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CyberEnglish

Four experienced teachers claim that they have “overthrown traditional classroom dynamics and environments mired in tedious micromanaged routines and replaced them with classrooms that support scholars’ choices and voices.” Their conversation reveals the changes they have made, the reasons for them, and the exciting results in different classroom settings.

Two of us were good children who did our homework, studied for tests, and pleased our parents academically. Two of us were wayward children who did not get good grades, only studied during that prime time between one class and another, and did not warm the hearts of our parents academically. How strange that we diverse four would find our way into teaching and find kindred hard drives. How wonderful that the four of us shook off the dust of the traditional classroom and donned the electronic trappings of mouse, digitized text, and images to create subversive classrooms where students interact with meaningful texts and write for real audiences.

We are subversives, of course, who have gone against the flow of tradition to ride the rapids of technology and, with it, test the waters of innovation. One of the definitions of *subvert* is *to overthrow or destroy*, and that is what we, as subversive teachers, have done. We have overthrown traditional classroom dynamics and environments mired in tedious micromanaged routines and replaced them with classrooms that support students’ choices and voices. We think in terms of student-centered CyberEnglish classrooms. The term *cyber* comes from *cybernetics*, a term coined by an American mathematician from Greek words meaning *governor* or *steersman*, and means *to steer* or *to control*. And so we steer with computer technology that allows students to exercise their voices and choices and become scholars rather than students. And by thinking of our students as scholars who routinely offer their scholarly activities up for review—not just by their fellow students and a teacher but by everyone—we embrace listservs, chat rooms, discussion boards, and instant

messages, not to mention Web building, as ways for our students to exchange ideas, drafts of writing, and reading reflections. We are about sharing and group processes rather than isolation.

What happens in CyberEnglish classrooms between teachers and students is subversive. CyberEnglish is about students (or scholars!) and teachers taking risks. To learn more about those risks, we invite you to read our online-conversation-as-article, which we wrote using the same techniques and technology that our students in CyberEnglish use—communication and exchange of drafts through email attachments and final polishing and editing by the group in a MOO, a sort of chat room, with open copies of the final draft at hand.

Why Do You Call Your Cyberstudents Scholars?

Ted: I call my students *scholars* because scholarship is the practice of making work public, engaging in peer review, and passing it on. This is what scholars do. CyberEnglish students embrace the same tenets of scholarship, hence I call them scholars. CyberEnglish is the practice of transferring much of the responsibility of learning to the scholar and of showing and assessing that learning by the use of public Web pages. CyberEnglish invites the public to be part of the assessment of the scholar, teacher, and school.

How Are CyberEnglish Scholars Different?

Ted: In the act of Web publishing, cyberscholars are converting a passive classroom into an active one. Instead of one-to-one correspondence from teacher to scholar, cyberscholars seek out primary and secondary

resources, create their own artifacts, and share them with the world via Web pages. It is the interactivity of Web publishing that changes the classroom dynamics. Cyberscholars are more in control of their writing and reading and, thus, their learning.

Dawn: Web publishing changes everything about writing. It is not just that students recognize a real audience. I see how the writing process itself changes as students write for the Web. Certainly, when students consider audience, their writing is more purposeful. Many of my students have commented in their cyberjournals and in other reflective writing that they are concerned with whether their reader will understand what they are saying. This is a powerful change from their previous concerns. But what excites me even more is that I see the traditional linear approach to writing supplanted by something more organic. I see drafting, editing, and revising happening simultaneously. And revising never ends because writing on the Web is writing that is never finished. I see a more serious regard for how writing will be perceived by others. Students do not worry about writing for me; they know their audience is potentially anyone.

Pat: My cybersophs are self-starters. Each day I walk into a classroom of students logged on to the class Web site, reading the day's assignment, starting work on their Web sites, or writing, all before the starting bell rings. Students direct their learning. Some may be meeting in small groups in a chat room to discuss a piece of literature, emailing me about their independent reading, visiting ClassicReader.com to select a short story to read for a project, chatting about a group project, revising, or visiting an online writing lab for help with a writing problem or information for a writing assignment. Cyberstudents also tend to work more collaboratively, emailing each other drafts of their writings, questions on a work of literature, URLs of Web sites they have found, or invitations for collaboration on projects.

My cyberstudents also seek their own audiences for their writing. They share their Web sites with friends, older students as mentors, and family. Parent response has been tremendous, with parents requesting copies of books their children are reading so that they can read along and join in discussion through email discussion lists. What could be more subversive than encouraging parent-adolescent communication?

A big surprise to my students is the feedback they have gotten on their work. One highlight was the day they received compliments on their Web-published sun/shadow mandalas and poems from Fran Claggett, whose mandala assignment I had used.

Nancy: William Costanzo regards the computer screen as one of the changing sites of literacy today. Costanzo explains, "Anyone who has written with a computer knows that language on the screen seems different from language on the page. It seems more flexible, more fluid, more akin to the flickering of light than to the fixity of print"

(11). We all remember writing first drafts and second drafts of papers, laboriously copying by hand what we had written previously. Computers enable students to immerse themselves in their writing processes, a subversive concept in itself. Costanzo points out that computers "give inexperienced writers access to alternatives that might otherwise remain invisible" (17). In other words, inexperienced writers have a tool that lets them create professional-looking text, which they can change efficiently. When we watch students compose at a computer, we see them drafting, revising, and editing fluidly, switching from one mode to the next as they need to.

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CyberEnglish Is Fun

Nancy: One of the things that we might consider is the element of play in CyberEnglish. Play in the classroom is subversive. After all, aren't literacy and literature serious stuff? But people like Janet H. Murray talk about the culture of gaming and its role in our always-developing sense of narrative. Many of my students included images in word-processed texts and included color and graphics in their Web pages. In her chapter entitled "The Aesthetics of the Medium" in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Murray talks about the ways in which images immerse readers in a pleasurable environment. Students experience this satisfaction when they work with images. And though Murray refers to gaming images and virtual reality, the immersive quality of electronic images, illuminated by a computer monitor, truly captures students.

Teachers have long sensed that "fun" can be a powerful classroom element, but in the throes of teaching "about" literature and language, play often becomes a rare spice. Computers bring back that sense of play. Though many computer-phobic adults find computers a frustrating mystery, many students, because of gaming, approach computers with a sense of play. That sense adds a dimension to CyberEnglish

that allows students to take risks; share information, both verbally and electronically; and ultimately approach classroom tasks (meaningful tasks) with a sense of adventure rather than dread.

Ted: Scholar-centered CyberEnglish was the obvious next iteration of teaching English in schools where technology was upgraded to computers, especially

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computers connected to the Internet. In addition to the great new tools that provided enhancements over handwriting, computers provided more time for editing than physically

rewriting papers. Scholars published their work for a larger audience. Publishing scholars' work was a difficult task in most English classes. The World Wide Web changed all of that. Many find it subversive to turn so much control over to scholars.

Dawn: I agree that CyberEnglish is fun English. There are few students who don't like being on computers. Just getting that positive emotional connection to learning in English is incredibly subversive. Brain gurus say kids won't learn anything if they hate being in class, hate reading, and hate writing. I have to say that since I began CyberEnglish, I have not had the whining and the negativity. On the contrary, students are generally enthusiastic, on task, and concerned with quality. CyberEnglish has made a big difference in many ways, and I think it comes from the perception that it is a fun class.

The perception of fun is only the portal. What we accomplish with computers is what makes CyberEnglish fun for the teacher. Ted said that the Internet makes it easier for peers to view and comment on each

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other's works, and it is true. My students peer edit their writing and their Web-page designs. Presentation is a skill that we can really work on in CyberEnglish. The only real variety in presentation for paper text is

font. On the Web, students have so many more choices about color and graphics. Even the way writing looks is more fun.

Pat: Cyberstudents present fewer discipline problems. As involvement in learning increases, misbehavior disappears. During a recent email listserv discussion about a book they were reading, my class digressed to how they felt about using a listserv for discussion. Several were more comfortable with this type of discussion rather than traditional whole-class

discussions where they felt shy. Others simply found it "fun." My favorite remark came from the student who liked cyberdiscussion because "we all can play as much as we want." I like the idea of learning as play.

Ted: I could relate many stories like this one, but it was just recently that one of my scholars exclaimed, "I have a telementor, Mr. Nellen," as he was reading email. The scholar beamed, "He likes my page and my essays. Cool." After further reading and a chuckle, he told me, "He's telling me some of the same stuff you have to make it better!"

This could only happen when scholars publish their work online. Teachers may not be the most important people in the scholar's life. It is subversive for teachers to relinquish that power, since we have always believed that teachers should be the ones in control. The scholars know that they can improve their work at any time, that others can see it, and that their audience isn't just the teacher or a writing group. The CyberEnglish classroom structure supports scholar choice and voice. When the scholar has choice, the scholar has investment and is an active learner. When the scholar is told what to read and how to write, the scholar is not in control and there is less investment in learning. Sometimes disengaged students sabotage the learning environment.

Dawn: Technology allows me to structure my curriculum so that individual choice is really important. And using Web pages, computers, and other technology simply forces us all to think differently. When students are expected to make choices in reading, writing, Web design, and more, they come to value the results of their choices. The work they publish is truly theirs. I was concerned about a lack of voice in student writing, but now that what they write is more up to them than me, I hear their voices loud and clear.

I was never a student who liked being told what to do, so I have always been a bit rebellious as a teacher, too. Whenever I design a new unit for CyberEnglish, I think about how best to offer wide ranges of choices and still meet learning goals. I guess this is called *differentiation* in some circles. To me it is simply smart pedagogy. The more choices my students make, the better. I think CyberEnglish teachers view students as real writers in the sense that we expect students to make conscious choices about subject, mode, style, and presentation for a real-world audience.

Pat: I see CyberEnglish as empowering students. Our school had scheduled an assembly as part of our drug-awareness program. When the names of the

band and speaker were given to students, a red flag went up. Some of our cyberstudents got on the Internet and found information about the band and its questionable ethical agenda, shared that information, and the performance was canceled, all because the Internet provides more information to more people.

Nancy: We can think of the concepts of voice and choice in the CyberEnglish classroom as *agency*. Murray defines *agency* as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (126). The school environment traditionally robs students of agency by mandating assignments and regulating actions—when to eat, when to drink, or when to go to the restroom. CyberEnglish restores student agency by providing the technology that enables recursivity, which allows students more control of their writing process.

Dawn: What occurred to me as we wrote this article was how much our process mirrored what we expect to happen in CyberEnglish classes. Our composition evolved through a single ongoing draft that did not initially progress logically. In fact, at times all I could see of our attempt was a jumbled mess. Through peer editing and online conversations, we began to see it take shape.

Pat: Another good example of using electronic means to collaborate is a project that Dawn and I worked on. While chatting about a possible article for an online journal, we came up with the idea of creating a new unit combining Dawn’s multigenre project and my oral history project. Though Dawn is in Wisconsin and I am in South Dakota, we “got together” to plan the project, first through email exchanges; then on a blog; and finally, needing more synchronicity, in a MOO. For two months we met in a MOO for about two hours on Saturday mornings to brainstorm, write, add to, revise, and finally edit the Web site we set up for our Living Histories Multigenre Web project. Oh, and the whole process was also *fun!*

This collaboration, which we did as cyberteachers, is the same type of collaboration that our cyberstudents do in our classrooms through listservs, bulletin boards, MOOs, and email exchanges. Not only can students in the same class collaborate in this way, they can connect with students in different classes and schools through cyberspace.

Nancy: When we read and write, we call on all of our knowledge of texts, both oral and written. Webbed texts, because a reader must physically click on a link, ask readers to make associations. When stu-

dents create Web sites, they must anticipate the meaning a reader might make of the links they provide. Literacy is all about making connections.

Dawn: I think it is important that we use the technologies we teach. We understand how the Internet facilitates conversations and connections. We also find ways to use technology in our own learning. In writing and editing this article, the four of us used email and the Internet and tracked our changes in Word. Then Pat and I used a MOO to do extensive proofreading. Because we use these tools, it is easy for us to see the benefits for our students.

Ted: Scholars constantly speak about their email collaborations with their peers. They expound upon the power of this collaboration. Another interesting thing happens: They speak about their own learning. They become conscious of their inquiry and control of their learning.

What Do We Do That Makes Us Subversive?

Nancy: In a “traditional” English language arts classroom attention is paid to deadlines, order, and linearity. It is easy to become focused on covering the curriculum rather than engaging students in meaningful textual experiences. Print technology tends to ask us to believe that text is linear, that it can only be read and written in a certain way. CyberEnglish, however, challenges this notion.

Schools are being asked to provide more reading instruction, use more difficult texts, challenge students to develop critical-thinking skills, and place a greater emphasis on meaningful vocabulary (Routman 5). CyberEnglish immerses students in a highly dynamic environment that demands critical reading and writing. Because of the vast audience of the Internet, students challenge themselves to write clearly and thoughtfully. They are no longer playing the “please-the-teacher” game. They are doing what real writers do. That can be scary for teachers who are used to being the “center” of students’ attention and the main audience for their writing.

Dawn: Challenging the notion of literacy can be subversive. In addition to reading and writing,

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technological literacy seems to be a critical element in how we communicate. A recent Pew Research Center report said that “44% of U.S. Internet users have contributed their thoughts and their files to the online world” (“Reports”). So integrating computer

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literacies into an English class is important. And yet, is there a point where my cyberclass becomes more of a technology class than an English class? I think the great thing about a CyberEnglish class is that these literacies overlap, and because of this we are able to give our

students a truly integrated experience. CyberEnglish is reading and writing, audience and conversation, revising and ownership, choice and empowerment, and it all overlaps, one feeding the other. I never saw that in my traditional classroom.

Pat: Just teaching students some computer technology is in itself subversive—invading the space of another department. What will the computer science teacher do with my students, who already know Word, FrontPage, some HTML code, and PowerPoint?

Ted: Setting up the tech part is crucial. It is not just technology; it is the critical use of technology that allows or supports scholars as they wrestle with big ideas. It’s not fill-in-the-blank assignments or taking multiple-choice quizzes. It’s also not a glorified typewriter. What we do is tap into our scholars’ prior knowledge about the computer environment. They do know

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more than we do and use the technology more fluently than we do. They select ways to accomplish the tasks of the class on their own terms, which is a powerful tool for us and helps transfer much of the responsibility of learning to the scholar.

What Are Some of the Risks That CyberEnglish Teachers Take?

Ted: Going public, exposing the entire class to the public is risky. We take a chance in showing what we do. For lack of a better term, it may be *reality education*. The scholar’s every move is recorded and displayed for the world to see.

Pat: Being glared at by other teachers whose students say “why can’t we do things like the cyberstu-

dents do” really adds to the feeling that I am running a covert operation here. When I started using computers in the classroom, I often found myself in the role of student because my students knew more about the technology than I did. It was a humbling experience and led to a real atmosphere of sharing and cooperation between my students and me. We have all become learners together, fellow explorers and adventurers in this exciting new world of cyberlearning.

Dawn: I know what Pat means. All will not understand what you do even when you try to educate them. There are still a significant number of adults with computer-phobia and for them CyberEnglish is a gimmick. It is really frustrating to try to lead an educational revolution when no one understands what you are fighting for. I have felt alienated, that’s for sure. But I know I am making a difference for my students and that is why I teach in the first place.

I think we have only begun to understand the revolution. There are still far too many people who don’t know or can’t conceive of how technology renders cognitive changes in the user. I know that I started thinking differently once I began using a Web page as a teaching tool. I also think that the kinds of things we are talking about scare most teachers. The old ways are so much easier because teachers easily control the old ways. When you move away from linearity and admit that the writing process is a messy, happens-all-at-once interaction of writer, audience, and text, how do you manage it? To admit that each student might write, think, revise, understand, and connect at their own pace and to let that happen is the true benefit of a CyberEnglish class.

Nancy: It isn’t that learning doesn’t happen in a traditional classroom environment. It does. But it is learning designed to happen in controlled spaces by teachers who are charged with maintaining control of their students. Only certain kinds of knowledge can be privileged in that controlled environment. CyberEnglish teachers do not give up control, but they share it with those individuals in the classroom who have the most at stake—the students. The fluid nature of electronic texts, especially Webbed texts, tends to foster a more fluid, dynamic approach that puts the student at the center.

Ted: We love our scholars as all teachers do. We want the best for all of our scholars as all teachers do. What makes us subversive is that we have gone out, not to tear down but to rebuild a more viable, rele-

vant, and authentic classroom. CyberEnglish is public and available for all to see and to practice.

We have heard the expression, "It takes a village to raise a child." CyberEnglish is that village.

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Neil Postman in *EJ*

A "Simple" Way to Improve Schools

What would it take to move the schooling process as it presently exists in a humane and sensible direction? The first need is, of course, to make schools into what Ivan Illich calls "convivial communities." That is, places where people are trusted, accepted, and encouraged, as against places where they are controlled, judged, and punished. The simplest way to do this is to get into the schools teachers who are loving, responsive, and authentic people. That is, people like us. Naturally, this is impossible to do because, in the first place, most people aren't like us, and in the second place, neither are we.

Neil Postman. "The Ecology of Learning." *EJ* 63.4 (1974): 58–64.

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