

# Decentered, Disconnected, and Digitized: The Importance of Shared Space

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## How Digitizing Decenters

Ask students in their first or second semester at college how they would feel about taking a writing course where they should expect to learn less by listening to their instructor and more by working with their classmates, where they won't see their instructor each time the course is scheduled to meet, and where much of their work will be conducted online rather than in the physical proximity of their instructor and fellow classmates.<sup>2</sup> While many students might be excited by the use of technology, we suspect that a good number of these students might pale at the thought. Though what we've mentioned here flies in the face of a traditional teacher-centered, or "sage-on-the-stage" pedagogy, we know that, on the whole, composition hasn't been "traditionally taught" for quite some time now. Yet, when we shift our non-traditional ways of teaching to an online delivery system (whether technology-enhanced, hybrid, or totally online) we are asking some students to adapt in ways they hadn't imagined. Pleasantly, we find that many do. Not only do they adapt, but they also learn the material and achieve the course goals, all the while enjoying these "new" methods for learning.

Most of us who have taught in an online environment would concur that while not every student succeeds in all levels and all aspects of a face-to-face (f2f) composition classroom, not every student succeeds in the technology-enhanced classroom either. More than ever before—while teaching a hybrid course—we began to wonder why this is. This led us to ask: If it is true that

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technology-enhanced pedagogies further decenters the teacher and encourages increased interaction between student and content as well as between students, how do students who are accustomed to learning (and excelling) in the traditional “sage on the stage” format make the adjustment to online learning?

Based on our experiences, we concluded that the answer to this question is something they don't experience much in a traditionally-delivered course: collaboration—more specifically, the creation of and engagement within a shared space. In our f2f classes, the collaborative aspect of assignments and community building don't make or break the class, but in a hybrid class, the success of the students and the class seem to be directly related to the design and use of collaborative as well as cooperative learning activities including discussion groups, group projects, presentations, peer feedback, invention dialogues, and so on. While these activities further decenter the classroom away from an instructor's monopoly on authority and perhaps create feelings of apprehension and anxiety in some students, if done well, collaborative learning activities create a stronger connection between students learning together in a digital environment—in spite of their physical disconnection.

Yet, as we praised the role of collaboration in an online environment, we were made keenly aware of Hewitt and Ehmann's (2005) interest in calling our attention to what they see as a point of dissonance in the field of computers and composition. While there seems to be a natural and easy connection between social constructivist epistemologies and computer-mediated communication (CMC), “what becomes problematic is the relatively low value given to proving claims made for social constructivism as applied to OWI [online writing instruction] . . . over time, as many people have posited a productive connection between social theory and OWI, this connection may have developed into a perceived cornerstone of OWI notwithstanding the fact that there is little empirical evidence to support it” (p. 45). The literature that does exist, they find, is largely anecdotal, involves very small studies, or is nonreplicable. We ask our students to adapt, and they typically do, but we lack the evidence to explain first if and then why it works—or not.

Thinking specifically about collaborative learning as a “by-product” (Hewitt & Ehnmann p. 37) or “hallmark” (Palloff & Pratt, 2005, p. 6) of social constructivism, our brief historical examination of computer and writing scholarship supports Hewitt and Ehmann's claim. Since computers have been introduced to composition instruction, there has been much optimism for the role they

would play in students' writing, particularly in collaboration, yet we have found very little that attempts to prove that this optimism has become a reality in the classroom. In 1990, Spitzer wrote that while "computers were once thought to promote isolation," they "may in fact prove to be of greatest help in creating cooperative learning environments. . . . Computers promote collaboration" (p. 59). Implicit in this and other early arguments is the assumption that isolation, particularly in a composition class, is undesirable—that collaboration and community are necessary conditions for an effective pedagogy. We are not arguing against this. Certainly, computers have influenced our pedagogies by enriching f2f collaborative activities and by providing opportunities for new forms of collaboration.

We do believe, however, that as we move toward proving that our online pedagogies help students to succeed in our classes, we should pause to consider and examine our assumptions about teaching writing with technology. Handa told us in 1990 that "when we enter a computer classroom for the first time, we must consciously work to be aware of aspects of our own pedagogies, and we must continue to reflect on their consequences" (p. 173). Even though we've been entering computer classrooms and digital instructional spaces for 16 years since, we must continue to be acutely aware of our pedagogies and their consequences. The primary goal of our study, therefore, is to determine if the creation of shared spaces does help students succeed in OWI. To do this, we will begin to examine the typically unexamined assumptions that collaborative learning married to technology will make for a better/stronger/faster writing pedagogy. As a pilot to what we feel is necessarily an on-going study, we collected and analyzed students' perceptions of collaboration, interviewed instructors, and observed the digitized spaces.

### **Collabor...co-oper-what?**

Although most any writing instructor will immediately appreciate the concept of "collaboration" we have come to discover that not all of us are designing our courses based on the same—or even similar—understandings of the term. Roschelle and Pea (1999) cautioned that "collaboration" is in danger of losing any real meaning because "technology evangelists tend to label almost any web facilities for correspondence or coordination across distance as a 'collaborative tool'" (as cited in Paulus, p. 102). Paulus (2005) similarly found that research studies related to teaching and technology typically assume that anything involving "participant interaction is the same as collaborative learning" (p. 102). We have found the same to be occurring in composition studies. Collaboration has become so taken-for-granted in our social-

constructivist classrooms, that we call just about any kind of activity where students work together “collaboration.” In our field’s scholarship, we find the terms “collaboration” and “cooperation” often used interchangeably, if “cooperation” is used at all. Therefore, because both require the thoughtful construction of shared spaces, we think it will be useful to make some distinctions between collaborative and cooperative learning.

It is not entirely due to carelessness or misunderstanding that the two concepts are so often conflated. Kenneth Bruffee (1999) called collaboration and cooperation “two versions of the same thing” (p.83). And Panitz (1996), who has written extensively about cooperative learning and writing across the curriculum, stated that he has “been searching for many years for the Holy Grail of interactive learning, a distinction between collaborative and cooperative learning definitions.” Nevertheless, clear distinctions are to be made that will be important to the instructor designing, creating, and facilitating shared spaces.

Stacey (2005) explained that while there are many connections between the terms, the two reflect different philosophies (p. 151). She starts us off with a clear-cut distinction between the two: in cooperative learning, students divide the work among themselves and later assemble it into its final product to be evaluated. “Collaborative partners,” however, “do the work together and while the work may be delegated, the final result is negotiated” (p. 151). This gives us a good place to start, but let’s look a bit more closely at the implications of these distinctions.

Many students—especially those working in a digital environment—often find that cooperative learning can be more efficient than collaboration. Rather than working synchronously through a project or issue, or waiting asynchronously for each other’s discussion points, students divvy up the work, go do it, then cobble their results into a final presentation. We can see, then, how cooperative learning often takes the form of “cumulative talk,” where knowledge is *shared rather than constructed*. Further, in this method of learning, students typically are assigned (or may assign themselves) roles toward completing a task for which the instructor has an end result or “answer” in mind. Cooperative learning works well, therefore, when the goal is to learn or “master” foundational knowledge, as the instructor maintains authority over both the students’ processes and learning. For this reason, it does not empower students, according to Panitz. Rather, students work together to discover the acceptable answer which the teacher already knows.

Collaborative learning, on the other hand, does empower student. Once a task is set into motion by the instructor, all the authority over both the process and the product is transferred to the groups. The “answers” are not predetermined, and as we well know, students working collaboratively will often arrive at unexpected, unforeseen, or even conflicting solutions or answers. Unlike the cumulative talk that occurs in cooperative learning, collaborative learning encourages “exploratory talk.” In exploratory talk “statements and suggestions are offered for joint consideration. These are then challenged and counter-challenged with justifications and alternative hypotheses” (Arvaja et al. as cited in Paulus p. 102). Online education experts Palloff and Pratt (2001) argued that “collaborative learning assists with deeper levels of knowledge generation and promotes initiative, creativity, and development of critical thinking skills” (p. 33).

In his seminal text *Collaborative learning: Higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge*, Bruffee (1999) extolled the benefits of collaborative learning.

[It] helps students learn better—more thoroughly, more deeply, more efficiently—than learning alone. . . . collaborative learning teaches students to work together effectively when the stakes are relatively low, so that they can work together effectively later on when the stakes are high. With collaborative learning, they learn to construct knowledge as it is constructed in the knowledge communities they wish to join after attending colleges and universities. . . . With no loss of respect for the value of expertise, they learn to depend on one another rather than depending exclusively on the authority of experts and teachers. Most important, in collaborative learning, students learn the craft of interdependence. (p. xiii)

Thus, in collaborative learning, knowledge is socially constructed through meaningful conversations between students.

We should be aware, however, that recent studies on minimal guidance instruction and human cognitive architecture by Kirschner, Sweller and Clark (2006) caution that there is “overwhelming and unambiguous evidence that minimal guidance during instruction is significantly less effective and efficient than guidance specifically designed to support the cognitive processing necessary for learning” (p. 75). These studies don’t necessarily deny that minimal guidance produces some sort of critical thinking activity, but they do challenge the

presumption that our students actually produce and retain actual learning—that is if the “aim of all instruction is to alter long-term memory” (p. 77) as they propose.

If we agree with Kirschner et al., then we are left with a challenge to constructivist teaching approaches that tend to remove the instructor’s guidance and instruction from learning activities, thus not instilling any long-term memory learning within our students. Their study, in essence, is telling us that though we may think our collaborative, purposely vague assignments are forcing our students to apply (and yes, develop) critical thinking skills, they are quite possibly robbing our students of the guidance necessary to analyze and store that experience in their long-term memory. For Kirschner et al., “any instructional recommendation that does not or cannot specify what has been changed in long-term memory, or does not increase the efficiency with which relevant information is stored in or retrieved from long-term memory, is likely to be ineffective” (p. 77). Just as Hewitt and Ehmann cautioned us to examine more carefully the roles social constructivist learning plays in our classrooms, our challenge, brought to us through studies in human cognitive architecture, may not only be to create collaborative assignments and activities that engage our students in critical thinking and learning processes. We also need to be able to explain, interpret, and guide our students to a place where these processes become deeply embedded and no longer have to be learned and relearned with each new course and instructor.

As online writing instructors invested in our students’ long-term learning, we need to consider how we can design the digital environment for the most impact. Of course, students may resist the idea of collaboration at first, believing that the instructor does or should hold “the answers.” And once (or if) they come to see the value of it, they must make a continued effort to begin and sustain a truly collaborative learning process. Palloff and Pratt (2001) found that “when collaboration is not encouraged, participation in the online course is generally low and may take the form of queries to the instructor rather than dialogue and feedback” (p. 33). Therefore, to be sure that collaborative learning empowers students to make their own choices and create their own paths to long-term knowledge and meaning, online instructors must carefully construct the spaces in which students can fruitfully engage in this mode of learning. In fact, for effective collaboration, said Palloff and Pratt (2005), “it is not just the learners who collaborate with one another under instructor guidance, the instructor is a part of that collaborative process as well” (p. 5). The instructor helps to “form and shape” this environment and empowers “learners to

take on the responsibility to nurture it, extend it, and use it as the vehicle for co-created knowledge and meaning” (p. 5).

### **Collaboration in Action**

Collaborative learning takes several forms in composition courses including both discussion-based and task-based pedagogies: open dialogue between the whole class or small groups to generate ideas, the gathering of knowledge to present to and discuss with the class, jointly written papers, detailed critiques of each other’s writing, and so on. No matter the specific task or form the collaborative effort takes, Handa found that collaboration “involves getting students to realize consciously how much others . . . help develop our ideas. . . . Collaboration is a spirit that makes an author eager to talk over his work with others, makes him distrust his own work for the blindness he knows it contains” (p. 162). To be meaningful, collaboration isn’t just the completion of a task but an internalized way of acquiring knowledge, thinking, and writing.

Team-based learning expert Michaelson reminded us of three significant changes that must occur when making the “shift” from a traditional “sage on the stage” pedagogy to a collaborative “guide on the side” one, whether the course is f2f, online, or both. Of special interest to us is the third necessary change:

- First, the primary learning objectives of the course will shift. Instead of being primarily focused on familiarizing students with key concepts, the course goals will also include ensuring that students learn how to use those concepts.
- Second, the role and function of the teacher will also change. Instead of just being someone who dispenses information and concepts, the teacher will need to design and manage the overall instructional process.
- Third, there will also be a change in the role and function of students in the course. Instead of being passive recipients of information and content, students will need to be responsible for the initial acquisition of the content and for working collaboratively with other students to learn how to use the content. (p. 2)

A fourth element to add to this list is what Schrage (1990), a Research Associate with the MIT Media Lab, called “shared space.” Schrage argued that “collaboration, without exception, requires” it (qtd. in Conner, 2001). The nature of shared space is variable and dynamic; it can be a virtual space, a physical space, or a digital space. It can be a blackboard, a whiteboard, an

online chat room, or discussion board. What's important, he found, is that "you need to have the media where the ideas can be captured and represented and those representations can be modified and played with." Clearly, teaching writing using technology provides ample opportunities to create and use shared space. We believe that a digitized class creates and maintains shared spaces in ways that a f2f classroom cannot.

### **Protected Spaces**

Before we begin our discussion of the study, we want to take a moment to consider those "protected spaces" in which both instructors and students may find themselves. Just as we took a closer look at the differences between collaboration and cooperation, we need to look at the ways we protect our teaching and learning. As Berlin said in 1982, we also want "writing teachers to become more aware of the full significance of their pedagogical strategies. Not doing so can have disastrous consequences, ranging from momentarily confusing students to sending them away with faulty and even harmful information" (p. 766).

When we theorize teaching, learning, and delivery styles, we often have the tendency to assume the ideal situation—ideal instructor, students, and classroom (f2f, blended, or digitized). One trend we've observed while conducting this study is what Hillocks called teaching as "protected activity" (as cited in Takayoshi and Huot, 2003, p. 5). This belief holds that if students don't do well, it's their fault, or the technology's fault, but certainly not the instructor's. This practice is easy to understand in a traditional, teacher-centered course. The instructor transmits the knowledge through lectures and if the student isn't able to recite it on the test, clearly she did not take good notes, understand the material, study appropriately, or focus during the test. If a hybrid or otherwise technology-enhanced course goes amok for any reason or at any level, more often than not, instructors blame one of two things: the students for "not getting it" or the technology for making the delivery too complicated. What most instructors fail to do—for reasons of interest, time, pride, or training—is take a closer look at *why* things may have gone awry. Consequently, we fail to examine our often long and strongly-held assumptions and beliefs about what constitutes sound teaching.

Students have the tendency to do the same—perhaps to a greater degree than their instructors as they are so rarely asked to reflect upon or theorize their learning. When they don't succeed in a course, they have the tendency to look beyond themselves and blame what they can't control such as the instructor, the technology, or their group members. This tendency could be called



“learning as protected activity.” When participating in a digitized course, students can become especially protective of their learning. In these cases, the technology is to blame for their lack of success in the course. New twists on the old, traditional classroom excuses come into play: they couldn’t find the link to the handouts, presentations, or assignments; they couldn’t figure out how to use the technology; they had a hard time meeting with their group members online; the system was down; and so on. In each case, these may truly be impediments to students’ learning, but with “learning as a protected activity,” these excuses prevent students from examining their own behaviors in the course. Even more important to us, however, is the feeling of disconnection students may experience because of and through the use of technology. Because an online course is theoretically “open” all day-every day, students tend to expect immediate and constant feedback. Some may even feel as if they now have the instructor locked in for their personal, one-on-one instruction and feel jilted when their instructor does not live up to this expectation. In addition, the structural elements of the course (the planned assignments, content, and digital spaces in the CMS) can complicate matters. The less open and specific an instructor is about the shape of the collaborative space, the greater the chance that students will feel disconnected despite the presence of resources and links that suggest connectivity. This feeling of disconnection provides another valid reason to treat learning as a protected activity.

Early in our discipline’s transition to online writing instruction, we realized the values of digitizing our social constructivist epistemologies by transferring collaborative learning activities online. Early adopters reported that problems encountered in f2f collaborative learning situations were often solved by moving those collaborative activities online, perhaps because the technology creates and/or suggests guidelines and guidance that the classroom activities lack. We also learned the transverse: many online pedagogical problems could be solved by implementing collaborative learning. Through peer review for example, Cyganowski (1990) found that “the natural strengths of [collaborative learning and online learning] tend to counteract problems with either alone” (p. 70) and that student complaints about f2f collaborative learning “were essentially eliminated” when transferred online (p. 71).

As enthusiastic online instructors and scholars of computers and writing, however, we can’t afford to blame students and excuse our teaching through technology. Hawisher used the term “technocentrism” to describe optimism for all things technological (Takayoshi and Huot, p. 5). “In a technocentric approach,” as described by Papert, “computers in the classroom are value-free

tools that focus on the technology itself and the ability of each new technological innovation to correct problems and create new possibilities” (p. 5). We might call this “digitizing as protected activity.” The danger inherent in digitizing as protected activity is that those of us who create and maintain the shared spaces where students are asked to collaborate may find ourselves, at times, unwilling to examine carefully those spaces. Rather than consider the effects, positive as well as negative, of the space and the assignment, we may tend to blame the students for not inhabiting the spaces properly—for whatever reason. Because effective collaboration is so strongly dependent upon digitized social spaces we must resist the urge to protect ourselves and our course design from analysis and critique.

### **Study Design**

“Decentered, Disconnected, and Digitized: The Importance of Shared Space” represents the early stages of our learning more about the elements of collaboration within digital environments/spaces. This first-phase of the on-going study seeks to determine if it is true that collaboration assists and enables those students who are accustomed to learning (and excelling) in the traditional “sage on the stage” format to make the necessary adjustments to online learning. By examining the generally unexamined assumptions that collaborative learning married to technology will make for a better/stronger/faster writing pedagogy, we additionally aim to counteract digitizing as protected activity.

For what we consider to be a pilot study, our guiding research questions include:

1. What are students’ perceptions of, and preconceived notions about, collaborative learning?
2. Do students believe collaborative learning influences their learning overall, and if so, how?
3. Do students find collaborative learning activities and/or the use of technology in their courses to be effective in engaging them in the writing process?
4. Does technology influence students’ perceptions about collaborative learning, and if so how?
5. Are instructors aware of the potential changes to their pedagogy when they choose to incorporate technology into their course(s)?
6. How can we approach technology in order to enhance students’ experiences with collaborative learning?

Rather than a case study or interview approach where we would only gain insight into the perceptions and practices of a small sample of students, we chose to administer an online survey related to Questions 1, 2, 3, and 5 to six sections of composition courses in the Spring semester of 2006. (Questions 4 and 6, we realize, require alternative methods of research.) Three of these courses were hybrid, taught 50% online and 50% f2f, and the other three f2f courses were taught in a computer classroom. The three hybrid courses used WebCT as their course management system for a variety of activities including “lecture” delivery, assignment submission, chat, exchange of papers for peer critiquing, online office hours, and so on. Our potential sample consisted of up to 150 students. For reasons unknown to us, we were not able to collect this many responses. Our initial hope was to survey this group of students twice and track their changes over the course of the semester. The first survey, however, only had 57 participants. The second doubled in size to 117. So, while we were able to collect valuable data related to individual perceptions, we aren’t able to make general statements about the changes over time.

There are, of course other issues with this approach, as we discovered. First, conducting a truly empirical study would require that all of the courses follow a common structure and format, complete with one course serving as the “control” course. Though there are objectives or goals that our composition courses share, the actual activities and approaches to meeting the course goals and objectives varies with each instructor. Therefore, the six courses we studied were all very different in structure and presentation. The hybrid courses, though, did share strong similarities as these three instructors had all gone through a common process of training and course building with us.

Although we have planned several ways to conduct further surveys and track student responses over time, the surveys employed in this study provided ample qualitative data for us to examine. In addition, the six instructor surveys and observations of their online practices enabled us to make useful connections between the students’ comments and what the instructors perceive was happening in their classrooms. Essentially, we believe that we now have a clearer sense of the space wherein further studies will be done...a clearer picture of the boundaries and lines that the study should fall within.

## Resisting Shared Spaces

In the surveys, we asked students to reflect on their experiences, both past and present, of working with groups and learning from their classmates. The next section, “Sharing Spaces,” accounts for students’ positive perceptions of collaborative learning. In this section, we discuss the ways in which our initial hypothesis—that most students would, at the beginning of their second semester of college, be somewhat apprehensive toward learning and participating in a decentered classroom—was proven. We wondered if Bleich’s (1995) warning that it can be “an occasion for abuse of the classroom by those who don’t take it seriously” would hold true (p. 47). One of our surveyed instructors confirmed this assumption: “Students generally oppose group work, so working with technology will aggravate their anxiety about having to carry all the weight of the work assigned.”

The negative student responses toward collaborative activities contain exactly the kind of comments we would expect to hear: students suggested that they don’t like the **leader/follower** dichotomy arrangement in most groups—some because they want to be the leader and some because they would rather not be the leader—that they work faster and/or **more efficiently** on their own, that they would prefer to be **accountable for their own work** rather than depending on others, and that their shy or “timid” **personalities** makes working in groups an uncomfortable activity.

Other negative responses interestingly noted either a direct **distrust of the collaborative process or of their peers**: “How can someone your own age know more than you and the instructor? Personally, I prefer to have my work revised by someone older and wiser.” Another student writes: “I trust my teacher more than my classmates.” One explained the distrust is valid because a classmate “could tell you the wrong information thinking it is right. The teacher knows what they are talking about so you will always do it right when they correct you.” Finally, one student stated that he prefers lectures because group activities aren’t like college work.

Obviously, there are several issues to uncover here. One is that students may object outright to the purpose of collaborative learning. In a number of comments it appears that the dislike for group work is born out of students’ willingness to defer to their instructors’ authority, believing that the instructor always has the “answers” and that they are the “right answers.” And, transversely, they believe that their fellow students know little about writing and are therefore unable to contribute to their learning. While most of these negative comments express distrust

in their classmates' abilities, a few students admit to feeling unable themselves to help their classmates learn concepts or write papers: "I feel as if I am unqualified to say anything that will really help anyone write a better paper since what works for me will not work for everyone." These students do not believe in the potential for exploratory talk to inform their learning and improve their writing. More strongly, they don't believe that knowledge, at least in a college classroom, is socially constructed. They are more comfortable in a passive learning environment, or perhaps a cooperative learning one where at least at the end, the instructor will tell them clearly if they are right or wrong.

Finally, what is a benefit of collaborative activities—**diversity of ideas**—for some students becomes a drawback: "we do not all think the same in the group, so we are not able to write all we want to be written." In this case, collaboration is seen as a power struggle over the final expression of ideas rather than an opportunity to shape diverse ideas into new knowledge.

Of the students who responded negatively, however, more of them seem to object to the enactment of collaborative learning. Their negative opinions about collaboration appear to be the result of poorly constructed groups, uncooperative classmates, and/or unclear assignments. In fact, most of the complaints stemmed from "slacker," uncooperative, or distracted **group members** who sit back and let everyone else do the work. In a clear case where other technologies get in the way, one student mentioned: "most of the time, the group does not hold up their end of the bargain and are too busy using their cell phones to text message or are on another site not ever really giving feedback." Another said simply "I do not work well in groups, so it has not been positive."

Schrage (1990) told us that the quality of collaboration is dependent upon three things: "that the collaborators possess a modicum of mutual trust, the belief that they are each adding value, and a genuine desire to solve the problem at hand or create something new" (p. 43). Additionally, productive collaborations are made because people "realize that they can't do it all by themselves. They need insights, comments, questions, and ideas from others. They accept and respect the fact that other perspectives can add value to their own" (p. 40). We are pleased about the close relation between the students' comments and Schrage's criteria. Even though the number of students who respond negatively to collaborative learning is low, we need to consider how we can create a shared space that combats these negative perceptions, creates

an equal working environment, and helps students feel invested in the outcome of the collaborative work.

### **Sharing Spaces**

In spite of the negative perceptions of collaborative work examined in the previous section, we found very little learning as protected activity and were surprised at the overwhelmingly positive tenor of student responses to questions about working in groups and learning from other students. On the whole students believed that they can and do learn from other students. The benefits they list are more than we expected to discover. Their collective comments reveal that students do realize the value of collaborative learning activities.

In 1992, Faigley wrote that in online discussions, “students are often shocked to find that other students arrive at different interpretations from theirs, even from readings of seemingly transparent, commonplace texts. Thus they are forced to confront different ways of constituting meaning from experience and to negotiate those meanings with other students” (p. 185). The students surveyed did not confirm this “shocked attitude.” Rather, they overwhelmingly stated that they appreciate and seek out their classmates’ **perspectives, opinions, and ideas**. In fact, this was exactly the comment that we saw repeated most often. “By listening to others’ point of view, you may sometimes get a perspective of things that make you visualize things differently and learn more.” Another said, “I think that a work that has been thought out by a group rather than just one person will turn out to be better.” And, “It always helps to hear what others have to say when you are brain dead and need a push into further thoughts.” In their own collaborative article, Yancey and Spooner (1998) stated that “one of the key arguments supporting collaboration has been that it allows a constructivist, collective kind of knowledge-making process that is faithful to and takes advantage of a postmodern, multimodal, Bahktinian understanding of how we ‘create’ knowledge” (p. 47). While the students surveyed were not so eloquent, they did acknowledge exactly this advantage to working and learning collaboratively.

Some students suggested that the amount of work they do in a collaborative environment is greater in both quantity and quality. They mentioned that they actually **contribute more to a group** than if they worked on concepts, assignments, and papers alone. Several other comments highlight the heightened sense of commitment to the class and its material when working in groups: “I am engaged in this class; I am not just another student.” The interaction

increases their “interest in the project/subject.” This next student connected the collaborative environment with improved writing:

We were able to give and receive constructive pointers in writing, this helped [us] look at assignments differently and helped in writing subsequent drafts. It was like a study group ... and it made the information more memorable and fun.

This heightened engagement and interest in the course content and objectives makes perfect sense. McNenny and Roen (1992) stated that their favorite reason for working collaboratively is that it allows them to “work in an atmosphere filled with team spirit” (304). They felt that working in a team promotes more sustainable and better work as well as creates a sense of commitment to others and the material that they don’t feel when expected to work and learn alone. “The alternative to collaboration,” they suggested, “is social isolation and alienation” (p. 304).

Logically, then, students mentioned that working in groups raises their **comfort level** in the classroom and makes it easier to learn. “This just makes everything a lot more relaxed and not so uptight,” said one. Another said that “if perhaps a student is uncomfortable to speak up to an instructor, it could be easier to speak to a peer.” And, “It helps me build my confidence knowing that I am being accepted by others and not being left out.” Their classmates, the instructor, and the material, according to these students, all become more accessible through collaboration.

While several students were happy to make new social connections and acquire “friends” through collaborative experiences, others use this experience **strategically**. Through their collaborative interactions, they were able to discover their classmates’ strengths and then go to them for help with class material and assignments later. “Working with peers is very important because it helps you make connections with people that can offer you help when needed.” Another commented: “I can identify which [students] have a better understanding in the subject, and I can get help from them so I can be more knowledgeable myself.” We are impressed by these students’ beliefs that their fellow classmates are willing to share ideas and collaborate with one another without the sense that they are taking advantage of them; their comments reflect a spirit of willing collaboration. This willingness becomes important when students have **difficulty learning from their instructor**, for whatever reasons. The “teacher may not always know how to teach and make students understand the subject, but with peer help it’s easier, because students identify with each other and know what problems you are having.” Another

said that learning from classmates is good “because they are currently going through the same problem and can explain it to you easier because we communicate at a student level, not at a professional level, where it can be difficult to understand sometimes.”

Alternately, some were **careful about how much credit to give their classmates**. This particular student deferred to the instructor for the knowledge-base of the class, but mentioned alternate points of view as an advantage of collaboration. “I can learn somewhat [from other students], not fully though. This is because only the instructor fully understands the concepts that are supposed to be taught and how they are to be applied. Students help in giving another point of view though.”

Other respondents were very aware, however, most likely through bad experiences with collaborative projects, that the ultimate quality of a group **depends on the members**. One said that only sometimes is he able to learn from others: “it depends on the intelligence and knowledge of the other student.” Or more to the point, “my answer depends solely on which student exactly the question is being applied to.”

Through working with their classmates, a number of students mentioned acquiring types of knowledge we weren’t expecting them to discuss. They revealed that they acquire **skills** such as staying on task, time management, prioritizing, study skills, note taking, organization, relaxation techniques, and leadership methods. Some learned **virtues** such as patience, courage, understanding, acceptance (keeping an open mind), and not being self-centered by participating in collaborative activities. Interestingly, no student mentioned learning how to use or manage the **technology** from other students (recall that all classes incorporated technology to varying degrees). Students either adapt so quickly that we don’t even notice them going through a learning process—and nor do they—or they already come to class prepared to use the technology through their experiences with using various software and internet applications in their previous educational experiences and their everyday lives.

Finally, we were pleased to find that several students recognized and mentioned **their willingness to share their opinions, their ability to teach** others and their interest in helping their classmates with their writing. “I feel like I can genuinely help improve a student’s writing,” said one. Another even went as far as to say that he “sets [his classmates] straight” when they disagree with him. While this may sound a little unsympathetic, we are pleased to see that this



student realizes that he has something to contribute to his classmate's understanding rather than deferring to the instructor for the correct "answer."

These students' comments reveal their collective understanding that they "need insights, comments, questions, and ideas from others. The [students] accept and respect the fact that other perspectives can add value to their own" (Schrage, 1990, p. 40). As their instructors, then, we need to consider how we can create a shared space that facilitates and accommodates the strengths of collaborative learning.

### **Digital Social Spaces**

Selber (2004) believed that students are too often encouraged to learn how to use technology before they actually think about the implications of the technology. What we should be doing instead, he argued, is teaching our students a way to be "critically literate in a digital age" (p.75). As instructors providing a gateway to a digital space for a course, we too would do well to apply our own analytical and critical skills to the technology we so often readily embrace and use. Earlier, we mentioned technocentrism as a form of "digitizing as protected activity," which we found reflected in many of the student responses to our research. Overwhelmingly, students approached technology in a positive, nearly naïve way, only pausing to question "tools" in terms of their functionality, but never their purpose or intention.

Feenberg (1991) developed a critique that uncovers two basic theories (and approaches) to technology: the instrumental and the substantive. The instrumental theory is "based on the common sense idea that technologies are "tools" standing ready to serve the purposes of their users." Technology is then approached only as a "tool" that remains "neutral without valuative content of its own" (p.5). Approaches such as this create misunderstood concepts of new technology (such as the idea that the computer is just a digital "typewriter") that may include a denial of the political and social power that the new technology may yield or come to encompass. We, and our students, generally subscribe to this theory as well, setting the technology aside as a mere tool without an effect on student learning other than the fact that it was present. We see this illustrated in the following instructor's response:

The worst students were my worst for lack of effort mainly. The **technology really had nothing to do with it**; they are just as used to using the technology as the good students.  
(Instructor Response)

Though we believe that the previous response could also be seen as an indicator that the technology gap is shrinking and that more students now have a foundational access to technology, it may also be the case that the instructor has chosen to focus on their teaching as something removed from a digital space. This attitude is reflected by another instructor:

It would seem that most of the judgments about the hybrid really **depend on the kind of instructor a person had** and the course they had developed for the students. I think the hybrid format is wonderful, but it would seem that **the format was less important than the type of instruction** they received. It's not for everyone, but just like any class, a lot depends on who teaches and how they teach. (Instructor Response)

What is ignored here is somewhat troubling. Though the instructor above shows an understanding that they've decided to teach their course in a different "format" (in this case, as a hybrid), the instructor also chooses to believe that the "type" of instruction is what really has the effective outcome, and that somehow changing the format of the course has no effect whatsoever on the type of instruction available. Obviously, had either of these instructors been teaching in a primarily lecture-based format, they may have come into some difficulty simply changing the "format" of the course, but since they both had some amount of collaborative learning built into their courses, the leap to a different format becomes somewhat more seamless. What hasn't been considered, however, is whether the technology made available to the instructors has dictated or anticipated this "type" of teaching.

Another, perhaps increasingly rare, but still possible, problem with these comments is that for many of these students the courseware used to deliver materials is one of their first technology gateways, effectively shaping their perspectives in regards to the uses of technology for learning and collaboration, as well as more general uses of technology within our culture. Even if it isn't their very first technology gateway, the digital counterpart to the course becomes the "gateway" through which each student must pass to at least access information. Thus, another choice presents itself to the instructor creating a course with a digital component: how will you use the "tool," and to what effect? Many instructors choose to use a digital space such as a Content Management System/Courseware Management System (or CMS, such as Blackboard or WebCT) as a digital "closet" or "file cabinet" for their courses. Students use the technology to gain access to the material/content, and may even be accessing and reading the content at the same time, but the vectors created in this type of network really only point between the

instructor and the individual student, and unfortunately point to a model for using digital spaces that is all too common. What's missing from this model is interconnectivity and exchange of ideas between students in a more democratic setting. What's missing is collaboration.

Hewett (2000) demonstrated something similar in her study of oral and computer mediated talk's effects on the revision process of composition students. Although the students in both groups were largely tasked to complete the same assignment, the shared spaces varied. Thus, the results varied. Hewett's conclusions about the various spaces used in her study suggest that none of them are actually as beneficial as they could be. She wrote that "self-generation of ideas, one of the theoretical lures of collaborative-learning activities, may be better served by a fuller interactive environment. If students are not interactively generating ideas with and for each other, they may be less likely to find ideas for themselves in the direct suggestions they give to their peers" (284). Hewett made a judgment here about the efficacy of the tools/spaces available and concluded her article with several possibilities for increasing the overall interactivity of the digital space/environment that the students collaborate in.

Schrage would agree with Hewett's assessment. He warned that we can't just declare a shared space and hope that good things will come from it. It has to be managed "both tactically and strategically." The questions he asked apply well to our teaching situations: "Are you trying to use the shared space to create new kinds of interactions and conversations? Are you using the . . . shared space to manage risk or create opportunities, to create consensus, or to identify different points of view? Are you using it to see what values people bring, which values to strip away, or what people are concealing as values, or are you trying to use it as a vehicle to accommodate?" (Connor, 2001).

Some instructors choose to see digital spaces as opportunities to get students to interact not only with the content, but with each other, asynchronously and synchronously. Beyond simply using email or a chat, student collaboration online can occur in several ways, though ultimately there's still a choice to make. Instructors choose to make connections between students, content, and tools, or to simply leave students floundering in a poorly designed, poorly conceived digital space without a welcoming environment for collaboration. We have a responsibility to critically engage the available technological tools and to push the boundaries of these tools to expand and change to better serve our pedagogies. This leaves us with several

questions to consider alongside the issues we address within the framework of this paper. If instructors, when critically examining the tools available for collaboration online (particularly for composition courses), find that the tools fail to meet their needs, why then are we not ourselves working more collaboratively with programmers and others who may be able to create more usable digital spaces? And, if we do find the tools we have adequate, have we considered the unspoken, rhetorical implications of these tools before we present them to students?

Taking the time and effort to critically engage the tools we plan to teach with allows us to not only work through and anticipate student frustrations and successes, but also gives us a chance to consider more immediately the rhetorical strategies we must put in place to create a digital social space that exhibits and organizes information and social networking in ways that are meaningful, productive, and engaging. For example: many of us use discussion boards (a.k.a. forums) to communicate with our students, to explore course content and topics, and to encourage students to collaborate with each other, often in groups/teams. Though this example is an effective model for using discussion boards, and a great starting point, it still may fall short of creating a “livable” or “habitable” digital social space. Students end up using terms like “visit” or “access” in reference to the course webspace, and yet, don’t have much in the way of buy-in or contribution to the construction, development, or direction of that space. They essentially haven’t “moved in,” and are only “visiting,” in a place/space that they can’t really touch or modify, only look at. This is not to say that students need complete access to control over a course, since there are genuinely good reasons that the instructor may need to retain some control or organizing ability to keep the course flowing. However, simple steps, such as adding a separate discussion board into the course which is only for student use and discussion, can rhetorically illustrate an instructor’s desire to be a part of a digital social/shared space wherein collaboration and communication are norms, and not simply assigned tasks.

Activities that foster a truly collaborative atmosphere tend to render a more useable and active digital space for the course. In our study, most of the courses, including most of the hybrids, had more than adequate activity occurring within discussion boards and the courses in general. However, when we more closely examined the kinds of things happening in these discussions, we realized that most instructors either a) lacked appropriate instructions or guidance that would form a collaborative digital space for the students, or b) had clear guidelines for *cooperative* or *individual* posting, but, for whatever reason, did not initiate something more open and collaborative. Calling tools like the discussion board “collaborative” is easy if you’re a marketing

guru, but it becomes a somewhat difficult claim to uphold when so few users truly collaborate within the space. As Payne (2000) told us in his article addressing the phenomenon of instant student publishing: “We need to critique technology in ways that are parallel to collaborative critiques of dominant discourse: by explicating indirect and routinely unseen ways in which power relations are maintained and political subjects are composed, we as teachers can begin to revise our classroom practices (and our uses of technology) to promote more legitimate democratic pedagogies.”

Payne’s article also critically analyzed the content management system Blackboard in terms of collaborative learning. Though our participants utilized WebCT 4.1 Campus Edition instead of Blackboard, the same criticisms could be launched against WebCT, and for that matter many other CMS applications like it. Payne wrote that “a primary tenet of collaborative learning, then—the reduction of the student-teacher hierarchy—is countered in the very design of Blackboard which composes both teachers and students along traditionally sanctioned social lines.” It’s worth noting that Payne’s own definition of collaboration falls somewhere between Foucault’s concepts of challenging power/control and Bakhtin’s concepts of the open dialogic approach, which in turn leads Payne to conclude that “regardless of what the teacher wants to do in this environment, he or she is authored to be an authoritarian.” It’s here that we must take issue with Payne’s critique (though we do appreciate and concur with much of it) in terms of our own study. The real problem that became evident in our study wasn’t so much that the CMS was leaving the instructors powerless to infuse their course with collaborative elements due to the extensive control settings. Rather, we found that many of the instructors simply didn’t seem to *want* to instill any sort of truly collaborative activities in the first place, opting instead for simple question/response discussions punctuated by occasional guiding comments and the even less occasional posted assignment, announcement, content and/or chat. In other words, though we agree with Payne that the CMS does indeed tend to reinforce traditional classroom hierarchies and classical f2f roles, our study tended to show that most instructors still go about doing things this way, anyway—regardless of the technology enhancement to the course. While the instructors who chose to “go hybrid” experienced significant shifts in their teaching, in the end, the online portion remained a virtual version of a f2f course. However, those instructors who embraced features like the discussion board’s ability to set up private group discussions, appear to have made a more profound shift towards embracing and using digital spaces for something approaching true collaborative activity.

And so the question becomes, what would happen if we all approached our chosen CMS critically, and forced it to change? Would we change it to make it a more fundamentally collaborative tool, or do we expect to have the same (or even enhanced) options for control and power over our course and students that we experience more tangibly in the f2f classroom? To the contrary, we often find, in faculty trainings for WebCT, that many instructors haven't given thought to collaborative activities (sometimes even in the classroom) until the potential for doing so in the CMS is discussed, as was the case for the instructors in our study when they were trained in setting up private group discussions. However, it is a potential not yet realized, as there are few, if any, blatant steps or demands for creating this sort of space. Many instructors take the first step into digital spaces by creating cooperative activities that enable them to account for accumulated knowledge; as a result, they stop short of collaboration. We believe that in order to help students succeed in their digitized courses, the task for online instructors, novice and experienced, is to bring together a critically analyzed online tool and a democratizing, open, and clear understanding of collaborative learning. In other words, any CMS can be "bent" to work for collaboration, and the key is to negotiate and discover places to construct knowledge, not to just share documents. Instructors have to, however, reshape their perspective on what control over a course can actually mean. They need to imagine and design a digital space wherein they can provide clear guidance and details for assignments and discussions, but also where they can also be open with their students about the shared experience of working collaboratively online.

### **Decentered, Digitized, but not Disconnected: Sharing our Shared Spaces**

We set out to answer some seemingly simple questions about teaching writing in a digitized environment. Specifically, we wanted to understand better the role that collaborative learning plays in helping students succeed in a digitized class. We realize that this first foray into the issue is really just the tip of the iceberg. There is much more to be learned. For example, as we might expect at UTEP, a Hispanic-serving institution on the US/Mexican border, several students discussed cultural and/or language issues in their responses. As we go forward with this study, we plan to consider Sterne's (2000) questions: "How did race get written out of computing? How did whiteness become a default setting for online culture?" (p. 191) More specifically, we want to discover if and how cultural orientation and/or background are factors in student, as well as instructor, approaches to and perceptions of collaborative learning and technology. We also realize there are ways to improve the research instruments and methods we used as well as additional methods that would reveal even more valuable data. Measuring

students' perceptions is only one piece of this project's puzzle, but we thought it important to pursue at this point as we frequently read and understand from experience how important students' perceptions are to the success of effective online learning. Zemsky and Massy (2004) for example, argued that "e-learning designers should more carefully determine what students expect from e-learning . . . . What do students really want?" If students do not feel comfortable in their digitized learning environment, they will likely drop the class and move into the more comfortable, traditional f2f classroom space.

Despite these "limitations" we feel that our research has uncovered and/or highlighted several points of value and has established a myriad of additional questions which we feel must now be pursued as well. This study has made clear that there are two significant factors to (re)consider as we pursue the connections between collaboration and digitized spaces. We'd like to discuss them here.

As we previously mentioned, our initial study revealed two rather interesting aspects about our students (we'll refrain from attempting to generalize this data for a broader range of students until we can retool our research a bit). First, our students had a stronger grasp and understanding of technology than previous institutional research and other studies would suggest. We base this observation on the fact that this sample of students responded to technology-related questions in what could almost be considered bold and self-assured ways. This indicates to us, at least, that our students may be ready to take the use of technology in their courses beyond word processing and CMS-driven web applications. Second, our students also had a fairly clear appreciation of group work and the collaborative process, revealing that some had even thought about the processes of these pedagogical approaches to the point where they had already made some rather rational judgments. Oddly (for us at least), we found that our students clearly desired working in groups and collaborative environments, and generally preferred doing so in many cases. Why then didn't more of the instructors participating in the study incorporate more collaborative learning activities within their courses? The answer may lie within our analysis of the instructor responses.

While the majority of instructors participating in our study stated that they value collaborative learning, each had a different approach to, and in some cases, a different definition of collaboration. While this in and of itself is a good thing, we do wonder if, as Yancey and Spooner (1998) suggested, not all of us who believe we are decentering our classroom through

collaborative learning and activities are actually doing it as effectively as we might. “Writing group roles are carefully defined, tasks are parceled out, and the deadline is paramount. In other words, we usually assign for students . . . cooperative—not collaborative work” (55). They made this distinction: “Collaborators achieve a critical level of congruence in understanding, purpose, and other intellectual dimensions of the project. Cooperators, on the other hand, organize themselves differently: clear structure, division of roles, division of knowledge, efficiency—‘hierarchy’ in its neutral or positive dimension” (52). This is a distinction, we believe, that most instructors do not often enough pause to consider.

Our observations of what occurred in the digitized portion of the course becomes relevant here. In the courses that were the busiest online, we saw more indicators of cooperative learning’s cumulative talk where knowledge is shared between students and fewer indicators of exploratory talk where knowledge is constructed by students. Much of the work students did online was either in the form of individual responses to the instructor (via the discussion board) with little or no engagement with their class members or in the form of cooperative activities. Students were certainly actively engaged with the material: they were asked to answer questions about readings, issues, or their research, but the postings were largely made in a digital vacuum. Their posts were thoughtful and interesting, but there is little or no indication that they were aware of their fellow classmates’ postings or even their existence. Occasionally an instructor would insert a comment into the discussion or reassert a question raised by one student’s post, which lead us to believe that even the instructor knows they aren’t reading one another’s comments. Students would immediately respond to the instructor’s question, but still not to each other.

We cannot blame the students, however, because nowhere did we see that they were asked to read each others’ posts nor to respond to one another. Despite the ability of an instructor to generate icons and tools, as well as to impose an organizational structure to a course, unless the instructor purposefully sets out to design it, the course will lack a space for genuinely collaborative activities. Until an instructor decides use the discussion board more as a forum for working through ideas and activities and less as a virtual refrigerator for slapping up post-it notes, then technical efforts toward creating a space for collaborative activity remain empty shells. In the examples we examined, the instructors were standing at the front of the classroom, only virtually so.



In one example of a more extensive cooperative activity, students were given interesting assignments that provided opportunities for exploratory talk, but then assigned specific roles and tasks to complete. The result was students working with the same text, but for different reasons, and then cobbling their individual responses into a group response: cumulative. In addition, the (potential) collaboration that may result from such an assignment was not enhanced by any actual digital space other than the use of WebCT as a “reporting” structure. Group discussion boards could have been created and used to make any collaborative processes not only more transparent, but also documented or captured, to use Schrage’s term.

To be fair, we are only examining the online portions of these classes. It is entirely possible that there were plenty of collaborative activities happening in the physical classroom; the responses to our instructor survey indicate that is possible. One instructor commented that “teaching writing is a process that, in my classes, is based upon collaborative learning” and goes on to mention that in every class meeting, students find themselves working together. So, we want to be careful to note that we are not counting collaboration absent. What we are saying is that is isn’t present online.

This brings us to the next point, which is that these pedagogical considerations are compounded when a f2f course is moved into a digitized environment, either partially or wholly. Zemsky and Massy (2004) argued that course management systems such as Blackboard and WebCT make it almost too easy for instructors to digitize their already existing course materials. While this is great for composition instructors who are typically overworked and underpaid, who are often left to teach an online course without the “luxury” of meaningful online pedagogical training, the result is that the pedagogical implications of their choices often go unexamined. In fact, Zemsky and Massy additionally argued that this “rapid introduction of course-management tools has actually reduced e-learning’s impact on the way most faculty members teach.” Added to this is the fact that the research to support the teaching of these digitized courses has not kept up with the increasingly rapid pace of developing and offering them. As has long been the case in the composition theory/practice debate, we should wonder if what we are assuming in our scholarship is what is actually happening in the classroom. We need more attention to what is being done, how it is being done, and why (or not) it is working. And, we need to create effective ways to communicate these discoveries to those who most often teach composition courses.

We realize that this is just a beginning to responding to Hewett and Ehmann's noted gap in composition scholarship, or "the relatively low value given to proving claims made for social constructivism as applied to" digitized writing environments (p.45). We believe, however, that this research is a step towards validating the work we are already doing in both the digitized and the f2f classrooms. While preparing for this study, we found little current research that questions both the classroom practices and the pedagogical philosophies that underlie our lines of inquiry as well as the discipline. This study is a step in that direction. The results, of course, are meant to be suggestive, rather than definitive, but we can safely conclude that students perceive and understand collaborative work and experiences to be worthwhile to their learning. We also hope that some of this study is an encouragement for those of us working in the so-called "trenches." More often than not, we find ourselves creating course spaces (both digital and pedagogical) that resemble trenches themselves: linear, narrow, dark, and chaotic. Knowing that our students are ready and willing to climb with us out of those trenches, into new social spaces where we can collaboratively construct a course that truly reflects our pedagogies can help to give us further reasons to invest our time and energy into such pursuits.

### **Continuing the discussion**

Through the development of this study, and the resulting presentation for *Kairos*, we've tried to maintain an openness about our research, our methods, and our own comments, concerns, and additional thoughts in parallel to the textual result. In the spirit of that openness, we'd like to encourage you, the reader, to help us continue to explore the various aspects of our study by posting to a discussion with your own questions and comments.

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