Race and Gender in an Internet-based History Course

Susan Butler

Introduction

Emerging from the debate regarding the educational value of Distance Education (DE) is the claim that an online course cannot meet the same high standards as a traditional class. Central to this claim are assumptions that a DE course lacks the same academic rigor and student interactive participation as its classroom counterpart.

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Field:
American History
Course:
History 27: Race and Gender in American Culture
Context:
—an American survey course covering the entirety of American history;
—fulfills the General Education history requirement for the Associated Arts degree and for transfer to the California State University system;
—ethnically diverse: Hispanics (40%);—many students have yet to complete the remediation need of basic skill development in reading, math, and English;—class size is 48 students;—attrition is high
Intention:
--to offer a meaningful history course to individuals who are working and/or who are reentry students and prefer a DE course.

This claim has merit. Many who engage in teaching a DE course literally export their syllabi and course requirements to an online environment. By so doing, faculty structures a class that is a dressed-up version of a correspondence course. Taking this approach as the norm, detractors of DE use apocalyptic rhetoric to wage their argument: DE will wipe out real learning, become a way to exploit and eliminate faculty, and be the death knell for the Socratic process.

Despite strongly stated objections, Distance Education is now a reality. The momentum of the

expanded access to information on the Internet coupled with increased budget constraints on educational institutions drive the engine for the growing proliferation of DE programs. Advocates for expansion of an online curriculum argue from the strongly held belief that a large dose of distance education will provide the elixir of all that ails higher education process: Poor student achievement; necessity to make delivery of education more flexible and non-traditional; rising costs associated with faculty salaries, more students, and aging facilities; competition from a new crop of DE programs promoted by alternative institutions of higher learning; and so on.

Yet, close scrutiny of the expressed parameters of this debate suggests that advocates and naysayers alike have used flimsy materials to construct the debate. Their discourse deals with practical, budgetary issues and their claims are often based on limited understanding of computer-based technology. This situation potentially makes for misguided decisions in funding, staff development, and curriculum development. Working within a flawed structure will, indeed, damage the quality of education in the humanities and social sciences, and will, indeed, not solve problems facing higher education, no matter how much money and effort are expended.

Therefore, it seems that educators must shift the nature of the debate. Instead of a discourse about "uploading" a tried-and-true methodology to an electronic environment, they need to create an alternate pedagogy that integrates computer-based technology with academic disciplines. Such an enterprise is complicated, but will emerge, in part, from efforts of those who structure courses using technology. That enterprise of these adventuresome educators will refocus the commentary to an evaluation of the ways in which integration of computer-based technology expands the ability for students to acquire knowledge, gain self-assurance, sharpen critical thinking and writing skills, and become life-long learners. These are the goals of any educator who cares about students.

This article offers a case study of one adventuresome educator. It evaluates the rationale and results of designing a method that combined (1) an online, short lecture and (2) computer conferencing as the fundamental method of instruction in a DE class in American history. To establish the foundation for the analysis, this essay provides an overview of the course and delineates the online lecture-to-conference approach. Following this overview will be a careful analysis of the practical and pedagogical implications of this methodology, an analysis that relies on student commentaries and critiques as well as on personal observation. From the explanation and analysis this essay will demonstrate that inclusion of the lec-

ture-to-conference method in a DE class is a pedagogical method that uses computer-based technology to enhance learning. Not only does this combination of the online lecture and computer conferencing format make a reality academic rigor and student interaction, but also it provides a way for students to encounter American history in ways not possible in the traditional classroom. In sum, this method introduces a new learning paradigm that integrates technology with course content.

Overview

In fall 1997 I developed a DE course in American history to be taught in an asynchronous environment. This course, Race and Gender in American Culture, was first taught in spring 1998, and continues to be included in the list of classes I teach.

This decision to teach a DE course reflected my concern as an educator that online courses had the potential of damaging the learning process. Thus, as I began to structure the course, my primary focus was to create a class that was not an updated version of a correspondence course.

I selected a history class that covers American history in its entirety. This particular core curriculum course was most appropriate for my experiment. It always attracts students and naturally lends itself to thematic teaching. For my online venture, I chose the themes of race and gender because they directly related to my evolving pedagogical underpinnings of course development. Whether in a traditional or virtual classroom, the inter-related experiences of African Americans and women offer an excellent framework to explore the historical narrative from a more inclusionary vantage point than traditional approaches to survey courses. The combination of these themes also provides a way to engage students in a critical analysis of comparative history. More significant to the DE course, these two themes provided an opportunity to maximize the primary resources available on the Internet, which, in turn, added to interest and interaction among students.

Though extraneous to the focus of this essay, it is important to note some of the practical considerations in the development of this course. Though an online course, I decided to include five in-class meetings so students could become acquainted and so I could get a better measure of their concerns and needs. I also used these class meetings as a vehicle to provide thematic lectures on broad-based topics, e.g. the Civil War. In addition, I established online "help" documentation, since many students at my institu-

tion are unfamiliar with use of email and the Internet. Finally, I developed the Web-based information on software supported by computer services, rather than acquire new skills and software. The institution uses Windows NT, and Front Page 98 is the standard used for development of Web pages. In various ways, these practical decisions directly impacted the use of online lectures and computer conferencing, as will be noted.

The Lecture-to-Conference Format

The gravitational poles that charted my journey in developing an online course were academic rigor and student interaction. If either were missing, then the journey I wanted to map for students would become frustrated by dead-ends and wrong turns. To accomplish my purpose, I developed a method that made my Web site the mechanism to disseminate online lectures and to generate online discussions.

Though this method evolved into a unique application in Race and Gender in American Culture, it is not my creation. Rather, it was a reconfiguration of the methodology used by the Distance Instruction for Adult Learning (DIAL), a division of the New School of Social Research. My exposure to the DIAL method came from my participation in one of its courses in fall 1997. In this course the instructor presents course content in short online lectures, and creates discussions through computer conferencing.

As a student of DIAL, I quickly realized that the lecture-to-conference provided a method that could make Race and Gender in American Culture a dynamic, interactive course. This method had the potential of providing a way to expand the information base for the course beyond the textbook and ancillary readings. It offered a means by which I could entice students to encounter the vast and dynamic resources on the Internet. It created a forum for an interactive exchange of information and ideas.

The Online Lecture:

Within the construct of this methodology, I consider the brief online lecture the core of the class. It defines the content for the course, it demands that students discover the texture of history through access of primary sources (written, visual, audio) on the Internet, and it frames the questions for the computer conferencing. For Race and Gender in American Culture, these brief lectures have been labeled mini-lectures.

In terms of style, a mini-lecture must be brief, no more than ten computer screens or 2,000 words. Further, the writing style must be clear, direct, and absent of academic jargon, and the tone of the narrative must be inviting, friendly, and accessible. This is complimented by a content that is structured to expose new information or perspectives, not found in the assigned readings. More importantly, I use the tone and content of every online lecture to accomplish pedagogical objectives. Each challenges students to think critically about the subject and to be motivated to formally express their ideas in the related online discussion. Further, each explicitly or implicitly challenges students to consider the historical narrative from a new vantage point.

Such a process begins with the first mini-lecture—a "welcome" message to students. I use this first mini-lecture to not only introduce myself and the class format, but also to encourage students to participate in their first online asynchronous computer conference.[1] From its first sentence, "I am pleased that each of you has decided to participate in this newly offered on-line course in American history," I try to make students feel comfortable with the online process.

In addition, I use this introductory lecture to declare that Race and Gender in American Culture represents a shift in the learning paradigm for understanding American history. First, I explain my rationale for selecting race and gender as organizing themes for the course:

> We will exam history through the lens of the two interrelated themes of race and gender. What you will discover in the coming weeks is that the issues encountered by African Americans and women in our history have much in common . . . as the discussion unfolds, we will discover that individuals in these two groups, by their actions, logic, and protest, have been instrumental in making the promises of democracy a social reality for not only themselves, but for other groups who have been pushed to the outer fringes of society.

The second essential point I make explains the ways in which implementation of computer-based technology not only enriches the learning experience, but also, once again, shifts the learning paradigm:

> Finally, you will have the opportunity in this course to learn about the past by participating in the most dynam-

> ic and far-reaching technology of today —- the Internet. This has many advantages. A couple of these include the fact that you will gain considerable confidence in the exploration of the resources available on the "Web." Also, you will discover that you can, indeed, have a voice among your fellow-students in on-line discussions. Finally, you will acquire the practical expertise in using Internet and email, skills that are increasingly more essential in academic studies and the labor market.

Note the tone of this description is inclusive and conversational, rather than pedantic. My intent is that students begin to intuit that the traditional learning paradigm of teacher-centered learning is not part of Race and Gender in American Culture. More importantly, I sustain this inclusive, conversational tone in content-based mini-lectures.

Though friendliness in these online lectures is essential, this tone represents only one key element for successful online lectures. Mini-lectures must be well written. This narrative style should be direct and clear; the sentence structure, non-complex. However, if these lectures only impart information, then their function becomes one-dimensional in the online environment: They function as a "replacement" for the traditional lecture of the classroom, which, in turn, causes students to be passive learners.

My intent is greater. I wanted to make these mini-lectures the mechanism that entice students to interact with the technology to discover the tactile, rich texture of American culture; to interact with their peers exchanging opinions, ideas, and assessments of their discoveries about American history. To meet my objective I integrate links to written, visual, and auditory sources on the Internet into the text of each mini-lecture. Students are asked to access these resources as part of the reading of the mini-lecture. The selection of specific Internet links ties into my overall objective to cause students to engage intellectually and intuitively with primary sources in such ways that they discover that our nation's past is a story about people much like themselves. As shown in Table 1, for example, in a mini-lecture entitled "That Peculiar Institution" students access pictures of slave quarters, as well as written excerpts from slave narratives. In an online lecture on the 1890s, they find links to the photographs and text of Jacob Riss' [How the Other Half Lives;] an example is illustrated in Table 2. In both cases, the encounter with primary sources embraces the value of

the experiences of the "nameless" individuals in our past, rather than those men and women who made official and well-known public pronouncements.

Table 1: Internet Links for "That Peculiar Institution"

Text from Mini Lecture	Internet Links
"On a plantation, house slaves had relatively easier assignments than field hands. Most house slaves were women, and, many feared the sexual advances of their masters. The working conditions for these house slaves can be viewed in the following documents:"	Working Conditions, The Main House Working Conditions, The Kitchen Living Quarters for Slaves

Table 2: Internet Links for "How the Other Half Lives"

Text from Mini Lecture	Internet Links
Jacob Riis, journalist and photographer, publicized the housing and living conditions for those living in the tenement building in his 1890 expose, How the Other Half Lives. What made his book especially powerful to readers were the photographs he included. Why not take a few minutes, go back some 100 years, and let Jacob Riis take you through his photographs. Once you have taken this tour, why not read some of Riis' book. The Introduction gives you some idea of Riis' intent. To gain a better idea of the construction and impact of tenement housing, take some time with the following sections from Riis' book.	· Baxter Street Alley in Mulberry Bend · Bohemian Cigar Makers at Work in Their Tenement · "Five Cents A Spot" · Necktie Workshop in a Division Street Tenement · Bandits' Roost · A "Slide" in Hamilton Street · Italian Mother and her Baby in Jersey Street · Shoemaker Working in House in Yard of 219 Broome Street

Computer Conferencing

Even though the mini-lecture carries the weight of the course content in this learning paradigm, it is not the ingredient that challenges students to intellectually engage in the learning process. That ingredient is computer conferencing.

In simplest terms, computer conferencing can be defined as an online discussion among members of a particular course. The most distinctive and positive feature of computer conferencing is that

participants in a class become a community of learners. As the teacher steps into the background, functioning only as a facilitator, students move into the foreground, creating and sustaining the unfolding commentary about events and issues.

Computer conferencing is Web-based, which differentiates it from communication by email. Moreover, computer conferencing differs fundamentally from the chat room concept in two key ways. First, online discussions typically occurs asynchronously, whereas the vitality of chat rooms requires synchronous conversations. Second, and more significant, computer conferencing in an academic setting is driven by critical, informed assessments of course content, whereas chat rooms are opinion-based.

For the purposes of my course, I label computer conferencing as web discussion pages; thereby, matching the label used in Front Page 98. Within the process of content delivery, I link a Web discussion page to each mini-lecture. In the concluding sections of a mini-lecture, students are prompted by questions to address certain aspects of the content and Internet discoveries in the linked Web discussion. In shaping these questions, I attempt to challenge students to think critically. They are prompted to move from a descriptive to an analytical discussion. They are led to consider events and actions of historical figures from diverse perspectives. They are prodded into taking a stand on an issue. Table 3 illustrates these prompts.

Table 3: Prompts for Web Discussion Page

Mini-Lecture Four: That "Peculiar Institution"
In this discussion session, I would like you to examine these two perspectives. Thanks to recent scholarship by historians and to vast historical resources on the Internet, we can read the original sources. I have posted to this page some of the more dynamic statements of these two perspectives. For our general discussion, I would like you to use the procedure shown below. Select and read one source from each of the two categories. [The first category asks students to read George Fitzhugh's "The Blessings of Slavery;" the second, recommends a short selection for Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, or Annie Burton. All these slave narratives are found on the Internet.] As you read and think about the expressed ideas, realize that each of the writers is sincere in his/her beliefs. In a short statement, compare the expressed ideas of each of the individuals. In so doing, answer the following questions: 1. How does Fitzhugh justify slavery? . What evidence does he use to make his case? 2. Do you think that Fitzhugh believes what he writes, or do you think that he believes that he must "make an argument for slavery" because of its economic and political ramifications in antebellum America?

3. What were the actual experiences of Burton, Douglass, or Jacobs?
4. How do the experiences of the former slaves (Burton, Douglass, Jacobs) reflect the reality of slave culture in the South prior to the Civil War?
5. Can you see any relationship from either or both of the accounts that you have read to the attitudes toward race in today's society? Be specific.

The Process of the Lecture-to-Conference Methodology

Within the context of the lecture-to-conference method, delivery of content in Race and Gender in American Culture is a three-step process.[2] These steps are:

Five in-class lectures that introduce overarching themes of specific units of study.[3]

Two-to-three mini-lectures associated with each unit of study. The subject matter of these online lectures focuses on some aspect of the experiences/contributions of women and/or African Americans on the historical narrative.

One-to-two Web discussions linked to each mini-lecture.

Further, the assignments associated with the lecture-to-conference method represent one-third the points earned toward the final grade. This, obviously, builds into the process a strong incentive for students to participate. Out of an eighteen-week semester, the first two and final weeks are used for introductions/orientation and closure, respectively. During the fifteen weeks allocated to course content, each unit of study is approximately three weeks. This implies that students must complete each lecture-to-conference assignment within a one-to-two week time frame to stay on task. Each unit of study begins with an in-class lecture, and on that date, I post all the mini-lectures and Web discussion pages associated with the specific unit for that three-week interval. This provides students the flexibility to work through the information of each unit at their own pace. Though units of study are contained within three-week intervals, I keep online lectures and discussions for study units posted on the web site for five-to-six weeks. This allows students to use the material for exams, as well as provide access to the information for students who might lag behind. However, after that extended window of time, I "close" the online discussions. If some students have not contributed, then they lose credit for that assignment. Finally, through moderating the Web discussions I determine which students are "missing." In response to this lassitude, I contact these students by email, asking whether they need help and gently reminding them to stay on task.

Evaluation

The lecture-to-conference paradigm represents an innovative method that increases student learning and participation in an online class. More significantly, this approach has proven the added value of using electronic media in teaching history. It assured that Race and Gender in American Culture provided academic rigor and student interaction, and made this particular DE course an innovative, inviting experience for students. The lecture-to-conference format:

- Provides a mechanism for students to increase success and confidence in both the learning history and using technology
- Increases critical thinking and writing skills
- Makes an online experience accessible, friendly, and non-threatening
- Creates assignments that require discussion and collaborative learning
- Introduces the enriched texture of primary sources available on the Internet
- Structures assignments that entice a pursuit to "learn more"
- Teaches computer literacy

The fact that the lecture-to-conference method fulfilled my expectations is noteworthy in itself. What is even more gratifying, however, is that students enthusiastically embrace this approach to learning. They volunteer that they find acquisition of information and interactive learning in the virtual classroom an exciting environment. Importantly, they express a real intellectual enjoyment in accessing various resources on the Internet. Some have asked for more time expressly because he/she wants to explore all the Internet resources before offering comments. Admittedly, the Web discussion component of the course has been less successful for students. Yet, even with its handicaps, these online discussions have proven to be a forum in which students collectively demonstrate high levels of interest and interaction with the resources they discover on the Internet.

To evaluate student success and response to this online course, our campus research analyst and I designed two student surveys, one to be administered at the beginning of the semester; one at the end. Though these surveys chart a variety of topics, student reac-

tions to the mini-lectures and discussions, featured in the exit interview, are significant to this discussion. What follows is the distribution of responses regarding the lecture-to-conference method of students enrolled in the spring 1998 semester class.[4] Clearly, for this group of students, this method was perceived as a positive learning experience.

Table 4: Student Survey Responses—Spring 1998

Question	Distribution of Responses		
Presentation of Materials Was Excellent (mini-lect.)	Strongly agree: 69.2%	Agree: 30.8%	Do not agree: 0%
Rate Level of Learning	Excellent: 92.3%	Good: 0%	Average: 7.7%
Mini-Lectures Helped Understand Am. History	Strongly agree: 61.5%	Agree: 38.5%	Do not agree: 0%
Internet Links in Mini-Lectures Pertinent	Strongly agree: 53.8%	Agree: 46.2%	Do not agree: 0%
Internet Links in Mini-Lectures Interesting	Strongly agree: 53.8%	Agree: 46.2%	Do not agree: 0%
Internet Links in Mini-Lectures Increased Desire	Strongly agree: 50%	Agree: 33.3%	Disagree: 16.7%
Mini-Lecture Assigments Too Difficult	Strongly agree: 8.3%	Agree: 8.3%	Disagree/Strong. Disagree: 83.4%
Mini-Lecture Assignments Clearly Stated	Strongly agree: 46.2%	Agree: 53.8%	Disagree: 0%
Organization of the Web Discussion Page Clear	Strongly agree: 53.8%	Agree: 38.5%	Disagree: 7.7%
Feel comfortable posting in web discussions	Strongly agree: 69.2%	Agree: 30.8%	Disagree: 0%

Though successful, the lecture-to-conference format, as now implemented, has faults. What has become most obvious to me is that students seldom use the Web discussions (computer conferencing) as a forum for interactive discussion and critical assessment. Rather, these online discussions become a placeholder for each student to describe or make observations about content in the mini-lectures. Equally important, as it is currently implemented, the lecture-to-conference format overwhelms students with too much information. The overarching result is that the course easily loses its interior coherence, which diminishes students' ability to become self-confident, self-directed learners. Working from this empirical evidence, I have concluded that each component of this methodology—the mini-lecture and the Web discussion—needs

reconfiguration. This must begin with a re-assessment of the mini-lecture.

The Mini-Lectures

Mini-lectures suffer from two basic flaws. First, I have used the concept of "mini-lecture" as a catchall category, instead of a clearly defined entity. Most mini-lectures, for example, introduce new ideas, thereby approximating the function of a lecture by the professor. Online lectures in this category include the links to the Internet and questions for the linked Web discussion page. Unfortunately, I have also used the mini-lecture nomenclature to review information from the textbook or restate information given in class meetings. This second category of "mini-lectures" might have some Internet links but no attached Web discussions.

The second problem is more damaging to the learning process. Some of the mini-lectures designed to impart new information are, at present, too long and complicated. Most often the cause is that I have defined subject matter too broadly. Ancillary to this is that what I include tends to include either too many Internet links or links in which the text is too long, e.g. one or more chapters from Harriet Jacob's autobiography.

As a result, students suffer from cognitive drowning: they find themselves unable to read, access, assimilate, and evaluate all these tasks. More revealing, they find this "too much" for one mini-lecture/Web discussion assignment. It is noteworthy that at this point in the semester, students begin to fall behind in assignments and/or drop out of Web discussions.

The unit of study on an Expanding People (1800-1850) best illustrates these two basic flaws: Within this unit I have included mini-lectures that fall into both categories. In addition, I defined too broadly the subject matter in the mini-lecture on "Women in an Expanding Nation"

Within this unit, the first posted mini-lecture, "The Market Revolution," is basically a review of the in-class lecture, though it includes links to the Internet. In this initial mini-lecture (as it is now labeled), students are asked only to pay attention to specific pages in their textbook, as well as view the Internet links of maps that (1) chart westward expansion, (2) increase in transportation networks, and (3) compare increase in growth of cotton and increase in slavery. This online lecture has no associated Web discussion; it serves merely as a review of in-class and textbook information.

By comparison "Women in an Expanding Nation" represents a content-based mini-lecture. Tt also serves as an excellent example of drowning students with too much content. The largest problem with this mini-lecture is that it includes a discussion and Internet links for both working class women engaged in industrialization in Lowell, Massachusetts, and middle class women associated with the cult of domesticity. Further, students are expected to engage in Web discussions on the questions and issues presented in the mini-lecture.

Though covering both groups of women might work within the environment of an in-class lecture, this broadly conceived mini-lecture confuses and overwhelms students enrolled in an online class. This, I determined, unfortunately, after I had completed the mini-lecture. To mitigate this problem, I decided to direct students to select one group, either working or middle class, for their study. The directions, shown on Table 5, illustrate this attempt to correct the expansive nature of the mini-lecture.

Table 5: Purpose and Directions for Group Discussion

This mini-lecture will examine the ways in which the market revolution changed the lives of women, and this is a complicated history. For our purposes here, however, I will concentrate on just two groups of women: (1) Women workers in the New England factory system, and (2) Middle class women in the Northern and mid-western states. In this lecture I will emphasize certain key points made in your textbook (see especially pages 213-214, 218-228). In addition, I bring to my comments some of the recent observations and interpretations of historians of women's history. Finally, to make these points more real to you, I have also included within each category Internet links to primary sources. A group of questions follows each set of links.

My decision to try to "simplify" this complicated mini-lecture merely exasperated the problem of "too much information," rather than remedying it. Most obviously, students can not know which group they might prefer until they begin to explore the information on the Internet. Once engaged in that process, many find themselves lost in a morass of information. Such cognitive drowning becomes even more apparent in "questions for discussion" and Internet links included for women of the middle class in the mini-lecture of Women in Antebellum America. These are shown in Table 6.

Web Discussion Pages

The problems intrinsic to the Web discussions compromise the learning process to a greater degree. Impressionistically, I had identified two basic problems: First is the structure of the discussion page in Front Page 98; The second, the absence of clear direction from me regarding the intent of the online conference.

The structure of these online discussions causes much of the problem. As shown in Table 7, the discussion page feature of Microsoft Front Page 98 does not allow the commentary to appear as as a continuous narrative that one can scroll through. Rather, these online conversations appear as “threads” under specific topics.

Table 6

Women of the Middle Class—Emergence of a Separate Sphere

Discussion Questions for Middle Class Women:

The following links to the Internet will help you get a better grasp on the dynamics and assumptions of this "separate sphere." These links divide into three subsets. The first is a letter that expresses the expectations of gender roles during this time period. The second subset invites you to explore some of the illustrations and articles of the most widely read women's magazines in antebellum American, Godey's Lady's Book. The third takes you to a descriptio0n and some of the text of domestic manuals written by Catherine Beecher, and her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Browse through these links, using the following questions to guide your observations:

1. As stated above, social norms imposed certain attitudes and behaviors on women. How are these expressed in the Wilson letters? Are there also certain expectations of men?

2. What are Catherine Beecher's stated assumptions regarding the importance of women? How does the "plan" for the "model home" reflect these ideas?

3. What are your impressions of Godey's Lady's Magazine? How do the articles, pictures, etc. reflect the importance of the "separate sphere"? In what ways do the contents of this magazine put pressure on women?

4. Do you see any connections between the expressed attitudes of the 19th century regarding the proper sphere for women and the types of "how-to" literature we have today?

Internet Links:

Subset One:
· Joshua and Sally Wilson Letters to George Wilson (1823) November 23, 1823

Subset Two:
· An Overview of Catherine Beecher's A Treatise on Domestic Economy.
· Domestic Manuals by Catherine Beecher and her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe
· Periodicals Advancing the Separate Sphere/Cult of Domesticity

Subset Three:
· Louis Godey, Publisher of the Lady's Book
· Sarah Josepha Hale, Biographical Sketch
· Selection from Sarah Josepha Hale "The Empire of Woman"
· "O Leave Her to Her Grief" 1858
· Illustrations from Godey's Lady's Book
· Color Plates from Godey's Lady's Book

Thus student commentaries appear in individual units, defined by person and subject. These several separate threads are not easily seen as an interactive discussion. Students operate as isolated units, and only with prodding from me, do they read through the entire body of information.

Table 7: Sample of Contents—Women in Expanding America

Web Discusion Page—Women in an Expanding Nation: Workers

[Home Contents Search Post]

CONTENTS

Note: you may need to reload this page to see the most recent additions.

Women Workers in an Expanding Nation Susan Butler 9/22/98

Re: Women Workers in an Expanding Nation Pattie Sanches 9/23/98

Re: Women Workers in an Expanding Nation Karen Hooker 9/30/98

Form Results Inserted Here

Re: Women Workers in an Expanding Nation Pattie Sanchez 9/23/98

Re: Women Workers in an Expanding Nation Karen Hooker 9/30/98

Re: Women Workers in an Expanding Nation Alex Saenz 12/10/98

Though this software is part of the mechanics of the course, the result from its use is that students struggle to feel part of a community of learners. They often cannot feel a sense of interaction. Thus, the mechanics of the software have greatly diminished inter-

active learning in Race and Gender in American Culture. The second intrinsic problem with these online discussions requires much greater consideration and change. Students often do not use the Web discussions as a forum for critical evaluation of the information presented in the mini-lecture, nor do they actively "talk" to one another.

Disturbed by absence of consistent critical commentary in the Web discussions, I decided to solicit student observations and recommendations. To do this, I included a question of the final exam in the fall 1998 semester. This question required students to evaluate one of the lecture-to-conference assignments of that semester. In asking this exam question, I had two objectives:

> To provide a mechanism by which students would better realize the shortcomings of their own contributions.
>
> To obtain student recommendations as to ways that I might alter the Web discussion aspect of the course.

Student responses provided great insights and recommendations. Fairly consistently, these students stated that they liked the mechanism of online computer conferencing as well as the methods I used to move the discussions in more critical and positive directions. To quote one student, "I think you did a very good job with the interaction with students, throughout the [Web discussion] you asked questions, and responded with helpful remarks. I believe that your continued interaction moved this discussion into a more lively conversation. . . " (Precaido)

However, the more valuable comments were critical of the process of the Web discussion pages. In general, these criticisms fall into three inter-related categories:

> —Absence of critical analysis by students
>
> —Frustration with "too much information" to assimilate in the mini-lectures in order to provide meaningful commentary in the online discussions.
>
> —Unclear directions, expectations, and deadlines from me.

Regarding the absence of critical analysis, the more perceptive students observed that the commentary of the Web discussions suffered because participants responded either as they might on "a

quiz" or with opinions derived from personal experience instead of an analysis of historical content. One student lamented that the "topic [of women workers in Lowell] rapidly migrated to a discussion of today's working conditions for women. . . " Though important, he noted, the online conversation never addressed "all the direct and implied questions in the mini-lecture" (Mendenhall). Another student who critiqued the assignment on abolitionists made a similar point. "The comments on the Web discussions page," the student writes, "deal with the individual's opinion of whose work . . . [he/she] likes best" rather than follow the stated objective to "react to the writings of these abolitionists as if we were living during that time in history." Reflecting her own frustration, this student continued by noting that the "comments made in the Web discussion page are redundant/fluff-off-target/not involved" (Caceres).

Upon reflection, I believe that the fact that many of the Web discussions disintegrated into non-analytical conversations is directly related to two other shortcomings, also articulated in this exam question. These are cognitive drowning and unclear directions.

Consistently, students complained that I had given them too much information in the mini-lectures, thereby, making it difficult to shape meaningful responses for the Web discussions. One student observed that once the discussion [on women workers in antebellum America] began to "liven up," this more active discussion never went very far because of "time constraints." "Our ability to go back and respond to each other's comments" could not be done, because it was "critical that we continue with the other Web Discussions." This student continues by regretting that now that she had reread the Web discussions that she would "have liked to respond" but could not, because she was "trying to keep up with the other assignments" (Caceres). In addition to the sense of too many assignments, this same student also noted that the Internet links in the mini-lecture that helped prepare students for the Web discussion were great because they reflected a "wide range" of ideas, but these links were also "quite extensive and a bit overwhelming" (Precaido).

Another student supported this sense of being overwhelmed (Mendenhall). In fact, he went one step further, telling me that he had had to upgrade his modem and ISP account so he could access information in a timely manner. Further, he recommended that I do the following:

> State opening and closing dates for each lecture-to-con-

ference format
Be more vigilant in sending email reminders to students who are "absent" from the Web discussions.
Remedy the "lack of focused discussion" within these Web discussions
Verify that all Internet links within the mini-lectures are valid

This student's suggestions reflect observations made by others. For example, another student recommended that I should engaged in "more monitoring" of the online discussion and set up "guidelines" at the beginning of the semester to prevent "personal attacks" as well as making clear that the online computer conferences should be forums for critical assessment of the content of the mini-lectures (Hatch).

Recommended Changes to Lecture-to-Conference Methodology

Thus, from student comments as well as my own analysis, it is apparent that I need to modify the format of the mini-lectures and Web discussions. Not doing so will make this lecture-to-conference methodology fall significantly short of its potential as a new learning paradigm. Specific changes that need to be made include:

General:

Reduce number of assignments within the semester, using the lecture-to-conference method as the major means of learning. At present, the course requirements include other computer-based assignments, which adds to the overwhelming nature of the course.

Provide specific due dates and clear directions for each lecture-to-conference assignment.

Design and articulate a criterion for measuring student participation in these online assignments. Such criteria will measure both quantity and quality of the commentary of the Web discussions.

Monitor on a regular basis the Internet links within the mini-lectures to assure that they remain active.

Select a brief edition of a textbook.

Mini-Lectures:

Rename the "information only" online lectures from "mini-lec-

ture" to "review."

Restructure the content information in the content-based mini-lectures so that each online lecture makes only one major point and stays within the 2000-word parameter.

Develop a tiered-approach of Internet links within each mini-lecture to mitigate the problem of "too much information." The first tier will be designed to "whet the appetite" of the student. Such an overview will provide a better mechanism to help the student to commit to a specific theme for further thought and discussion within the linked online computer conference. Once a specific theme is selected, the student will be prompted to access additional Internet links.

Web Discussions:

Find software for the Web discussions that show contributions as a continuous stream of commentary. This will require institutional support.

Divide students into smaller online discussion groups of no more than five, if the software cannot be changed. This will reduce the visual confusion when the Web Discussion page is accessed. Further, the smaller group configuration may very well engender more active discussion.

Introduce the initial online discussions as an in-class activity and/or synchronous discussion. Such an orientation can increase students' comfort with technology as well as help create a sense of excitement about the process.

A New Paradigm

Even though the lecture-conference format has flaws in its current configuration and implementation, this methodology has pedagogical significance beyond the parochial experience of Race and Gender in American Culture. Most apparent is this method offers a template that can be used not only for other DE courses but also as an integral part of courses taught in the traditional classroom. More importantly the lecture-to-conference interweaves course content and electronic technology. Such a union has the potentiality of expanding boundaries of acquisition and understanding of American culture.

The potentiality of expanding boundaries of learning is embedded in this new learning paradigm. The lecture-to-conference methodology makes learning a more equal, democratic process:

Every student has equal opportunity to access the richness of information available on the Internet and every student has an equal voice in the process of analysis. Such equality is not achievable in the traditional classroom. This, as an example, has tremendous significance to the value of integration of electronic technology with course content. Most obvious, Internet links allow students to gain equal access to the historical sources. Not all students attend a school that has an acclaimed research library, nor do they have the funds to purchase numerous books that an instructor might assign. Internet access to primary sources changes this dramatically, and, as post-secondary educational institutions develop student-centered computer labs, opportunities to access resources expand exponentially.

Making learning more democratic is related directly to my decision to require students to access primary sources on the Internet. As noted previously, links to information are intrinsic to the acquisition of information in mini-lectures and evaluations of the information in Web discussions.

It is essential to note at this point, that I make reading and discussing primary source material fundamental to learning in every course that I teach. Students like this approach and learn better. I have discovered in my DE course, however, that integration of these primary sources has greater impact on student learning. Most apparent is the reality that the Internet is a gateway to written, visual, and audio primary sources that are not available for instruction in a traditional classroom.

For example, when teaching the events and dynamics of the Civil War in a traditional classroom, I assign a collection of primary sources, such as excerpts from the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Emancipation Proclamation, and so on. Further, these assigned primary sources become the nexus of class discussions and collaborative learning projects. Added to this, I enhance the teaching of this time period with a multimedia presentation on the Causes of the Civil War. All these greatly enrich the learning experiences of students.

By contrast, students enrolled in Race and Gender in American Culture have a wider range of choices of primary sources about the Civil War, expressly because of the Internet. Instead of being constricted by sources that I select for a course reader and include in a multimedia presentation, students are encouraged to explore the vast number of diverse resources available electronically. The nature of the primary source shifts away from the traditional writ-

ten information to pictures, to sounds, to personal letters. Specifically, students hear the music, played by instruments of that time, as they read the lyrics. Many of the songs and poems are not included in the "canon" typically assigned or included in published anthologies of primary sources.

At a deeper level, the inclusion of Internet links in the lecture-to-conference format has the net effect of exposing students to past reflections and experiences offered by individuals whose "voices" have yet to be heard. A published anthology of Civil War reminisces, for example, might include song lyrics by Stephen Foster and a poem by Walt Whitman. But, because of costs associated with publishing, that same anthology likely could not include "If We Knew" (http://www.erols.com/kfraser/knew.html) and the numerous songs and poems by those every-day soldiers and people who wanted to record their feelings and experiences about the splitting apart of a nation. Theirs is a story that has equal value to those who have made it into the canon.

IF WE KNEW
Author Unknown

Closely press to say goodbye
Which among the lips that kiss us
First would 'neath the daisies lie
We would clasp our arms around them
Looking on them through our tears
Tender words of loving kindness
We would whisper in their ears.
If we knew when friends around us

That the Internet allows the voiceless to be heard leads to the most significant impact of the use of the Internet. As students access the reminiscences of the "voiceless," they begin to realize that expressions of events and experiences by everyday people of the past has equal value to the experiences of the noteworthy. Much of this added value is intertwined with the fact that the reactions to events expressed by the everyday people of the past resonates with the student. The individual from the past and the individual in the present share the reality that each is an individual whose historical position and social stature is that the "common folk." Yet, from that social position the person from the past and the student of the present both realize that he/she has the freedom to make a statement about emotional and intellectual ideas. In turn, these expressions become infused into the texture of

American culture. Indirectly, the realization that the creation of the historical narrative is more inclusive, more democratic demonstrates that it is individual human agency that writes our history. Once this is realized, then learning history for students becomes a meaningful, relevant journey.

The active use of the Internet in the lecture-to-conference format achieves another dimension in democratizing the educational process: It breaks down the implicit hierarchical structure between teacher and student. That this process is student-centered is obvious, but implications of this refocus extend far beyond increased self-reliance and self-confidence.

In the lecture-to-conference format students "follow their noses." They are given some pointers, but from then on, they decide where to go. In that proactive process, students decide what they want to consider, and these choices connect to their own interests and inclinations.

In the traditional classroom a more static process unfolds: I decide what is worthy of exposure and discussion. My decisions are based on two factors, the availability of resources and my value judgment of what should be used. The second factor is the more insidious to the democratic process of learning. As I structure a lecture presentation on the Civil War for a traditional class, I gather together images, sounds, maps, and so on. My decisions are based on both my academic training and my personal political and cultural experiences and biases. No matter how conscious I am of remaining open-minded, my historical perspective is informed by the reality that I am a white, middle-class, well-educated female. I cannot relate to slavery the same way as a student who is African American. I can be consciously empathetic to the plight of slavery, but I may very well miss a primary source that has greater resonance for students. Thus, in the confines of a traditional classroom, not only does the traditional hierarchical structure of expert (teacher) to novice (student) still exist, but also the expert's decisions regarding the inclusion/exclusion of sources can very well miss essential points worthy of exposure and discussion.

Equally important, the new learning paradigm of the lecture-to-conference format has the potential to create a contemporary interpretative narrative about our nation's past. This prospect does not exist as readily in the traditional classroom. Within the forum of online discussions, students create a discourse within the larger community of learners, and this discourse stands as an organic, creative interpretation that connects past events to present concerns. Such contemporary, ongoing interpretation is unique to

each time the course is taught. Moreover, over several semesters, this contemporary interpretative narrative can become a new form of oral history—one that binds the view of past events with specific experiences and concerns of individuals who live today. Using the lecture-to-conference format as a means, students engage with the past, creating intellectual space for themselves and for their community of learners. This intellectual space is in constant flux, becoming redefined by student interactions with the texture of American culture.

Much has been learned by me, one adventuresome educator who decided to engage in the creative process of merging the study of our past with the technology that will dominate our future. Though this adventure has been fraught with hard work and frustration, the journey is rewarded as I watch students discover that our new technologies give them agency and a voice in our historical narrative.

Notes

[1]This initial mini-lecture includes an online conference (web discussion page), in which students introduce them.

[2]Students must complete other assignments as well as working through the online lecture material and participating in the web discussion pages. They have three exams, must complete four Internet Activity Pages, and write an interpretative essay on James McBride's The Color of Water.

[3]The "units of study" for Race and Gender in American Culture are A Revolutionary People (1765-1828), An Expanding People (1800-1848), A Divided People (1830-1877), An Industrializing People (1880 - 1900), and A Modernizing People (1900-1968). In large part these demarcations reflect titles and chronology contained within the assigned text,

[4]Though this same survey was given to students in fall 1998, the data is not available because of a change in personnel in the Research & Development department.

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