

Ewriting Spaces as Safe, Gender-Fair Havens: Aligning Political and Pedagogical Possibilities

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Introduction: Advocating Safe Spaces

In his epilogue to the 1999 *Computers and Composition* special issue on computers, composition, and gender, Hugh Burns outlines five important goals for computer-mediated writing teachers: that our curriculum and our teaching are gender neutral, that our instructional practices are fair across the board, that our networked classrooms are safe havens for individual differences, that our writing curriculum stimulates freedom of expression and values all human discourse, and that students think critically about and critique thoughtfully how technology intensifies the public discourse on gender, ethnicity, class and economic status (168). Although Burns is clearly acknowledging the potential for electronic writing environments to be tools of empowerment, he does not presume that the technology itself is a de facto means to an end. Rather, it is the pedagogy enacted within an electronic writing environment that determines the extent to which it is empowering for students, particularly students whose gender, race, class, age, and sexual orientation may have impacted their access and thus their attitude toward computers both inside and outside the classroom. Such acknowledgment represents a shift from early "rhetorics of technology" (Hawisher and Selfe, 1991) or "egalitarianism narratives" (Romano, 1993) in the field of computers and writing that touted the networked computer as being able to erase discrimination and provide a utopian forum in which students were freed from material conditions that empower some and disenfranchise others.

Yet with respect to gender, Benjamin and Irwin-Devitis (1998) contend that gender bias continues to pervade English classrooms and that "the transition from girl to woman is a treacherous one in which many girls begin to doubt their own feelings and move toward relationships based on cultural stereotypes" (67). For scholars addressing computers and writing, including Lisa Gerrard (1999), one prevailing cultural stereotype is the "male image of computers," whether that image is reinforced by the advertisements in most popular computing magazines, by the sheer numbers of men as opposed to women in the technology-based fields, or by the continuing development of video and computer games—designed by males for a predominantly male audience (Cassell and Jenkins, 1999)—that position men as subjects and women as objects or completely absent from the picture (378–79). These male-dominated visions of technology send powerful messages to male and female students alike, and in many cases, the message that girls have traditionally received is that computers are not for them. As Gerrard and others have noted, "video games are helping male students become adept at computers, while girls are being left behind" (380). Although there are web sites and video games specifically designed by females to create emotionally safe and intellectually supportive spaces for women and girls (Kaplan and Farrell, 1994; Takayoshi, Huot, and Huot, 1999), these espaces continue to be the exception rather than the rule.

The extent to which safe spaces exist for women and girls outside the electronic writing classroom impacts the extent to which safe spaces can exist inside the electronic writing classroom. Indeed, by the time many girls reach high school and college, "boys are the ones who monopolize the spaces in the school's computer room at lunch and before and after school, and they take more computer courses in high school and college" (Sadker and Sadker, 123). But because the Internet is on its way to becoming the workplace of the future, it has become vital for our female students to claim their online space both in their roles as working professionals and in their roles as literate citizens, using these newest technologies of literacy to effect the type of social change Hugh Burns calls for both inside and outside the electronic writing classroom. Moreover, such goals are consistent with a recent study by the American Association of University Women in which a series of focus groups revealed that "while girls show little interest in the inner workings of the computer, they are very interested in the possibilities of using technology to promote human interaction" as opposed to boys' view of the computer as "inherently interesting" (9). As teachers in electronic writing spaces, we must explore ways to move all students beyond knowing how the metal box works to understanding what it can do for all students, regardless of gender and other subjectivities. Thus, our purpose in this chapter is to align political possibility with pedagogical application. To do this, we weave a web of theoretical goals consistent with Burns's list, the recent call for gender equity in technology education by the American Association of University Women, and feminist pedagogical theory. We offer specific instructional initiatives that can allow students to develop technology-based literacies in a supportive and nonthreatening envi-

ronment. As we shall conclude, such enabling spaces within our own virtual classrooms have the potential to reverse the more negative impact of historically gender-imbalanced spaces within the larger political culture.

Designing Safe Ewriting Spaces

Clearly, as Burns, the AAUW, and others have affirmed an electronic environment can give voice to the disenfranchised, but technology in and of itself is not necessarily empowering. Thus, where does feminist pedagogy intersect with electronic writing environments, and what does this intersection mean for teachers of online writing attempting to design a course situated in feminist or gender-fair pedagogies? According to Eileen Schell, "feminist pedagogy revalues the experience of women students and encourages individual voice and personal growth in the writing classroom" (75). Such pedagogy can be used as a framework to support the goals Hugh Burns outlines, especially since a variety of studies have shown that, under the right circumstances, individual voice and personal growth can be cultivated in electronic writing environments for some students (Blair and Sauer, 2000; Hawisher and Sullivan, 1998). The greater challenge is to extend existing research to develop online environments supportive of all students of varying ethnicities, economic circumstances, sexual orientations, ages, and abilities. Feminist pedagogy offers a foundation for developing an effective writing environment because it endorses revaluing the experience of female students, who have repeatedly been shown to struggle not with the technology itself but with underlying political factors that continue to disenfranchise them. An endorsement of feminist pedagogy can also address difficulties resulting from race, class, and age issues that always intersect with gender-related issues. According to Wendy Hesford (1998) "Feminists should develop writing pedagogies that reflect the experiences and languages of traditionally oppressed groups and simultaneously bear witness to social constructions of whiteness and to the way such constructions shape reader-writer and student-teacher relations" (148).

Though space doesn't permit us room to address these related issues, an underlying feminist framework can be broadened to revalue the experience of *all* students in the computer-aided writing classroom, and it can offer a way for a safe electronic writing environment to thrive. Moving beyond rhetorics of technology and egalitarian narratives present in previous research on computers and composition means not only theorizing goals but actually articulating practicalities involved in designing a computer-mediated writing classroom based on feminist pedagogies. In this chapter, we suggest that teachers interested in incorporating feminist/gender-fair pedagogy into an electronic writing classroom should do the following: redefine *computer literacy*, respect multiple points of entry into the electronic writing environment, collaborate to establish ground rules for communication, establish "friendship groups" or a buddy system as a support network, and recruit technology mentors for students.

Redefining Computer Literacy

Before developing an online writing course, teachers need to redefine the term *computer literacy*. The AAUW has pointed out that computer literacy involves much more than the word processing which girls are already skilled at; it involves solving real-life problems with technology (xii). Making such a distinction is important in the electronic writing environment because students typically already possess basic technological skills such as navigating the Internet and sending email, and scholars such as Bolter (1995) and Johnson-Eiola (1997) have demonstrated that hypertextual writing environments demand more complex thought skills. Hypertextual writing often calls for giving serious consideration to issues such as what amount of text to use on the screen and how links between pages function, considerations that don't exist in the traditional writing environment. Yet many early discussions of hypertext (Bolter, 1991; Landow, 1992) focus on issues of usability and consumption of preexisting content by expert authors. As Laura Sullivan (1999) asserts, "Most male theorists see hypertext as a tool through which teachers can bring information to students and have students manipulate and respond to this information in new ways" (29). For Sullivan and other feminist teachers, however, the multilinear nature of hypertext not only allows for the representation of diverse voices but also for multiple, fragmented subjectivities. In the context of the writing classroom, this may manifest itself in online assignments that blend the personal and academic—and the visual, verbal, and aural—in order to enhance opportunities for establishing situated yet fluid knowledges and identities. For female students in particular, the potential for reinventing one's self through hypertext and electronic discourse has its roots in Donna Haraway's (1996) discussion of the gender-neutral cyborg, within which traditional binaries of male/female, body/machine collapse in ways that foster empowerment. Although the extent to which Haraway's manifesto is seen as utopian has been a subject addressed by many technofeminists, practical experimentation with cyborg writing can indeed occur. For example, as a way of enabling students to see the technical and personal power of image editing, we have each had our students experiment with altering their own digitized self-images by using filters and other features of image-editing programs such as Adobe Photoshop. These software applications enable students to change the colors and orientations of their images, "crystallize" themselves (each of the pixels is enlarged to make the image appear to be composed of crystals), or design themselves with three heads by using the cut-and-paste option.

For many women, controlling their own images online represents a form of agency that differs dramatically from their experiences with web sites designed to objectify rather than personify the female image. Some sites that present positive female images show readers how the site writers edit pictures of themselves. On the Grrl.com site, Bonnie Burton shows herself in a variety of poses and then jokingly tells readers that some people think she is vain for posting pictures of herself (Grrl). This contradiction reveals some of the core prejudices women face online. Burton's situation reveals that al-

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though the formats may vary, identity seems to be an ever-present issue for female students. In this sense, computer literacy becomes less of a "how" than a "why." The use of hypermedia technologies allows collaboration as well as the establishment and reinvention of personal identity that in the case of women is based on something more than their external image.

However, developing positive images is only part of the equation. In addition to encouraging alternative/feminist forms of communication such as image editing, cultivating the supportive sense of community that feminist pedagogy advocates means exploring how hypertext writing can be feminist. In comparison to print documents that often possess the traditional introduction, body, and conclusion, electronic discourse and hypermedia formats lend themselves well to the open-ended, discursive, and/or unfinished writings that female students appear to prefer (Benjamin and Irwin-DeVitis, 1998; Stygall, 1998; Cleary, 1996). Teachers can design assignments that foster these more experimental, nonlinear features. Eileen Schell notes that feminist pedagogy values the authentic voice often found in nontraditional sources (75). Ultimately, electronic writing environments lend themselves well to nontraditional spaces for genres such as online journals and discussion forums.

Respecting Multiple Points of Entry into the Electronic Writing Environment

In addition to redefining what it means to be computer literate, the AAUW recommends that instructors respect multiple points of entry into the electronic writing environment (xii). Every teaching approach will not work effectively with every student; thus, a variety of approaches is needed to address different learning styles, particularly those that have been identified as feminine by theorists such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Mary Belenky et al. (1997). It is likely that students will have a range of technological prowess, and students who aren't technologically skilled have the dual task of learning both the technological skill and the content for the class. Permitting extra lab time to navigate thorny technological issues can provide a lifesaver for these students and those who feel uncomfortable in the computer classroom.

Teachers can use part of that extra time to utilize assessment strategies that equalize knowledge among students rather than penalize those with fewer technological skills. One specific assessment option is the use of a student "eportfolio." In her introduction to the recent AAHE collection on eportfolios, coeditor Barbara Cambridge (2001) refers to eportfolios as knowledge builders, citing previous research that defines both the theoretical and practical characteristics of eportfolio assessment: their ability to feature multiple examples of work, to be context rich in providing more descriptive analyses of both process and product, to offer opportunities for selection and self-assessment, and to offer a sense of technological literacy development over time (2). Certainly, an eportfolio approach is similar in its goals to a print-based portfolio approach. In the context of hypertext writing, however, the multi-linear, media-rich document design process and the multiple, real-world

Internet audiences both suggest the necessity for continual revision. These phenomena make a portfolio approach not only instructionally viable but also theoretically consistent with student-centered learning and feminist pedagogy, particularly in its encouragement of self-reflection and self-assessment.

Encouraging Collaboration to Establish Ground Rules for Online Communication

In addition to engaging in self-reflection and taking more responsibility for more formalized assignments, students should collaborate on establishing "ground rules" for online communication in the networked environment. Indeed, online communities do not exist by sheer virtue of the technology or by putting a group of people together online. Rather, communities must be nurtured in a way that involves the equal collaboration between teachers and students and the recognition and respect of differences within the group. As many teachers have noted, students new to the online environment will often say things online that they would never say in real-time situations. Before online conversation begins, teachers can spend time discussing what kinds of communication are appropriate in the virtual environment, stressing that maintaining decorum and demonstrating mutual respect are the social and academic responsibilities of the entire class, not only those of the teacher. Wahlstrom (1994) notes co-ed writing forums are often contentious because women and men often approach collaboration and negotiation differently, a finding supported by Gilligan (1990), among others. In fact, "computer-supported writing systems often fail because they don't take into consideration conflict and consensus in group decision making" (Duin as qtd. in Wahlstrom 183). To counteract this problem, teachers can assign roles and responsibilities to students to ensure equal accountability and leadership between genders and to enable collaborative knowledge-making. Offering alternatives to the notion of electronic discourse as yet another space to be mastered is necessary to empower marginalized students who find traditional discourse threatening or exclusive because of its emphasis on linear, and in some cases agonistic, concepts of argumentation and of a singular voice that represents or refutes others. Furthermore, endorsing collaboration rather than competition might ease some of the tension female students may be feeling in the classroom.

Establishing a Buddy System or "Friendship Groups" at the Computer

Taking the concept of collaboration a step further, teachers can establish a buddy system or "friendship groups" at the computer. Sanders (1986) argues that even though the computer lab and computer culture in general have been male dominated and even threatening to women (Miller, 1997; Dibbell, 1993; Van Gelder, 1985), those interested in helping female students navigate technology more comfortably shouldn't be searching for an overarching "villain."

Instead, she notes that factors previously considered relatively minor, such as the absence of girlfriends in the lab, actually make a significant difference. Since female students place preeminent value on peer relationships, it is understandable that the computer lab would seem much more welcoming if other same-sex peers were present. Sanders further contends in "Villain Wanted" (1995) that "by the same token, girls also reported that their girlfriends' lack of interest in computing was far more powerful in discouraging their computer use than any other factor" (154). Our own "Cybergrrl Project," an after-school computer camp in which we taught eleven junior high school girls to create web sites for family and friends, reflects this dilemma (Blair and Sauer, 2000; Sauer, 2001). Three girls who were not part of the established groups that formed during the study failed to complete the project, in part because of a lack of communication with and support from friends. As we noted, these girls came and left each week alone and were also isolated during the actual work time. While the Cybergrrl Project invited them to construct their own visions of what a "girl-friendly" web space might entail, clearly, a safe haven—created and sustained by all participants—is necessary for females to remain and interact in electronic environments.

Buddy systems can also extend beyond the actual classroom. Hawisher and Sullivan found in their study of the listserv *women@waytoofast* that even after the study ended, women went to the listserv to call for help negotiating harassment situations online. They note, "There was a tremendous feeling of power in the knowledge that support was only an email message away" (195). Students can similarly employ online forums to share difficulties and solutions and thus feel more comfortable in the classroom if they have an intense support network.

Cultivating Mentoring Relationships for Students

Since the AAUW (1996) has found that "nothing is more important to girls' developing sense of self than a mentor," teachers can also cultivate mentoring relationships for students (86). The 2000 AAUW report suggests that teachers follow these steps to strengthen such relationships: secure course release time for mentoring work, give public recognition to mentors, provide resources for legal protection, and offer more than one adult connection to female students (87). Because composition teachers often find themselves in mentoring roles due to the nature of the writing course (i.e., providing personal feedback on papers, holding one-on-one conferences with students), these suggestions can help them negotiate the leap between the traditional classroom and the computer-aided composition class. For instructors who find themselves in the position of teaching students who already have technological skills, Roberta Furger (1998) advocates that female teachers learn additional technical skills right along with the students. Doing this will provide students with female role models who are interested in technology and believe it is important. Many teachers rely on instructional technology specialists at their institutions to perform hands-on demos or to troubleshoot with other technical problems, so mentoring relationships can counter what can become a "white-

coat" syndrome, in which technological expertise and authority is invested in the techie specialist, often male. Although the workshop and hands-on elements of the computer classroom do foster an informal mentoring in which students naturally help each other—particularly with evolving skills such as web design and digital imaging—instructors should establish more formalized mentoring contexts as well. For example, instructors might assign minisoftware lessons to individuals or teams of students and require both documentation and demonstration. Allowing students to become the experts and to teach both the instructor and fellow students disrupts the expected balance of power in the computer classroom and enables the disenfranchised, thus realizing the feminist pedagogical tenet of giving voice to those who have no voice. Yet even while enacting such mentoring initiatives, students themselves, both male and female, may have traditional attitudes about who should teach (the teacher) and who knows more about technology (males). These traditional notions create a "mastering"—as opposed to a "mentoring"—phenomenon that may actually reinscribe the very hierarchies teachers are working to dismantle. Given this possibility of student resistance to more decentered approaches, it is equally important to recognize students' differing expectations and to encourage critical discussion among students about how technology intersects and impacts gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, class, and economic status arenas in the classroom. Hawisher and Sullivan argue:

Electronic networks, neither egalitarian utopias nor sites devoid of power and influence for women, offer women a way into the male-dominated computer culture. But gaining access to this culture means that women must confront issues of gender and power in the construction of their views of e-space. (173)

Confronting these issues guarantees that they will not be overlooked as class projects are completed. Traditionally, female students have had a problematic relationship with technology, encountering problems such as online harassment and prejudice from male colleagues. Understandably, female students come to the writing classroom with a host of (sometimes conflicting) expectations. As Hawisher and Sullivan found in their 1994 study of their woman@waytoofast listserv,

some women wanted e-spaces to be a supportive community; some wanted them to be sites of scholarly discussion about composition studies; some wanted them to ease the burdens of professional or personal isolation; some wanted public discussions to take on the comforting qualities of personal e-mail; some wanted fun and escape from their day-to-day, overworked lives; some wanted efficient forums for the exchange of professional information. (178)

Clearly participants were looking for varying, often contradictory, levels of support from colleagues and a range of formalities and "appropriate" discussion topics, making it impossible for Hawisher and Sullivan to design a listproc capable of meeting the needs of all women. Indeed, in their subsequent

analysis of their own participation as lesbian feminists on the women@waytoofast list, Joanne Addison and Susan Hilligoss (1999) noted the absence of commentary on what were essentially their initial coming-out narratives on the list. As a result of this experience and other research grounded in a feminist materialist perspective, they conclude that "women-centered lists are not inherently more democratic than other types of lists and we have a responsibility as feminist teachers and researchers to recognize our own antidemocratic practices so that we can move toward transforming them as well as the technology" (29). Within the context of the first-year writing classroom, it is important for teachers to remember that an "add computer and stir" model of technological integration will not guarantee safer, more egalitarian online spaces for our students, particularly those from more diverse backgrounds. Even the best attempts at egalitarianism can lead to expressions of racism, sexism, and homophobia, as composition specialists have noted (Faigley, 1992). Thus, we must experiment with a range of assignment contexts, teaching styles, and communication protocols collaboratively established by teacher and students to better foster safe havens for all students.

Granted, a listproc or other online forum doesn't have to please everyone to function smoothly or to be a challenging learning experience. Electronic environments *do* allow an accessible forum for all participants to post their opinions, and many conflicting opinions about the appropriateness of cutesy Thanksgiving pictures or the value of rehashing the online harassment narratives were voiced in the all-female forum on which Hawisher and Sullivan report. Although female students accustomed to "being nice" might feel uncomfortable with confrontation, such disagreements often "invigorate the discussion" and increase the number of postings on listservs, according to Hawisher and Sullivan (184-85). In fact, Burns argues that an effective online writing curriculum should stimulate freedom of expression and value all human discourse. Recognizing and acknowledging differences reinforces critical thought about technology's relationship to writing. Negotiation should be the order of the day if all voices are valued.

Conclusion: Paying Attention to Pedagogy

Realizing an electronic writing classroom informed by feminist pedagogy is possible when the previously discussed strategies are enacted, and such strategies can pave the way for the effective online writing classrooms Burns and others envision. Basing a computer-mediated writing classroom on feminist pedagogy invites female students in particular to actively claim space as a safe haven. Hawisher and Sullivan argue that doing this is necessary, saying,

We agree that feminists must harness the new technologies to serve their own just political and social goals. Though women do not always know how to harness e-spaces as sites for feminist power, it is our contention that women's participation in e-space will necessitate a rethinking of public and private space. (195)

By encouraging safe havens within the electronic writing classrooms, teachers provide both male and female students with an opportunity to develop a technological literacy that extends beyond mere technical skill to higher-level thinking capacities, including a more critical understanding of how the visual, verbal, and aural features of literacy can be used to sometimes reinforce, and sometimes transform, cultural norms. Indeed, as Selfe (1999) insists, a critical technological literacy requires that both teachers and students "pay attention" to the ways in which technological access and ability are mediated by the cultural and materialist constructions of gender, race, class, age, and sexual orientation. As we have suggested, the fact that students can write in (assumed) private, online spaces in a networked classroom doesn't guarantee that such spaces are safe. The amount and type of interaction the student has with peers in the class, the pedagogical motivations behind how either the lab or the virtual environment is designed, the types of projects assigned, and the extent of instructor and peer guidance all contribute to constructing a nonthreatening space for both female and male students. Ultimately, the feminist theoretical and pedagogical principles woven throughout this chapter can help to better realize the technological literacy and gender-equity goals for which Hugh Burns, the AAUW, and countless others have called.

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