

Teaching Philosophy and  
Technology-Based Teaching Unit  
Beth Church  
November 29, 2006  
ENG 728 – Dr. Kris Blair

### *Teaching Philosophy*

Feminist rhetorician Gloria Anzaldua tells us: “If we’ve done our job well we may give others access to a language and images with which they can articulate/express pain, confusion, joy, and other experiences thus far experienced only on an unarticulated emotional level” (Foss, Foss and Griffin, 115).

I think this perspective accurately expresses one of the pillars of my philosophy for teaching writing. I like the idea of teachers being able to empower students with skills that can help them with their professional lives, as well as their personal lives. Giving students access to new worlds within themselves through their more effective use of language is an important part of teaching for me, which I believe meshes well with the traditional college experience of students “broadening their horizons.”

One way to help them develop their own sense of those languages and images is through the use of technology. Computer technology offers great potential to enhance that access with its hypertext links, graphics, sound and video, along with the worldwide communities it opens up for students to visit through the Internet and on-line chatting. Teaching in a community college environment, I have found that some of my students have had limited experience with technology, and yet they most always greet it with a sense of optimism, albeit some apprehension. Many of these students come from backgrounds of limited means, and so it is my intention to help them understand that cyberliteracy should be defined in a way that involves more than material possessions. I hope they come away from my classroom with a strong sense of engagement with technology that invokes critical thinking and analysis of its social, economic, racial and cultural impacts.

Recognizing that writing is a challenge, struggle or even nightmare for students, I want to be able to understand students and their learning processes so I can help them become comfortable with writing, and hopefully confident about their work. This desire also applies to the use of technology in the classroom. By incorporating technology into the pedagogical aims of the traditional writing class, such as the practice of revision and self-critique, students can gain facility with the various software programs while they learn to see themselves as writers.

Donald Murray’s perspective on the excitement of the writing process best captures the spirit of my teaching philosophy. “What is the process we should teach? It is the process of discovery through language... Instead of teaching finished writing, we should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness. We work with language in action. We share with our students the continual excitement of choosing one word instead of another, of searching for the one true word” (Murray, 4).

I love writing, and as a teacher, I enjoy sharing that with my students, believing that excitement is contagious. I'm not sure many students appreciate writing as a dynamic experience. Viewing it frequently as drudgery, they may not have considered it as "discovery." Students planning careers in fields that they consider unrelated to writing – health care, information technology, engineering, etc. – look forward to engaging in discoveries in their own fields each day in the working world. And the discovery process is nothing new to the current generation of students, as it primarily has been their *modus operandi* for interaction with technology throughout their lives – whether that be video games, iPod use, IM conversations, or Myspace web page designs. The excitement of discovery is something I believe they enjoy and could grow to understand as being part of the writing process. I personally like the idea of approaching writing in this way, as something new, enlightening and amazing at the end of the rainbow to which writing can lead us.

### *Technology-Based Teaching Unit*

The technology-based teaching unit that I have designed involves three assignments for the students:

- creating a website,
- participating in a service learning project and keeping a journal,
- and writing a research essay and PowerPoint presentation.

The first assignment would ask the students to **create a website** with the specific rhetorical purpose of creating a message that runs countercultural to other sites they have browsed on the Internet. This first would require them to select a specific community or issue, and then research related websites already on the Internet. The idea is to gain an understanding of what is out there, and see whether there is another perspective a student believes should be present in cyberspace. Class discussions should focus on questioning the power of visual images, and by whose authority are such images promoted in society. Gail Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan propose this application of Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" onto web spaces and describe them as "countersites where culture is represented, contested and inverted... Viewed as utopias, e-spaces present a vision that corresponds to social constructionists' goals of a decentered writing class where communities take shape" (173-174). What I hope students will come to see is their opportunity to create a space where they have the power to establish values, images, ideals, concepts, etc. that may not be part of the hegemonic system in which they live. For instance, a student might want to create a site for a retail business displaying fashions on models who are not underweight, promoting a more healthy way of viewing the body. Or, a student might design a site for a non-profit organization showing images of a place where their ideals have been established – a world without domestic violence, or hate crimes, or landfills.

The second component of this unit is a **service learning project**, for which students would select a charitable organization and volunteer their time helping out for four to six hours. For instance, they could be sorting items at a recycling station, delivering meals to homebound residents, reading with adults at a literacy program at the library, collecting winter clothes for a homeless shelter, planting trees in a local park, etc. The work they choose should be related somehow to the subject of their website. They would keep a journal describing their activities, their own responses to the volunteer work, their interactions with people involved with the organization,

the impact they felt they made, and other thoughts and feelings about the experience. Also, in-class freewriting could focus on various aspects of the volunteer work.

The last component of the unit would be for students to **write 8-10 page research papers** covering the topic of their work and websites. Likely, their essays would be a bit more broad than the specific mission of the service projects and websites. For instance, a student could create a website that illustrates a world where trees are never destroyed to be used as paper. She then could volunteer at a recycling station. And finally, her research paper could be about the use of paper by newspaper and magazine publishing companies in the United States. Research can be conducted via the library or the Internet, but class discussion should include guidelines for what makes a good or reliable source in cyberspace. After completing the essay, each student would create a 7- to 10-minute PowerPoint presentation from their paper to present to the class.

I believe this combination of activities fulfills a number of pedagogical aims. First, the project give students a sense of empowerment with technology and within the community. They have the opportunity to create a document (a website) for the entire world to see that proclaims their own views on a topic or community about which they feel strongly. They gain experience using web-authoring software, such as Dreamweaver, for a purpose that they select. Gaining the ability to be an active – not just passive – Internet user also should help them to recognize the importance of questioning the authority of publications and practice their critical thinking skills. Additionally, this can help them see the importance of having many voices in cyberspace – and taking note where and when some voices are silenced.

Their hands-on volunteering time can help students to see how they can make a difference, even in a short period of time. It also provides them rich material to use in narrative and descriptive writing activities, as well as compare/contrast writing on what they have seen first-hand versus what is portrayed on the Internet. The research paper, while serving its traditional role in the writing class, also incorporates technology by the use of Internet for information and the PowerPoint for the follow-up presentation. Students gain experience with these software programs while writing and practicing oral presentation skills.

I also believe this assignment will help change the perspective of students who find themselves believing in the stereotype of computers and technology as cold, sterile and impersonal. In class discussions, I hope to incorporate the image of the cyborg – the half computer/half human being and encourage them to explore the ways that technology benefits or enhances personal human interaction. Their volunteer service work – which likely they will consider quite a personal experience – will be explained by and enhanced through technology as it takes shape on web pages and PowerPoint presentations. Using James Inman’s explanation of “the cyborg era” that we current inhabit, students will have the chance to consider themselves in such a role. Among the characteristics Inman describes about this era are: a foregrounding of individuals, an adaptability of technology for individual purposes, an emphasis on the context in which technology operates, and the importance of activism by a cyborg (14-15). All of these characteristics are interwoven through these assignments to illustrate how the stereotype of impersonal technology does not have to be true. Technology often takes the blame for perpetuating or causing many of society’s ills, and I would like students to appreciate how technology can be used to their benefit and for the improvement of the world around them.

## *Works Cited*

Foss, Karen A., Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin. *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*. Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks, California, 1999.

Hawisher, Gail E. and Patricia Sullivan. "Women on the Networks: Searching for E-Spaces of Their Own." *Feminism and Composition Studies*. Eds. Susan C. Jarratt and Lynn Worsham. Modern Language Association of America, New York, 1998, 172-197.

Inman, James A. *Computers and Writing: The Cyborg Era*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, New Jersey, 2004.

Murray, Donald. "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product." *Cross Talk in Comp Theory*. Ed. Victor Villanueva. NCTE. Urbana, Illinois. 2003.