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Cybertext/Cyberspeech: Writing Centers and Online Magic

Sara Kimball

Introduction

Like many others, the Undergraduate Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin is in the process of creating a virtual writing center. Some parts of our virtual writing center function as an information server, providing text on the World Wide Web to users who can access it when they please. Other parts of our virtual writing center are interactive. We have experimented with real-time online consulting in a MUD, and since the spring of 1995, we have engaged in several projects with high school students, providing commentary on the students’ drafts over e-mail. One of the most memorable of these exchanges involved helping students from Garden Valley Collegiate, a high school in Winckler, Manitoba, Canada, prepare for a debate on Hamlet by responding in the roles of characters from the play to their questions about the characters and their motivations. For the past two springs, consultants have worked with seniors from Roma High School in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas who were enrolled for college credit in a section of first-year composition taught jointly by their teacher and by Linda Ferreira-Buckley of UT’s Division of Rhetoric and Composition. We also have connected the Canadian students with students from a high school in McAllen, Texas, for an exchange of essays and responses.

Computer technology allows us to do things such as the e-mail exchanges with high school students that we might not do otherwise, but in working with student writers online, we are not merely transporting what we do in face-to-face conversation in our real-life writing center into cyberspace. In many of the social contexts in which it is used, online discourse—whether synchronous or asynchronous—is a hybrid with
elements of both speech and writing: it can perhaps be viewed as conversation enacted in writing. In working online, we are not, however, simply talking in text. Instead, we are working in a medium that people perceive and react to both as text and as conversation. Some claims about the benefits or drawbacks of online consulting, however, stress the textual aspects of online discourse without adequately considering its conversational aspects, and some impute an almost magical power to the written word and to computer technology to alter or efface ways of interacting with each other that are deeply ingrained in all of us from our lives as speakers of languages and members of societies. These claims include the fear that online consulting provides unique opportunities for plagiarism (Baker), the assumption that the written record generated by an online session is a more complete record of the session than participants’ recollections of it (Healy 188-89), the assumption that online tutorials can focus on interpreting student text rather than interpreting students (Coogan 17), and the assumption that conversing online allows participants to shed their offline social identities more or less entirely (Henley and Maid).

Writing and Magic

We should give careful thought to whether some of the alleged benefits and problems of working online result from the nature of the medium, or whether they result from culturally conditioned attitudes and assumptions we bring to the medium—and to producing text in any medium. Some of these claims may have more to do with our attitudes toward the technology—our unexamined fears and enthusiasms—than they do with the technology itself, and some of them seem to result from the almost magical authority which writers are apt to impute to writing—an attitude that seems to be as old as the technology of writing itself.

In addition to running UT’s Writing Center, I work on ancient literacy. I have a number of publications on the Hittite writing system and language, and I also have training as a classicist. Like some scholars who work with the details of literacy in an ancient society, I find myself amused and irritated by claims made about the powers of literacy—especially alphabetic literacy—to alter cognition, in particular, to induce rationality, often identified with formal syllogistic reasoning. The acquisition of a particular type or degree of literacy can introduce an individual to new modes of discourse, and learning new ways of talking about things can lead to new ways of thinking about them. The technology used to produce writing can also profoundly affect how individuals or societies view the process of writing. But societies are as apt to appropriate literacy to their own pre-existing goals and ends as they are to be changed by it. Studies of literacy in ancient societies that used magic prior to the introduction of
writing, like those of the Hittites or 5th century Attic Greeks, show that far from introducing a cool, abstract rationality that sweeps away magical thinking, writing can be very much intertwined with magic (Thomas 78-88). Literate people in these societies used writing to practice magic, to record it, to classify it, and to control it. For example, this passage is from a Hittite tablet that records testimony in a court case. Although the text is badly damaged and not entirely clear, the accused seem to have cast a spell that involved writing the names of enemies on images of wax and sheep fat and burying the images:

... On the [...] day, when it became dark, Kazera did the following in the woods at Kummaha. ... The female temple attendant Hilammaddu ... and the widow of Kazera. ... They made three images of wax and sheep fat and they smeared them with clay. On one of the images they set the name of [name gone] but on another image they set the name of GAL.UR.MAH, and on the third image they set the name of Sarri-Kusuh, and they buried them [i.e. the images]. (KUB XL 83, lines 10-12)

The procedure described in this passage is no different from actions described in numerous Hittite ritual texts that do not mention writing. To rid the world of an enemy or something else unpleasant, such as a disease or social problem, a ritual practitioner could make an image of the unwanted entity and bury or destroy it. Writing, as Rosalind Thomas notes in describing similar practices among the ancient Greeks, served to enhance the magic (78-82). Unlike the Hittites or Greeks, we do not deliberately use writing to do magic, but unconsciously, we may have similar attitudes towards it. Maybe the most troubling aspect of claims that view literacy or a particular technology of literacy as automatically altering cognition is that they allow us—alphabetically literate and immersed in a culture of print and electronic literacy—to regard ourselves as cool, rational, and not prone to magical thinking.

The Hittites and Greeks may have used writing to enhance the effects of magic, but I think we also sometimes invest written language with more or less magical powers, not always stopping to think about how much comes from the medium and how much comes from our attitudes towards it. We are also apt to invest computer technology with almost magical powers to enhance the effects of writing. I think it is time to stop and reconsider.
The Magical Permanence of Writing

Jeffrey Baker's claim that conversing online about the ideas in a draft in progress is potentially problematic because of the permanence of writing is a case in point. He describes two hypothetical sessions discussing a paper on Don Quixote, one face-to-face, the other online. In each session the tutor raises questions about whether Quixote fits the role of romantic hero:

[The tutor asks] “What does the teacher say about the romantic quest?”

“Well, I'm not sure I understand it very well, but I think it means that the hero is usually somebody like a knight who has a goal and who has to overcome a bunch of obstacles to reach it,” the student replies.

“Good,” the tutor says. “From my experience, the romantic hero is usually successful, but what about Quixote? How does he fit or not fit into the role of romantic or chivalric hero? Is he successful in his quest? Or is his success different from other kinds of heroes?” (Baker 6)

In the face-to-face session the questions are viewed as unproblematically ephemeral. Baker claims that because nothing is written down, “the terms and concepts which they denote remain slippery, somewhat indeterminate; the tutor has not defined anything for the student; the tutor has simply attempted to help the student come to a workable definition for herself” (6). Since the online session produces a written version of the question, however, it becomes a matter of concern that the question might show up in the student’s text. The tutor has given the student an idea that the student might appropriate—not just by repeating it, but perhaps through the physical act of copying it and pasting it into her own text.

Writing centers do have historically justifiable concerns about not being seen as promoters of plagiarism, but I think the concern here has more to do with the magical permanence we impute to writing than it does with a real problem produced by working in cyberspace. It also confuses writing as an intellectual process with the physical act of transcription. Consider the face-to-face version of that conversation again. I would probably feel I had done my job as a tutor if I had raised a question—injected an idea into the discourse—that helped the student focus on her own ideas, something to grasp, react to, or question. Presumably, we would discuss it for a while, and I would hope the student would leave the
session with something to think and write about. I would view my role as that of guide through the process of invention. If my question was salient or provocative enough—or if it was short and simple—it might make it into the student’s paper more or less verbatim. But that would not be a problem if the question had functioned as a jumping off point for further thinking and writing, especially if the question had been more naive, the sort of question a consultant might ask if the paper had not been on literature but on, for example, ancient history or electrical engineering.

I would be troubled, however, if the student sat there during the session, hanging on my every word, not responding, reacting, or questioning, but simply assimilating my words of wisdom—even if she never wrote anything down, and this can, of course, happen in a face-to-face session. As long as the question is intended and received as a starting point for further conversation and thought, why should it matter whether the consultant expresses her thinking in speech or in writing?

Magical Completeness and Conversational Reality

David Healy’s claim that the text produced in online consulting functions as a transcript of the session that is both more permanent than people’s recollections of the session and a more complete account than a tutor’s brief written report imputes a sort of magical completeness to writing. Healy claims that electronic conferencing [preserves] that which is always being lost, namely the very talk on which the traditional writing center depends. For the fact is that although some writing center talk may be overheard and appropriated, most is not. From one perspective, talk is the center’s ether, from another, talk is always dissipating into the ether from whence it can never be reliably retrieved. . . . Only partial, reconstructed, mediated accounts of [face-to-face] writing center tutorials typically survive the actual event, usually in the form of brief synopses written by tutors. An online conference, however, can be preserved in its entirety—subject to analysis by colleagues or a supervisor, available for record keeping, for training, for employee evaluation. (188)

But this attitude posits an immutability for text and an ephemerality for speech that I am not sure is entirely justified. The log of a session is more permanent than someone’s recollections of a conversation because it can be accessed long after the event it records has ended, but it is not complete: it does not include important aspects of the conversational
interaction that the computer cannot record.

No record of an event preserves the event itself in its entirety. A transcript of speech is already an artifact, abstracted to some degree from the actual event. No transcript of a conversation can ever hope to capture all of the nuances of speakers' pronunciations, intonations, facial expressions, or use of non-verbal signals, and these are all aspects of conversation that do considerable communicative work. A transcription of a tape-recorded conversation is a representation of the aspects of the communication that the transcriber perceives as salient. Transcribing a face-to-face conversation for linguistic analysis is an exacting task that requires making principled and systematic judgments about the relative importance of non-linguistic cues—decisions about what to retain and what to leave out—and highly experienced researchers are apt to disagree about the relative communicative significance of such cues (Stubbs 226-30).

To make the transcript a useful representation of reality, some of the reality it is supposed to capture has to be suppressed. Paradoxically, the more non-linguistic detail a transcript tries to capture through special notation, the less easy it is to follow. The non-linguistic cues that aid participants in a conversation in their interpretations of other participants' contributions distract the reader of a written transcript.

Although a computer can produce a transcript without making human judgments, its transcription does not preserve an interaction intact either. As a transcript not of speech but of verbal interaction enacted in writing, the written product of online communication is probably closer to the actual event it records than a transcript of a conversation would be, but it still cannot fully record the session as a communicative event: a large part of interpreting meaning in a conversation involves interpreting the interaction itself, including meanings intended by participants that are not fully explicit in the conversation's lexical content. The transcript of an online interaction cannot hope to capture anything but the grossest of signals about participants' intentions or about their attitudes toward the interaction, because the medium provides fewer channels for signaling intentions and attitudes than speech does, and employing these channels takes more conscious attention on the part of participants. The fact that participants' attitudes and intentions cannot be recorded, however, does not mean they were not there.

This lack of information about participants' attitudes and intentions makes a difference in a medium that seems like conversation. One problem with the lack of communicative richness is that, seduced by the conversational style, participants in interactions may harbor assumptions from their experience as speakers about how their communication is likely to be interpreted. For example, one common cause of flamewars and other online disputes is misreading an interlocutor's attitude or intention. A
communication meant as ironic, and probably readily interpretable as such when accompanied by cues from tone of voice or facial expressions, is easy to invest with far more weight than its initiator ever intended. This is why guides to netiquette frequently caution against irony and issue instructions on the proper use of emoticons (or “smileys”) for those tempted to engage in online irony.

It is also important not to confuse detail with reality. For example, the log of a MUD is more detailed than the tutor’s written report. But it is a text, after all, and like any text, it is open to multiple interpretations. In some cases, these multiple interpretations are indeed inherent in the technology. A MUD conversation can be logged by any participant, and, therefore, can be recorded in any participant’s point of view, none of which is any more “real” than the others. Although the user can review the log to remember pieces of advice or courses of action the conversation has suggested, this review is an act of interpretation, in part because the computer captures only words and in part because network technology does not necessarily reproduce communications in the order in which participants in a discussion intend them.

Face-to-face conversation is organized as a series of turns taken by speakers. Speakers can organize turn-taking to regulate speaker overlap, maximize understanding, repair breaches in understanding, shift topics, and end the conversation. In face-to-face conversation, speakers can use silence meaningfully along with paralinguistic cues, such as nods or facial expressions, and linguistic cues, such as verbal expressions of interest, vocatives, or explicit requests for response, to order turn-taking. A perceptible silence of more than a few seconds’ duration is disconcerting for most of us, and it is usually readily interpretable as a cue for someone to jump in and start speaking (Green 151-53). In an electronic conversation, however, speakers have no effective control over when a stretch of discourse reaches their interlocutors. Silence is ambiguous, since participants cannot determine reliably whether it is deliberate or the result of Netlag.

Participants in online conversation can try to control the allocation of turns, for example by falling back on linguistic cues such as vocatives and explicit questions like “So what do you think . . . ?” to signal their desire to select the next interlocutor. In real-time conferencing, participants sometimes consciously provide the equivalent of paralinguistic cues through typed description. The use of “emotes” (typed descriptions of actions such as “Jane nods”) to organize communication in MUDs, for example, is well documented (e.g., Cherny § 43.2). But, since the timing of communications is not entirely under the control of participants, these devices do not work predictably, and conversation, even between only two participants, can easily fracture into the pursuit of multiple topics.
Topic fracture occurs fairly readily in asynchronous communication forums such as e-mail discussions and newsgroups. Readers who participate in such forums are no doubt familiar with how easily a single topical thread can unravel into two or more related discussions. While topic fracture is common in asynchronous communication, it is virtually inevitable in synchronous conferences such as conversations in MUDs.

In this conversation from a session in our MUD, for example, Calvin and Martina (the names of characters adopted by two of the students in my tutor-training class) and I (in the guise of my character BossLady) are discussing a paper Martina wrote describing her writing process. Two, or perhaps three, conversational threads intertwine with a rapidity that might be fairly irritating in a face-to-face exchange. There is a main conversation about collaboration in writing for school versus collaboration in writing for work (in plain type) through which winds a conversation (in italics) about whether the participants should discuss Calvin’s paper, and this latter conversation shifts briefly into a conversation about the UWC (the acronym for Undergraduate Writing Center). The log is from BossLady’s point of view:

1. Calvin dreams of purple popsicles.
2. BossLady hands Calvin and Martina purple popsicles.
3. You say “About your paper, Martina.”
4. You say “One thing that struck me.”
5. Calvin says “Martina, don’t drip on your paper . . . points off.”
6. You say “You emphasize collaboration at work.”
7. You say “But you’re alone when you write for school.”
8. BossLady gets purple popsicle herself.
9. Martina says “Oops! I had to go answer the door.”
10. Martina says “Yeah, I did mention that in the original paper.”
11. Calvin says “Is it necessary to discuss my paper, since I already have a grade?”
12. Martina says “But I cut it out.”
13. You say “Do you want to?”
14. Martina says “What is your paper about?”
15. You say “Do you want to, Calvin?”
16. Calvin says “I’d rather talk about the UWC.”
17. Martina says “BossLady, should I include the collaboration somewhere?”
18. You say “Do you normally collaborate in school writing?”
19. Martina says “The UWC was a great learning experience for me.”
20. Martina says “No, normally I do not. It has been a one-man show.”
21. Calvin says “Make sure collaboration doesn’t = collusion.”
22. You say “Would collaboration at work = collusion?”
23. Martina says “No, because the context is not changed at all.”
24. You say “What context?”
25. BossLady is a bit confused.
26. Martina says “Collaboration is important because of the context of the writing.”
27. BossLady wonders about contexts.
28. You say “Collaboration at work?”
29. Martina says “We are all different and instructions are interpreted differently.”
30. Martina says “My writing at work is instructional.”
31. You say “Why?”
32. Calvin thought context was a paper written by an inmate.
33. You say “Why is writing collaboration at work unproblematic?”
34. BossLady throws popsicle at Calvin but misses.
35. Martina says “I’m thinking about that one. . . ”

This conversation is not especially incoherent, and the participants took active steps to provide topical coherence (e.g., the repetition of collaboration). The participants sometimes also took active steps to select the next interlocutor (e.g., BossLady’s use of the vocative in line 15), or to indicate their attitudes toward the interaction (e.g., line 27, “BossLady wonders about contexts,” which is both an indication of BossLady’s internal mental state and an invitation to Martina to be more explicit about what she means by context). It requires some reflection, however, to render explicit the steps a participant might take to separate out the topics and to make judgments about intended meanings.

Presumably, we rely upon our experience as speakers to unravel the topical threads in this discourse. As speakers, for example, we are accustomed to making judgments about a contribution’s relevance that inform our judgments about speaker intentions (Green 83-87). It seems fairly obvious that Martina’s assertion in line 19 (“The UWC was a great learning experience for me.”) is a response to Calvin’s statement (“I’d rather talk about the UWC.”) in line 16, since Martina’s assertion seems more relevant to Calvin’s contributions than to BossLady’s.

But the meager information this log provides about the participants’ non-linguistic behavior does not allow a reader to go as far in interpreting meanings below the lexical surface as a participant in a face-to-face conversation might. It is possible, for example, that Martina
intended to go with the flow and carry on two conversations simultaneously, one about her paper and one about the UWC, something that is easier to do in synchronous conferencing than it is in face-to-face conversation. It is also possible, however, that she wanted to change the topic of conversation, perhaps to avoid talking about her own paper, and she latched on to Calvin’s assertion as a way of doing so. The latter intention would have been much easier to read if accompanied by additional, non-lexical information, for example if Martina had used a raised pitch of the sort English speakers use to introduce a new topic (Green 100-106), or if she had turned her gaze away from BossLady and toward Calvin.

In a face-to-face conversation, a topic shift would have contributed to a reading of their intentions. For example, the second reading becomes more plausible if the lines are rearranged to reflect Martina’s apparent intentions about the participants to whom she was directing her responses:

17. Martina says “BossLady, should I include the collaboration somewhere?”
18. You say “Do you normally collaborate in school writing?”
20. Martina says “No, normally I do not. It has been a one-man show”
16. Calvin says “I’d rather talk about the UWC.”
19. Martina says “The UWC was a great learning experience for me”

In a face-to-face conversation, a topic shift might have been accompanied by speaker overlap (speakers interrupting one another) and this would also have provided information about Martina’s intentions. The lines grouped together are meant to represent contributions that overlap partially:

Martina: “BossLady, should I include the collaboration somewhere?”
BossLady: “Do you normally collaborate in school writing?”
Calvin: “I’d rather talk about the UWC.”
[pause]
Martina: “The UWC was a great learning experience for me”

If the transcript presents only an attenuated and somewhat unreliable reality, it also presents only a slice of that reality. As readers, we do not necessarily have access to the context the participants share. A reader
encountering the written transcript might, for example, assume that Calvin's desire to talk about the UWC was a radical shift in topic, perhaps an idea that occurred to her out of the blue, and perhaps a way of shifting the other two participants' attention off of her own paper. There is nothing in the conversation as I have presented it that makes that an implausible interpretation, and perhaps it was a plausible interpretation of Calvin's intentions at the time. The participants, however, would also have interpreted it as a desire to return to an earlier topic of conversation, since we had been discussing the UWC earlier in a part of the log I have not provided.4

Authorial intent is, of course, problematic in literary analysis. However, in working with a writer online or in reviewing the transcript of an online session, we are engaging not only in textual analysis, we are using also our internal, unconscious linguistic and communicative competence to analyze an interaction we are apt to perceive and react to as conversation. Difficulties in gauging the intent of a speaker with whom one has a personal or professional relationship have consequences much different from gauging the intent of the author of a literary text. If, as a writer, the participant in an online discourse is necessarily absent from her text (the conversation), she is also not very far away, a living, feeling human being who intended some meaning in her communication and who may assume that her intent is as easy to judge as it would be in a face-to-face conversation. Although speakers in a face-to-face conversation do not always judge each other's intentions accurately, most conversations between people who share a set of cultural assumptions work precisely because we do gauge other speakers' attitudes and intentions fairly accurately and largely unconsciously. Perhaps authorial intent is irrelevant or unknowable in dealing with literature, but gauging interlocutors' intentions is a large part of conversational work, whether it is interpreting illocutionary force or simply figuring out who is to speak next. It ought to be very relevant in working online with student writers.

The Magic of Online Identity

Another claim about online writing center work is that the lack of physical presence enables the consultant and writer to concentrate on text undistracted by assumptions triggered by physical cues about sex, race, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, political proclivities—or any other markers of their various selves that people carry. Release from the constraints of physicality can be useful on certain basic levels. Jennifer Jordan-Henley and Barry Maid, for example, observe that “[cybertutors] are not affected, for instance, by students with bad breath, or by students
who make them uncomfortable in some vague way, or by students who are
angry at a teacher, or by those who cry for the consultation’s first ten
minutes” (212). My student, Chaun Davis, also describes the advantages
of being able to efface one’s physical presence in textual conversation:

Working in the MUD certainly limits displays of emotion. Some
feel this to be a drawback because participants and students
appear blunt and unfeeling. Perhaps the benefits of such a
situation have not yet fully been explored. Patience is a rare
virtue. At times consultants run out of patience and it becomes
difficult to mask angry or frustrated feelings. MUD consultations
allow the consultants to hide behind the screen and still commu-
nicate with the student without revealing their true emotions.
(Davis 2)

But beyond these basic levels, it seems unlikely it is ever truly
possible to efface one’s offline identity completely. We all enact our
various identities in the language we produce, written as well as spoken.
Susan Herring, for example (“Gender Differences,” “Gender and Democ-

racy”), provides evidence that not only do men and women often employ
much different styles in online discussion groups (aggression, strong
assertions, authoritative tone, sarcasm, and put-downs from male con-
tributors as opposed to support, hedging, uncertainty of assertions, and
appeals to the group from females), participants in online discussion
recognize these aspects of style as gendered male and female. Kira Hall
describes both the criteria participants in a feminist discussion list use to
judge whether a new contributor with an unrevealing user name is male or
female and the conventions of linguistic non-aggression they impose upon
the list’s discourse to create a feminist culture (158-62).

People listening to tapes or the radio can come to very specific
conclusions about a speaker’s race, class, and region without any visual
cues, and writers do sometimes bring markers of their ethnic, regional or
class identity into their writing, especially in drafting. A writer whose first
dialect is Black English Vernacular, for example, may well produce prose
that shows some signs of her original phonological system (a tendency to
leave off inflectional endings for noun plurals, possessives, and past tense
forms of regular verbs in -ed, for example). It is possible that such markers
might be more frequent in online prose where conventions are usually
more fluid and relaxed than in paper prose, especially in real-time
communication where writers normally have little opportunity to revise or
edit. Another writer whose education and class background have equipped
him with a Latinate vocabulary might be expected to deploy it online. In
both instances, the writer’s prose does convey cues about offline identity
that an audience might well react to, at least on an unconscious level. It is possible, of course, to disguise oneself online by actively taking on a new persona. In *Aspects of Self*, Sherry Turkle describes the experiences of users who log on to MUDs and enact identities quite different from their offline selves. One such player claims the following:

> You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever. You can be just whoever you want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be. (184)

But this anonymity could well be as much an artifact of the situation—of logging on to a MUD frequented by players from all over the world for recreational purposes—as it is of the medium. The very act of logging on to a writing center MUD in the roles of consultant and student, by contrast, already anchors the participants in a MUD session to at least part of their offline identities, and I think we have a particular responsibility in a writing center not to forget there is a real person behind the text or the persona.

And intertextuality aside, I do not think people interact with texts; they interact with people. As writing teachers we may struggle to convince our students to imagine audiences for their writing, but as speakers, we and our students are highly attuned to audiences, even if we are not always aware on a conscious level of how we shape our speech to our audience. As speakers, we are fairly sophisticated at adapting our speech to the social situation and to what we believe about our interlocutors, and I am not sure that awareness disappears entirely in cyberspace, especially if we can assume that participants in cyberspace bring their experience as speakers with them online. I find that when I do not have a full set of visual and aural cues to give me some sense of who is talking to me or to whom I am talking, my imagination is quite willing to step in and fill in the blanks. I do this when I listen to the radio, and I do it online.

Imagined audiences haunted our first Roma exchange, for example. Roma is a small, isolated town in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas located roughly 50 miles away from the nearest movie theater. The population of Roma is over 95% Hispanic, and it is one of the poorest school districts in the nation. Many of the people of Roma are agricultural workers, and most maintain extensive family ties across the border in Mexico. People speak English that is heavily influenced by Spanish and Spanish that is heavily influenced by English.

We were all concerned about audience when the project started. Institutional relationships were one source of concern. UT’s relationship
with Roma does seem to spring from a genuine concern with outreach to minority students, a desire to provide students from the Valley with resources and opportunities that their district probably could not afford otherwise, and a desire to recruit minority students and help them feel welcome if they decide to enroll in UT as undergraduates. But it is a relationship that is not without its potentially paternalistic elements, elements we wanted to avoid in our exchange. We were also aware of difficulties in establishing tone over e-mail and worried that we had come across as disembodied—or worse, Anglo—voices of abstract institutional authority emanating out of cyberspace. In any kind of writing center work on a classroom assignment, the teacher was always there as an audience hovering somewhere off on the sidelines, and we had two teachers to contend with, each with an individual set of hopes, fears, and worries.

Far from entering into a discussion about texts solely in text and undistracted by physical presence, I found myself continually distracted by the absence of physical presence. I was trying to establish a connection with people that I knew only as a collection of abstract socioeconomic and sociolinguistic categories, and I have not had much contact with high school students for years. I found myself struggling to aim what I said at imagined Hispanic high school students from an imagined place without even any solid indication of how firm their command of standard English was. I never knew whether I was using the right vocabulary and worried that I was either talking down to them or going right over their heads. And I did not have the quick confirmation I am used to in face-to-face sessions when I look over at the student I am working with and find that what I’ve been saying has not been ringing any bells.

Dave Coogan, describing an e-mail correspondence with a student, Kathy, notes how the pace of conversation slows down in e-mail, allowing the tutor the luxury of getting deeply into the text (176-79). Reading Coogan’s account of the correspondence, however, I am struck by the emphasis he places on the correspondents’ attempts to read each other’s intentions and by his own concerns about whether his response would have its intended effects. It is an account laced with words of concern and an exquisite sense of aiming for an audience—for example, “I was worried” (177), “I took a gamble that she would welcome another close reading” (179). Perhaps the session worked so well as much because the tutor took such care to get to know his writer and to imagine her as an audience as it did because it was conducted over e-mail. Perhaps, too, the difficulty of reading intent while working online is apt to impress on a good and thoughtful tutor the importance of reading a writer as a person.
Conclusion

I do not want to leave the impression that I think online writing center consulting is a bad idea—far from it. Online communication can work a kind of magic. It has enormous potential for bringing together writers separated by distance and for creating occasions for communication between writing centers and their publics. It can, for example, create new possibilities for learning and teaching. I am not sure we would have hit on the idea of responding to the Canadian students’ questions about Hamlet as characters from the play had the conversation been held face-to-face. The Roma exchanges may have had some rocky moments, but I doubt we would have been able to work with students so far away except over the Internet. The suppression of information about identity may have some advantages, too. One of the teachers from Roma told me that she thought the students were initially more comfortable working with people from UT online than they would have been in face-to-face tutorials. Perhaps working online gave us an initial safe space to get to know each other; I also think that all of the participants—consultants and Roma students alike—have found opportunities to begin filling in some of those blank spaces in abstract socioeconomic and sociolinguistic categories with concrete information about real people. If working online makes concerns about respecting the writers we work with explicit, because we know we are struggling to fill in blanks, then that is an advantage of online work, too.

But if we are engaging with a technology that we invest with the authority of magic—whether it is computer technology, writing, or an intersection of the two—then perhaps we could take a lesson from the Hittites. Many of the Hittite texts that have been discovered are rituals that present in exacting detail instructions for pacifying angry gods, the ultimate cause of individual and collective misfortune in the Hittite worldview. The people responsible for these texts, the ritual practitioners, do not seem to have regarded magic as an entirely ungovernable phenomenon beyond their control. There is little direct evidence for the training of ritual practitioners, but the ritual texts are the products of a sophisticated professional tradition. From the practitioners’ point of view, magic was an intellectual activity with practical significance for society. We should think of magic from their point of view not as a flashy floor show that mystifies, terrifies, and entertains—though it may have struck their audiences this way—but as a field of intellectual activity with practical significance for their society.

Rather than reacting as an audience upon whom magic is worked, whether it is the magic of technology transforming cognition in a social vacuum, the magic of a computer preserving conversations intact, or the
magic of networked communication effacing identity completely, we should act as ritual practitioners for our own times. We should try to understand the nature of online exchanges, respecting and interrogating the medium in which we work, trying not to be distracted by unexamined assumptions we bring from our experiences as speakers or writers, trying, instead, to learn from them. Perhaps in doing this, we will also learn more about what we do when we converse face-to-face.

Notes

1 David Olson provides a recent critique of this position (20-44).

2 Michael Halloran, for example, notes that until the 19th century, when inexpensive paper and steel-tipped pens became available to modern European and American writers, the expense of paper and the physical difficulty of maintaining quill pens encouraged a two-stage process of drafting in which the writer had to “think out carefully what to say, then write it down, ideally getting it exactly right the first time” (169-71). Under such conditions invention and revision were likely to be viewed as entirely mental processes. The Hittites, by contrast, used waxed wooden writing boards for ephemeral types of writing such as receipts and invoices and possibly for drafting documents that were later transcribed onto clay tablets. Although we do not know much about Hittite attitudes toward invention and revision, we do know that they regarded the wooden writing boards, which were much easier to erase than clay dried to a stage hard enough to take cuneiform signs, as inherently less trustworthy than clay, even though the writing boards were hinged and could be closed and sealed to prevent unauthorized tampering.

3 Georgia Green (151) after Sacks, Schlegloff, and Jefferson. Denise Murray notes that the rules formulated by Sacks et al do not necessarily hold cross-culturally or for all types of conversation (320).

4 Turning the log of an online conversation into a useful document can also involve some of the same subjective judgments that transcribing a tape-recorded conversation does. In reproducing this conversation, for example, I have also altered reality somewhat. After some internal debate, I decided to edit out typos and misspellings and to make the capitalization and punctuation conventional in order to avoid distracting the reader. The result is considerably less messy than the conversation in which I participated. I was also using a Telnet connection to the MUD instead of special MUD software. On my screen I saw both the commands I had typed in and
the response that the MUD server returned to my machine, and the commands themselves were sometimes interrupted by communications from the other participants. Again, to make the log clearer, I removed the commands from the edited version. This unedited transcript of lines 11-18 is a closer approximation of the reality I experienced while participating in the conversation, but it is very difficult to view as a useful record of the conversation:

Calvin says “Is it necessary to discuss my paper, since I already have a grade?”
“do” Martina says “but I cut it out”
you want to
You say “do you want to?”
“do you want to, calvin? Martina says “what is your paper about?”
You say “do you want to, calvin?”
Calvin says “I’d rather talk about the UWC”
Martina says “Bosslady, Should I include the collaboration somewhere?”
“do you nroomally collaborate in school writing?
You say “do you nroomally collaborate in school writing?”

Creating a vivid online persona takes conscious attention and sometimes it is hard work. I have logged on to MUDs myself in the persona of a small black and white cat named Sam, but unless I periodically remind my interlocutors that I am a cat by displaying signals of cathood like purring, meowing, and scratching things, they are apt to forget I am a cat, though given the power of names to signal identity, they probably react to me as some guy named Sam.
Works Cited


