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Teaching Students to Talk to Each Other: Improving the Discussion Board

*<http://www.lehigh.edu/~indiscus/>*¹

By and large, my students don't know how to talk to each other. Well, you know what I mean. Like virtually all humanities teachers, I value discussion and have always made a prominent place for it in my pedagogy. But, again maybe like virtually all humanities teachers, I have equally always been more or less unsatisfied with the results. In class there was never enough time, never enough participation, and ever too much talking to *me*. If I left students alone, they frittered. If I led them too much, they withered. And always, always at root there was stark uncertainty about how to fairly assess their contributions. So, frankly, I greeted the advent of electronic discussion boards like news of the Second Coming. Here was a chance for all students to talk, for all students to talk *to* each other, and for all students to talk to each other in a way that I could observe and, where necessary, provide guidance to insure meaningful and productive talk. Here was a chance of realizing my career-long dream of a true learning community characterized by a culture of intellectual conversation.

Deus ex machina. Didst think the machine would fix all for you? How have you lived so long, Gallagher, and retained such naiveté? Silly me. The spectre of dissatisfaction soon cast its shadow over my discussion board as well. I was, in simple fact, not using the discussion board properly. I was using it as a bulletin board, either

asking students to post individual, discrete messages or, at best, to post and respond to someone else. In the former case my students paid just about as much attention to the posts of others as they do to notices on unweeded bulletin boards in school corridors. On the other hand, the post-and-respond case seemingly yielded mostly only unreflective agreement or knee-jerk argument, end of story. I worked hard to incorporate student posts into my classes, but I provided little in the way of instruction and graded mainly on the number of posts they did. I told students how much to post but not much about how to post. It is no wonder my students didn't know how to talk to each other. It is no wonder that I sensed no general student huzzas at the increased opportunity to raise their voices. Quite the contrary, graffiti-ish statements like "I hate discussion boards" were appearing *unsolicited* on senior student exit surveys across the department, indicating that other teachers were stirring similar discontents.

What I gradually realized is what I will call the centrifugal force of discussion boards. What I gradually realized is that I had leashed the discussion board to my existing pedagogy -- added it on -- when what it wanted to do was pull me out of my orbit and reshape my pedagogy. One or two posts aren't "discussion." There was untapped potential for so much more if, indeed, discussion were to play any significant role in intellectual development at all. For my VKP project entitled "Improving the Discussion Board," then, I finally yielded to the Call of the Wild. In a general education course of twenty-three students on 19th century American writers, I "decapitated" my usual pedagogical sequence of informal lecture, discussion, essay -- deposing the sovereign essay, making discussion (in class as well as on the board) 100% of student

evaluation. In this class the discussion board would be performance space not rehearsal space.

This course – “American Literature: The Essentials” – was a new course totally designed around the discussion board. There were seven two-week units, the first a more-or-less “regular” week in which the students did their posts. In the second, which I called the “meta-week,” I used student posts from the previous week as our texts not only to deepen the intellectual inquiry into our essential authors (Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, Douglass, Jacobs, Crane, Twain) but also to raise consciousness about the nature of posting itself. Over the seven units, the students gradually moved from one individual post to a five-post interchange involving multiple partners, and I captured their thinking at each step with a meta-week survey (eight in all). This was total immersion, a discussion board “boot camp” for both the students and me. I was in training to become the “sage on the side” (in Randy Bass’s witty turn of phrase), and my goal was for students to develop “rhetorical muscle memory” (a tip o’ the hat to my Lehigh colleague Stephen Tompkins for this one). Each student wrote (and I read) eighty-three posts and responded to (and I read) 114 short-answer survey questions over the course of the course.

So how did I proceed? What was my strategy for improving the discussion board? First, I immediately engaged in a bit of therapeutic brain washing. From Minute One, Day One I instituted a propaganda campaign aimed at combating auto-pilotness and reshaping student class worldview. We are not, I proclaimed, a more-or-less random aggregation of Lehigh drones here to feed the university bureaucracy yet another credential on our individual paths to graduation. Rather, we are a learning community

pooling our imagination, knowledge, and skills to understand and interpret seven of the most significant works in American culture. I tried to inculcate this worldview through a constitution, a mantra, and a metaphor – three different ways of “saying” essentially the same thing: that the discussion board was central not marginal, essential not trivial, to the learning in this course.

A Constitution: The Visible Heart of our Community is the Discussion Board

Even though all course documents were online in our Blackboard course web site, I opened the class by giving students, for dramatic effect, one real piece of paper, a description of a learning community that I called our “Constitution” – yes, capital letter, as in the founding document of a society – that valorized the discussion board as our visible heart, the place where bloods mingle. Discussion boards only make sense if you begin with the idea that the class is a community. Students need to think of "us," not just "me," if they are to take the discussion board seriously. Conversation makes us colleagues. Community is the *point d'appui*, as Thoreau would say. Community is job one. Without a sense of community, discussion withers.

It is clear from survey 1 that the “courseview,” if you will, embodied in the “Constitution,” which I referred back to religiously and ritualistically several times, was alien to the current reality of these Lehigh students. Though the survey shows lip-service to the value of classmates to their education, when I asked the students to choose a specific personal analogy or metaphor for college, they revealed themselves – depressingly -- as passive (college is like purgatory where others decide our fate), joyless (college is like a buffet bar filled only with tough choices) toilers (negotiating college is

like cresting ocean waves) in a community-less middle world. Only two responders mentioned the role of other students at all, and about the best they could say about it was that though college is like scaling a mountain, “The task is better if you have a few climbing partners.” Ah, the partnership of pain. Thank heavens for fellow sufferers!

In survey 8, however, all students except three reported a high level of community behavior ranging from new social relationships outside of class to the free and civil interaction in discussion. One student characterizes the evolution of community in this way: "I think that at the beginning, people were participating only to show how intelligent or insightful they were individually. by mid semester, a lot of people finally started working WITH each other, really trying to actively keep conversations going online and in class. when G presented ‘good’ DB posts, it wasn't just specific people, but groups of people who worked well together AS A GROUP.”² Just the kind of society the Constitution was designed to promote!

A Mantra: The Art of Writing on the Discussion Board is to Keep the Conversation Going

It was a safe bet, later borne out by surveys, that few students received any prior instruction about how to write on the discussion board, and my sense, later borne out by the evidence of their first posts (see Writing Socially below), was that they would simply write there in the same manner as they wrote their formal essays. However, the mainly argumentative and persuasive essay writing we teach at Lehigh is meant precisely to shut off discussion. Most often we teach students to write essays in which they prove a thesis, in which they conclude conclusively. In the ideal world, all readers could do at the end

of a successful, well-wrought essay is nod in affirmation, compelled by an inexorable train of argument. That is precisely not the kind of writing on the discussion board I wanted students to do, so I felt the need for a mantra to help combat ingrained habits and naturalized thinking about how to write.

Thus, in addition to the Constitution, I also greeted students opening day with the mantra "The art of writing on the discussion board is to keep the conversation going." I wrote that line on as many course documents as I could. I chanted it in class as many times as I could find excuse to. When I passed the students on campus, I gave them the first part of the line and demanded that they fill out the rest. I wanted this line blazed on the brains of my posters. I wanted no doubt among the students as to what their purpose on the discussion board was. And, as you can see from the above comment that students were "really trying to actively *keep conversations going* online and in class" [my emphasis], the mantra worked its magic, creeping into community speech as surreptitiously but not as disruptively as Bartleby's "I prefer not to" in Melville's essential story.

A Metaphor: Writing on the Discussion Board is like a Game of *Noncompetitive*

Racquetball

Besides a Constitution and a mantra, I felt I also needed a metaphor for the relatively new practice of discussion board writing because our culture almost exclusively values, practices, and rewards closure and competition and winning, precisely what should be suspended in discussion -- and because I needed familiar and useful terminology for teaching the separate steps in multi-stage interaction.

So, on Day One I further introduced the analogy of a non-competitive game of racquetball (tennis works too) in which the object is not to win but to keep the ball in play, “stretching” each player in the process through a variety of shots, just like we teachers talk of exercising our minds by keeping ideas in play. I show a short video of my racquetball partner and me that dramatizes the idea for the students. We found it was both more exercise and more fun (and thus more valuable) to try to keep the ball in play rather than to beat each other and end the game. We move up to the server's box, say 15-18 feet from the front wall of the racquetball court, and hit the ball back and forth with the object of keeping it in motion as long as we can. If we keep score, it's the string of successful hits. The nature of the game changes from competition to cooperation; the people engaged are partners not opponents. The incentive is to keep going. The idea is not at all to make shots easy to hit, nor, since we live in a fallen world where our racquetball skills leave a lot to be desired, is it even possible. The idea is to create interesting, exciting interchanges for each other.

Furthermore, the racquetball metaphor enabled me to adopt a vocabulary to designate each post in a sequence for specific reference for teaching, conferencing, and evaluating purposes: 1) the serve, 2) the return, 3) fielding the return, 4) volley 1, 5) volley 2, 6) etc. Thus, for example, I was able to lecture the class on the strategies of servicing, show a student how a pattern of poor returns was impairing successful conversation in his group, or ask several students to brainstorm how to keep conversation from going dry at the distant volley 2 stage. I had good success with this metaphor. Even students who don't play racquetball (or tennis) readily employed the common language -- talking themselves about how they "served" or how they "fielded"

somebody's "return." And note how this comment from a final survey affirming the utility of the metaphor even ventriloquizes my precise language: "That analogy got to the point of what we were trying to do on the DB: keep it going, get some (intellectual) exercise, and stretch each other out."

So, a constitution, a mantra, and a metaphor were elements of the first part of my design strategy, an attempt to frame the discussion board in a new way. The second part of my strategy was closer to the bone, to give students the actual practical tools they needed to talk to each other in a community way. I have seen rows and rows of bookstore shelves with advice on how to lead discussion; I can't remember one guide aimed at the participants in discussion. We assume discussion needs a leader; we assume followers know how to follow. Yet in the best spirit of a learning community, I wanted to decenter as much as possible. In the best spirit of liberal education, I wanted students to be independent and self-reliant, equipped to operate consciously rather than passively or reflexively. In short, I wanted students masters of their own fates, empowered. It seemed to me, then, that students needed to know and practice three basic things: how to start a discussion, sustain a discussion, and write in a social style.³

The "Five Eyes": Some Ways to Start a Discussion

My instinct was that for most students discussion is a magical, spontaneous activity, both in person and online. Thoughts just strike you. A reaction jumps into your head during the give-and-take, and you run with it (and you're often simply glad that something does jump into your head). But the big difference between face-to-face discussion and discussion boards is precisely more time to think out your response --

more time to be conscious. And thus I wanted students to reflect before posting. And if time to reflect means anything, there must be options to weigh. I wanted students to be conscious of alternatives, to be conscious of a limited but meaningful universe of posts from which to choose at a particular time. I was also "conscious" from anecdotal evidence as well as my own experience that one of the major complaints about discussion is that it becomes boring from repetition of ideas, from lack of variety. Hence, the more awareness about posting options, the more potential for keeping thoughtful discussion going.

So, with a little help from Bloom's taxonomy,⁴ I encouraged students to realize that when it came to looking at a work of literature they had five sets of eyes not one, that each eye revealed a different perspective, that each eye tapped a different level of their own thinking and required the practice of a different skill, and that, taken together, the results of looking through each eye would go a long way to sketching a comprehensive picture of the work under consideration. The five eyes are *hypothesize*, *analyze*, *synthesize*, *internalize*, and *criticize* – that is, student serves can begin to examine what the story is about, how it works, how it compares to other stories, how it relates to themselves, and whether it is good or bad. The idea is that 1) each individual student would be conscious enough to pause before initiating a discussion thread and choose an eye not only on the basis of personal interest but also one that contributes variety to whatever other eyes are in play at that moment. The idea is that 2) each individual student is conscious enough of his or her own choices to practice all of the eyes over time, exercising all of the levels of thought, growing as an agile thinker.

Though a few felt “cramped” or “distracted” by the requirement to utilize the five eyes rather than serving “off the cuff,” every student in the final survey affirmed that this approach was helpful in providing a “jumping off” point for discussion. Which is not to say, however, that, in practice, they were always conscious enough to achieve the spice of variety that was my first goal for this approach. A three-member group in the Moby-Dick unit, for example, show admirable community consciousness, each serving from a different perspective: hypothesizing, synthesizing, and internalizing. The hypothesizing student crystallizes her statement of Melville’s purpose in the striking phrase that “one will know death before one knows depth.” The synthesizing student launches a comparison of the image of Christianity in Moby-Dick and Uncle Tom’s Cabin (two units back) for the purpose of enhancing Ishmael’s “nobility.” And the internalizer energetically proclaims that “moby-dick is probably the coolest book i’ve ever read” and proceeds through a bit of autobiography into a litany of the kinds of “deep thought and introspection” about the nature of life the book stimulated. This is model serving in the five-eyes system! However, by contrast, in the Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl unit, the third server in a three-member group duplicates the first, comparing (synthesizing) that novel to Uncle Tom’s Cabin and even hitting, apparently totally unawares, such identical topics as feminism and the narrative voice. This third student was obviously deep in his own world when thinking about the serve rather than actively contributing to a wider pool of knowledge in that little community.

One purpose of the eight surveys was to lubricate the self-awareness necessary for achieving the second goal of this five-eyes approach. During the meta-weeks I asked students to look back at their work through such prompts as “Where did the idea for what

to post about come from? Can you reconstruct your thinking process a bit? Did you refer to the ‘five eyes’ document for this post or any of the subsequent ones?” and “How would you describe the ‘serves’ that you made? Were they all the same or similar? Was there a different approach from post to post? If there was difference, can you reflect on why? My strong suggestion is that you use the ‘five eyes’ as your guide. Try to describe each of your posts in terms of one or more of the ‘five eyes.’” One of the most endearing results of this frequent self-reflection was the student who realized she was an “analysis addict” and on her own moved to vary her serves. Evidence that students were talking to themselves, as it were, about the need to vary their routines for their own intellectual benefit also showed up in such statements within the posts as “Ok, since I really haven’t been doing much synthesizing lately, I figured that I would make a conscious effort to write about Incidents’ similarities with other books we’ve read this semester.”

The five eyes replaces the magic of discussion with a mechanism for discussion in order to improve interchange. The five eyes somewhat closes what is often billed as the wide open space of the discussion board but does so for the good of all – for the good of the *community*. Groups are offered a more varied menu of ideas on which to feed, individuals have an opportunity to expand their internal “real estate” (as Thoreau would say), and I have a genuine means for evaluating this aspect of discussion board activity. In subsequent courses I have even closed the space a bit more, assigning individuals to serve from each eye in rotation at the beginning of the course to insure familiarity with each form and to immediately foster rhetorical muscle memory.

The “Nine Legs”: Some Ways to Keep a Discussion Going

Ok, five-eyed serving is a way to start a richly varied group discussion. But, once started, how not only to sustain but advance discussion? How insure that a discussion “has legs”? My scaffolding here again not only reflects my initial premise that for most people discussion is a spontaneous activity but also my own past experience that often reply posts are stand-alone entities not strongly recognizable as part of a conversation. A reply post (returning a serve, fielding a return, volleying) must be part of a flow coming toward it and pass that flow onward. So in my scaffolding I tried to make students conscious about being in a conversation, prompting them to “realize” an audience (in effect, a sixth eye) by 1) addressing and signing – and thus humanizing -- reply posts, by 2) beginning with a transition from the host post, and – the major factor -- by 3) choosing the most appropriate one of nine response options I gave them. Thus, my ideal discussor would have not only five eyes but nine legs available for use!

You can, I prompted the students, give a discussion legs by agreeing, questioning, enhancing, answering, building, disagreeing, weaving, re-directing, and re-thinking. I gave each of the options a gerundive label, hoping the vocabulary would be easily understood as actions they were performing or to perform. I wanted a shared language with the students that enabled me to say things like "See, your characteristic response is to agree, and I would like to see you do more in the way of enhancing and building." To that end, I divided my nine legs into three roughly hierarchical categories, trying to compel awareness that certain kinds of posts were highly stimulating while others were likely to be dead-end conversation-stoppers. For instance, to agree with someone is fine but maybe ultimately unproductive of further thinking, whereas enhancing someone’s point with additional information is better, and building a new insight on a previous point

best of all. My goal was not to assign a precise price tag to each and every post but to raise consciousness about the nature of responding, to give students concrete strategies to "keep the conversation going," and thus to encourage students to strive, over time, for a higher percentage of higher-level replies.

A steady chorus of straightforward, flat-out agreement is the discussion-bogey to avoid at all costs, and there was an inveterate, consummate "agree-er" in the class who provided classic examples of such conversation stoppers as the simple "Thanks!" that was all her partner could manage after a short return in which all she basically said was "I loved your post it was great. . . . your theories are cool." But many of the conversations I tracked evolved into quite interesting learning experiences for the students as a result of their increased attention to the dynamics of interaction. For example, a student in the Red Badge of Courage unit, already admirably sensitive to the need to introduce a topic "no one else [has] brought . . . up," serves a post analyzing Crane's use of nature, especially the sun imagery that marks the different changes in Henry's development. Her returner agrees that Crane uses Nature significantly and well but enhances the conversation with two additional supporting examples before building on the server's point the suggestion that the primary purpose of the Nature imagery is to make an anti-war statement. Thus, this second student turns back to the first, giving her this new but related idea to think about and an invitation for her to help him test his point when she fields his return: "Did you ever find instances of anti-war statements while you were reading, and if so, was it through nature that you felt this anti-war sentiment was being implied?"

A similarly productive interchange occurs in the same unit when this time the returner disagrees (a top-level return in my leg-schema) with a server who “hated” this “dark and quite disturbing” novel because she “detested” Henry, calling him, memorably, “the monstrous blemish that appears without warning on prom night.” In an interesting move, her returner disagrees with her savagely negative evaluation of the story as a whole while accepting her negative characterization of Henry and building a new point on the idea that his characterization accurately depicts human nature: “You mention that Henry represents the ugliness inside all of us. He is that which we try to conceal. Then wouldn't it make sense for all that to come out during times of war, when we are weak and vulnerable? War is supposed to bring out the worst in people, this is how they change. They see the monster that they can be and it scares them. The war is showing Henry who he really is, and he can't stand it, that's why, in my opinion, he acts the way he does.” Such an intriguing strategy. The second student offers the first a way to change her mind through a development of her own thinking, and in her survey that unit the first student herself identified this return as the best she received precisely because of the value of its constructive disagreement.

A different kind of productive interchange happens in the same Red Badge unit when we look at the cluster of returns to an excellent serve passionately proclaiming that “Henry is a moron” who “can't even command himself” and who “should have had his mental makeover at home in the safety of his own bed.” The four disagreeing returns each take a different tack: one rebuts the notion that Henry was a danger to others, another argues that war triggers a maturation that could never happen on the farm, a third denies that Henry was a glory-seeking youth, and a fourth points sympathetically to his

lack of a male role model. The server receives four high-level returns that literally cover the waterfront. In my view this concourse of interchanges is quite successful. The server is now in a challenging position, the kind that demands tough thinking. He's been handed a serious mandate to re-think his position, and if he decides to hold on to it, he has four different kinds of objections to negotiate. His group has made him look at his ideas in a mirror of forceful doubt. To keep the conversation going, he must decide to hold or fold. The high-level returns are going to foster beneficial intellectual growth whichever way he goes. Not one of the group members settled for cheerleading and back-slapping, the kind of return one student on the final survey – showing the results of a semester of my intense consciousness raising -- rather superciliously said “anyone can make . . . rather effortlessly,” but, instead, all members chose the “upper level posts [that] require much more thought” and lead to “something for others to think about.” *Vive la communauté!*

Writing Socially

While reviewing the student serves in the very first week, I realized that I had missed a pretty big and pretty important notion in my planning. I was preparing students to be conscious of what to write in a serve but not how to serve. I was not covering the whole territory. A number of the best students wrote mini-essays (and two between 500-600 words were not so mini) complete with thesis sentences, elegant phrasing, grammatical perfection, direct quotes, page citations, and – above all – closure. These posts smelled too pungently of the midnight oil of revision for my liking. They were formal pieces imported into the discussion board only after much polishing – and they

sounded incredibly stilted there. These posts were, as one student described his own early serves in a survey, “aces” not designed to be returned. (Making students return – or try to return -- their own serves is a fruitful, eye-opening exercise for them.) If “the art of writing on the discussion board is to keep the conversation going,” then the students needed to write conversationally. In addition to five eyes and nine legs, then, my students needed a voice appropriate to the discussion board space.

These very first posts in the course revealed a natural tendency among a significant number of the students for what I have begun to call “writing solo” rather than “writing socially.” The goal of “writing solo” – fine for formal essays -- is usually to prove a point to others and reach closure. On the more informal discussion board, however, the goal of “writing socially” is to explore a topic with others and defer closure as long as possible. Writing solo very often means distinguishing views you already hold from those held by others, but on the discussion board ideally you are building your views with others. Thus, for instance, the serve must not be simply a product, but it must trigger a process – it must seed a four- or five-step interchange. The role of a server is to be a discussion starter, not the almighty wizard or omniscient oracle on a topic. And thus the voice of the server should be less *here's how it is* or *here's-what-I-think-now-tell me-what-you-think-about-what-I-think* than *here's-what-we-together-should-think-about*.

The server, then, must resist the long-standing and deeply ingrained habit that seems most “natural” to a student -- giving “the” right answer right away. The server, especially, must defer closure. This behavior was “natural” to me, a teacher long experienced in leading discussions, but I had not thought to make it explicit to the students. There's a way of doing a serve as well as a what to put in a serve, and students

need to be conscious of both dimensions. Thus, in the second unit I introduced the notion of “serving socially,” and after that “write socially” in general became a second mantra during the rest of the course. The job of the server, I drummed, is to start, to prompt, to direct, to invite, to initiate, to incorporate, to facilitate, to reach out, to energize, to engage. And the purpose of a serve, I thumped, is to kick off thinking, to initiate thinking, to trigger thinking, to gather thinking, to collect thinking, to stimulate thinking, to focus thinking. Thus, “serving socially” might mean proposing a subject not as a conclusion but as a question, as a problem, as a mystery, as a puzzle, as a tentative assertion, as something needing support, as an issue needing consideration, as a source of “wonder,” as containing something hidden to be discovered. And “serving socially” might mean not saying all you know or believe all at once, holding something back for later, giving others opportunity and “space” to contribute, presenting yourself as open and receptive to the views of others.

This salutary notion of writing socially rather than writing solo on the discussion board took hold almost immediately. It was as if, once the difference was pointed out to them, the students said, “Oh yeah, I knew that.” One student’s serves and her classmates’ reaction to them make a good case in point. In unit 1, the Awakening unit, students voted her 550-word essay with eight properly cited direct quotes showing Kate Chopin used “the metaphor of the ocean and water [to relate] to Edna’s own internal struggles” one of the top three serves in the class -- predominantly because, as one student put it on a survey, “it’s well written with clearly articulated points which she supports with textual evidence!” She and the class were dismayed and perplexed when, during the first meta-week, I registered my severe difference of opinion with their valuation. I felt humbled

and dominated by her comprehensive and superior work, I said, totally shut out from response, and, moreover, the student who wrote the above praise sounded precisely like a stuffy English teacher rendering an objective verdict on an essay from the Olympian heights of Mt. Detachment rather than a fellow participator personally involved in a hot discussion she had ignited. She had written an essay, and as essay writer she was judged. And neither action was appropriate here in discussion space. What if, I suggested among other things, she posed one of the questions that her "essay" seems to answer -- for instance, "what metaphor in the novel helps us to understand Edna?" Wouldn't that be better serving strategy?

In unit 2 on Uncle Tom's Cabin students voted this same woman's now crisper 250-word serve best in her group, but this time both the nature of her writing and the criteria for its selection were radically different. "Wow," she begins conversationally, "what a powerful read!" and then, embracing her group, "Who couldn't empathize with the steadfast, loyal, martyr, Tom, the courageous and beautiful Eliza, and the angelic Eva?" But she's bothered by one irritant -- "the novel lacked the true sense of rage, urgency and disgust that the enslaved blacks must surely have felt" -- embodied for maximum impact in two biting, staccato-like questions ("Where is the hatred? Where is the fire?"), and culminating in the delicious street phrasing of "Why doesn't Tom just rub Legree out and be done with it?" before opening the topic up to other voices: "Did this issue irritate anyone else or am I just a cynical detester of sentimentality?" In the space of one unit this student has transformed her serve completely into a discussion-friendly style. There's a personal voice, direct address, energy, excitement, passion, and -- above all -- open-endedness. It's hard not to feel engaged by this serve, and this time "writing

social” elements were in the selection criteria offered by her audience: the server takes a stand, voices her opinion, she challenges the novel, gives her insights but asks for everyone’s input. “Though there wasn't much concrete information,” one voter declares, “I still think it was a really good way to get the ball rolling for other ideas and opinions.” Exactly. This time this student has written a serve, and as a serve writer she was judged.

This student continued as an excellent server – rousing her group to think one later time, for instance, with "Ouch, who's up for a good stretch?" – and made a perceptive comment in her final survey: "I don't know if I'm a better poster now than at the beginning of the course, but I do think my posts changed throughout the course." I think that what she is getting at here is that she wrote well from the beginning, even when she was writing solo. Writing socially does not mean writing sloppily or writing senselessly. It does mean recognizing that writing is different in different contexts. It does mean on the discussion board assuming a voice that invites response.

The Big Claim

What a difference a strategy makes. I’m a long, long way from the days of saying to students (my memory’d voice is eerily like Ben Stein’s in the classic classroom scene opening Ferris Bueller’s Day Off) “You are required to post on the discussion board two times a week, and I will count the number of posts you make in assigning that percentage of your class participation grade that is the percentage of your final grade.” Voodoo economics, indeed! Now (I say modestly) I have tapped the true potential of this new technology. Now I have a rationale to talk about the discussion board with students that makes sense to them. Now I have a language to talk about the tools of discussion with

students. Now I have a set of documents about discussion to guide students. Now I have a warehouse of model posts to show students. Now I have logged hours and hours honing my perceptions of student behavior in discussion board space. Now I have a fair basis for grading discussion board performance.⁵ And now I have had the sweetest taste of a learning community you can imagine.

During this project I felt the shadow of the Thoreau who saw that all the new technology of the trans-Atlantic cable might yield would be news that Princess Adelaide had the whooping cough. It is not bad to have Thoreau on your shoulder in a project like this, however. He keeps you honest. But I can say about my experiment in (student) self-reliance, as he of his at Walden, that it met "with a success unexpected in common hours." My students – some haltingly, for sure – learned to talk to each other and in doing so talked to me in their final surveys in words I had longed to hear:

Normally, other students have very little to do with my own learning process.

Most times, the other students in class are only thought of as the ones you need to be sure to beat on the next test. They are the ones that determine the curve, and therefore how well you do in class. This class is the only class I can think of that makes the other students a learning tool for the class. Listening to and understanding other students comments helped me better understand the books we were working on. Their insight helped me look at things differently.

"Their insight helped me look at things differently." Bears repeating. There is no glamour in discussion board work, not even the satisfaction of saying, as one can sometimes say about student essays, that the award-winning "best post of the year" was

done in my class. Nope, no awards for posting. No sexy web site or multi-media bonanza to awe colleagues either. Just old-fashioned text and tons of it. Only hard, time-consuming, often boring, and, at faculty reward time, invisible work of tangling and untangling the half-formed ideas of novice learners.

But I think discussion boards are the most undervalued of the new technologies.

Simply stated, if critical thinking and rethinking are central and crucial goals of liberal education, discussion is essential. Frankly, though, I'll wager that for the vast majority of us discussion is invisible in our pedagogy. Who teaches the principles of good discussion? We run review sessions and provide study guides and other materials to facilitate student performance on exams. We run whole courses and sequences of courses and even organize whole departments to teach students how to write effective essays. But who teaches the principles of good discussion? Who teaches students how to talk to each other? When else do we get a chance to hear aphrodisiac admissions like *"Their insight helped me look at things differently."* Yes, I think discussion boards are the most undervalued of the new technologies.

¹ This companion "Improving the Discussion Board" web site contains all the information relating to the course-long project that is condensed in this article, including course handouts, a broad range of student survey responses and, especially, my annotations of approximately 150 discussion board posts and exchanges, only a few of which could be shown here (see the "student work" sections for each of the eight surveys).

² All student survey responses and posts quoted in this essay are unedited.

³ In the rest of this essay I am able to include only a few examples of student work, but on the project web site listed at the head of this essay there are examples and annotations of approximately 150 posts and exchanges. See the "student work" sections for each of the eight surveys.

⁴ Benjamin S. Bloom, ed. Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals, by a Committee of College and University Examiners. New York: D. McKay, 1956.

⁵ The documents, posts to use as models, evaluative profiles of students, and other possibly suggestive things are all available on the project web site for your use. I ask only that you give me feedback about this system – your criticisms, modifications, improvements, etc. -- as well as descriptions of your own ways of improving the discussion board.