interactions unless we so chose. I think the situation evolved in a good way--They did their thing; it felt like an imposition on many of us; we expressed that dissatisfaction; they accommodated. A way was created where they weren't 'shut down' but the rest of us didn't have to read their stuff if we didn't want.

This post demonstrates how the students began to take ownership in the process of their own learning and development of the program along with their teachers. This created a strong bond between all of the participants as co-learners. Students learned how to read and respond more selectively and in doing so became a self-directed learning community.

One student reflects:

We all don't read everything, or consider everything, BUT the growth in this area since the first day of school has been, and continues to be, phenomenal. Responses to individuals

blossom. Concern is expressed for absences. We seem to be bonding together as a writing family. Even though we aren't bonded by ideals or blood, we are bonded as artists and supporters.

Another comments on how communications norms began to develop in the process:

In this first marking period the 'What is God' item came up. It was here, early on, that we really defined some of the unspoken rules that we use for debate here-rules that have defined us since, and I think set a precedence for future communications."

The student-organized Cafe of the Arts, resembling a village square where people gather to laugh, talk and debate, became the center for community formation. Students created items on religion, writing in foreign languages, physics and music theory, sharing of favorite quotations and books, worldviews and philosophy, literature circles, and more.

Here is an example of the items created in the café by teachers and students during the first quarter of interactions:

Café of the Arts: A gathering place for all friends

You may create a new item, read all the items or click on item titles listed below to read individual items.

Title	Author	Responses
<input type="checkbox"/> May I take your coat?	Ginny Little	157
<input type="checkbox"/> Pondering Wonderfully Deep Thoughts	Red the Bruce	101
<input type="checkbox"/> Overwhelmed? Click here	Ginny Little	36
<input type="checkbox"/> The Poet's Corner	Justin Sacks (Pell)	73
<input type="checkbox"/> Our own photo album...	Jess Ott	74
<input type="checkbox"/> Homosexuality... Homophobia...	Jess Ott	147
<input type="checkbox"/> By the fire, where the storyteller sits...	Dirk Flinthart	26
<input type="checkbox"/> Democrats vs. Republicans	Red the Bruce	27
<input type="checkbox"/> Questions for our newcomers!!	Tiffany	23
<input type="checkbox"/> Thankful	Ginny Little	21
<input type="checkbox"/> The New Commandments	Dirk Flinthart	53
<input type="checkbox"/> Oppression, ethics, morality.	Dirk Flinthart	47
<input type="checkbox"/> Christmas is close!!!	Jess Ott	39

- ❑ So what's life about anyways? Ginny Little 45
- ❑ Welcome WMU grad. students Ginny Little 36
- ❑ What kinds of things do you read? Kimberly Dysinger 35
- ❑ Where does creativity come from? Steven Landon 26
- ❑ A Smile A Day Virginia Weldon 76
- ❑ Rob's item for talking about whatever.. Rob Swikoski 68
- ❑ Current Events Denny "Five Days and Counting" Rodriguez 21
- ❑ Free Computers Ginny Little 25
- ❑ Creative Writers, Version 3.1? Ginny Little 21

Nearly half of these items were created and facilitated by student participants. Item titles reveal the diversity of issues covered. Young Rob, for example, who had never written a poem prior to this online program, started his own item to simply dialogue about whatever came to mind. Tiffany created an organizational facilitation item for newcomers to ask questions. The final item, Creative Writers 3.1, was used to compile works for our second book of poetry and short stories. Within these topics, wide-ranging dialogues, for which there is little time in the regular fifty minute classroom focused solely on mandated curricula, allowed students to discover, articulate, and question their beliefs and values. Students uncovered their underlying assumptions, and as writers, began composing reality. The items listed in the printout of the Café items demonstrates the range of interests of the students in a forum of integrated subject matters. As an example, one item of collaborative musings resulted in the following poem:

A Smile a Day: Visiting Author, Virginia Weldon, posted an invitation to the students to list things which made them smile. We wrote examples for nearly a month. The following collective poem, edited by Rianna Hulse and Virginia Little, is the result.

Think of things that make you happy,
Which force a smile.
The unforgettable things, you know,
That come up on the inside of closed eyelids.

Remember the light of laughter
When darkness and doubt
Push in from the edges.

Smile, like you do~

When you see a dolphin's playful face
As it rolls over in the wake of a boat,
Or a dog catching a frisbee in great leaps across the park,
Catch the glow of a child's face under the tree lights
On Christmas morn.
Or the feeling you get when there's a letter in the mailbox tucked in amongst the bills
Bringing news of an old friend.
Remember late nights over a pint of Guinness
Sharing stories till the sun rises to send you to bed.

Listen to the music of your memories
Of pets, like your bird who ran across your dresser
Feet tapping lightly on wood.
Love as often as you can.
Feel the hugs, good tight ones, full of the thing that makes hugs so marvelous.

Tell stories, write poetry, eat good food
Become a poet with words which reach
Another's heart and mind.
Watch it show in their eyes.
Smile as you drop under flannel sheets at 1 a.m. with homework half done
And the sleet begins to fall in earnest.

Snuggle long in bed on any day of winter
And give to those in need whenever you can.
Smell the scents which remind you of a special place or time
And notice other people's smiles who have it harder than you.

Remember your dreams
Drive down deserted country roads
Watch fireworks explode with smoky traces against a summer night's sky.
Wake in the night in the middle of the ocean where all you can see are
Stars and moon,
All you can hear is darkness,
All you can taste is warm saltiness,
And all you can feel is peaceful.

Feel the cool in autumn's breeze
And the way a sudden lightning storm
Cools the oppressive heat of the day.
Watch the sun rise and witness
The purples, blues, and yellows
Slipping in and out of each other.

Muse on journeys past
And envision future quests
While watching a robin build her nest.

Smile when you find the luxury for
An uninterrupted nap.
Or the ease of sleep after finishing a job well done.

Admire your lovers.
Notice the grace of beauty
In the small of a woman's back,
Or a good tight fit in a pair of leathers
Or a brightly colored bikini.
Lay on the warm, clean sand
And let the salt dry on your skin,
With nothing more in particular to do.

Relish waking to the start of a day
With a kiss,
Or the feel of your lover's hand tracing the side of your face.
Lay in someone's arms feeling safe,
As if nothing could ever go wrong
And create your own constellations in the stars
As you lay on your backs in an open field.

Eat a piece of chocolate,
Wish on a falling star,
Hug your blue blankie,
Watch a field mouse scurry across the living room carrying a large piece of popcorn,
Or gaze at a rainbow arching into forever.
Listen to an insanely great song
Really LOUD
In your fast car with the window's rolled down.

And always remember,
When the sun appears after many grey days~smile!

The essence of the interactions in The Cafe is aptly described by another online
teacher and author:

I believe that the online process is mimetically related to the action of the poet's mind
in which there is, practically speaking, no center, no beginning, middle or end-or
rather, perhaps, the center is everywhere, and the process is more simultaneous, multi-

phrenic, and multi-vocal than it is orderly, linear, and conclusive...as the author H.L.Goodall has said, the only answer to life's strangeness is further and deeper strangeness, not simplification and clarification. Certainly this is true of both poetry and the increasingly complex technical world (Bateman, Claire, 1995, p. 169).

In the particular item, "Is there a God?" which started early in the program and continued to the end of the year, students explored their beliefs on the divine mystery of the unknown with perspectives ranging from Christian Fundamentalism to atheism. The disparity of viewpoints caused some initial discomfort, but eventually students relinquished ownership of these ideas as they learned to honor diversity. Not uncommon became comments like, "Gee, I never thought about it like that." Or, "I may not agree with you, but..."

At the required Empowerment Evaluation meeting in November, students taped snippets of their online writing to their backs. They then tried to identify each other through their writing and inner characteristics. Thus, we began by working towards getting to know each other well enough to trust, a necessary element to self-motivated learning and in the development of a sense of learning community.

Students were also asked during orientation to create their own items in the Café of the Arts, to monitor these items acting as organizers and facilitators. Students took on this role quite seamlessly and began self-constructing communication guidelines. In one post for example, a student commented:

Items in café should have a point and if possible to avoid topic drift. Those starting new café items should be the organizers in charge of keeping people on topic and facilitating discussions. Freedom and space of online forums can deter from the focus.

When several students began cluttering the forums with chattering, the group asked

these students to create their own item for socializing. “Kat and Red’s Playhouse” opened the next day as a space reserved for humor and frivolity. Students demonstrated their ability to self-monitor their community, establish communication guidelines, and to share leadership as co-facilitators of the learning process. One student commented on the nature of his learning:

This class is not just a means for a beginning writer to grow but it is a way to interact with other students and writers from other districts or other places in the world. I enjoy the light atmosphere as well as respect the teachers’ disciplinary actions.

Creative freedom blossomed in the online environment which is supported by the growth of 1.1 numerical ratings between pre and post Empowerment Evaluation measures. Streamlining the physical environment while making it more colorful and “real time” parallel, learning to use the software capacities to their full potential, having advanced students help in the training and mentoring of incoming student groups, and following a teacher-researcher paradigm which supported such balance between creative freedom, disciplined content area work and structure allowed for students to take ownership and to explore their creative talents.

In meeting the goal of creating an environment where creativity could flourish, there is no question that we were successful. The combination of the strength and flexibility of the medium--particularly Caucus software capabilities--combined with the relative emotional safety of being able to communicate individually without pressures of peers or time constraints, led students to explore aspects of creativity which outstripped the original design of the project.

Perhaps most remarkably, students appeared to spontaneously develop an understanding of the necessary balance between freedom and discipline, clear organization and organic chaos which supports the creative process. With an absolute minimum of discipline and direction imposed on them, they developed an organizational and motivational structure which provided

the necessary comfort levels to take risks and explore their creative potentials and ideas.

One of the greatest problems encountered in implementing this project was, and remains, the interface between the highly creative learning environment and the rigidity of the hierarchical system which is supposed to support such innovation. The stated goals of the school system-creating thinking students-and the real goals of indoctrination and subordination create a dichotomy which thwart the creation of new learning environments which address 21st century reform.

Administrators from the school system cancelled the program at the end of the two years citing “inability to monitor student teacher interactions and lack of policy for governing the online educational environment.” Administrators feared the loss of locus of control and lacked expertise to create a new learning program based on learned experience. The creative environment fostered in our program was in fact so effective that it necessarily has moved beyond the confines of the school system. (See newspaper accounting and teacher and parent responses in Appendix J). Students now voluntarily participate, and continue to re-invent the scope and potential of the program, re-named and envisioned--21 BEAT St. lies at the intersection of business, education, arts and technology in the 21st century. The program is now housed through the online campus based in Arlington, VA., The College of Exploration. More about the movement of the program outside the school system will be discussed in the epilogue section of this dissertation.

Discovery of Self

**Goal statement: To discover more about ourselves through our own eyes and others-
6.84-8**

Sub-questions: Who are you? How have you grown as a writer and as a person?

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” Plato

I take the best spiritual writing to be prose or poetry that addresses, in a manner both profound and beautiful, the workings of the soul. One learns quickly that some people speak with authority on the inner life, while others compose with flair, but to find the writer who combines both skills is akin to locating a ballerina who plays the horses, or rarer still, a horse that dances ballet. We are hardly at a loss for past masters to emulate. In every epoch and tradition, great spiritual writers abound, from St. Paul to Jalaluddin Rumi to Basho. Yet much of post modern culture, especially those aspects driven my mass media, remains under the influence of forces—materialism, consumerism, hedonism, moral and intellectual relativism—unfriendly to spiritual values. The upshot is a fierce tension between our highest aspirations and our cultural norms. This tension should produce some outstanding spiritual writing, for all great writing is born of struggle” (Zaleski, Philip 1998, Preface, xii).

Shattered dreams
Flit along on broken wings
Through the dark night
Seeking refuge in the eyes
Of visionaries
The mad,
And poets.

Shawn Nicolen-Student-1997

Pedagogy and Praxis

The purpose of all true learning is to grow as a person, to discover more about oneself and the world. Unfortunately this is often forgotten in current educational settings which compel teachers to teach to standardized tests with scores linked to school district funding. The most prominent concerns of pre-service educators I teach are always behavior management, what to teach on Monday, and how to appease administrators while simultaneously trying to positively impact the lives of their students.

Debates continue on a pendulum between back-to-basics conservatism and more open educational approaches deemed as radical or as relevant to student lives. I do not believe there is a single educator who would argue that basic skills are not necessary. What those skills *are* may

be arguably contested, and more to the point, the pedagogical approach, or the how and why of teaching and learning.

In this program, the teacher acclimation to liberatory education, as discussed in the literature review, encouraged students to attend to self-awareness and personal growth while simultaneously focusing on the content of the course, creative writing. Richard Lewis addresses the core of educational purpose in his article, “The Story the Child Keeps,” from the book, Sacred Stories, (1993):

An adult going into a classroom needs to make it clear to each student that he or she has the tool with which to create meaning. That tool is the imagination. Once children recognize the imagination as something powerful within themselves, they are able, ultimately, to live more fully. For some children, an entire childhood can pass without their ever realizing that they have an inward life. How often we hear of children whose daily routine is made up of attending classes in which little attention is paid to the welfare of their inner lives (p. 137).

The following student post wonderfully illustrates this desire for self-expression and a more humanistic approach to education:

To Ginny:

The whole reason I joined this class was to learn to be able to express my feelings onto paper, to be creatively descriptive in my writing. It’s a lot harder than I imagined. I wanted to be able to express in words the feelings I have when I look across a cornfield on a fall afternoon, that feeling of perfect peace and beauty. I could go on for pages just repeating the words, ‘It was so beautiful. It was so beautiful.’ I want to be able to describe with infinite detail how I see the world. Help me, Ginny. Provide me

with the ways to let out the emotions onto paper. Eventually I hope I will be able to do this on my own. For now, I can use all the help I can get. I want people to see the real me. I'm sick of hiding, Ginny. Show me the world. Show me how to be human. This is more of a cry for help, than an asking. Drew Davey/student, 1997.

This particular student, a handsome, athletic, popular young man in his school, offered other students the example of taking a risk, of opening oneself to learning to write and writing to learn more about ourselves-through our own eyes and those of others. These kinds of young men generally don't often overtly express their feelings, rather they tend to create a façade, an "I'm cool" front. Because young Drew was the first to expose his inner self and take this risk, he became a leader in our forum. He was the first person to open himself to the vulnerability of the creative process. Others followed. Later, in a piece written for the poetic drama but which was not included in the final presentation, Drew demonstrated his newly found voice, his conscious reflection on his actions and those of others leading to a heightened sense of empathy:

Teenage World

It's always the different kid
Who is loved only by their mother
Who is the subject of constant harassment.
I do not stand up for him.
Instead, I sit and watch him be tormented by the "cool" kids,
The clique of jocks that are always in the spotlight.
Envied by many,
I am guilty by association.
I have no guts to say, "knock it off jerks," or "leave the kid alone."
Am I scared?
Will I be rejected for standing up
Trying to defend him?
Will I lose my superficial friends?
That has to be it.
It took so long to be accepted,
Not willing to throw it all away.
I sit silently and pretend not to notice.

But I do.

They look back with smiles on their faces
Expecting me to join in.

But I don't.

I pretend it's me they're picking on.

I would love to retaliate, but do I dare?

Class is over.

The boy stands up and leaves quickly

Before giving his tormentors another chance

To expose him.

"Smart thinking, kid," I think.

I try to read his thoughts.

Maybe they'll get tired of making fun of him

And go pick on someone else.

Maybe he'll stay home from school tomorrow

To avoid harassment, plot revenge,

Or read a good book.

Who knows what is going on in his mind?

I hope he'll get these "cool" jerks back someday.

They'll be flipping burgers while he is CEO of a major corporation.

He's done nothing to deserve this.

What kind of natural selection is this?

It is always the weak and helpless

Who fall prey to the strong.

Can it be that the strong and cool are only psycho?

Does having large friends give someone the right

To be a narrow minded bully?

It's a sad existence

When making someone feel small is the only way to feel big.

The harassment, the cruelty,

Flows so freely

Through the teenage world.

Drew Davey/1998

Perhaps current readers feel the irony and ominous foreshadowing of the events of the Columbine High School massacre. If we allow students to express these feelings, to address the issues confronting them, and if we awaken their sense of social justice, we may be able to heal the schism these young teens grapple with on a daily basis.

In response to the question "Who am I?" one student wrote the following:

Before I'm gone
They'll say, "she is water,"
With a mind that gurgles and spurts
A tongue that laps up colors
Eyes that brim with a limitless sky
But best of all, they'll say:

She is water

With fingers that stream and gush
The ideas of the ancient river
And dreams of today's puddle
Before I'm gone I hope they'll say

I am water.

The flow of INSPIRATION being
The essence of my self
But for now, I am only the
Rusty metal of the backyard hose...
No control over the slow drip.

Katie Givens-1997

I asked students to evaluate not only themselves and how they had changed as writers and as people, but their peers as well, by posing the following questions: "Who in the class has 'defined' themselves? How do you see them? What are they like? How have they changed, if at all?" One student responded:

I think a couple of people have really defined themselves. I really admire how they tell it like it is without worry about the opinion of others and how they seem to enjoy comments and opinions at the same time. Nicole and Kathy have grown marvelously; I love hearing about how they are both becoming their own person, even if it's difficult and it makes me so proud to know they are doing well with it, though I hurt along with them as they struggle.

Another added:

It's good to know that my presence has made an impact on some lives. I think that's all

anybody truly wants: to make a difference. That's why I'm becoming a writer. With published work, your memory lives on, maybe for countless centuries.

And yet another:

I think Kat has really begun to find herself and launch into new areas. She writes all the time and what amazes me is the different moods she reflects in her writing. They are not all on the same theme and tone. Red also has moved into the area of storytelling with her Therenia tale. I think everyone has grown in one way or another. I see relationships developing and bonds forming between the members of this class.

We are linked more than in a technical sense.

As a teacher I wrote in my field notes:

Students have crossed writing boundaries to try new forms. Red has begun her story of Therenia; Aaron tries poetry for the first time; Kathy finds a safe home to come home to in her writing; Carrie combines photography and writing powerfully and her voice is like the wind; Nicole finds courage to transform her relationship to her parents through her expression. The list can and should continue.

Other students added:

I think I have changed quite a bit. I never used to write about things like my parents or the way I felt just because I felt that way at the moment. I've also noticed changes in other people's writings. They seem less stiff and unsure, more comfortable with the idea that other people will be reading their writing, and in turn, who they are.

I like this forum because there are people out there who are like me. Interested in the same things, talk the same way, think alike. And yes, there are some people who are

more like me than others, but this is the most akin group of people I have ever come to know. I never notice change in myself but these people have helped me to see myself more clearly.

When you write a piece and you think it is terrible and someone else thinks it's publishable, you are seeing yourself through others' eyes. When someone writes something and the next time they log on twelve people have responded to them telling them they should elaborate more, discover more of themselves. That is really something. Or when you say that you see yourself in the writing that the person wrote or that you feel that way sometimes. You're seeing yourself all over again.

The student connection to knowing through relationship with others is expressed in these posts, as if looking in a mirror. Empathy and a sense of connectivity, to both creative expression and to each other, allowed the students to define and re-define their senses of Self. The foundation of learning community, of connectivity, allowed them the safety to explore with and through each other and to take risks.

Student comments summarizing the discovery of self goal statement were as follows:

- ✓ There is a sense of honesty and a comfort zone which has been created which helps us in the process of seeing ourselves. We've created an environment where we can learn and be ourselves at the same time.
- ✓ We seem able to see through our own soul and others through the sharing of our writing.
- ✓ We continue to move beyond surfaces to depth of discovery of ourselves.
- ✓ Discovery of self comes through introspection and retrospective reflection.

- ✓ If we bond with our critics, step outside our work, it helps us to see through another's eyes and grow.
- ✓ Numerous responses to our writings help us to see ourselves more clearly.
- ✓ Positive feedback helps us to develop confidence in who we are as writers and as people.
- ✓ Re-reading our own work helps us to see ourselves differently over time. Critiquing ourselves teaches us how to look at our own growth more closely.

This summary details an awareness of a learning environment which allowed for openness and risk-taking resulting in an increasing depth of discourse and an ongoing focus on reflection and introspection as related to growth as writers and as people. All of these elements were an integral part of the pedagogical approach and design of the program by the facilitators. And, interestingly, all of the other goal statements are enfolded into this one: Growth as writers and people, the power of critique and retrospective analysis and revision, the foundation or environment to support these goals, the safety of the medium and our private campus. All of these goals interrelate directly to the umbrella goal: To discover more of ourselves through our own eyes and others.

Early in the first semester I addressed the students' discomfort with the shift from more traditional schooling methods to a process of authentic inquiry and more natural learning:

I am asking you to learn in new ways. It's not what you're used to. The class requires a high tolerance for ambiguity and growth in perhaps unexpected ways. It's not all spelled out and can't be. We are never sure exactly what will evolve. It depends on many things. Part of change, of transformation, is discomfort. We don't like taking the covers off and exposing ourselves to a cold room from beneath the warmth and security of our blankets. But once we get up, we find it refreshing though initially it

may be a bit uncomfortable until we find our sweatpants. Yes, it's all about self-motivation. This isn't regular school. This is life learning. We discuss some pretty intense issues and we write our lives and re-create our realities and sense of self. It's not a smooth road and life isn't either. You are learning to learn for yourselves and what you're made of. You're finding that who you thought you were might not be who you really are, in some cases. It's all a bit shattering at times and then also though can be very liberating.

One of our visiting authors then added a response poem:

81:17) [Seen] 07-FEB-98 19:18 Virginia Weldon

The process of discovery is fundamental.
The process of self-discovery is magical.
Finding ... and then expressing
The real me has been sometimes difficult,
Sometimes nearly impossible
Yet, always rewarding.

She continues:

Usually, self-discovery starts from "outside" and opens us up to new perspectives we may have overlooked or not wanted to see. I offer the poem below relating to a crises point in my life. I was lucky. I had a friend. As we all do ...here in this magical forum.

A Friend In Deed
Pardon my bleeding feet ...
I've just been walking barefoot
Over the shattered illusions
Of my life.

Today, I may be in pain,
But pain has a way
Of getting my attention
And tomorrow,
With the slivers and shards
Removed,

I shall continue
Upon the path of my life
Renewed ... and strengthened
Because I was lucky enough
To have a friend
Who was willing
To tell me
The truth.

Virginia Weldon, author, 1997

Poetic and prose responses were not unusual in our forums. Creative expression blossomed as we sought to discover a deeper sense of self and other, and how the two might intersect. The goal of the facilitators was to guide, not to control. Another author comments about the nature of our own teaching philosophy and how it impacts our students:

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self knowledge-and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject (Palmer, Parker J., 1998, p.2).

I hoped students would discover the value in the joy of their own learning and growth. One student commented:

The first day I started this class, I was nervous that my writing would be too shallow and I would be laughed at. The first couple of weeks I just stuck to the assignments and eavesdropped on other people's writing. I honestly thought I could keep that kind of work ethic for the rest of the year. It really bothered me to see everyone else being so creative and honest and seeing me doing so little. That's when it hit me. This class

is not about doing the required assignments and asking for a grade on them. It's for finding the "real you". Sure, the required assignments can be creative outlets, but it's the work done outside of the requirements that really counts for something. It is there where real aspects of one's life can be expressed and discussed. That is where real inspiration comes from. Prompted writings have much less feeling and emotion than what comes from the depths of the writer's soul. It is my belief that this is what is expected by the teachers but not directly expressed to the students. The student is supposed to come to this realization on their own. That is how this class should be graded. Just sticking to the required work but doing a pretty good job on it should earn you a 63%. Realizing that this is not all that's expected from you and acting upon this realization should earn you a 100%. Telling others that this is what's expected should deduct a percentage of your grade because it's almost like cheating. Giving them something they haven't earned. Just a few thoughts from a kid who just discovered joy in writing.

This passage highlights this particular student's epiphany that learning is for Self, not for grades, and that self-discovery is the main goal. What is "success," afterall, without creative fulfillment? Only emptiness, hoop jumping, and test scores--which unfortunately is what characterizes a large percentage of traditional pedagogical approaches.

I walk five miles in the morning with my small terrier. The purple and pink of the flowering trees, the smell of spring, the feel of my feet on firm ground-it all helps me to renew, to clear my mind, to actively meditate. I am not one for sitting. This dissertation process has indeed been one of action, discovery, and growth. The notion of research as combined and inextricable with teaching, the stance and perspective of true inquiry, of becoming a co-learner with my students

have all taught me to listen more closely and to reflect more carefully on both theory and praxis. I have learned to attend to a democratic and negotiable process with my students. I especially like working with young adults who ask lots of big questions, ones without direct answers, questions which we forget to think about as grown adults or we have decided have no answers, or the ones which we cling to in our mind like spiders to a web. Adolescents, young adults and new teachers keep me fresh in my thinking, challenge my sensibilities. They make me laugh, cry, wonder, and yes, question. And I learn. Young people don't hold so tightly to their ideas, but are more flexible in their willingness to discover. In his book The Courage to Teach, Palmer Parker addresses the intersection of self with the self as teacher. For me, these lines have faded greatly.

In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge.

When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life-and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject-not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a myriad of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth (p.4).

Teacher-researchers, Witherell and Noddings (1996), further discuss this idea:

This rigidity of thought tends to be reinforced by our societal distrust of the meaning and usefulness of the imagination. It is not until these children are given a chance to slow down and sink into themselves, by someone who takes the time to listen and to encourage listening in the child, that any kind of renewed response in the child is brought into being. Rene Girard has suggested that in our 20th century drive to demystify life, we create the greatest myth of all-that of detachment. (Bruner, 1983).

Within teaching, counseling and learning activities, it is a commitment to genuine dialogue, imagination, and ethical concern that guards against our detachment (Witherell and Noddings, 1996, p.141).

Once students realized that this forum was a place where they were expected to take ownership of their own learning and that they had an authentic and interested audience, they rose to the challenge. In addition, they sought to create change and impact others with their newly found voices. One student commented:

Now that I have an outlet and an audience for creative writing, I want to be dynamic. I want to produce powerful writing that affects minds and overturns established concepts. I want to express myself more completely. Sometimes I feel an image inside that is gnawing to be written but I can't find the words. I crave the ability to express my inner self absolutely, definitely, the way it feels to me.

One of our students, Jessica Ott, from Geneva, Switzerland who joined our forum to “practice her English” also found herself seeking her own writer’s voice:

We learned a fabulous phrase in French today from the title of an old textbook. To develop ‘un style certain et un certain style.’ It means a definite, grammatically correct writing and a particular flair in your writing. You express yourself in your own specific way but in correct English so others can understand you. It sounds like a great goal for a writer to keep in mind and work towards. Especially the part about a particular flair. That is the part I want to concentrate on...to hear my own voice and develop it. I catch myself thinking of myself as a real ‘writer,’ something I had not done before.

Students began connecting the online course content with a more deeply felt objective-defining oneself through one's voice and through the connection and relationship to others. The safety of expression from behind the screen coupled with skilled and supportive facilitators and peers offered an open arena for this process to unfold.

The Art of Facilitation

The first consideration, and one that cannot be stressed strongly enough, was the intentional creation of a learning community by facilitators in an environment that supported risk-taking, self-discovery, and social awareness. One student reflects on the sense of connection between self and learning:

There is a sense of relaxation and freedom when I go online and am able to escape into the lives of others and explore my own life. I am learning to know others as real people and realize there is so much out there I have no clue about-writers and novels and books and teachers who actually care about the well being of their students. I have never encountered teachers that are so incredibly caring about their students and somehow make them feel at home.

And yet another:

I can't thank Dirk, Ginny, and everyone here enough. They've helped out so much. Without this class, I wouldn't be who I am now. My inner voice would have been muted so I could just become another mindless dolt who drove with his seat leaned all the way back or with his head on the desk.

This student posted a final comment which points to the importance of a caring and supportive environment in the learning process:

As time has passed, we have all certainly become more self-aware. Being sheepish and afraid to speak is always present when new people are added to a group, but with

the development of our community, we have made others feel welcome and able to open up without fear of reprisal. With people being open and expressing their true feelings, we have all been able to become more self-aware.

Visiting authors offered participants additional education and perspectives through a more integrated curriculum. As participants interests became apparent, guest authors and speakers were invited online for scheduled periods of time to engage with the students. As the following post suggests, sometimes these additional viewpoints and areas of expertise provided students with new knowledge that affected their sense of self and that of the world:

I found the visiting author who spoke about meditation so fascinating and I was like ‘ahhh, I’m learning something,’ and I wasn’t prepared for the change in me. Usually growing and changing come from out of nowhere and you’re like ‘Wow, that was cool,’ but here you have to search them out and sometimes I’m not prepared to do that. I sometimes can’t think so hard any more and feel out of touch with myself.

Yet another student comments on the nature of the curriculum and the learning process as related to “real” life, acceptance of self and of diverse viewpoints: “While writing is an integral part of our community, life skills are the core. We are learning how to deal with other people by first accepting their ideas, and by that, accepting them.”

What more valuable lessons may we teach our students? As the primary teacher-researcher and lifelong learner, the “big” questions have always intrigued me and therefore, my students. One writer explains it as follows:

Becoming conscious of the myths we are living means really examining our own lives and asking the deepest questions. I don’t pretend to know all the questions that we must ask ourselves in this process, but I do want to make three suggestions. A good place to start is

with the question, What are my gifts? This is related to a second question, What is it that gives me joy? Joy is very different from pleasure or happiness because joy involves struggle and pain as well as triumph. And the third question-one that is particularly important to me is: At what point is there an intersection between my gifts and the needs of the world? (Keen, Sam, 1993. In Sacred Stories, p. 34).

As a teacher I have always been conscious of helping students identify their individual talents and interests, their core passions. Once they identify those and learn to believe in what's possible, they begin to move their voices out into the world, with prompting and guidance, of course.

Project and Inquiry Based Curriculum

All students were required to do an individual or collaborative project to reach outside into the community, into that "real" world they spoke and wrote about. Some students did online surveys with other participants in virtual communities. One student comments:

We had to decide on a yearlong project that would be able to sustain our interest for the entirety of the year. I have always been interested in studying people-what they think, how they feel. I decided to do a project on how an individual's definition, or lack thereof, of the meaning of life affects the way they live. This project will give me more insight into other lifestyles differing from my own so that I will have more experience and background to write from.

Blatantly expressed here is a connection between asking the "important" questions and combining that to the core of the curriculum-creative writing. The results held interest for us all.

Collaborative Learning

The primary group of students who progressed to the advanced class worked on the Omaha Pedagogy of the Oppressed collective drama (Appendix H). As the teacher I began recognizing

individual pieces of the students' work which characterized marginalized people--a migrant worker, a kid at school everyone picked on, a handicapped woman, more. I suggested to the students that they might use these pieces to create a presentation for the conference. I mentored the students as they wrote, edited, and submitted a proposal which was accepted.

Students formed small group committees to work on each character's representative piece. Students requested to do this work themselves without my participation in the beginning. They wanted to prove to themselves that they were ready to create knowledge on their own. They elected two individuals who would not be able to attend the conference to review polished pieces and to make final decisions about which pieces would be included in the presentation. Some poems were combined into collectively written pieces.

Once they had the characters selected, they asked me to meet with them to shape it into a performance piece for presentation. The comment was: "We're writers, not actors." All along I had maintained an internal vision for the presentation and was now able to offer the missing link that would tie the individual characterization poems into a coherent piece of work. I suggested creating a narrator who would tie the poems together by asking the questions all of us think internally, but generally don't ask. I gave the example of the homeless person and asked the students: "What do you think about when you see a homeless person on the street?" The answer came in the form of this narrative question: "If I give you my change, will it change your life, or just make me feel better for helping you out?" It is a universal kind of response that I knew the audience would be able to relate to from their own life experiences.

I arranged to meet at a local coffee shop with one of the students, Katherine Blanke, to work on the narrator sections. We took each character piece and then free-wrote our responses and

questions. Kat took these brainstormed writings home and wove them into narrator responses between each of the individual poems.

Subsequently I suggested to the students that we could not leave an audience at the end of our presentation, depressed and without hope. I challenged them to find some way to address the issues they were raising. I asked them how they believed change could be enacted, how they might promote it. They resolved that this happens through one person, connected to one person, and so on, and is reflected in their final poem. Another student, Ajax, then worked to add music and dance to accompany some of the poetic pieces.

The presentation was so well received by the conference organizers that students were asked to perform it an additional two times—once at the keynote luncheon with Donaldo Macedo and once for the tribute to Paulo Freire at a local arts theater. The audiences were visibly moved and later a request was made to publish the entire presentation in a book titled Language, Literacy and Social Justice, edited by Sonia Nieto, Erlbaum Associates, in press. The performance was given again for local arts events and professionally videotaped.

After the event, students were asked to reflect on the project in an online item. The flavor of those responses is well represented in the following student posts taken verbatim from the online archives. They first address the difficulty of group collaboration:

Although I wasn't able to attend Omaha, I still learned a lot about life through the process of creating the presentation. I learned about taking a group of about 20 people, and organizing all their ideas and visions and view into ONE idea, ONE vision, ONE view. I learned that writing from the point of view of someone you're not is a difficult, yet enjoyable challenge. I enjoyed working with everyone to create a masterpiece. I liked reading the many, many pieces that came out of the prompt to write about

oppression and then taking these pieces and refining them into a well articulated piece on how oppression touches all of us and how all of us can do something to help. Most of all, I loved spending time with some of the most open-minded and supportive people I know. We came a long way as a group. We went from arguing and debate over how to do this, to creating and refining and learning as a collective ensemble. I'm really sad that I couldn't go to Omaha, but I'm extremely proud of everyone who did and I'm glad that I was able to participate in the project.

The preceding post addresses the difficulty we have all experienced in attempting collaborative group projects. Students come to the process with different ideas. They struggle with representation and voice. They grapple with how, what, and why questions. Group dynamics and ways each can contribute as a cohesive whole challenge all participants. Learning to learn together as a group is a task and skill which will be highly valued in the future workplace as well.

Another student comments on the nature of group collaboration:

90:52) [Seen] 16-MAR-98 14:26 Ajax

REFLECTION

When we first started meeting to plan the presentation, I felt frustrated. We weren't moving fast enough, we all had different ideas, we didn't communicate them well enough, we had no organization or leadership. I thought for sure that we wouldn't finish in time for the conference. Gradually, though, poems began to take shape even without the reassuring framework of a traditional performance production, and they began to sort themselves into place in relation to each other. Kat's narrator poems, written closer to the performance date than I would have ever thought possible, sewed

the pieces together into a single, unified garment, and the presentation that I feared would never happen suddenly had shape and life.

For my part, I had a hard time writing about oppression. Perhaps it was because I don't notice oppression much in my daily life, or because even that vague "assignment" kicked my natural aversion to homework in high gear, or because I felt so frustrated and hopeless. I tried to start a few pieces, but never got very far. Once other people started writing, though, I found that I could help them rework their pieces and feel that I'd contributed something. Even though it didn't go into the final production, I was very happy with the poem about the person pressured to excel that Drew and I worked on together. Later, I helped rewrite the handicapped woman's thoughts that Helen started, and felt that our final version was much better than any I could have written on my own.

I finally found a job choreographing dances, which, even though it didn't have much to do with writing, became my main involvement in the project. It felt good to finally take dance out of the classroom and showcase performance into a production aimed at larger causes. That was the first time I've ever improvised for an audience, and it proved to me something that has often bothered me--can I duplicate what I do in private for an audience without freezing up or getting distracted? Even though, as usual, I waited too long to start on them, they turned out really well. I used to hate group work. Okay, in most cases I still would rather work alone, but being a part of this project taught me that people will self-organize, they will get things done, they will pull through if you only give them your trust. And if they have a good motivation for doing it. I scramble around a lot trying to get things done, while so many others don't, and I think it's because they realize that school has no intrinsic motivation. The presentation did--it had a purpose and an audience, and no one would let the group down by

letting it fall apart.

This post highlights some very important facets of the learning process: how systems are naturally self-organizing, how the group learned to work through their different approaches to the project creation, to finding ways for everyone to contribute their natural gifts, and to bring it together into a cohesive whole.

Yet another student reflects on the overall conference and how it impacted her:

[Seen] 11-MAR-98 20:25 Marta Brill

Some ramblings about omAHA- (Our mantra during the trip became OMMMMM-aha, symbolizing calm reflection and then epiphany. We would gather in a circle, hold hands, say “ommmmm” and then more loudly and with excited voice- AHA!)

not a poem, not finished, just thoughts....

conference rooms filled with people searching for truth
who actually live out their lives according to their beliefs
souls that acknowledge the need for change
people that don't accept society
and play the little game.
revolutionary educators--an oxymoron? not here
they embrace, they live, they take long strides
and see life straight on, not from the angles

poets read and talk about release and inspiration
you may be a prisoner
you may be a Chicano from a neighborhood I'll never set foot in
but when you write, you are me
my soul and my mind
how could you experience with human emotion parallel mine?
the need for escape, freedom, recognition, and truth
they are mine as well

I come together with others my age for something greater
welcome synergy

writing and expressing our world
our hope and vision of pain
its a presentation now, complete and whole
tied together by a narrator who asked the questions
i would have asked
if I had thought to ask them

the weeping audience and teachers confirmed me
made me realize that we were okay
that our work was something to be proud of
something local, global, universal
yes, universal.

Freire? Who exactly is Freire?
now I want to know.
I'm embarrassed by the ignorance I possess in youth.
I want to find out about the man that touched so many
made them cry and believe and see
see that change is possible with love.

I think that the most beautiful image of life and love
is sharing a cigar on a rooftop
or doing a group jump in the elevator
nobody knows that Brian cracked the ceiling in one
until now.
or the glow on a young girl's face
as she accepts truth, reality, and others.

one match, one light, one candle. one.”

These initial reflections by Marta demonstrate her attempt to process the newly learned educational pedagogy of Freire, of addressing oppression, of a crisis of representation in her writing voice, of the bonding with teachers and students and audience alike. She knows she has changed, experienced something “life-changing.” She later expands her reflections to include the following:

90:45) [Seen] 15-MAR-98 17:28 Marta Brill

Reflection/Impressions

This is kind of prosaic, but it was important to me to record what we saw at the conference, so I wouldn't forget. Here is the shortened version.

The first day we heard a poet, Jimmy Santiago Baca, speak. The thought kept running through my mind that this guy knows. He is clued in to what is important and what living and writing are all about. Living and writing are connected. We live through language and communication, while writing doesn't exist unless it reflects life and reality. Truth, searching, ripping getting to the very center...that's how I think of writing. Baca taught us the concept of writing letters as a way to touch and universal emotions. Often in prison he was able to read the heart of a fellow prisoner and convey their emotions in his letters. His book, which I bought, begins:

Pinos Wells--

an abandoned pueblo now

The presence of those who lived

in these crumbling adobes lingers in the air

like a picture

removed

leaves its former presence on the wall.

It goes on to be a novel in verse about a young Chicano named Martin. Other stanzas are more poignant than the example I gave, but here is a feel for his style---simple, careful, straightforward. No academia, but very deliberate writing. I loved his stories of pushing college students beyond their racial, class, and social comfort levels.

For my own part, I wrote a piece based on the life of migrant worker's child. In the background three dancers did a field worker inspired dance filled with repetition and worker

movements. I am proud of how my piece turned out, it's chronological, poetic, and has a uniform purpose. I addressed the constant moving, educational struggles, and vicious circle affect. I researched it through Ginny's interviews, professional interactions, and the book, Voices from the Fields.

I'm proud of the writing, editing, and shaping of this piece. I've never written anything like it before, something not based on my own experience. Once we were in omAHA it began to bother me...what right did I have to speak for another. I am not a migrant worker, how can I pretend to know? How can this be real writing if it doesn't come from my life? I don't know...I'm proud and yet embarrassed.

The next session I saw was a short presentation and dialogue about Weafin, or Ebonics. It was presented as an expression of heritage and tradition, but that was only a small part. Weafin is a way of expression, it is language--and language is the gateway to communication and understanding. It needs ultimately to be embraced as its own entity and not looked down as stupid, ignorant, etc., but for now, the presenters stressed that standard language was very important because it is the language of power. Let the students express themselves in Weafin then translate it into standard English. Weafin is more than vocabulary, I learned. It is body movements, gestures, a way of standing, a certain flip of the head. If we don't allow students to express themselves in the languages of their home and family they could be frustrated easily and fail. This follows the same logic as this class. Learn to express yourself first, then work on academic poetic elements. Just the elements is dry and insincere unless the heart and soul is present.

On Thursday night we presented for 30 people. At this tribute for Paulo Freire several people spoke of how this man had touched their lives. I was intrigued by the powerful

following of Freire, so I am reading his collaborative speaking book, We Make the Road by Walking. The audience (and Ginny :) were actually crying during our presentation. Granted, they came looking for an emotional experience, but it was still rewarding. This was one of my favorite moments of the conference.

This in-depth post reflection shows that Marta has discovered the power of her voice to impact her audience and the world. She summarizes main events of the experience and how her thinking has shifted in relation to the world and her perception of culture, people, and language. She recounts the power of other authors and presenters to reach her in new ways, to expand her understanding of Other in relation to Self.

She also documents that as a facilitator, I cautioned students about speaking other people's lives and the need to research, interview and make these writings as authentic as possible within the genre of "fiction." The crisis of representation, of speaking other people's lives, became a core lesson that we worked with for many months following the students' experience. Most of these students were white and from middle to upper class families. Being exposed to a conference of the oppressed catalyzed new and disturbing revelations about the world. To transcend the nature of our limited thinking based on our own secluded world, is to engage in transformative, life-changing, learning. Another student ponders on the experience:

90:48) [Seen] 16-MAR-98 12:56 Helen Walls

Reflections on Omaha

This trip occurred at just the right time in my life. Before we left, I was struggling with dealing with the routineness of life - every day meant school, work, watching General

Hospital, and sleeping every chance I got. What's the point? Then this trip came along and gave me a chance to look at life a little differently. The result? Difficulty with school, and the friends I have just at school. Lots of emotions about everything, which results in more emotional writing (a good thing, for me!). A feeling of detachment from family and work. Increased awareness of a whole school of thought formed by one man, Paulo Freire, regarding mainly education.

I was nervous for the second presentation. I kept thinking, we are supposed to be the product of Freire's speaking and writing. How can we possibly live up to that, to these worshippers of Freire and his teachings? But when I got out there in front of all those people, I could look them directly in the eye and I *was* my piece. I became that woman, which wasn't too hard because she is a part of me. That's why I originally wrote about her. And when I released her, that hole in my chest disappeared. There were people in the audience sobbing while I was doing my piece, and that emotional of a reaction to something I held so close also helped complete me. I wasn't sure how the audience would react, but about five people came up to me afterwards to tell me how wonderful and touching it was. And I was satisfied.

The third presentation at the luncheon was also very powerful for me. I was nervous for this one, also, mainly because of everything that was going around about people like Caryn and Marta feeling uncomfortable about the material we were covering in our presentation. What right do we have to speak for others? We got up and did it though, and I think it was a little more solemn than that of the night before. When I was done reading mine this time, I felt really released. I was shaking, and almost felt like crying. I still can't quite figure out why this was. The only thing I can think of is that, like I was saying before, the piece had become so close to me.

Helen is recognizing the progression in her response to the events in Omaha. She realizes that in impacting others with her voice, in *becoming* her character, she has succeeded in reaching others, and in turn, reaching and illuminating a new side of herself.

Yet another student reflects:

90:56) [Seen] 16-MAR-98 18:45 Drew Davey

Omaha was a vision. I found more creative prompt during that trip than I've found all year in this class. The thoughts, visions, poetic interpretations lie tucked within my mind to be released at a much more controlled rate. Controlled fury at oppression.

I found my inspiration, my voice, but I can't put a finger right on top of it. It's there and I feel it. It's emitting in all directions, not just through the pen, but continuously through my mind and body. I walk proudly at school and home, confident that I know something that nobody else knows. That is, I FEEL something that nobody else KNOWS. Nurture it and let it grow in me to grow a *new* me. I still put up some of the same old fronts to people I know I can never really talk to on an intimate level, never reach. Maybe I can lead once more by example.

Drew reflects upon how the learning has transformed his sense of Self and how this has changed the ways he relates to others. He is uncertain as to how it will impact him in the future, but is confident of his newly found voice and awareness of oppression. Still another student adds commentary about the nature of schooling, test taking, the comparison to this more authentic

learning experience, and how this event impacted her thinking:

19:250) [Seen] 16-MAR-98 17:46 Caryn K. Senour

Feeling so helpless, so god damned helpless. Discussion is such a beautiful thing. Not allowing discussion is teaching one to be mute, to not have thoughts of their own, to accept facts as they see them and never view the situation from more than one angle. I am not a god damned bank, I have thoughts and feelings, I want to share them...So many facts have been crammed into my head today, written down in my notebook, hoped to be remembered for the test tomorrow. Fuck tests-they don't measure my knowledge, they don't calculate my perception of the world-they only determine how much of theirs I have accepted. Does a bad grade reflect a poor understanding, or does it reflect one's beliefs?

For most it's a poor understanding, but perhaps it should be a reflection of one's beliefs. Perhaps one should be given information from all views and be allowed to determine for themselves what they do and do not believe. School should be an exposure opportunity, rather than a biased 'here are the facts accept them now experience.' School is so one-sided, yet it's so close to us that we don't even notice the brainwashing as it occurs. We are so used to being repressed, to simply accepting everything, questioning nothing-never forming beliefs/opinions of our own. It feels so good to think again.

The problem with many adolescents is that they do feel powerless, like their lives are out of their hands...they know that they don't like school, but they don't know why. They know they find most things boring-yet they don't realize that there are things that they want to know. They reject learning all together simply because they are unable to explore and learn at their own rate-they just don't know that. All they know is that they don't care and don't see

any reason why they should. They have nothing figured out, no beliefs to back up their actions. Simply existing, turning the wheels of a massive machine, which nobody meant to create, nobody wants for to exist, yet are all a part of, and always will be a part of; it's the way that things are, a myth, a phantom of reality. A veil of unconsciousness, subliminal unthinking.

This particular student directly addresses the need for educational pedagogy which allows students to self-determine their own learning, learning which is powerfully relevant to their sources of ultimate concern, their joys and talents, and how they intersect. She expresses dissatisfaction with her former “schooling” and feels her mind has been awakened through a connection to life and learning she had forgotten. She then captures this new sense of self and the nature of transformative leaning in a poetic response:

Do you see her, that short girl with the piercing eyes?
I've seen her before, but I can't remember her name.
There's something different about her. Not her hair, not her
clothes... Can't imagine what it is. It's as if she knows
something, a giant secret that illuminates her from the inside out.
She's changed. I wonder what it is?
You see me, a short girl with caring eyes.
You've seen me before, but forgotten my name.
There's something new about me.
It's not how I look.
They have no idea.
I know something, a gripping revelation that illuminates throughout, from me to you.
I've changed and it feels wonderful.

Another student in response posts about how she's changed, weaving in lines from the presentation itself:

I have more faith in humanity. I'm more open-minded. I've seen so much diversity, and I accept it. But I want to celebrate it more and more. Diversity is individuality and without the

struggles of oppression that all of us face, we couldn't be where and who we are. Problems are life's little obstacle course races, and those with the fastest times never bothered to stop and breathe in the different particles that make up the air; the dust, the mold, the smell of a nearby car wash, the sweat of a migrant worker, the plushness of a blanket...

The creativity of these student reflections, the themes they speak, the heart and openness, all confirmed for me as a teacher and a researcher that transformative and empowering learning had occurred. They write it. They live it. They embrace a newly broadened epistemology and worldview. It is the essence of true learning on paper, in my view.

At the end of the year students were asked to write final reflection papers in addition the Empowerment Evaluation process which was goal-based and ongoing. These serve to further demonstrate the nature of the student learning experience and add the qualitative and creative text to the numbers, each reinforcing the other:

One student writes a poetic reflection detailing the different nature of this learning experience, as compared to others she has had, and her own personal growth in the process:

Look at what I have, and what I'll miss-the friends I've made, the pieces I've written. I went from 10 poems at the start of the year to a grand total of 150 poems. One disk completely full, a feeling of satisfaction and completion like I really did something worthwhile. I always throw away everything from most classes I take in an attempt to forget, but from this class I will save everything, treasure it all along with the memories and the lessons I've learned about writing with passion, about discovering who I am, and most importantly, I will tell everything with the voice I have now discovered I possess.

Another adds a response poem:

33:11) [Seen] 01-JUN-97 11:58 Marta Brill

The
year
is
w
i
n
d
i
n
g
down
slowly
spinning
till it stops.

disbelief and wonder
"my, my it went so fast"

A blonde girl entered a room of strangers
Orientation day.
A blond girl unsure
of writing, of herself, of life.

Strangers become intimate
through a screen

I love you all

for what you wrote
because what you wrote
is what you are.

I love myself
for I am a writer
who can swim in
sounds
letters
words
and discovered herself.

Now I am sitting at a screen
loving you, loving me. And waiting
waiting for next year.
Anxious, hopeful, ready.

To continue growing with you.

This poem signifies the sense of community, the focus on the creative writing content, on self-discovery and the result of transformative learning: growth and continued questioning through authentic purposes.

Yet another student reflects:

33:12) [Seen] 01-JUN-97 21:57 Çh@z™

I have learned so many things in this class...just a few would be:
Respect everyone's opinion
Keep an open mind
Write what you feel and don't give a shit if people don't like your writings
Do it because you enjoy it.
Constructive Criticism- YES, there are people in this world who enjoy your writings.
Poetry doesn't have to rhyme
What http means, and so many other things discussed in this class...
I feel I have learned more in this class than any other.

As for a poem or something to end the year.. I'm thinkin... these things take time you know :)

This more light-hearted and brief post, “off the top of his head,” as we’d say, still points to the core of the curriculum and learning process: writing, open-mindedness, celebration of diversity, and self-discovery: “Do it for yourself, because you enjoy it.” He also asks for the time to pause and reflect before posting in more depth, showing how students had learned to expect more from themselves than a casual response.

Another student adds:

33:15) [Seen] 02-JUN-97 14:44 Katherine Blanke(KAT)

Detached remoteness fills my heart
and mind as I sit before a world I've known
for such a short time
but love with the strength of centuries.

Unshed tears burn behind my eyes
and a surge of pride extends in my chest

as my mind flips through my memory gently,
recalling every special memory
each person has created for me.

Snowy night singing Christmas carols
loudly in the darkness,
just after a wet snowball fight with strangers
and a wonderful play in a world I've imagined.

Black light bowling with friends of a friend,
watching her face light up there,
in the midst of her friends, together and separate,
we came together for her and she was happy.

Finding more of a friend,
in a soul and heart I adore,
I love more than ever before
and understand better in every day.

The first, outside of class gathering,
gradually turning into many, many more
as we started to get to know and inspect
and love more at first than ever before.

Class field trip with half the class, not even,
how we missed everyone and thought
Oh! he would love this and she would adore this author.
But we celebrated our creativity together,
and flourished in the city at night.

The first moment I entered the room,
my eyes sweeping around computers and foreign faces,
not knowing what to expect
and trying to hide my insecurities.

Unsure of myself, who I was and what I was doing,
I leaped in, like a swimmer into cold water
and just tried to figure out me
in figuring out you.

Now, more than ever before, I found myself
in discovering you and who you are.
I found my writer's voice
in all of you,
because it was you who awakened it.

A piece of my soul is with you always,
and it will ache with your absence
all summer long for some,
but for longer still,
for those of you who are gone.

@!KAT

And yet another:

One of my favorite ‘communities’ I have been involved in thus far (I am only 18) was that formed during my experience in Creative Writers on the Internet. After meeting online we then proceeded to become close friends in real time. When one of our group had problems, we supported them. When someone made an accomplishment, we felt proud for them. We banded together to survive these ‘turbulent adolescent years.’ Isn’t that what community is really about? Survival, if not physically, then in a more psychic sense? Shawn Nicolen, student, 1997

I responded to these posts with the following:

33:16) [Seen] 02-JUN-97 15:00 Ginny Little

In tears here...honest to goodness tears...these are all going in my book, yes they are, and the world will know that this was not just a class in school, but a life event.

Thank you.

33:18) [Seen] 03-JUN-97 9:19 Allen Bernstein('Mance)

Oops, we made the teacher cry, are we going to be suspended?

-'Mance

This student interjects humor to lighten the mood in saying our “good-byes” as we attempted to capture the essence of our feelings without getting too sappy, a fear of all “good” writers.

Kat, in the preceding piece, captures the social nature of the learning community as we attended conferences to hear authors in Chicago and Omaha, and as the students began becoming friends in real time outside of the screen, meeting at coffeehouses and each other's homes. Again mentioned is the core essence of the program-self discovery through interrelationship with others in her lines:

The first moment I entered the room,
my eyes sweeping around computers and foreign faces,
not knowing what to expect
and trying to hide my insecurities.

Unsure of myself, who I was and what I was doing,
I leaped in, like a swimmer into cold water
and just tried to figure out me
in figuring out you.

Now, more than ever before, I found myself
in discovering you and who you are.
I found my writer's voice
in all of you,
because it was you who awakened it.

Another student reflects:

33:19) [Seen] 03-JUN-97 9:45 Helen Walls

The end

Sad smiles hang on faces as
Honey thick silence fills the air.
A connection formed through computers
Changes and
Grows
To a connection of hearts.

The beginning

Some spread their wings
While others look on in awe.
Some turn their heads
To deny that change exists.
"Everything will be the same,"

they whisper,
Eating the sadness
that consumes them.

This final reflection points poignantly to the notion of “change” and was written to address the cancellation of our program which is fully discussed in the last chapter of this dissertation, the epilogue. The student points to fear of change on one side, and those embracing freedom and the connections of heart that results in finding the courage to soar. I cannot say it any better.

For that very reason, this chapter included a high percentage of verbatim content from the students’ own reflective poetics and minimal interpretive commentary by the researcher. I am convinced that their own words and feelings demonstrate best what kind of learning occurred during our time together online.

Authors of the Cluetrain Manifesto, 1999, discuss this phenomenon of the Internet as it evolves:

To its inhabitants, it is primarily a place in which all participants are audience to each other. The entertainment is not packaged, it is intrinsic. Many of those drawn into this world find themselves exploring a freedom never before imagined: to indulge their curiosity, to debate, to disagree, to laugh at themselves, to compare visions, to learn, to create new art, new knowledge” (p. xxi).

The core of our program consisted of becoming better people, more aware of Others undivided from Self. This included accepting multiple versions of concepts named “reality” and “perception.” As artificial divisions faded, empathy and opening ourselves to risk, change, and growth became central to our learning process. We learned with and through each other-about life and about ourselves. Everyone improved as writers. We learned to use the medium in

positive ways that enhanced the overall learning experience. We concentrated on learning who we were, including our gifts, passions, and joys and how these all intersected.

“Life will go on as long as there is someone to sing, to dance, to tell stories and to listen”

(Oren Lyons, interview with Bill Moyers).

Chapter Six: Epilogue

That was Then-This is Now

Online education is still in the beginning stages of development and research. Questions and skepticism continue to surface about how to evaluate the credibility of online learning and publications. This chapter is perhaps the most important section of the research project. It details the eventual cancellation of the online creative writing program by local administrators and why. In addition, this chapter addresses the salient promises and pitfalls that innovative and caring educators may encounter as they venture into this new technological terrain. My hope is that this research will inform others as to how to design, implement, and assess other online learning programs. I also hope that it will offer others an example of the creative tension created by pedagogical approach which focuses on our own inner lives and those of our students.

Another author, Parker Palmer (1998), addresses this dilemma in his book, The Courage to Teach:

The good news is very good, but the bad news is daunting. If identity and integrity are more fundamental to good teaching than technique-and if we want to grow as teachers-we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives-risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract. I was reminded of that fear recently as I listened to a group of faculty argue about what to do when students share personal experiences in class-experiences that are related to the themes of the course but that some professors regard as more suited to a therapy session than to a college classroom. The house soon divided along predictable lines. On one side were the scholars, insisting that the subject is primary and must never be compromised for the sake of the students' lives. On the other side were the student-centered folks, insisting

that the lives of student must always come first even if it means that the subject gets short changed. The more vigorously these camps promoted their polarized ideas, the more antagonistic they became and the less they learned about pedagogy or about themselves. If we stopped lobbing pedagogical points at each other and spoke about who we are as teachers, a remarkable thing might happen: identity and integrity might grow within us and among us, instead of hardening as they do when we defend our fixed positions from the foxholes of the pedagogy wars (p.13).

During the two years of this research with the high school students online, several critical incidents occurred, as could be expected. Eventually the issues pointed right to the heart of the pedagogical disparity held between administration and me. The incidents included students who were self-mutilating, an increasingly violent suicidal student, a young female student who fabricated a story of a child who she then claimed died of SIDS, and another student caught plagiarizing students' works from online and submitted them as his own to his regular school English course. In 20 years of teaching adolescents, I do not find these "crises" atypical. I dealt with them in a similar manner as I would have in the face-to-face classroom. The following poem illustrates the intensity of emotion and conflict expressed in the content of the students' daily writings:

I saw the scars on her arm.
Red splotches
Usually concealed under layer upon layer of clothing
But today she wore a t-shirt.
I saw them
Sprawling across her skin for an
Instant
Before looking away.
She wore the usual long sleeved shirt today
But I could still see them
I had memorized their places.
She wears them with shame,

Unlike the other girls who make public their abuse
“My mother did that to me,”
one proclaims proudly pointing out a thin white line on her upper arm.
But she hides her skin
Wearing jeans in the summer,
While I walk around shameless
In my low cut tank top and shorts.
Does she grow green under her layers
When the rest of us show off our bodies
Or wear our abuse like a crown jewel?
I saw the scars on her arm
And burnt them into my mind.

Emily Joslin-Jeske

I always connected with the students through gentle counseling and support in the forums, as did other participants including peers. I followed with private emails, and on the telephone, and in person. The director was notified immediately of each of these events and informed as to how I was proceeding. Schools were contacted with the exception of one case, which was handled in a private conference including parent, student, and teacher at my residence. Conferences were held with school counselors and principals in each of the other incidents. Parents were informed prior to school contact, and in one case parents attended a school meeting.

In each case, online archives were printed and highlighted to document the source of the concerns as they unfolded in the students’ own writing. Teachers were careful not to “advise” but rather to facilitate the students’ own attempts to sort through their challenges. I assured students I would maintain confidentiality until a facilitator felt the student was endangering himself/herself or the welfare of others. At that time appropriate action would be taken.

In each case instance, I worked with the other students online to dialogue about what had happened. These incidents affected our entire learning community, as it would in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Many of the students were grappling with similar or related adolescent issues and the online forum provided a safe place with responsible adults to assist in working

through these difficulties, allowing them to feel a little less alone knowing others had experienced similar life challenges.

Towards the end of the second year one of the online students, who was a teacher's aide in her regular school, reported seeing other students' writing being submitted by another online student. Parents, administrators, teachers and students involved were informed of the incident. The boy refused to acknowledge responsibility. Subsequently, he submitted plagiarized work a second time.

The director scheduled a meeting at the school with the principal, the district schoolteacher, the parents and the student. Unfortunately I was already scheduled for a meeting in Washington, D.C., and was unable to change reservations to attend. I did however prepare a file for the director highlighting interactions online with the students surrounding the incident.

Facilitators monitored the online interactions of the students and moved the dialogue from a place of anger to a place of compassion. Students whose work had been plagiarized responded with anger and emotion, posting comments like: "He stole my soul!" I responded: "Have you ever wanted to be somebody you're not, or pretended to be someone you're not? Have you ever felt inadequate? Have you ever been desperate to do well, no matter what it took?" Students responded affirmatively and eased in their natural inclination to place blame and to persecute.

At the meeting including the student, his regular teacher, the director of the online program, the school principal, and the parents, the parents objected to the public discussion of the incident with other students in the online forum.

The actions of one student impacted the other students in our learning community. The boy's actions caused a significant amount of discomfort and levels of trust weakened. The teachers in our forum were not viewed as the authority. Rather, we had a democratic process of dialogue we

used to deal with issues which affected us all. The student who had plagiarized was not being excused, as such, for the transgression. Students asked for an apology. One of our solutions was to put a copyright on each online conference page stating, “All information copyrighted and cannot be reproduced without permission from the author.” Students took ownership and learned problem solving skills along with compassion and empathy.

The parent later submitted a Freedom of Information Act request for how to file a grievance against the arts organization and district who funded the online program. Such a policy was not in place. I was told by the director that the parents had filed a lawsuit, though I later found out this was untrue. Administration immediately took an adversarial position and placed blame and responsibility on me as the teacher. Through numerous confrontational phone calls, the administration tried to coerce me into signing a document of “inappropriate action.” I responded that the same disciplinary procedures had been followed previously in three other instances. The director asked if it wasn’t possible to focus on the “content” of the course without addressing such emotional issues. I responded that art and emotion are inextricable.

Administration had been more than happy to accept the program’s national and international accolades, but took an adversarial position at the first sign of any challenge, which was to be expected in a fledgling program without policy in place. Not only did they fail to provide leadership, they looked to absolve themselves of any responsibility for program improvement or administrative monitoring.

One of the bonuses of online education is that ALL interactions are archived and retrievable, comparable to tape recording a face-to-face classroom on a daily basis. Eventually, with the district, the parents and the arts organization all employing attorneys, I did have to hire counsel to ensure that no negative memos or documentation would find its way to my permanent

teaching file. This was accomplished. However, the superintendent of the district announced that the program would no longer be offered within the public schools of the area.

Unfortunately, while it is possible to intervene where students are concerned, the powers of a teacher are limited when confronted by issues of administration and bureaucracy. The plagiarism case eventually led to the cancellation of the funding for the online program under the auspices of the local public school system. At that time I was contracted for a full time teacher's salary and benefits as an independent education and technology consultant. I submitted my resignation along with policy considerations for the funding organizations and public school districts (Appendix L).

Without these kinds of policy in place, or without the inclination to develop them, without making the learning explicit as we evolve, it is all for naught. The research, the learning, should be made available and applied for those who embark on similar educational endeavors in on-line education in the future. Administrators readily accepted community enthusiasm and positive response to the work of the students online, but immediately withdrew support at the first hint of a challenge.

Throughout this melee with the district, I was very conscious of how I was responding. Students had previously participated in marketing our program by performing for fundraisers, community events, political meetings and local, state, national, and international conferences. I knew the students had not only a direct ownership of the program, but would be learning from my responses, good or bad. I remained calm and tried to demonstrate a sense of grace under pressure. I stepped outside of the system and asked the students to come with me, voluntarily. I tried to help them see this "ending" as a beginning which held the possibility for freedom to learn as we chose without external pressures like grades.

Students in the original group are still voluntarily participating and paying their own server fees. They remain a part of the community, which is now four years old, and have mentored several other groups who have come online to participate including teachers, professors, and high school students from other districts. Students have taken their learning into the outside world.

Over a year after our program was cancelled by the district, the local paper printed a front-page article with a byline of 'Online course flawed' (Appendix J). Parents of students in the online program responding vehemently in favor of their children's experience in the course along with educators, artists, authors and others involved in working with the students in letters to the editor (Appendix J). In addition, the local paper printed a viewpoint article I wrote refuting the original article which intended to discredit our work. It felt gratifying to have a public forum for detailing what happened regarding the program cancellation. Parents, students and participating authors also immediately wrote to the organization superintendent immediately upon hearing of the program cancellation (Appendix J).

The program title is now 21 BEAT St., an acronym for the intersection of Business, Education, Arts and Technology in the 21st Century. It is a voluntary community of writers and students joined by those working for credit from public schools and workshops for intern teachers. I continue to guide the interactions online as the director of 21 BEAT St. along with my co-teacher, Launz Burch. We sometimes contract with schools and corporations for our services in technology and education consultancy, but most of it is voluntary at this point. The campus has been re-designed after the Irish village of Kinsale with building names reflecting our literary emphasis.



The learning community 21 BEAT St. is for high school students in various courses and educators interested in learning more about teaching, technology and facilitating learning online, including paradigm, pedagogical, and assessment practices. Part of the problem with most online programs is that they seek to replicate the ftf experience: delivering lectures by videolink at specific times; building websites which act as "textbooks;" sending and receiving set 'homework' through email; working to a rigid curriculum with a very specific examination at the end.

What has been most useful about this program is that it is designed way to take advantage of the online medium, rather than trying to replicate a classroom. The best classroom will always be just that: a classroom. What is demonstrated here is how the Internet can be used as something other than a traditional classroom to facilitate learning.

Our program has attracted interest and participation from an impressive array of people — visiting authors and poets, groups of students, and individuals ranging in age from adolescent to 80, signing on from around the world. Our participant numbers have ranged from 20 to 120 since the program's inception.

The connections between business, education, arts and technology continue to expand in our online campus. Of the 18 original participants in this study, six won awards and scholarships for

their writing. One is living in Washington, D.C. and working for Nintendo on the Pokemon tour. Several are writing majors in university and several are planning to be English teachers. 50% of the original student population are working in technology related jobs. Two are assisting in running a virtual community: <http://www.memespace.org>; six did internships in Washington D.C., either for the server company or for the National Endowments for the Arts. Three worked for our local community Net company and developed a site called LearnNet designed for students, parents, and teachers to use as a resource and networking board. Many have published in various forums.

Currently a group of World Literature high school students are participating from a nearby district using the online forums to augment their regular school course. In addition, students enrolled in a graphics arts course in Virginia share their work with the writing students which sometimes spurs collaborative arts work between them. We currently have a proposal submitted in conjunction with the virtual College of Exploration for a teacher workshop involving participants in a project in Ireland.

Our virtual campus, 21 BEAT St. offers teachers a place to learn from experienced online facilitators. We specialize in offering courses and workshops which include instruction in:

- ❑ Online communications
- ❑ Online facilitation skills
- ❑ Tailoring core curriculum to specific content objectives
- ❑ Online program design
- ❑ Instructional delivery methods
- ❑ Authentic cross-disciplinary learning with a diverse population of participants
- ❑ Integral program assessment using Empowerment Evaluation

- ❑ Development of online learning communities
- ❑ Pedagogical theory and praxis
- ❑ Peer and teacher mentoring
- ❑ Technology as a new literacy

Chapter Seven: Questions and Implications for the Future

Writing a story or a novel is one way of discovering sequence in experience, of stumbling upon cause and effect in the happenings of a writer's own life. Connections slowly emerge. Like distant landmarks you are approaching, cause and effect begin to align themselves, draw closer together. Experiences too indefinite of outline in themselves to be recognized to be recognized for themselves connect and are identified as a larger shape. And suddenly a light is thrown back, as when our train makes a curve, showing that there has been a mountain of meaning rising behind you on the way you've come, is rising there still, proven now through retrospect (Nodding & Witherell, 1998, p.88).

While each of the findings for the Empowerment Evaluation goals has been summarized and discussed fully, to look at the whole sense of what has been learned is paramount to validity.

What did the research implicate as to the elements and dynamics associated with creating, implementing, and assessing a secondary education online creative writing community which may be used to improve instructional design and delivery of future courses in online education?

The following tenets serve to answer this question more fully:

A combination of both online and face-to-face interaction represents an ideal educational environment. However, most think in terms of the majority of class time being spent in the regular classroom, augmented by online "education" which, as the research shows, is focused primarily upon finding information and creating websites and rarely includes fully interactive, community-based online communications. What this project helps to demonstrate is that if the model is reversed-- with online education being the primary content delivery mechanism matched with skilled facilitation and supplemented by occasional ftf meetings self-organized by the participants when deemed necessary-- that a powerful new environment for teaching and learning becomes possible. Such an environment has the capacity to cross cultural, age, class, gender, race and content area boundaries. The online environment fosters the possibility for

participants to become co-learners and teachers. Resources expand. Costs of maintaining physical structures are defrayed. Rural and urban, gifted and special needs students may all be served online.

Of interest also however is that when I ask students about most memorable moments, they always highlight face-to-face gatherings. Students suggest that the closeness developed online and the infrequency of our physical meetings contributed to these meetings being so “special.” They point to getting to know each other from the “inside” first, through their writing and beliefs, which in turn solidified friendships formed later in person. There is a catalytic energy which occurs ftf which cannot be replicated in the online environment.

Potentials for future educational endeavors combining technology with real time learning are only as limited as our vision. Moving forward responsibly and documenting our progress and questions is critical. Additionally, administrations need to recognize the quality of work that is possible in well-designed online instructional mediums. Currently they only recognize “contact hours” as time spent in a physical classroom, presenting a huge barrier to accrediting credible online programs by responsible educators.

Online teaching pedagogy and praxis will be reflective of our beliefs carried over from the more traditional educational environment. Any classroom, whether online or ftf, will only be as “good” as its teachers. By necessity, cognizance and learning styles are changing to meet new world demands. Technology will play a vital role in the future of our students, specifically in ways it changes how they think, create, communicate, live, work, and play. We can apply what we already know about teaching and learning to new educational environments, but should understand how change creates an initial sense of discomfort and fear, which in turn necessitates

flexibility and openness to learning new methods and ways of thinking about our craft and our perceptions of “reality.”

Teacher application and innovation in applying technology needs to be supported by administrations and communities. Without financial, ideological, and philosophical support by governments, educational administrations and global communities, teachers cannot feel secure in applying these new technologies. All learning organizations will experience the unexpected as new terrain is explored. There is no need to falter if teachers, administrators, and communities are willing to work together to address the demands and celebrate the successes made possible by the advent of new technologies and the subsequent innovations in teaching which may result. Author Palmer Parker in his book, Courage to Teach, 1998, states:

As we try to understand the subject in the community of trust, we enter into complex patterns of communication-sharing observations and interpretations, complementing each other, torn by conflict in this moment and joined by consensus in the next. The community of truth, far from being linear and static and hierarchical, is circular, interactive and dynamic. Conflict is the dynamic by which we test ideas in the open, in a communal effort to stretch each other and make better sense of the world (p. 103).

Integral assessment for program evaluation which places participants at the center of the process fuels a self-determining learning community. Everyone involved in the evolution of the online program had a felt sense of ownership. The foundational structure provided by Empowerment Evaluation methods allowed a continual feedback loop for program improvement and placed responsibility for high achievement and attendance to growth as writers and as people. Levels of empowerment reached from individual to organizational to larger communities. The intentional creation of a self-directed learning community allowed students

and teachers to feel comfortable taking risks in exploring a multi-disciplinary and highly intense arts based curriculum.

School learning should reflect natural learning more closely. As they say, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” Intrinsically motivated learning is preferred over externally motivated, grade driven models. Assessing students’ individual and collective skills and talents and subsequently co-designing learning plans and goals which support what students have a need and a desire to know creates an environment conducive to authentic process. This includes student reflection on their growth as learners and as people, with attention focused on self-awareness and respect for diverse viewpoints and worldviews. Collaborative learning and networking, which taps people and information and the connections between them, is a necessary part of the new global society. Just as in natural learning situations, students may ask questions, do research, ask for assistance, work independently exploring theories in practice, or have someone show them. Unique to the online environment are the resources of people-- authors, scientists and specialists in all fields who can be directly contacted to discuss and question newly learned information. And online, play and work seem to find a natural balance and rhythm not often found in the typical classroom.

The online environment when facilitated by constructivist, liberatory educators appears to support:

- ❖ Cross-disciplinary and more integrated ways of knowing
- ❖ Collaborative and cooperative learning
- ❖ Improved writing and online communication skills
- ❖ Strong sense of a learning community
- ❖ Broadened global resource base

- ❖ Project and inquiry based curriculum development
- ❖ Participants as co-learners
- ❖ Learning of technology skills as a new literacy, imperative to the future job market
- ❖ New educational environment possibilities
- ❖ Constructivist paradigm of teaching and learning
- ❖ Integral means of assessment such as Empowerment Evaluation and portfolios
- ❖ Archives for ongoing research and review
- ❖ Longitudinal connections with students with geographic, age and gender boundaries eradicated

Clearly this research provides significant support for the effectiveness of constructivist, liberatory pedagogy to enhance learning in the online educational environment. More research is needed which documents successful approaches to online instruction and the effective application of emerging technologies in the 21st century. We must ask ourselves: Are our methods based on the latest learning theories? Are we offering our students the best possible instruction? Is the focus of online educational programs fiscal, or does our teaching center on enhancing the student learning experience and offering new opportunities of value that cannot be replicated in the former classrooms of the past? Is the learning environment fully interactive? Does it make the best use of software available? Are facilitators skilled in online communications and pedagogy? Are we including our students' voices, ideas, and astute technological skills in our endeavors? Are administrations and political bodies willing to support teachers innovating new learning experiences for their students? Will the capacity of the online environment foster a closing of the digital divide between haves and have-nots, or serve to increase it and maintain the current social order? Can we create a new culture of hope by

connecting youth around the globe from an early stage, teaching them to honor diversity, dialogue, and an important clash of ideas? These questions remain in our hands as conscientious educator-researchers.

It is time to move forward and to continue documenting our progress, our failures, our hopes, the possibilities.

Postscript: A Retrospective Reflection

As with any research project or study, the results are but a moment in a continuous process of learning and re-learning. I have done my best to articulate the dynamics and the core elements of the program and research process, seeking to refine the ever-elusive answer to the question: “How do you do what you do?” However, I would caution any reader to consider that while this study may serve as a guide to creating, implementing, and assessing online creative literacy programs, the chemistry and catalysts which made this learning experience both successful and valuable to its participants cannot be packaged. It is about connectivity, love of learning, creativity, and the craft of teaching. It is about an exceptional group of students and teachers who did not distinguish work from play.

The study focuses on a two-year window of interactions with a core group of students. Our communications and connections still continue, however, in our online learning community, now four years old. Just last night I received a phone call from Los Angeles. Jessica, my student from Geneva, recently moved there to begin film school. Two of her friends from the mid-west and our online program, were there visiting. One had never been on an airplane before. His is now a senior at university and will become a secondary education English teacher. The other had never been to the west coast, having just graduated from high school and enrolling as a freshman as a creative writing major. The three of them called me from Jessica’s porch where they were

watching the sun set on the Pacific Ocean. How different the connections I have with these students in comparison to those I had for 50 minutes a day for a calendar school year.

This project was not without significant challenges. The possibilities for research in on-line education is infinite, given all interactions are archived and retrievable. As with any subject, one can view from a myriad of perspectives. We are in the process of creating new educational environments using what we know and asking important questions about our uncertainties.

What excites me most about this project is the way it demonstrates what's possible when we believe in ourselves and our students and when we place joy at the center of what we do and why. The power of the students' learning experience shines inside these pages, as often as possible in their own beautifully refined voices.

As I finished speaking with each of my students in L.A., Sean said to me, "Ginny, you'll always be my teacher."

I replied, "And you mine."

And so we continue.

APPENDIX A: Research Release Form

APPENDIX B: Entry Survey

Name:

Grade:

Date:

How do you feel about yourself as a writer?

Rate how you feel about yourself as a writer on the scale from 1 to 5
1=poor, 2=fair, 3=good, 4=very good, 5=excellent

How often do you write? Every day, 2-3 times a week, 1-3 times a month, hardly ever

What kinds of things do you write in your own time? Rate in order of preference:
Letters, personal journal, poetry, short stories, plays, music lyrics, novels, computer related communications, other.

Explain your first two choices and why these are your favorite modes of writing.

Why do you write?

How would you define creative writing?

What inspires you to write?

What would you like to improve about your writing and/or what frustrates you about your writing?

Why were you interested in taking this class and what do you hope to learn?

Do you have any concerns or anxiety about the course?

Have you ever taken a writing course in the past? If so, what was your experience like in that class?

How is your writing in school the same or different from the writing you do on your own?

What suggestions could you offer in relation to the teaching of writing in the school setting?

How do you feel about yourself as a reader?

What do you enjoy reading most? Rate by order of preference: .magazines, fiction, non-fiction, informational, biography, autobiography, short stories, letters, poetry, children's literature, plays, other

How often do you read for pleasure? Daily, once or twice a week, occasionally, hardly ever

Who are some of your favorite authors and why?

Name 3-5 favorite books and why you like them.

Rate your proficiency in computer technology from a 1 to a 5. 1=very low, 2=low, 3=average, 4=above average, 5=high

How would you rate your typing speed?
Slow, medium, fast? Words per minute?

APPENDIX C: Exit Survey

Which functions have you used during the course of our program? Circle yes, no, or don't know.

Email, personal conference lists, edit function, html text option, literal text option, word wrapped text option, cut and paste, uploading files, word processor in conjunction with Netscape, create own item function, mark all items as seen, new or individually managed, delete response function, freeze and thaw and remove from list. Have you been into any of these public Metanet conferences? Winter, spring, artist, sangha, society, kitchen, web, learning, other?

If you have entered public Metanet conferences, describe the experience please? Was it useful, or not? What are the highlights of your experience?

How many days a week do you access on average?

How much time average per day do you spend online? 15 minutes or less, 30 minutes, 45-60 minutes, over an hour and up to two, more

How much additional time do you spend offline on this course? Less than half an hour, half an hour to an hour, more than an hour.

In relation to our online community, rate the following from 1-5 with 1=poor, 2=fair, 3=average, 4=good, 5=excellent, n/a=not applicable

Course organization
Course content
Facilitation
Peer relationships
Teacher student relationships
Assessments:
Empowerment evaluation
Portfolios
Reflection papers
Visiting author's forum
Café of the arts
Metanet conferences
Group Meetings
Orientation
Awards and empowerment gathering
Final gathering
Trips
Presentations
Self organized face to face meetings
Rating for sense of learning community overall

Do you think the class should meet more often ftf? Yes, no, don't care.

Weekly/bi-weekly/monthly?

If so, do you think these meetings should be mandatory or voluntary?

Should they be teacher or student organized?

Do you feel you are part of our learning community? Why or why not? Please be thorough.

What did you learn that was valuable to you, if anything?

Is there anything you would have liked to learn that you didn't?

How often do you write? Every day, 2-3 times a week, 1-3 times a month, hardly ever.

Rate your proficiency in computer technology from 1-5. 1=poor, 2=fair, 3=fairly good, 4=good, 5=excellent

How do you feel about yourself as a writer from 1-5? 1=poor, 2=fair, 3=fairly good, 4=good, 5=extremely good

Why is creative writing important to you?

What kinds of things do you write? Letters, personal journal, poetry, short stories, plays, music lyrics, novels, messages, computer related communications, other

What did you like best about this course? Least?

Rate your experience in the course from one to ten with one being low, ten high. Why this particular rating?

What would you like to improve about your writing and/or what frustrates you about your writing?

How has your writing improved as a result of this class, if at all?

What are ways this program could be improved? Be specific.

Did you accomplish your goals as a learner? Yes, no, how so?

Did you feel learning community goals were accomplished? Yes, no, how so?

At the end of the second year, students still participating from the original survey were again asked a series of questions for comparisons:

Rate the program and your experience in it from 1-10 and tell why you chose the number you did?

In terms of goals from last year, could you rate each of those again from 1-5?

In relation to our online learning community, rate the following from 1-5 with one representing "poor" and 2=fair 3=average 4=good 5=excellent or n/a for not applicable

course organization: _____
course content: _____
facilitation: _____
peer relationships: _____
teacher-student relationships: _____
visiting author's forum: _____
cafe of the arts _____:
metanet conferences: _____
Trips: _____
Presentations: _____
self organized meetings: _____

Rating for the sense of learning community overall? _____

Our goals were as follows:

- 1. Community-6.84**
- 2. To become better writers-7.52**
- 3. Technology as a learning medium-6.72**
- 4. Self-awareness-6.84**
- 5. Environment where freedom can flourish-8.73**
- 6. Give/take/use feedback/critique-6.16**

Can you code these according to how you'd rate now? This is where we started from.

APPENDIX D: Pre-Writing Prompt

APPENDIX E: Post Writing Prompt

APPENDIX F: Holistic Scoring for MEAP Writing Proficiency Test

Ratings:

4: The paper is engaging, original, clear, and focused; ideas and content are richly developed with details and examples. Organization and form enhance the central idea or theme; ideas are presented coherently to move the reader through the text. The voice of the writer is compelling and conveys the writer's meaning through effective sentence structure and precise word choices. Skillful use of writing conventions contributes to the polished effect of the writing.

3: The paper is reasonably clear, focused, and well supported; ideas and content are adequately developed through details and examples. Organization and form are appropriate, and ideas are generally presented coherently. The voice of the writer contributes to the writer's meaning through appropriate and varied sentence structure and word choices. Surface features don't interfere from understanding or distract from meaning.

2: The paper has some focus and support; ideas and content may be developed with limited details and examples. The writing may be somewhat disorganized or too obviously structured. The voice of the writer is generally absent; basic sentence structure and limited vocabulary convey a simple message. Surface features may reduce understanding and interfere with meaning.

1: The paper has little focus and development; ideas and content are supported by few, if any, details and examples. There is little discernible shape or direction. The writer's story flat. Awkward sentence structure and inadequate vocabulary interfere with understanding. Limited control of surface features make the paper difficult to read.

APPENDIX G: Student Article Published by ITU

International Telecommunications Union
Geneva, Switzerland-1997
Education and the Internet: The Reality

Creative Writers on the Net: A Dialogue between Three Students
Edited by Virginia S. Little with Jessica Ott, Sean Moiles, Katherine Blanke

The following article is an edited dialogue between three students, Katherine Blanke, Jessica Ott, and Sean Moiles. Each of these students participate in the Creative Writers on the Net program in Kalamazoo, Michigan (<http://www.tmn.com/efa>). Kat and Sean participated for the full year during the 1997 school term and live in Michigan, while Jessica entered the program as a visitor during the final quarter. Jessica accessed the program from Geneva, Switzerland and next year will be enrolled as a full time student. The concept of a dialogic format, a word dance, for the article arose through their teacher sharing the idea of a "talking book" developed by Paulo Freire and his colleagues in their writings about education and social justice. "Here we are trying to decide how to get moments of each other's lives and to bring them to a book, a book which does not lose the essence of life. A dialogue is as the life that comes from the earth's springs" (Freire, 1990). Since our idea for the article surrounded bringing our own lived experience in education and the Internet, this format well-suited our needs and wishes. We anticipated questions our audience would wonder about or be most interested in and then began our dialogue around the umbrella question: How might we describe our experience in education and the Internet?

Kat: So far Education and the Internet is just beginning. We're sort of like pioneers.

Sean: It's a great way to meet people from around the world therefore you learn about different cultures and diversity which you can't get within school boundaries.

Jess: English class was boring, not even that it was boring..I've been talking English since I was two. In the Creative Writers on the Net on-line class I am learning things, not just repeating things I've known for years.

Sean: Does it make a difference that you're learning with other English speakers, in a more natural context?

Kat: Is it not so formalized like learning to say, "May I have a glass of water?" It seems to me that it's confusing if someone is from another country is teaching a different language.

Jess: So much of what you learn in a classroom in language is things like names of animals and not really things you will need to communicate.

Kat: On-line, it's like you wonder if people will speak other languages like French or German, but it seems really natural. Like with Jess, it doesn't seem like she's across an ocean, it seems like she's right here with us.

Sean: Along with that, there's a blind element, you can't see people based on their color. Everyone is equal. It doesn't matter how much money we have or other qualifiers.

Jess: You get to know these people by what they think and what's inside, not what you see. If you were speaking to someone, say you didn't like their haircut, you might not want to even get to know them. You don't judge people on-line by their looks but by their mind and by their souls.

Kat: We get to respect and accept each other by our views.

Jess: If you write something you don't have to look a person in the eye to wait for their response, you don't have to be shy. You don't see the person's reaction. If I would write a poem and read it to you and you said, "it was bad" it would upset me. But if I read critique on-line, I don't mind so much.

Sean: You're more likely to get the truth on-line, especially important for writing.

Kat: People take more time thinking about what they're going to say.

Sean: On-line you get a chance to reflect before you respond.

Kat: You take time, you can go back and notice little things, rather than just blanket, "this is good or this is bad." This is what made our critique so much better.

Sean: Also you get critiques from everyone, not just the teacher.

Kat: It makes you want to write more, people look more closely and that makes you want to look more closely at your own work and become better.

Sean: And when you give critiques, and you have to pay close attention to other people's style, it helps you be more aware of your own writing and approach to creative expression. In the future, people may be reading computer screens instead of books too, for example, and it may change the way we express ourselves. Longer posts, for example, are harder to read.

Kat: The way we express ourselves on-line can be different, like when we learned html, we started adding color and graphics, for example, which added a whole new way of saying what you were thinking, it added emphasis and imagination. Jess, were you scared at first because you came late into our class as a visitor?

Jess: Yea, I was a little anxious, but not really scared. I was thinking they're going to think my writing bad. But instead of saying I don't like this, students say, I would change this or maybe think about this in regards to your writing. It was comfortable and I felt welcomed and supported in taking risks in my writing.

Kat: It makes me want to write more cause I didn't know anyone so I thought it was more of a chance to be myself instead of what people thought I was. I also had never shared my writing with anyone before. I started with poetry, pretty bad poetry. I had never written poetry before and I wanted to try something new. It felt good. If it felt good, I'd write it down. Eventually I wanted to express myself more through words. That was good because if you try and look for a reason to write it seems forced, but when I had a reason to write from inside, it sounded good and people liked it, and I liked it! That then made me want to write more.

Jess: I like to write but I don't think of myself as a writer.

Kat: That's stereotypical though cause people think you're only a writer if you've published. I used to think that too, but not anymore. Because of this class, I write more and I have more inspiration. I only write now if I am inspired. It's an outlet. It's kind of like a right and a privilege. I think you're a writer if you write everyday, or if you think of yourself as a writer. Why don't you think of yourself as a writer?

Jess: I like playing basketball but I don't think of myself as a basketball player.

Sean: Do you take playing basketball seriously? Or writing?

Kat: How often do you write?

Jess: Not too often. When I have something to say, when it comes to me. I can't just sit in front of a piece of paper and write something, like how they ask you to do in school.

Sean: Did this class trigger more ideas or give you a need to write more often?

Jess: I do want to write more often now. I read some of the stuff other people wrote and I'd like to get to these ideas and be able to express them like these other people my age. I was impressed by what people managed to write. I want to be able to write like I see others doing.

Kat: I like the discussions on-line. We were free to express and voice all kinds of opinions without hesitating.

Sean: You're forced to read and write all the time and if you want to respond, you have to think about it, and really attend to your communications. There's no physical softeners. You have to be clear and concise.

Kat: And we learned to use qualifiers in our writing, like "she says as she shrugs her shoulders."

Jess: I enjoy this cause I can work on my English, I can work on my writing. I can communicate with people who have different views on life than the people I see every day.

Kat: Not only did we all become better writers, we became friends, knowing that we all came from different ways of thinking, and learning to respect that.

Sean: In thinking about our audience right now, I presume they're thinking, "So what did you learn?"

Kat: A lot more than you would in a regular classroom. In my English classroom I only knew a couple people well.

Sean: What's more important is that in this class you learn more about what it is you really want to know and what you're interested in, and it's a more authentic process. It's not like read chapter 3, test tomorrow.

Kat: It's not what the system requires, it's what you want to learn to be a better person and be better able to do what you want to do.

Sean: You interact with all different people instead of just the teacher telling you what to do. It's more of a democratic process. The teacher plays more of a role as a guide, asking key questions, questions for you to search upon. If the class is on the Internet, you shouldn't just have the teacher as the authority. There are so many people and resources on-line that can be used.

Kat: Most teachers are more interested in being "The Teacher" and being in control than in the student and what they are learning.

Sean: We need more teachers who spark ideas for you to search for answers instead of giving you the answers or telling you.

Kat: Yea, it's like multiple choice instead of true-false.

Jess: Teachers I have, most of them, just want to get out what they have to do. Once they say it, we're just supposed to know it. In this class, the teacher tries to get us to say, to get close to our own answers, not just saying "it's this way."

Kat: We were more like co-learners in this class, not just the teacher relaying information to students for later in life, if they remember it. If I'm not interested I don't learn. If a teacher seems like they enjoy teaching, it makes me enthusiastic.

Jess: Most teachers only think about their job as a job, they aren't so interested in our questions, or our learning. If you don't understand, teachers say, you should have listened. In this particular class if I didn't understand something, I could ask and the teacher would explain it in another way, or even again, in another. In regular class, even if I listen and I don't understand, they think I am stupid or I should be in another class. It's hard to translate my thoughts into English. Let me think a minute.

Kat: This class seems more relaxed.

Sean: I look forward to it.

Jess: I can go to "class" whenever I want to, you don't have to be in a classroom at a certain time, or worry about being late.

Sean: There's no bells. I can write as long as I want without being interrupted.

Jess: Now I am thinking that the audience is thinking, when can I be part of it?! Or, are they learning what they should be learning?

Kat: I think some people think that if it's fun it's not learning. A lot of kids in my school said, you like this class? They didn't understand that you could take an English class and enjoy yourself. Other classes are just lectures. A class you enjoy is like gym, not English.

Jess: I'm not even doing this for school, I'm doing this for myself. If I'm willing to learn outside of school, I do it for my own learning on my own time. So it shows it's something I like and enjoy. I wouldn't do it on my own if I didn't. If a class is taught in a way you enjoy, you don't mind spending your own time.

Kat: I spend more time on this class than my others. I work harder because I have a personal desire to do better.

Sean: I work an hour a day nearly seven days a week. I also spend time off-line writing and reading.

Jess: What motivates me is reading what other kids write and I think it's really good and I learn from that and I want to get to the same level.

Kat: I learned from this class how to write more clearly. That worked out great. So now in my second year, I want to learn how to critique better and how to make my own work better, to say what I want to say and have it mean something.

Sean: My writing improved; my computer skills improved. I can analyze a piece of literature more in-depth. I learned about different types of people and how different people are and think. I also learned the importance of revision. I always thought it was important I just didn't know what to look for to change.

Kat: I didn't know how to revise. I knew it existed but I didn't know how to do it, why for example you should keep a certain line, or trash another one. I've learned to be more myself in this class because I wasn't well-liked when I was growing up. I didn't fit in partly because I liked to read and write a lot. I didn't like myself and I didn't want to conform.

Jess: Yea, seems like in school you have to be like everyone else, dressing the same way, like clones of one person, or an actor. On-line you're just yourself and you act natural cause you don't talk about superficial kinds of things. Like if somebody writes something it's about what they feel and then others talk about what they feel too.

Kat: But even on-line it took awhile to get to know people. We had to develop a sense of community and get to know each other more personally. We did this through our writing, gradually. People are complex.

Jess: It's like an onion, peeling layers. And learning on-line is like that too. It's multi-layered and the learning is all interwoven. Like in the cafe, we talk about everything from physics to music to whether we believe in God. And yet, it's all creative writing and ways of expressing. This way the learning is not fragmented like in school with separated classes. We see more how things interrelate.

Kat: I like the way everyone got along on-line when we talked about all these different topics online. That was good to know. We developed trust. Our book had chapters on worldviews, on being a writer, on relationships, on love and family, lots of topics. We had lots we wanted to talk about and the on-line forum gave us the place and the space to do it. In regular classrooms there's

no time nor allowance for that kind of dialogue about what means most to us. We have to focus on getting the lesson that day, or doing homework instead of how we feel about stuff.

Sean: This online course created an environment where our creative ideas could flourish, and where learning became authentically integrated with life and discovery. Our yearlong projects and our learning directions were inquiry-driven, on our own needs to know. That's what true learning is about.

OK. I think we've addressed a lot of the primary aspects of our experiences and what other people would want to know or would question. We've discussed the foundations of this class including:

1. Cultural diversity and learning to respect disparate views
2. The learning of languages
3. The equality of the learning environment and democratic process
4. The essential nature of literacy, how reading and writing correlate, and how literacy is shifting as a result of online communications
5. The benefit of many-to-many communications
6. The openness and respect that on-line education can catalyze
8. Our thoughts on being writers and how life and learning can be integrated
9. The purpose of the teacher on-line in contrast to the traditional classroom
10. The freedom and accessibility of the medium and the outlet for self-exploration that a class like this can provide
11. In general, what we learned

As some of the first students to co-design an online educational program on the Internet, we hope that this dialogue provides a window into our experience and will offer others insights to consider as on-line communications and the Internet become more widely applied. The quality of the learning experience should always be placed in the forefront when discussing Education and the Internet. We feel fortunate to have experienced such a positive year as co-learners in the Creative Writing on the Internet program.

APPENDIX H: Poetic Drama

We are the Poets: Crossing Boundaries

The following poetic drama was first presented for The Pedagogy and Theater of the Oppressed conference in Omaha, Nebraska, March, 1998 by students from the Creative Writers on the Net class.

The first introductory piece, “We are the Poets,” is an example of Linked Verse, a form of Korean poetry. Each of us posted stanzas online over a period of a month. One of the students then edited the piece into a single poem. The rest of the presentation is a result of the students creating character sketches of marginalized people.

All poems were collaboratively edited and revised online. Original authors of each piece are listed. Some of the poems are “response poems” where one student would post a poem and then another student would respond to that character from a different point of view. This provides an excellent example of how writing online can be a collaborative, cooperative process. Students then added dance, music, and dramatization for the pieces with a narrator to weave the poems into a more cohesive performance piece.

WE ARE THE POETS: collective writing edited by Molly McDonald

(Stage direction: Players all stand in varying heights and position, turning toward audience as they recite their stanza and returning to position upon completion.)

We are the poets,
making dreams of sandcastles and skipping stones,
worn carpets and green Converse All-Stars,
the feel of yellow,
omnipotence,
the Everyday.

We paint broad strokes on a canvas,
of colors forgotten in the familiar comfort experienced by most,
of lemonade,
blue bowls,
and purple swirlings in our stomachs,
of snapshots freezing moments in time.

We are the poets,
we set no absolute direction for the reader's journey,
shape no destiny for the path they choose to walk-
we are simply shaping and molding a fluid substance,
not whittling away at stone.

We are the poets,
embodying the strength of words.
Our empowerment of verbs
enables you to command your thoughts-

obey, oppress, rejoice, embarrass, seduce.
Our manipulation of nouns
authorizes your tendency to label-
slut, saint, mother, addict, jerk.
Our reinforcement of adjectives
gives you the freedom to judge-
ugly, skinny, catholic, feminine, racist.
Our pre-meditated deposits of conjunctions
plant seeds of doubt in your mind-
but...or...yet...

Do we use these words too carelessly, too easily,
manipulating them to our whims?
Do we force only our own truth?

We are the poets,
learning to capture words, and tame them,
possessing a clarity of thought,
a clarity of vision,
that transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

We discover complexity in the depths of normality-
the plushness of a blanket,
pearls released from the mouth of a fish,
the glow of a night-light.

We are the poets-
they that create worlds,
destroy universes,
rebuild cosmos,
just to gain understanding,
just to add light to a dark room,
dullness to a bright one.

World and life intermingle with our ink blottings
of late-night-coffee seances,
putting forth an effervescent glow-
the light of freedom, justice, equality, faith,
a light casting a new reflection on the souls of others.

We indulge them with color, energy, and life,
only to set them free in the meticulous world
of shadow and light,
giving them space to wander, explore, discover.
We are the poets.
We live vicariously through characters

with wild hair,
who never wear underwear,
and chain smoke.
Who laugh at their own jokes,
use the backs of their sleeves to wipe their noses,
who are passionate about Tuesdays.
We are the poets.

NARRATOR: written by Virginia Little and Katherine Blanke- Performed by Katherine Blanke

(stage directions: narrator lights a candle and sits stage right in a chair throughout the performance)

I sit cross-legged on the floor,
sole candle flame
flickering shadows on the wall.
Almost a graduate,
supposedly grown,
my world lit only by the flame.
It doesn't show the way.
What did they teach me-
parents, school, society?
Their words, who they are.
They determined my path for me.
Don't ever let me see you kissing that black boy.
Don't talk to strangers.
Don't go to the north side of town.
Don't cross the river to the other side.
The boundaries of class, color,
just boundaries of difference.
I didn't question it; I was only a child, I had no say.
I noticed the groups at school,
all groups of the same color segregated by familiarity and fear.
Stay with your own.
Don't try anything new.
Don't contaminate your mind with someone else's crazy ideas.
Stay closed and safe.
And when I question,
my teachers tell me to be quiet.
Don't talk back, my parents say.
My pastor says he doesn't know.
My words fail me without action.
Questioning authority, anything,
unacceptable.
I don't know what I am talking about,
they say.

And so the questions are silenced,
until awakened by some movement,
someone reaching, some inner scream,
or an unblinding of the eyes
refusing the boundaries and the bars of the cage.
The light doesn't show the way.
My words become a window
and this is what I see.

INVISIBLE by Drew Davey

(Stage direction: Young boy in tattered clothes and baseball cap jingling a change can comes to left center stage)

I wipe my nose
with icicle fingers
and my cough feels like
steel wool
scraping my throat.
the chill of the wind
wells tears in my eyes
and the coldness of life
sheds tears on my heart.

I wasn't quite six
when we were kicked out of our house;
Mama's addiction ate the rent money.
Sure wish I had somethin' to eat.
She left me alone
in streets I didn't know,
said I'd be "better off" without her.
I'd hate to see how she's doin' right now...
Every day it's the
same ole thing-
gotta beg to eat
and hug myself for warmth.
Sure wish someone else would hug me.
Most people pass me their change,
sometimes a bill or two,
except that man in the spiffy suit~
he pretends his ears don't work.
The dark invites the cold
and it seems ironic my house once held a refrigerator.
Sure wish I had a bigger box-
my feet dangle out the end
or my head out the other.
Tonight my feet are especially cold

and my head feels especially hot.
So I think I'll lie down to dream of a better life
where I have decent meals, clean clothes,
and a life I'd love to live.
(Boy lies down on the floor)

NARRATOR:

I should just mind my own business
and leave him alone.
Never mind that he's cold,
that he's hungry,
he's alone with no one to look after him,
or to play with him,
or to love and hug him.

But if I give him some change,
will it really help him?
Will he buy food or a blanket,
or drugs or alcohol?
Does it matter?
Will it change his life
or just make me feel better for helping out a poor little kid?

Why are children thrown away every day while people
scream madness about recycling?
When will we stop battering our own kind and stop worrying
about material things?

(to boy) How can you just stay here like this?
Do you still hope?
Do you still love your parents who left you here,
cold and alone without a single idea of how to survive?
Do you still dream of growing up and becoming the president or an astronaut?
Can you still love?
Are you capable of love after being left here by the people who bore you,
after being ignored,
after being denied a life that you could live?

BABY-BLUE HAND by Phillip Rhoades

(stage direction: man dressed in business suit carrying briefcase walks quickly to center stage
checking his watch as he walks.)

I must of walked by that kid
Every day for two months.
Passed him and looked away too quickly
Hidden in my own life,

Hurrying to my job.
But today,
While the wind screamed at the ice
And the city shook,
I heard a silence-
One voice simply wasn't there,
Wasn't asking me for change
Like he had all those days before.
I think that was the first time
I really saw him.
Passed every day for two months
And didn't see him,
Refused to see him
Until he wasn't there.
I hated myself,
Worried over what I hadn't done.
I stood and hoped for that voice,
The tiny one with a cough.
But I knew
He wouldn't be asking for change
Tomorrow.

NARRATOR:

There he is, just minding his own business
passing the little boy by every day on his way.
Just pretending he's not there,
that his business is more important.

Sir, don't you see?
Can you see that boy over there living in a box,
alone?
With no one to love him?
He's just over there.

That could be you someday.
You could be out in the cold,
asking every passerby for change,
feeling as though everyone rejects you.

Do you have some time?
Do you know someone who could help? Anything?
Or is he just better off invisible?

I COME FROM DUST by Marta Brill

Each morning the sun rises over the rows of crops.

And some days I watch my father get ready for work,
tattered flannel shirt, jeans, rough hands, strong back.
I watch his graceful movements with pride.
He walks slowly to the rows.

I've seen the world from the back of a pick-up, following the crops
cucumbers then blueberries then apples then corn
Florida is Arizona is Michigan to me
same sky overhead, same thick dusty roads, same camps.
There are always new friends to be made, just like the one's we left behind.
Friends that look just like me, mirrors of my bronze skin and black hair.

This is my home: humidity.
I come from dust.
I trace my roots to peeling white wash trailers,
and parents with back-aches that never go away.
My dad says things are all right, there is work, we do fine.
Enough money for the gas to get us to the next field.
and some groceries.
Can I have a toy dad?
My torn shoe becomes a car and races around the trailer.

On Mondays the vans come filled with white people. I race to meet them.
They play soccer with us and bring us bikes, clothes, and treats.
Teenage girls give us piggy back rides and swing us by the arms
round and round we collapse from dizziness.
We give them bags of cucumbers and play our Mexican music.
Soon the van leaves.
I watch the dust cloud swirl as it vanishes beyond the horizon.
I wish I could follow.

Each day I imitate my father's steady stride as he walks toward the rows.
I pattern my movements after his, but stumble over the uneven ground.
My friend Fernando no longer walks beside me to school.
Instead he follows his father to the fields.

I sit in an unfamiliar desk and listen to an unfamiliar voice.
I try to focus on the teacher and the maze of letters and numbers,
But there have been too many faceless teachers,
too many chalked up blackboards.
My eyes shift to the open window.

For the workers a break is a sip of water
a miracle is a pair of second hand shoes that fit.
For me, a break is a dance with the sun
and a barefoot run through the grass.

I laugh with sparkling eyes and grow stronger every day.
I see the world as aflame with possibilities from the back of our pick-up.
But they just tell me I am young and don't know any better.

(stage direction: boy sits on floor just left of narrator, pulls off shoe and begins playing with it as if a toy car)

NARRATOR:

I don't understand who you are,
why your eyes aren't blue like mine,
why you don't live like us.

Don't you feel limited?
Always on the go, never staying long enough in one spot to make lasting friends,
to go to school.
Haven't you ever wanted more than what you have now?
A house to live in all the time, friends to see every day, a more secure life and future dreams?
Don't you get scared?
What happens when the work becomes scarce and you have no money?
How will you live?
My uncle lost his job.
He says your parents are taking his
and that you shouldn't be here.

Why do we work so hard to
keep you out?
Why are we so afraid of someone achieving
Our dream?

DREAMDANCE by Helen Walls

(stage direction: player sits in a chair with legs covered by a blanket)

People look at me
as if my soul is incomplete
because I can't dance.
People talk about me
as if I'm not in the room
because I can't stand up to challenge them.
People bury me in blankets
and leave me in a safe nest at home
because I can't walk
can't walk
I can't walk beside them.

As you look at me right now,
I see the distance in your eyes

focusing on the color of this blanket
on the shiny floor beneath my chair.
I can fight my distance, my prejudice
only by living in shadows,
letting you see only my words.
You can't oppress a sentence
or stereotype a paragraph.

I try to tell myself
it happened for a reason-
that secretly I am a goddess.
But that thought, so warm
tucked inside my heart,
seeped out through the hole in my chest
And came out as a sob
that went on and on...

Kids dream when they're little
of running for president,
flying to the moon,
playing basketball with the greats.

I just wanted to dance.

In bed I listened to my mother and father
dancing drunkenly in the kitchen
singing don't you step on my blue suede shoes
And the sounds of their shuffling feet
lulled my restless brain to sleep.

Once, I leapt out of bed
spun around and around my room
Until I was flying
and my legs were wings.
I woke up crying,
at six years old realizing
the emptiness that would be my life.

I try to tell myself
it happened for a reason-
that secretly I am a goddess.
But that thought, so warm,
tucked inside my heart
seeped through the hold in my chest,
The hole that no one ever took the time to sew shut--
Why waste time on an incomplete soul?

NARRATOR:

Her face is so sad,
mouth closed, unsmiling,
eyes vacant, unfocused, just blank.
As if she can't care about what she's feeling.
I don't know how to talk to her.
What if she thinks I'm staring?
What if she thinks I'm trying not to look?
She's different; she's hurt; I'm afraid.
It could've been me.

I don't understand you,
and I don't think I ever could,
but I feel for you,
as little as those words sound.
Do you still dream?
You can still do anything;
your heart can be your wings,
let yourself fly-
Fly for everyone who thought you were broken.
Fly for the dreams that crumbled at your stilled feet.

ON RETURNING TO IOWA by Molly McDonald

Even before she was confined to a bed,
having her feet rubbed was the highest of luxuries.
So I rub them now,
my hands working instinctively
beneath layer upon layer of starched sheets
and rough blankets smelling of institution-
massaging, kneading, smoothing away the knots
solidified by a lifetime of living.
As my fingers tire from the deliberate sculpting of skin and muscle,
I begin to see with my hands
proof of what she's known in her tired bones for years:
It's time for her to go home.
She begins her walk
with the warm evening breeze tangled in her thin cotton dress,
the fabric caught between her legs,
absorbing the fine layer of sweat that has settled on her skin
throughout the sticky heat of the day.
Waves of corn lap up against her heels,
beckoning to her to join them
in their soundless dance beneath the rising moon.
She longs to join in the gentle swirling and eddying of the verdant leaves,
Prepared to lose herself in the timeless movement of the field-

back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.
But upon seeing the beacon of light streaming from the back porch,
She redirects her path,
Following the dulcet melody of the rusting wind chimes
And the familiar sounds floating out of the kitchen windows-
Shuffling cards,
Crying babies,
The scraping of metal spoons against porcelain dishes,
Heavy footsteps on wooden floors,
Animated voices,
Brewing coffee,
Laughter.
Before the screen door slams behind her for the last time,
she sweeps the coupling June-bugs off of the cement steps,
and gives her marigolds a good soaking with the hose.

NARRATOR:

Look at her alone in a cold, sterile room
away from family, friends, life.
She's lived her life and now been thrown away.
They say, "We can't take care of you; we have our own lives."
Young grandchildren never visit, despite the parents' promise.
They'll never know her visions, her stories, her wisdom.
All the lost experiences, these lost people,
the lost heritage,
we ourselves push away.

FALTERING FAITH by Marta Brill

(stage direction: player dressed in priest garb, collar and coat, holds a bible and a cross)

This incense is choking me,
these vestments weigh me down.
I try to be like Christ,
to emulate his spirit:
such infinite compassion and unyielding love
that moved me as a young man.
These days I never know what to think.

I want to touch
the bleeding young runaway,
the empty disabled woman,
the aching worker from the fields,
to touch their faces, but reach further:
I want to sooth their soul.
But my words are lost
in a whirlpool of endless doctrine

drowning out my cries for the
lonely, oppressed, and dying.

People come to me pleading
for help
forgiveness
confirmation of faith.
"Yes my son, my daughter
God above has his plan,
the greater scheme of things.
Say five-hundred Hail-Marys
and don't forget to call your mother."

Sometimes I think I'm lying to them:
How can I absolve in His name?
How can a sinful mortal ever pretend to be clean enough
to give absolution without hypocrisy?

"Hello Jane Doe
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."
And as I mouth the words
I feel the distance between us widening.

This cross elevates me to God's messenger;
His Mercury.
Yet it also makes me responsible for His actions.
The actions of an absent being.
I think I see a few holes
in the greater scheme of things.

Why doesn't God appear and give us some help?
I've taught that this isn't his way.
He's detached
and just 'checks in' for his messages.
Maybe it's time he started answering them.

I read in the paper
a child has been found
battered,
tortured,
violated,
and left for dead on the riverbank.

After years of searching,
I'm further away from the truth
than when I began.

I don't know if truth exists anymore.

So where do I go?
My bishop?
but he seems more like a glorified administrator
one who manages, not tends, the flocks.
His crosier speaks of indifference.

So where do I go?
At night I read the Catechism, the Bible, Augustine
Squinting at lines of laws and theory
Abstract and Idealistic
they inspire
but do not show the way.

So where do I go?
How can I turn to God and hope that He will listen?

NARRATOR:

Father, I've seen so many people today.
People with lost eyes and broken souls.
Unloved people with shattered dreams and forgotten hopes.
I see this same vacancy in your eyes.

Who will help the people, guide them, inspire them,
when they are hurt and hopeless?
Where are their leaders, our leaders,
those who show us the way?

These lost people are questioning their faith;
Why isn't God helping me?
Where is God?
What is the president doing to help me?
Where are the Ghandi's and Thomas Jeffersons?
Religious wars, the constant accusals,
"you're not of my faith; you must conform!"
The picketing people outside abortion clinics.
Why must people shed blood for blood?
Can't we walk hand in hand instead of meeting fist to fist?

I know you have these same questions, Father,
and no more answers than I have.
But maybe it's time we look inside ourselves
for the inner glow, the inner fire,
instead of to someone else..

Maybe it's time to realize
Only we can save ourselves,
through our own divine spirits.

GAIEA CRIES by Caryn Senour and Justin Sacks

(stage direction: player center stage with floral head wreath of vine and flowers)

You've circled my equator
you've burrowed deep beneath my surface
left my atmosphere
and been to the bottom of my oceans
but do you really understand where you've been?
You can predict my weather
measure my earthquakes
observe my tornadoes
and record my eruptions
but do you realize my majesty?
You've studied my
Fossils, flora, fauna
and researched my physics-
but can you really understand My creation?
You have razed my forests, dumped garbage all over me,
but do you truly comprehend what you've done?
You have paved me,
ripped holes in me,
and used me up.
When will you stop?
Take a moment
from your petty
human differences
and get to know Me.

NARRATOR:

One day the people of the world will come together
seeing past race, color, sex, religion,
our oppressors,
and realize the common bond between us.
The desire to touch our Mother, our Earth.
From that which bore us, to that which we will
Return.

BLINK by Brian Jespersen

There is a man walking,
through the streets of depression and despair.
A man not in touch with the world.
A man who doesn't care.

He walks through streets of trash,
past hideous crimes,
on past a child being born.
He walks not caring.
He walks not living.
He doesn't see the dawn of sun.
He can't hear the laughter of children
and screams of other distant worlds.
He walks endlessly and aimlessly.
Not a thought of joy.
Not a pain at heart.
He walks,
until he stops
and
blinks.

NARRATOR:

What awakening is there?
The light doesn't show the way.
How can I reach past what has been expected of me?
How can I open my eyes and free myself from the darkness of these
boundaries before me
set by other blinded figures?
How can I learn new things breaking through what I have learned before?
How do I reach through the boundaries of color, of class, of differences?
Let my color melt into yours,
let my eyes reflect yours like the sun on a placid lake.
Let us understand each other without fear.
I am the lake; you are the sun.
Let us reflect each other without the clouds holding us back.
I mirror you on the inside;
we fear, we love, we hurt, we hate.
We are capable of understanding,
we only need to choose to use it.
Why fear the unknown, the uncomfortable?
Why hold the same views, opinions,
and self to go unchanging for years?
I still sit,
my world lit only by the flame.
The light doesn't show the way.
Only in my outstretched arms
and now wide-open eyes
will the path be illuminated,
and seen.

ONE written by Virginia Weldon, performed by Jackie Petto

(stage direction: player goes up to narrator and takes candle, moves to center stage)

One match
Struck against the darkness,
If only for an instant,
Forever alters our perception
Of "things as they are."
Shadows and distortions
Are transformed
And, in the process,
So are we all.
One candle
Held high above our heads
Illumines the landscape
Around us
Extending our boundaries
Beyond where we stand,
Challenging us to take action,
Showing us where we might go
As well as where we have been.

One Soul, a fire,
Is a torch
Passed from heart to heart
Stirring embers in some,
Igniting new light in others-
And, through them all
Creating a solar fire
To birth a fresh sun of consciousness
As light for our planet.

It only takes one.
One match.
One candle.
One Soul.
One.

(stage direction: each player in turn takes the candle and adds, and One, passing it on to the next player. All players finish holding hands and bowing with conclusion and bow: We are the Poets.)

HOME AGAIN a post-reflection by Aaron Webb

Words, words, words, words.
How can I sit here, scribbling words furiously
when I could be up

doing, creating, saving?

Maybe the next person that I stood next to in the elevator
would say the right thing
would suddenly turn me into a neat, organized person
who Got Things Done.
Good things, that would save myself, and change lives.

Maybe a walk on the street would show me something
something random and wonderful
that would change my Self into that optimistic, hopeful person
who can spend a night without staring out the window
for sleepless hours pondering the mysteries of
evil, war, death, ignorance, classism
and humanity.
What I would do to be able to believe that it is going to be all right.

Maybe if I had stayed in the bustling room,
instead of cowering in a poet's hideaway
I could have said the right thing to
or heard the right thing from
the beautiful, funny woman filled with life.
Someone cracks the right joke,
looks the right look,
and I suddenly get my chance to be the romantic
falling over myself in loving, giving glee.
A powerful soul, melding with mine,
And that first wonderful kiss of love and devotion
instead of affection or motherly ease.

Maybe I should be sitting open
a receptacle for a spiritual experience
which gives one new life.
Future insurance, just a martyr away.
All life's questions answered by lists measured in
chapter, line and verse.
A trusted mentor to be followed and listened to
even on the deathbed,
a leader who appears on a neat, pious schedule.
The terrifying concepts of
evolution, future, universe, and purpose
set neatly in diamond encrusted boxes.

Instead of the selfish, archival shit,
I could be writing things that Matter.
A fantastic masterwork that could inspire.

Maybe a book that hundreds of people
would travel to discuss:
"The Pedagogy of the Lonely, Heartless, Lazy, Disorganized
Poet who Retreats and Hopes and Loves and Wants"
I could write the ultimate treatise of the
"Win-Win" concept causing Gaia to weep with joy
and millionaires and peasants to hold hands
their music rising above the cold cities.
Maybe I could write something that would satisfy me!
Maybe these things are within my grasp
or I should at least try to achieve some of them.
But it's all wrong:
I'll write some more shit
rearrange my priorities
snooze through another sunny day
accidentally repulse the caring woman
and cry myself to sleep.

APPENDIX I: Goals and Outcomes from August 1996:

APPENDIX J: Newspaper reports, letters to the editor from parents and educators, letters to superintendent of the arts program:

The following letters are three of many sent to the superintendent of EFA programs in response to the cancellation of the creative writing on-line program.

Dear Mr. -----,

I'm an Australian writer with a modest publishing history, and for the last year or so, I've been involved in the Education for the Arts programme as a guest author with Ginny Little's class in creative writing. I've kept up with the current situation with regards to that class, and with all due respect, I think it's well past time that we had a talk.

I'm well aware that the odds aren't good for the class to be resurrected under the auspices of its previous supporters. That's not why I'm writing to you. No, I'm writing because I'm not certain you're really aware of what's happened here, and what's at stake. I admit that's a pretty audacious thing to say from fifteen thousand kilometres away, but if you'll bear with me, I hope you'll understand what I'm getting at by the time this letter is finished.

You see, it seems to me that what's at issue here is a matter of deep principle - an issue which calls into question the reasons each and every one of us has chosen to be involved with education in the first place. Think about it: there are two basic types of problem with the modern education system. They can be reasonably easily classified either as problems that people like you and Ginny and I can't really hope to solve - such as underfunding, and community attitudes to education -and problems that we can legitimately approach, here and now, with our own hands and hearts and minds.

What kind of problems would those be? Well, if you asked me, I'd tell you that after a year of working closely with the EFA students, and after my own schooling, and after talking to students here in Australia too, the big problems that we might consider looking at are all fairly closely related. Failure to engage the students, for example. Lack of relevance in the conventional curriculum - that's another. The production of assembly-line, rote-learned average students as opposed to individuals with a real interest in understanding and learning - that's another one, very important.

After all, when you think about it, what's the best possible outcome for conventional schooling? Some very few students, gifted with quick understanding and the ability to absorb large quantities of information without losing their curiosity, will master the curriculum and remain interested in further study. By far the majority will discover that in order to pass, all they need to do is parrot a set of pre-arranged answers and performances, and to a greater or lesser degree, they will do exactly that. A very substantial minority will find themselves either incapable of doing this under school conditions, or unwilling to do so, and will wind up being discarded by the system altogether.

Is this satisfactory to you? Is this set of outcomes the reason you decided to work in education? Is it the best that can be achieved?

I doubt it. I think that the EFA creative writing class has demonstrated a number of vital, powerful alternatives, and has succeeded in overcoming most - if not all - of these problems. The evidence is there for you to examine at any time you care to do so.

Take this idea of actively engaging the students, for example. Why don't you ask my young friend Rob Swikoski about that one? Get in contact with him, identify yourself, and ask him how it felt to write his very first poem, Mr Wiles. Or his second, or his third... and then, why don't you contact some of his other English teachers and ask them why they think that Rob hadn't written poetry before this? I'd be kind of interested to find the answers to that one myself, because it's abundantly clear that Rob really enjoys being part of a creative process and sharing his ideas with others, even accepting criticism and looking for new ways to find his own voice. Personally, I find that engaging the students is a lot easier than trying to deal with them without doing so, and I'm damned if I can figure out how a conventional class structure can hope to succeed without it.

Then there's this idea of relevance in the curriculum. Do you recall what it means to be seventeen years old? I certainly do. I remember very clearly how it was to be trapped in a construction created entirely by people who seemed to have no interest in my personal thoughts, ideas and feelings. I can remember how it felt to have a mass of facts and dates thrust at me, to be told that I was to remember them and digest them because they were "important." Oh yes, they were important, all right. They were important because if I didn't master them, then I wouldn't be "passed" by an examination system in which I had no voice, and "accepted" by a tertiary system which had never attempted to address itself to me.

You know the question that kept occurring to me while I was trying to digest all that crap? I sure hope you do, because I can guarantee you that the self-same question has been occurring to every one of the kids in your schools: why the hell am I doing this, anyway?

So, how can you ensure a relevant curriculum? It's not that hard. Come on into the EFA class and take a look around. Sure, we're only about 'creative writing' - but why don't you look at some of the discussions on strong social issues, such as drugs, and abortion, religion and war? Or have a look at the curiosity the students display about topics as varied as Vietnam, economic policy, and Zen Buddhism? It's not hard to make a subject relevant. All you really have to do is engage your students and let them ask questions. Sooner or later they'll wind up leading themselves right down the path of learning - and they'll absorb a hundred times more because they came there of their own accord, and they can see why the matter under study is worth learning about.

As for helping create individuals with a zest for learning - well, I hardly dare write on this for fear of sounding like some kind of new-age Pollyanna of "empowerment". The students themselves are the very best arguments for that one. Take a look at their work. See what they have made of themselves. Look at the questions they dare to ask. Look at the way they revel in finding themselves, given only half a chance - it's there in the writing of every one.

When I came to the forum, I had fairly ordinary expectations. I recall that I thought I might have to "dumb down" what I was saying and doing for a high school class. I recall being very apprehensive about approaching controversial topics -although my own writing deals with such things almost constantly. I remember thinking that I would be dealing with students - probably prompted and primed with a few questions from their teacher, which could be answered tidily and conventionally, with a few literary flourishes to make it all look neat.

I was wrong. I was very wrong.

I have seen the sun rise in these students. I have read words which have touched me to the core. I have smelled and touched and heard and tasted a score of insights which would never have come to me on my own, and I have wrestled with impossibly difficult ideas as a result of their thoughts and curiosity. I have not met students: I have met individuals. I have met equals - perhaps with less experience than myself, but with every bit as much drive and talent and potential. I have met real people with real thoughts and real ideas, and if you look there, where I have been, you'll see them for yourself. These aren't rote-learned ciphers or cogs in an educational system. These are live human beings who are fascinated and appalled by the world they're expected to join, and are desperate to learn more about it, and about themselves. It's a lot easier to let them be individuals than it is to force them into a common mould.

That brings me back to this idea of principle. After all, if the education system isn't for the benefit of the students, then what is it for? And if it is, why isn't more attention being paid to what they want, rather than what society sees fit to thrust upon them. Did anyone think to ask the students what they felt about the matter before this class was withdrawn?

Principle: we're here for the students, not just because of them.

Now you know what I've been doing. Now you know what I've been giving to the principle. Now I'd like to know something from you: what are you giving these people?

Do you think that's an unfair question? I could load it a little more. I could point out that you get a salary for what you do, and that I've put in rather a lot of my own time and money without expectation of any material return. could suggest that I've been a real martyr to The Cause, and you should be ashamed and embarrassed to have had any part

in the closure of the programme - but that would be bullshit, and it's not what I'm here to say. Because, you see, I have been given a return from the system, and it's the nature of that return that I want you to know about.

I'm a little afraid you may have forgotten what it's like to be in a place where giving and receiving, teaching and learning are all one and the same. Maybe you were never lucky enough to find a place like that to begin with, in which case you need to learn. "Teaching" in the forum has been a revitalising miracle for me. I've learned more about writing and criticism in the last year than in the ten years preceding. I've made friends and had arguments, and floated ideas and shot down other ideas. I've challenged others and been challenged, and risen to meet the challenges as best I can. These students - they kindly say that I've been a help to them, and when I hear this from them, I despair of ever being able to explain just how much help they've been to me.

I have given, and everything given has been returned to me a hundredfold. I've been part of something very powerful, very special. I've seen the light on the horizon, the shape of things to come, the New Jerusalem, and I tell you, I am the kind of convert who could make St Paul look like an atheist. I'll be coming to Michigan in July with the express purpose of learning every last thing that I can about setting up another such class on the internet. And then I'm going back to Australia, and like a madman, like a fool, like a grinning idiot, I'm going to break my back trying to convince the education system here to make something similar. Because we need it. Because they need it. Because I need it, and the hope it gives me for the future.

That's what I'm giving these people. It's not a lot, but it's the best I can do. And so I'm going to ask you again, and this time, I'm hoping you'll consider the question very, very closely: what are you going to give them?

Yours sincerely,

Launz Burch

Dear Mr. _____:

Concerning the cancellation of Creative Writers on the Internet..

I don't think I can express in words what this class has meant to my life.

Illustration by example: here is an excerpt from an article published in News You Can Use, the Arts Council Newsletter.

..Shawn Nicolen, Creative Writers' webmaster (<http://www.tmn.com/efa>), who parlayed this high school class into a summer internship with The Metasystems Design Group in Washington, DC. Shawn says this experience with Creative Writers on the 'Net changed his life. He is a freshman at Western Michigan University in computer science, has a part time job at Net-Link, the local ISP....

And afterwards, I used my previous experience at Net-Link, along with some help from Ms. Ginny Little to obtain a job as web-master of the office of educational technology at western michigan university. (<http://www.oet.wmich.edu>). I see this in turn leading to new opportunities at larger companies, or even someday my own. My life.

I don't like to think about where I would be if I had not had the opportunity to participate in this class. Flipping burgers maybe? What it's all about is the experience of the thing; meeting people and learning the ways in which technology changes society and the ways in which we learn things in such an environment.

I realize this is just one letter.. and I'm not sure if this is even the right channel to be pursuing... but anything you can do, or any information you could provide me on how to ensure the continued survival of this environment would be greatly appreciated.

Thanks for your time,

Shawn Nicolen (mailto:shawnn@tmn.com)
Net-Link Systems Customer Service
WMU Office of Educational Technology Webmaster

434 North Lincoln Street
Arlington, Virginia 22201
June 9, 1998

Superintendent

Dear Mr. -----:

I am Deputy General Counsel of the National Endowment for the Arts. I am also an active member of the Meta Network community, which for the past two years has hosted the Creative Writers on the Net program.

I am writing (in my personal capacity and not on behalf of the Endowment) to urge you to reconsider your decision not to offer the Creative Writers on the Net class next year.

I have been so impressed by the quality of the program and the students involved that I have invited two of the students to intern this summer at the Endowment. I am looking forward to working with them to harness both the specific skills and the creative energies that they have developed in this extraordinary class. I am sure that you are receiving many letters from students in the program and their parents. They can attest, better than I, to the extraordinary qualities of the program and the ways in which it has enhanced their writing and technological skills and enriched their lives.

It would be a terrible shame if such opportunities were denied to other Kalamazoo students, as well as to the students who wish to continue in the program. It would, however, be an even greater shame if this model program were ended before it has the chance to spread to other communities. Creative Writers on the Net serves as a national model of an innovative, cross-community arts education program melding creativity and technology. Indeed, last year, we featured the program on the Endowment's website. A copy of that article is appended.

I urge you to reconsider. Many thanks.

Sincerely yours,

Hope O'Keefe

APPENDIX K: Course Descriptions

Title: Creative Writers on the Net

Course Concept: A creative writing course designed for online communications and instruction through a text-based medium. Students will correspond with other students and teachers via a bulletin board system and Internet homepage location. Students will log on either from home or school computers and explore the vast resources for writers on the Internet. Visiting authors, in-depth writing projects, peer and teacher response to writings, and building online learning community are all an integral part of this program with the content focused on exploring the various creative writing genres.

Course Description: The design of Creative Writers on the Net is based on research in literacy and computer mediated instruction. Technology is considered the new literacy of the 21st century. All communications for the course are archived and continuously recorded allowing students freedom to complete their work at their convenience while still attending to timelines and course guidelines. Students check into a homeroom area to access weekly course assignments and important announcements. The online classroom houses individualized student folders for posting ongoing writing work, responding to peer writings, and developing one's creative writing talents. Instructors provide detailed one-to-one feedback to every student. The Student Center provides an area for individual and/or small group collaborative year-long writing projects with the final goal to move one's work into the larger community. The Visiting Authors Forum allows students and teachers to invite popular authors of interest to the students to engage in extended dialogue about writing, writing process, and publishing. Face-to-face meetings include the Orientation session for online training in how to navigate the conferences and to meet

classmates and instructors, student organized gatherings, a self-organized writer's workshop session, and end of the year culminating celebration of our work together.

Goals and Objectives: Students in the Creative Writers on the Net course will demonstrate the ability to:

1. Draft, revise and explore the varying creative writing genres
2. Use the technological system for instructional purposes
3. Work cooperatively and collaboratively in an online learning environment
4. Respond reflectively and constructively to co-learners
5. Incorporate responses of peers and mentors in revisions.
6. Make substantive use of online resources for writers
7. Maintain an electronic portfolio
8. Be an integral member of an online learning community which encourages diversity in ways of perceiving the world
9. Connect life and learning in meaningful ways
10. Explore the development of Self as a writer/person
11. Create knowledge and interpret the world through an authentic writing voice.

Assessment: Students will participate in developing a community evaluation model for attending to the writing process beginning with the question, "What makes a piece of writing "good?" Students will be required each quarter to write a reflection paper analyzing their participation in the course and their growth as writers/people, including writing samples and support for what grade they feel they deserve. Students will also develop an ongoing process-portfolio with reflective summations of their writing progress.

Course Length: Students spend an average of one hour per day online not counting reading and writing offline time. Full year. Two credits.

Prerequisites: Acceptance into the literary arts course will include:

1. Formal letter of interest application
2. Teacher recommendations from the home school

Staffing: Certified secondary language arts teacher with substantial experience in teaching in online forums. Writing and creative arts experience required.

Recommended Environment:

Schools must provide the following:

1. Computer (IBM 486 or higher running Windows 3.1 or higher) (MAC Mac OS System 7.5 or higher, lower versions must purchase MacTCP. 8 MB RAM recommended).
2. Time and quiet working space for student access to school computer for ALL students accessing from school sites.
3. Netscape version 2.1 or higher
4. Internet access through 28.8 modem or higher
5. VGA color monitor
6. Standard dial up phone line connection
7. Information access network guidelines

Nearly all students elected to continue working online a second year. Thus, the advanced course was created during the summer.

Course Title: Advanced Course: Creative Writing on the Net

Course Concept: The advanced course is designed for students who have completed the first year course and wish to continue their work on the Internet as writers and as a learning and

literacy community. Students will be able to maintain contact with peers from the first year and through their already deeply established connections as a writing community continue to develop their work as writers through a second-year program.

Course Description: As these students will have already surmounted the technological aspects of online learning and established their sense of learning community, they will now be able to focus more intensively on further developing their skills as writers and as a community who is able to learn both collaboratively and cooperatively. Initially students will be responsible for mentoring incoming students to the first year course as online consultants for the program sharing their learned skills and expertise. Students will continue to develop writing projects started in their first year, or may decide to design new projects based on their learning experiences from the original course. Students will be encouraged to publish and share their work in outside communities and will develop a full group presentation of their works. Much of the curriculum will be co-generated with the students as we explore together the directions for their second year of study. Students will continue to participate in an online learning campus, will have weekly writing assignments, and will maintain an ongoing process-portfolio to demonstrate their progress as writers/people.

Goals and Objectives: Students in the advanced course will demonstrate the ability to:

1. Be mentors to incoming students and online facilitators fostering the goals of the program.
2. Maintain an extended learning and literacy community through active participation and respect for community members
3. Develop an in-depth writing project of value to themselves as writers and to the larger literary community.
4. Present their work in public forums, speaking, demonstrating, publishing.

5. Reflect on their growth over a two year extended course period
6. Advance their technological proficiencies
7. Self-organize and direct meaningful learning activities and directions
8. Maintain an ongoing process-folio of their work with reflective commentary supported by online archives of their writing work.
9. Be creative and imaginative in their explorations of literacy and learning.

Assessment: Students and teachers will negotiate appropriate guidelines for assessing student growth and progress as writers.

Course Length: Two hours average daily commitment online as well as offline reading and writing time. Full year. Two credits.

Prerequisites: Teacher approval and successfully completed first year Creative Writers on the Net course.

Staffing: Instructors from the first year will facilitate second year program as integral members of the student learning community.

Recommended Environment: Same as first year course.

Appendix L: Policy Guideline Suggestions

Policy Issues and Suggestions for Needed Guidelines

An EFA policy for teacher and program evaluation should be clearly articulated in writing and be consistent for all EFA teachers and courses. This might include such things as quarterly progress reports by teachers, documentation of issues arising with students or some guidelines to follow, etc. I have suggested Empowerment Evaluation in as a viable program evaluation tool which would be suitable for all EFA programs.

Teachers should be guaranteed all rights of any certified teacher in the system.

Disciplinary Actions with Students should include:

Notification of director or administrator of record or both?

Talk or meet with student

Talk or meet with parent

Notify school counselor or principal when appropriate

Notify social services when deemed necessary

Discuss with online community with permission of student for re-entrance to class if the incident involves other students or is deemed to have an impact on the ability to conduct class, or if it has served to erode trust or the ability for other students to learn.

Budget items and allocated funding needs to be in writing and approved by EFA, supporting district and teacher of record so there isn't confusion between the three.

Policy needs to be generated for enrollment and withdrawal procedures for EFA students.

Student with EFA laptop who fails two consecutive classes should be asked to return laptop and withdraw from class. Students who continually disrupt online learning environment by aggressive or unacceptable behavior may be asked to withdraw. Student who does not participate in an ongoing and acceptable level will be asked to withdraw...just as some suggestions.

Communications from home schools needs to be more clearly outlined. I often don't know who is in the class, who is just failing, who has withdrawn.

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