BUILDING AN ONLINE EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY: THE ARCHITECTURE AND LANGUAGE OF THE ELECTRONIC CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT:
During the Spring 1998 semester, I served as a graduate student technology assistant to a professor teaching his first online course (a graduate course in American literature). This analysis, based on participation (as both assistant and auditor) and on transcripts of asynchronous listserv posts and synchronous online sessions, examines the procedures and outcomes of a course based on language and virtual rather than physical presence and explores the effects of these factors on the development of an electronic educational community. The results suggest that the newly-developed and as yet undefined architecture of cyberspace encourages individual autonomy which disrupts conventional classroom protocols and challenges traditional modes of community-building, factors which have the potential both to enhance and to threaten the success of the electronic classroom as a learning environment.

THE IDEA OF THE ONLINE UNIVERSITY
Cardinal Newman's nineteenth-century articulation of The Idea of a University dictates that a university be a specific central, physical place for "the assemblage of strangers from all parts and . . . in one spot; else, how can there be any school at all?" (31). Newman cites two reasons for this requirement: first, that "a University seems to be in its essence, a place for the communication and circulation of thought, by means of personal intercourse, through a wide extent of the country" (31), and second, that "excellence implies a center" (39). Obviously, Newman could not have envisioned synchronous computer-mediated communication between individuals or groups separated by distances of a few feet or a few continents. While we relish the possibilities online education presents, we still find ourselves questioning the fundamental criteria Newman set forth: can online education be "personal" in the same way that a sustained face-to-face classroom encounter is? Can it achieve "excellence"?

Part of the difficulty in answering these questions stems from the fact that most professors developing online courses are venturing into new territory, their own experience as students having occurred in a traditional classroom setting. In a critique of instructional software programs, Sharon Gray advises that Web-based Instructional (WBI) design requires shifts in pedagogical strategies. In order to understand the need for such changes, Gray suggests that instructors need "ideally, to immerse themselves as students in a WBI environment." Most of the software programs she reviews "allow instructors to experiment with the product as if the instructor were a student" (18). While such immersion may allow instructors to consider pedagogical features of the software from a student's perspective, it cannot simulate the student's role in an academic community, forging relationships and interacting with other students and with the instructor.

My goal in this paper is to approach online education from the inside, from the student's perspective, and by evaluating a specific online educational experience in light of theoretical
statements on computer-mediated education, to explore how the architecture and language of the electronic environment affect issues of community in the online classroom. I am one of those residents of academic limbo--a graduate teaching assistant--not quite faculty (even though I am responsible for two undergraduate courses) and not merely a student either, for the same reason. In the Spring of 1998, I volunteered to serve an internship as technology assistant to a professor teaching his first distance education course, ENG 5903, a graduate seminar in modern American literature. At the professor's request, I agreed to audit the course as well, so that I could participate fully as a student. I should state at the outset that he was not at all desperate for my help. Energetic and eager to expand the university's horizons, he had studied the research, read the case studies, attended conferences--prepared himself well for this venture. (1)

The course design incorporated both synchronous and asynchronous activities: we met weekly in an IRC channel for a three-hour synchronous session; between sessions, we posted to a listserv. In addition, the class met face-to-face on four occasions: two technology training sessions at the beginning of the semester, a mid-semester "how's it going" session, and a final class which ended with a lunch outing. The course, on the whole, was very successful: end-of-semester student surveys indicate that students considered the course worthwhile, effective, and commensurate with their expectations. Moreover, their responses to the instructor personally and pedagogically were quite positive. This is not to suggest, however, that we enjoyed sixteen weeks of uninterrupted academic harmony. We were threatened by---and ultimately overcame---difficulties inherent in online education. The following analysis is based on personal interaction with other students in the course and is documented by transcripts of all listserv postings and synchronous class sessions and by a thorough evaluation instrument which students responded to at the semester's end. Of the nine students (other than myself) who began the course, six completed the semester. (2) All six completed evaluations and agreed (on condition of anonymity) to being cited and/or quoted in this paper. (3) While I admit that this singular experience cannot be regarded as a representative sample, nevertheless, as a case study, this analysis may help instructors to anticipate obstacles and to develop strategies for success in online courses.

COMMUNITY IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM
One of Sharon Gray's recommended pedagogical shifts involves "changing the instructor role from lecturer to facilitator or leader" and "building a sense of "classroom community" (18). Judith Boettcher argues optimistically that the online environment encourages students to "contribute their experiences, share their insights, and frame thoughtful, reflective questions . . . creating a knowledge community among the student group. . . ." Furthermore, she reasons, "anecdotal evidence suggests that students feel closer to faculty and to their fellow students in online courses." Boettcher wonders, then, whether it is "possible to use this new environment to do what we have always wanted to do, but have been constrained by the classroom?" (45). Similarly, Bob Fulketh asserts that "Distance Education (DE) represents a major change in how students participate in the educational process" (28). Part of the online educator's challenge, as Fulketh sees it, is to guide students who approach education from a pragmatic "consumer-oriented" perspective, into building relationships which facilitate learning. Education, he says, "is not something that you deliver, like clean diapers or mail order clothes. Students are living, breathing human beings and need to be part of a learning community" (71). These three educators assume the importance of community in the classroom. Furthermore, in developing
their arguments for adapting traditional pedagogy to suit the computer-mediated educational environment, they assume that such community does indeed exist, at least potentially, in the traditional classroom.

Evaluation responses indicate that most seminar participants share this belief in the importance of community:

| How important to you is interaction with other students when you take a class? |
| A B C E | Very important |
| D | It helps, but it's not a big deal |
| | Doesn't matter at all |
| Comments | F: varies |

Students are slightly less confident, however, that academic communities are successfully formed, as the following responses indicate:

| How would you respond to the following statement: Students in any class become a community with a group identity as people working together on a joint project? |
| A | Agree completely |
| B C D E F | Agree somewhat (with a few qualifications) |
| | Disagree |
| | No opinion |

When specifically asked whether the online seminar course achieved community, responses were more sharply polarized:

| Do you feel that the students in this class formed a "community identity during the semester"? |
| A C E F | Yes, I feel like part of a group working together on a shared project. |
| | Yes, I feel like the students formed a community, feel left out of it. |
| B D | No, I don't think the students developed any sense of community. |

Student B commented that "this occurred less-so than in a traditionally meeting class." Interestingly, the same two students who felt that the class failed to achieve community indicated that they desired more face-to-face interaction:
This class met in a face-to-face session at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the course. How often should a distance education class meet face-to-face?

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<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A C E F</td>
<td>These beginning, middle, and end sessions were just right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B D</td>
<td>We needed more face-to-face sessions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We needed fewer face-to-face sessions.</td>
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</table>

Student B commented, "Although, I probably learned as much about the novels as in a regular session, this was more sterile, and I didn't enjoy it as much. This format made it much more difficult to get to know the other students." Student D indicated, "I think that with face-to-face classes there is a better opportunity for the students to bond and maybe see each other's points of view a tad more clearly." By contrast, student A found that student interaction was not lacking but different, and more conducive to learning:

The student interaction was very different from most traditional classes. I [sic] most classes we get a lot of personal history from each other such as I liked this book b/c it reminded me of my Grandmother who . . . etc. whereas, in this class we didn't get that, we got intellectual discussions about the material at hand! What a concept. That is what classes are supposed to be like.

Similarly, student C appreciated the learning value of this different level of interaction: "Online is a different dynamic. Just as we need the sun and the moon, we need to learn in different ways--alone, in a group, online, present. The online component helps us see the value of words and ideas detached from a body. Thus, distraction can be eliminated."

ARCHITECTURE, POWER STRUCTURES, AND COMMUNITY

The architecture, the spatial locus and design of the physical university, significantly shapes the formation of community in the traditional classroom. Faculty work and socialize in private office areas. Even the "public" hallways between offices are clearly perceived by students as faculty turf, disparate and isolated from student work and socialization areas. Undergraduate classrooms tend to generate some form of community simply by grouping desks of one type in opposition to a singular desk of another type, suggesting an initial "us" versus the instructor. Even graduate seminars held in rooms with tables tend to preserve a "head table" architecture in spirit if not in physical arrangement. The collective effect is to create community through polarity, isolating the instructor and grouping students into the sort of community represented by collective nouns: the student body or the class. These architectural norms also communicate behavioral expectations to students by reinforcing the authoritative role of the instructor. Boettcher notes that:

In the classroom there are well-defined patterns of communication. The most accepted pattern of communication is primarily from the faculty to the students and from the students back to the faculty. . . . The teacher is speaking to 25-30 students at the same time, and their eyes and body language communicates [sic] the likelihood that they are listening (or not) and understanding (or not). In this environment it is often assumed that the faculty member is the one and only expert. (45)
In cyberspace, traditional architectural distinctions which define relationships and behavior cease
to exist. Cyberspace is not, however, without architecture. In his seminal analysis *The Virtual
Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Howard Rheingold argues that a
metaphorical or virtual locus of interaction becomes, for regular visitors, "a place," a center as
vital and real as any physical site where people gather. Nevertheless, Rheingold acknowledges,"In virtual communities, the sense of place requires an individual act of imagination" (63).
Responses from ENG 5903 students indicate that some but not all students were able (or willing)
to fully engage in this imaginative act: Student C commented, "At times when I 'said' something,
I felt insecure because of the absence of eyes to affirm or kind voice to acknowledge." By
contrast, Student A wrote:

To me, this course wasn't "distant" . . . To me it was as much a local community, a
traditional class except it was held in cyberspace. I didn't feel a distance with anyone, not
my instructor or the students. When I logged on, I felt as if we were all in the same room.
In fact, I found myself talking out loud or laughing out loud as if everyone could hear me.
We might not have been in the same room looking at each other but I definitely felt we
had made these all-important connections that help the class as a whole.

Despite variance, conceptions of place in an electronic environment share a fundamental
architecture which replaces the hierarchical arrangement of the classroom and the physical
campus with the metaphorical and non-hierarchical web. Building on sociologist Ray
Oldenburg's theory of "third places," Rheingold argues that people are attracted to virtual sites of
computer-mediated discourse partly because these sites facilitate the sort of informal conviviality
which disappeared with the corner drugstore and the town square. Oldenburg writes:

Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social
equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle
for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality. . . . The character
of a third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a
playful mood, which contrasts with people's more serious involvement in other spheres.
(42)

Rheingold argues that computer networking facilitates discourse characteristic of "third places"
and fosters the formation of communities: "wherever CMC [computer-mediated communication]
technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities
with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies"(6). Such communities are non-
hierarchical and egalitarian, for "people who often dominate conversations face-to-face, because
of rank or aggressive demeanor, are no more visible than those who would remain silent or say
little in a face-to-face meeting but say a lot via CMC" (63). Such sites, Rheingold suggests, "are
the unacknowledged agorae of modern life" (25).

This egalitarian electronic agora is one of the great promises of the information revolution, an
ideal with global implications. Walter Wriston describes the computer revolution as the
"Twilight of Sovereignty." Decentralizing knowledge, he asserts, decentralizes power, fostering
a political environment in which "The Orwellian vision of Big Brother watching the citizen has
been stood on its head, and it is the citizen who is watching Big Brother" (xi-xii, 4). Of course,
not everyone agrees. Langdon Winner, for example, laments that "Current developments in the
information age suggest an increase in power by those who already had a great deal of power, an enhanced centralization of control by those already prepared for control . . ." (48).

THE ONLINE CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE
The online classroom exists within this larger context of shifting power structures and democratization. Caught in this shifting paradigm, tension between egalitarianism and centralization seems inherent in the architecture of the distance education classroom where authoritarian structures collapse into a metaphorical web. In ENG 5903, this tension was apparent in discussions of the content and purpose of the course and in the students' perceptions of the instructor's role. The first listserv post of the semester initiated the debate over course content. James wrote:

Given the title of 5903 I thought this was a course on Contemporary Fiction. I naively did not know that this was synonymous with Poststructuralist Fiction. . . . I sat down last night to get a head start. . . . I was sickened. . . . No sane person wants to live in a world where there are no values, no standards, no absolute right and wrong. I can't understand why so many people seem so willing to march down a road leading that direction. (1/26/98)

Sharon responded: "your comments on postmodernism and the canon are really interesting. You do make some really sweeping generalizations I'm inclined (for the sake of playing devil's advocate) to ask you to support"(1/26/98). James answered the challenge by contextualizing his remarks in his expectations of what a graduate course ought to be:

My hope for the listserv (and class in general) is to have a place to "work out," a brain-gym of sorts where we can exercise intellectual muscle. . . . Bluntly, I admit, I would like to know how to be an intellectual elitist. Discrimination, in its most sublime meaning, should be the goal of education. (1/26/98)

James read widely and posted vigorously. Frequently, his comments provoked constructive debate on significant topics, and his lively interest in the course fostered increased participation from other students. Nevertheless, his early challenge of the course content and purpose sparked an ongoing controversy which escalated over the next few weeks. The instructor responded to James's initial challenge by posting a more accurate description of the course content and a statement clarifying his intent:

Indeed, some of our novels fit right into that category . . . . But most of our syllabus consists of perfectly accessible narratives . . . . I think the reading this semester will be provocative and engaging and fun. My agenda is not to indoctrinate you with poststructuralist ideology. I could have put together a syllabus consisting entirely of the more radical avant-gardish experiments, but I deliberately didn't do that. (1/27/98)

James continued, however, to challenge the course content; and while the class as a whole did not share his "elitist" ideology, his recurring attacks on the course syllabus and attempts to respond to those attacks threatened to monopolize the discussion in synchronous sessions and listserv posts. In the synchronous class session on February 14, the conflict turned personal.
Discussion opened with a debate over how to approach the current week's novel, Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. James had requested study guides which would explain the novel's merit. The instructor questioned the need for such materials at the graduate level, and the following exchange ensued:

<James> I "got" WW, I just didn't like it...  
<James> I was asking for some help appreciating its merits...  
<James> not understanding the sequence of the book.  
<Linda> I vote...  
<Linda> NO study questions...  
<Linda> NO hand-holding...  
<Linda> NO material on reserve...  
<Linda> that takes the whole analysis process out of our hands...  
<Linda> isn't that what we're here for?  
> Others?  
<James> yes...  
<James> one thing, Linda...  
<James> we ought show we can analyze. you might take some things for granted.  
<Sarah> I think it would be nice to have a little background information before going into the material.  
*Cathy prefers to not rely on the instructor --- I can do the work myself*  
<Linda> what might I take for granted?  
*Linda agrees with Cathy*  
<James> You...  
<James> ndisplay a  
<James> Opps...  
*Cathy sighs, ah, the wonders of reader response*  
<James> you dispplay an attitude of superiority...  
*Cathy giggles*  
<James> that you don't always back up...  
<James> we ought show we can analyze before you assume...  
<James> that it's never needed...  
<James> I'm not convinced everyone can.  
> Well...  
> I see we have some disagreement here...  
<Cathy> who is "you" in your statement, james?  
> but it's interesting to see that most of you don't want "study guides" or...  
<James> Linda  
> material on reserve...  
>My belief...  
> is that in a graduate seminar...  
> I should not give "study questions" or put material on reserve...  
> to be read before the assigned text is read...  

Linda followed up with a listserv post:
There are a few things I wanted to comment on with regard to the postings. One thing I have noticed was that in the chat on Saturday I was accused of having an "attitude of superiority" that I didn't always "back up"....I would never deign to say that I thought my classmates didn't have anything of interest to say. Quite the contrary. And yet I have actually heard words to those effect [sic]. I think we learn by simply doing it as opposed to Dr. S holding our hand through the process. Logically I would think everyone would agree with me. If you don't have the basic skills needed for graduate study then perhaps it is wise to master those skills before undertaking a graduate program. (2/16/98)

James responded that he was considering dropping the course:

Due to insensitive behavior on both "sides" it appears we may have reached a point where civility and real communication is impossible. . . . Linda is clearly wounded by my assertion that she cannot discuss a "novel's" literary merit very well. But what I meant by my comment was that I don't think any of us can. We are learning, hopefully, how to do that, but we still, all of us, have a long way to go. Do we need any more proof than the repeatedly ignored pleas for someone to explain why Kingston's novel should be considered good from a literary standpoint. (2/17/98)

James proceeded by proposing a system for ranking novels in order to determine their relative merit for inclusion in a course syllabus. The instructor responded:

You appear to have a desire to rank novels. I do not share this desire. . . . I have assembled a syllabus for this semester that emphasizes diversity. . . . Never have I had a student who repeatedly challenged the integrity of my choices as you have. . . . I believe it is premature to suggest that "we have reached a point where civility and real communication is impossible." I believe the class as a whole is willing to work on whatever conflicts and tensions exist. Speaking for myself, I believe this group has much potential; I am enthusiastic about the group and the course format. Do feel free to remain in the course and to continue a civilized dialogue with us. . . . In my opinion, a graduate class is the place for politely vigorous intellectual exchange. (2/17/98)

ARCHITECTURE IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

The foregoing excerpts illustrate two specific difficulties inherent in online education, difficulties related to architecture and to language. First, the absence of physical classroom and campus architecture and their accompanying behavioral norms subvert the traditional roles of instructor and student. Trent Batson describes his traditional classroom experience in theatrical terms: "I was on stage and the students were judging me; then they took their turn when they wrote a paper that I judged. We took turns performing for and judging each other" (qtd. in Tornow 16).

Using the same metaphor, Rheingold explains the difference between this structured format and that of computer-mediated communication (specifically in IRC): everyone is on stage who wants to be, everyone is the audience, and everyone is a critic" (182). In other words, anyone can play any role at any time, so that no one can be sure just who is in charge at the moment or, indeed, whether anyone is or should be in charge. In some respects, this leveling is a positive force which enables students to accept more responsibility and to participate more freely in their own
educational process. On the other hand, the instructor cannot absolve himself from all responsibility for the class. Administrators require accountability--and so do students. Nancy Baym's research indicates that external contexts do not entirely disappear: "The preexisting speech communities in which interactants operate provide social understandings and practices through and against which interaction in the new computer-mediated context develops" (141). Despite his continual challenge to the instructor's authority, even James indicated in a private e-mail that he hoped the instructor would somehow intervene and solve the crisis of hurt feelings (2/17/98). Wendy responded to Linda's post: "This is something of a personal nature that might be best dealt with in private. You might want to discuss the situation with [the instructor]. . . (she once again points to his professor hat) . . . " (2/17/98).
A listserv post from the instructor illustrates his awareness of and attempt to maintain a delicate balance between professorial authority and student autonomy:

As you all know, this course is experimental. And it is the first time I've ever done a course on-line. I welcome productive and professional debate about how the course is going. As always, I will strive to accommodate the many and conflicting demands of my students while also remaining true to my own sense of what is appropriate. (2/17/98)

LANGUAGE IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM
A second inherent difficulty in online education has to do with the role of language. The unique web-like architecture of the online classroom contextualizes language in ways that differ significantly from the context of face-to-face communication. Two specific language factors need to be addressed. The first is that electronic data buses do not transmit the nuances of eye-contact, gesture, intonation, and facial expression which contextualize meaning in most of our informal discourse. Rheingold states that "IRC does not fit well with conventional theories of human communication . . . . Words, and the elegance of expression and timing that accompany their use, exist in a purely disembodied state in IRC" (180). The use of emoticons and verbal descriptions of actions and reactions helps to replace non-verbal cues, to create, in fact, a new discourse context and a new set of behavioral norms. Seasoned computer talkers tend to incorporate these conventions seamlessly into their discourse. Newbies, on the other hand, may be fully occupied with simply adjusting to the technology. Thus, a significant demographic factor to be considered in the design of an online course is the computer literacy of the students. Instructors cannot safely assume that students who register for online courses are skilled in computer applications. Evaluation responses from ENG 5903 students indicate a wide range of competency:

| How would you rate your experience with computers prior taking this course? |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| **F** | Very little or none |
| **E** | Limited (Still uncomfortable with computers) |
| **B D** | Competent (comfortable with at least some applications) |
| **A B** | Skilled (comfortable with multiple applications) |
A query about specific skills relevant to the course design produced the following responses:

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<tr>
<th>How would you rate your specific experience with the following computer applications prior to taking this course?</th>
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<td><strong>E-mail:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Synchronous Chat Session:</strong></td>
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These responses clearly indicate the need to address issues of competence in using computer applications. More importantly, however, they indicate a significant disparity in the students' familiarity or unfamiliarity with the contexts of electronic discourse. By far, the greater number of listserv posts illustrate the truth of Boettcher's suggestion that the online classroom encourages students to "contribute their experiences, share their insights, and frame thoughtful, reflective questions" (45). Other posts suggest that sitting in front of a computer screen, perhaps in pajamas with a cat on your lap and a cup of coffee at your side, it's easy to forget that networking places you in a social situation where you have to mind your manners. In an early listserv post, Wendy, a seasoned computer talker, wrote:

This is a forum where toes can easily be stepped upon without even a thought. This is something that needs to be kept in mind by not only the typer but also all the others who are reading what is being typed. We do not, in computer, have accents and what is typed in one inflection may not be read that way by another. This is a fact of the computer. (2/1/98)

A second language factor is that written transcripts of class discussions concretize dialogue which would be ephemeral in a traditional classroom. Fernback and Thompson argue:

Still another component of CMC that is both troubling and constructive is the permanent nature of the conversation. . . . lack of a clear record allows deniability, which can be useful in reaching consensus. With CMC, however, the precise words of the author can be preserved, locking a person into a perhaps untenable position without allowing a face-saving retreat. Thus, ideas become concretized before they are fully developed through the give and take of freewheeling dialogue.
These two factors, the absence of familiar contexts and the concretization of words and ideas, combine to create potential for misinterpretation and for concretization of that misinterpretation. This fact was painfully illustrated in ENG 5903 when Susan posted that "in the past week" she had been called "narrow-minded" and told that "I am so Stupid that I do not belong in a graduate level English class. Fortunately I do not need the class credits and I do not have to sit silently and be insulted. Effective immediately I am dropping the class" (2/18/98). The interesting thing about Susan's post is that transcripts do not support her allegations. Computer searches of all documents reveal only two occurrences of any form of the term "narrow-minded." The first came from Susan herself in a post about the Kingston novel: "I am not trying to ask this in a narrow minded way I just want to know what I should be getting from this book" (2/10/98). The second occurrence was in a post from James, submitted within fifteen minutes of Susan's post and addressed jointly to the instructor and Sharon: "There seems to be an implied, though I hope unintended, accusation of narrow-mindedness lurking just beneath the surface of your posts to Susan and I" (2/10/98). Apparently, James had interpreted comments including the instructor's broad suggestion, "I would urge seminar members to strive for a broadening of taste" (2/10/98) as an accusation of narrow-mindedness. Secondarily, Susan read James's interpretation as a fact. Apparently she also personalized Linda's remarks about the "basic skills needed for graduate study," remarks written in response to James's questioning Linda's interpretive skill. Susan's personalized interpretation was that Linda had called her "Stupid."

In any environment, understanding the architectural and rhetorical contexts is a significant factor in the development of community. Even in familiar contexts, it takes time for a class to evolve into a learning community. When contexts are unfamiliar and must be reconstructed, the process is complicated and slowed. In ENG 5903, misunderstandings reached crisis point in the fourth week of the semester. Susan's dropping the course was a wake-up call which, ironically, stimulated the formation of community. Rheingold's experience on the WELL has led him to conclude that "you aren't a real community until you have a funeral" (37). In some ways, dealing with Susan's withdrawal was like responding to a death. During the next few weeks, listserv posts were pedantically polite; in synchronous sessions, students treated one another with an almost comical deference. In essence, the class decided to become a community and to guard against future loss.

**REDEFINING COMMUNITY**

As early as 1968, ARPANET researchers J.C.R. Licklider and Robert Taylor predicted that "online interactive communities . . . will be communities not of common location, but of common interest . . ." (qtd. in Rheingold 24). If shared interest were the only criterion, academic community would be easy to achieve. In truth, any community requires commitment on a more personal level. Rheingold states that "A core of people must flat-out believe in the possibility of community and keep coming back to that amid the emotional storms in order for the whole loosely coupled group to hold together at all"(53).

Responding to Rheingold, Wendy Grossman writes, "I'd argue instead that what makes a community is a mark of difference between the community members and the rest of the world and, more importantly, an external threat, real or imagined" (7). In ENG 5903, a second crisis which occurred during the fourth week of the semester, almost simultaneously with Susan's withdrawal, illustrates the reality of "external threat" as a catalyst for community. James posted to the listserv an e-mail exchange with Judy, a friend who was not a member of the class. The post quoted his remarks about another class member, Wendy:
A fellow graduate student actually wrote to the listserv stating that there were too many dead people on the literary canon. If that were not bad enough, she went on to claim that since a canon was a place to start, the inclusion of "bad" works really helped one learn! I think that girl belongs in an Orwell novel; she has unknowingly invented her own form of Doublespeak. (2/14/98)

The post also included Judy's response: "You must educate her; she's been brought up in a politically correct world that is soooooo incorrect on somethings, it's tragic. Try to forgive her for her learned ignorance and show her the way to true appreciation" (2/14/98). This was not a first occurrence: during the second week of the semester, James inadvertently posted to the listserv an e-mail he intended to send to Judy. In it, he complimented and quoted entirely a listserv post from Sarah. Within twenty minutes, James posted a public apology to Sarah:

I thought your post was so neat that I had planed to send it to her, but I got the address wrong and sent it to the listserv instead. A good thing, because in doing so I realized that I had not asked you if such action would be OK. As you can see I didn't alter anything and complimented you, but that's not really the point is it? I acted unthinkingly in my excitement. So I wanted to ask you: is it OK if I send a copy of your post to my friend? It's not exactly publishing, but it is your privacy at issue. I am very, very sorry if you are offended. (2/5/98)

Sarah was apparently not offended by the first instance, but Wendy most certainly was offended by the second. The class as a whole felt that posting the exchange with Judy was inappropriate, that Judy was, in Grossman's terms, an "external threat," different from the community. As a result of this occurrence, at the February 28 face-to-face mid-term session, the instructor asked class members to sign a retroactive statement acknowledging the "distinctive character" of listserv postings and online sessions and agreeing that transcripts from either would not be "quoted from, shown, given, or sent to anyone outside the current group of participants without the written consent of all those who appear in the portion(s) in question" (2/28/98). Although this action concretely defined the community, that definition was problematic for Cathy. In a private e-mail she wrote, "I decided to drop the class. I debated dropping due to personal and professional obligations which were interferring [sic] with my class commitments, but ultimately decided to drop because I could/would not sign the 'confidentiality' statement for the class which I feel is contrary to the character of electronic communication" (3/11/98). Although the community had dwindled, we had also achieved a sense of identity which defined our character, purpose, and practice. The remaining weeks of the semester passed smoothly and productively. Surprisingly, the stormy fourth week controversies were not at all significant in the final student evaluations of the course. In fact, the only reference to these crisis points was a comment from student A: "Body language, eye contact, facial & body expressions, etc. . . are essential to avoid what happened this semester--miscommunication."

**CONSEQUENCES OF CRISIS IN COMMUNITY**

That "miscommunication" did significantly impact the course, however, not only in the loss of two students but also in the number and the character of listserv posts. Statistical analysis of the number of posts from those who completed the course reveals that after the fourth week, most students simply posted less:
The listserv was active for a total of fourteen weeks. Counting only the posts from students who completed the course, 46% (66 of 143 posts) of the listserv activity occurred during the first four weeks (29%) of the class. If posts from students who withdrew are added, 52% (82 of 159 posts) of the listserv activity occurred during the first 29% of the class. Some part of this may certainly be accounted for by the fact that activity generally subsides near the end of the semester. However, the statistical analysis reveals a sharp line of distinction between weeks four and five and considerably less listserv activity after the fourth week:

The character of student posts also changed, becoming less personal and more general. During the first four weeks, 35.8% of the posts were addressed to a specific class member: writers began by naming the person and responding directly to ideas and comments from the addressee. After the fourth week, only 14.5% of the posts were personally addressed. Listserv content became more fragmented as students tended to introduce individual topics rather than responding to topics introduced by others.

**CONCLUSION**

These statistics support the conclusion that while crisis may serve as a catalyst for community, the costs of crisis are significant. Clearly, instructors designing online courses need to develop deliberate strategies for fostering community, strategies which will help to orient their students to the rhetorical contexts of the online classroom. Specifically, these strategies must address the architecture of the online classroom and the ways in which this architecture impacts relationships and behavioral norms. Concurrently, these strategies must address language and the rhetorical features of electronic text. Online education offers tremendous potential for learner success, but that potential cannot be maximized when significant portions of class time and energy are required to resolve misunderstanding and dispel misinformation. In the absence of rhetorical orientation, actual experience may suggest that many theoretical statements are abstract and idealistic. As more researchers and practitioners of online education share their experiences,
hopefully we will develop orientation strategies which will facilitate the formation of online academic communities, strategies which will enable online education to meet or exceed the idea of the physical university, delivering excellence, as Newman suggests, "by means of personal intercourse, through a wide extent of the country" (31).

NOTES
1. I am indebted to Dr. Stephen Souris of Texas Woman's University for supporting my desire to treat his course as a research model, for encouraging my participation and observation on multiple levels, and for routinely sharing with me his insights which shaped the course design and his rationale for dealing with concerns as they occurred.
2. One student reluctantly dropped the course after three weeks due to personal problems which caused unexpected difficulties in her schedule. Two others withdrew for reasons which will be discussed in relevant sections of this paper.
3. End-of-semester surveys were completed and submitted anonymously. When citing these surveys, I refer to students by the alphabetic letters A--F. When quoting from listserv posts or class sessions, I use fake names. I have selected male or female names corresponding to the gender of each student. Since this paper does not treat gender as a critical factor, there seems no reason to do otherwise.
4. The actual course title was English 5903.02: The American Novel, 1945 to the Present.
5. Class members agreed to post comments in brief sections, using ellipses to indicate an unfinished thought. We also agreed to focus on content and to ignore spelling and capitalization errors. With the exception of substituting false names, I quote comments exactly as they appear on the transcript, preserving the ellipses along with the spelling, etc. In order to focus attention on the critical elements of this exchange, some intervening and irrelevant remarks have been omitted. Italicized comments were made by the instructor.

WORKS CITED