

From a Distance: *Teaching Writing on Interactive Television*

JOYCE MAGNOTTO NEFF
Old Dominion University

This study used methods from grounded theory to examine an interactive, televised writing course taught via Teletechnet, a distance-education program at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. The findings show how technology affects a writing classroom and influences the construction of students as writers. Critical factors include how the instructor perceives and manipulates electronic contexts, how she imagines the subjectivities of students, and how intermediaries affect her authority as a teacher. The results suggest that institutional contexts are reconfigured in televised instruction as virtual and material spaces that allow interesting tensions to emerge. Students balance presence against absence in these spaces. The instructor balances tradition and innovation. Teletechnet administrators balance economic and educational considerations. Televised teaching is an opportunity for faculty and students to rethink, and possibly resist, traditional pedagogies, course designs, and authority structures.

I can't believe how much time and thought I'm giving to Teletechnet teaching. I woke up this morning with visions of the class in my head. I was thinking about my usual way of having lots of student talk and participation and how that's just not going to work on television.

Teaching journal, 1994, p. 5

This report results from a close examination of the experience of teaching writing on television, an experience that promises to affect many writing teachers' lives. Televised teaching via distance education is not new, but it is becoming more popular as technology improves and funding for higher education shrinks (Schweiger,

1994). For faculty in most disciplines, televised instruction poses little overt difficulty because it supports traditional methods of delivering education—lecture, discussion, examination. But writing teachers have long since rejected that banking model (Freire, 1993) to embrace workshops, peer groups, conferences, and portfolios—highly

interactive methods that depend on a close relationship between writers and readers, students and teachers. How do these methods fare when technology and distance intervene? This study of an advanced composition course that I taught on interactive television explores how one electronic setting affected the teaching of writing.

Background and Research Questions

In their ongoing investigations of how media affect “the ways we know what we know,” Gozzi and Haynes (1992) argue that electronic media create a paradoxical epistemology or “empathy at a distance.” The paradox arises when “we experience a vivid presence, but at a distance. We are involved, yet we are uninvolved. We are affected, yet we are unaffected” (p. 221). Gozzi and Haynes believe that to succeed in such a world, human beings will learn to distance themselves from their own empathy (ironic empathy), to tolerate ambiguity and incompleteness, and to “sight other selves through the refractions of their simulations” (pp. 226–27). Furthermore, individuals will “‘triangulate’ information received through electric media by discovering alternative versions, different ideological sources—yes, even print versions. . . to navigate the different zones of epistemology with ease and effectiveness” (p. 227).

Chesebro (1984), in a study of the epistemological functions of media, makes claims similar to those of Gozzi and Haynes (1992) and states that electronic media are “the dominant mode of epideictic communication in the

contemporary American culture” (p. 121). Electronic media focus on the present, on celebration (praise) and rejection (dispraise). They “legitimate the display of emotion” (because they are billed as entertainment) while simultaneously discouraging audiences from “recognizing an ideological dimension” (p. 122). Chesebro also claims that “electronic media now function as a social reality which provides information, knowledge, and value systems equal in power to the kind of understandings produced by science and everyday experiences” (p. 126). Most powerful is Chesebro’s proposition that “socially shared or cultural value systems are ultimately a function of particular media uses and media configurations” (p. 126).

Gozzi and Haynes (1992), Chesebro (1984), and others (Berge & Collins, 1995; Negroponte, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Wagner, 1996) imply that those who teach on television should examine the power of media to affect their ways of knowing and value systems so that they may better understand how that power shapes—and can be shaped by—faculty and students. The present study considers media and power issues in terms of a second body of research about how students are (and are not) represented as writers in face-to-face school settings. In this study, the terms *construct* and *construction* refer to socio-cultural systems of beliefs, assumptions, and operating principles that are fluid, negotiable, and context dependent. Social and structural attributes (e.g., writing is part of a grading system) influence a construct. Thus, the con-

struction of student-writer that obtains in one setting may differ from the construction of student-writer in other settings. *Representations* are discursive (oral and written) expressions of notions or beliefs. The same individual might (probably does) hold conflicting representations of a concept (e.g., student-writer). This is not to say that representations are individually rather than socially constructed. Instead, it is to suggest a distinction between an individual's discursive expression of notions about a subject (a representation) and the larger construct of that subject formed at the intersections of individual and institutional representations.

Studies by Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt (1993) and Sperling (1993, 1996) as well as my previous research (Magnotto 1991, 1995) suggest that in successful writing classes students are constructed as writers (Bartholomae, 1985; Goleman, 1995; Rose, 1989), are encouraged to develop writerly subjectivities (Anson, 1989; Yagelski, 1994), and are seen as producers as well as consumers of texts (Anson, 1989; Dunn, Florio-Ruane, & Clark, 1985; Goleman, 1995; Scholes, 1985). The present study, a semester-long look at one section of Advanced Composition, developed from my many concerns about what might happen in electronic classrooms: Will students who are marginalized in traditional schooling know themselves in new ways in televised courses? Will faculty who often base their credibility on the logic of print literacy reconstruct other selves, both simulated and authentic, on television? When faculty teach student-centered,

process-oriented writing courses, must they lecture if they are the only ones able to be on camera? How can they effectively mentor, coach, or conference without meeting students face-to-face? Can long-distance writing workshops succeed? What happens to peer-response groups if only one or two students are enrolled at a distance site? Who and what might mediate faculty interactions with student-writers? I distilled these concerns into three major questions for this study: (1) How are students constructed as writers in such a setting? (2) What mediating elements have roles in distance education? and (3) What impact does distance education have on composition pedagogy?

Context of the Study

Old Dominion University's distance education system includes a component called Teletechnet, which serves a special audience and purpose. Through one-way video and two-way audio, Teletechnet delivers upper-division courses leading to bachelor's degrees in dozens of programs. Most students have already completed associate's degrees. They attend classes in television studios located at community colleges (and other sites) across Virginia and other states and also in military ships at sea. Instructors teach in the studio on the home campus in Norfolk, Virginia, or in one of three satellite studios. Teletechnet has achieved widespread acclaim in terms of enrollment and student satisfaction. University administrators and state legislators appreciate the high student-to-faculty ratios and the resulting cost-savings, "\$800 less

than the average on-campus cost” per student according to a university newspaper (Teletechnet, 1995, n.p.).

Teletechnet is marketed through brochures that claim flexibility, easy access, low cost, and high quality. A site director at each distance location distributes separate schedules of televised courses, advises students, and registers them. Students complete their registration using Teletechnet credit card sales drafts that are included with their bills. Student satisfaction is assessed through course evaluations and marketing research such as a 1994 survey about teaching ability and course delivery (Flanagan, 1995) and surveys to select the outstanding Teletechnet teacher of the year.

In the fall 1994 semester I taught English 327, Advanced Composition, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 11:00–11:50. The course was broadcast from the transmitting studio on the home campus to seven additional sites across Virginia. I had fifteen students in the studio with me; nineteen students were at a distance. The students were diverse in age, gender, class, ethnicity, and prior educational achievement. Twenty-nine were female, five were male. One had a bachelor’s degree; at least 13 had associate’s degrees. Their stated goals for the course included achieving such competencies as improving grammar and punctuation, learning organizational strategies to make their writing more interesting, and relieving writing anxiety. Ten students completed the course with As, thirteen with Bs, ten with Cs, and one with an F. Study participants included

the students, myself as the teacher-researcher, technicians, site directors, instructional designers, and a graduate assistant.

Method

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is based on “systematically and intensively analyzing data” not just to order them but to examine conceptual relationships and to generate theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 278). It is a methodology requiring the researcher to code data in a series of passes until a provisional theory emerges inductively from the analysis and is further tested through theoretical sampling. Strauss and Corbin stress that “Grounded theory methodology insists that no matter how general—how broad in scope or abstract—the theory, it should be developed in that back-and-forth interplay with data that is so central to this methodology” (p. 282). Code notes, integrative memos, graphics, and balancing matrixes leave a paper trail of the process.

I used grounded theory for this study of Teletechnet because it allows sophisticated representations of complicated social practices such as writing and the teaching of writing. It also allows, and even encourages, a blurring of researcher-participant positions by valuing the experiences that all participants bring to a project. This emphasis on the perceptions of research participants can be seen in Guice’s (1992) study of how sixth graders define themselves as readers, Gross’s (1992) look at how veteran teachers reconceive the value of dialogue journals when con-

fronted with student responses to the journals, White's (1992) report on how a novice researcher redefines herself as she produces a dissertation using grounded theory, and Smith's (1982) discussion of how two researchers perceive their collaborative efforts. Grounded theory appears as a methodology in Matranga's (1995) study of how implementing writing workshops changes a teacher's theoretical understanding of writing development, Nye's (1995) study of writing as healing, and Smith's (1996) study of doctoral students who write journals about their field-based experiences.

These studies exemplify the reflexivity of grounded theory. Researchers selecting the methodology work to maintain a questioning stance and an awareness of their situatedness within the methodological paradigm. They use multiple data collection methods, triangulation in data gathering, and multiple genres for reporting findings (see, for example, Spigelman, 1996). As Glaser and Strauss (1967) explain,

Joint collection, coding, and analysis of data is the underlying operation. The generation of theory, coupled with the notion of theory as process, requires that all three operations be done together as much as possible. They should blur and intertwine continually, from the beginning of an investigation to its end. (p. 43)

Grounded theory is interpretive and dialogic. Emerging findings are shared with the research team and with research participants so that each stance is interrogated by other interpretations. As a project moves through recursive cycles of data analysis and theory build-

ing, interpretations are renegotiated. Furthermore, because grounded theory explains and predicts, it is useful for practitioners as well as researchers. It is open and ongoing and can result in, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967), "a well-codified set of propositions or in a running theoretical discussion" (p. 31). Grounded theory is, they continue, "theory as process; that is, theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product" (p. 32; cf. Neff, 1998). The remaining sections of this article interleaf data analysis, memos, graphics, findings, and emerging theory to reflect the multi-layered results of grounded theory work.

Sources of Data

The data collection for this study included a teaching journal; videotapes of 40 classes; lesson plans; blue pads (used in place of a chalkboard); the course pack and textbooks; logs of telephone and office conferences with students; drafts, peer reviews, and revisions of students' papers; statements of students' course goals; students' information sheets and photographs; interviews with participants including a graduate assistant, two instructional designers, and a researcher studying Teletechnet for other purposes; attendance sheets; grade book entries; and documents about the Teletechnet initiative.

Data Analysis and Preliminary Findings

Open Coding

Data analysis began with open coding. As Strauss (1987) says, "It is especially important to understand that these ini-

tial open-coding sessions have a 'spring-board' function. The analyst does not remain totally bound within the domain of *these* data, but quickly jumps off to wonder or speculate or hypothesize about [other] data and phenomena" (p. 63, emphasis in original). For example, the following videotape summary from November 30, 1994, shows how I responded during an early coding session. The bracketed comments are free-wheeling and intended to serve as heuristics for later coding sessions. Eventually, a tentative set of concept and category names emerges from open coding.

There is music playing at the sites during the 10 minutes between classes while the screen shows which class is next. It's another example of the teacher not having full [control] or even knowledge of the learning situation.

The class starts with the agenda and an invitation to students to come to campus to present their oral research reports before the camera.

The print on the charts that I write is still too small to read easily even this late in the semester. Why did I never correct that? [resistance on teacher's part]

After 15 minutes for the student evaluations, S1 gives her report on corporal punishment in schools. She says she is nervous. She makes a response to someone at a site who did a peer review of her report and asked whether she was for or against. That question spurred the writer to take a stand. This shows her awareness of a reader's part in [co-constructing] her text.

S2 gives an excellent presentation on farm safety. Wonderful statistics and examples. [coding question: Did her paper match the presentation which was easily an A+?]

S3 on nuclear war. Boring and basic, nothing new. During the semester, she and I had a few conversations about her topic

and she never "heard" my criticism about the topic being as big as the earth. [the Bambi approach to a topic—tell us what we already know or what is so syrupy and general as to waste our time without even realizing that's what you are doing. Why do I call it the Bambi approach? She seems so innocent AND ignorant of deeper work and issues. She is unaware of her audience as anything other than a loving mother or an easy teacher who wants pabulum.] [resistance on student's part]

S4 on witches in Va Beach. Entertaining and informative, and she had sent visuals ahead. She speaks with enthusiasm about really learning something from her research process.

S5 on effects of divorce on children. She mentions that the topic comes from personal experience. She gives some stats, but could be more specific. She states that the statistics she found were overwhelming to her and again gives the sense that she had a good [learning experience from the research.]

The class ends with my encouraging people to do visuals and with questions from students about when I'll be in my office. I show the list of Friday presenters.

Some of the early category names bracketed above (control, resistance, co-constructing a text) proved fruitful later in the study.

Axial Coding

Axial coding is the next stage. I applied a rubric involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies, and consequences to categories developed through open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Then I wrote memos recording each category and examples of it from the data base. The following excerpts are from a memo on *constructing a writer* that was written after several coding sessions. Note the back and forth exploratory nature of the memo

as I free associate, pull in quotes from theorists I am reading at the time, and summarize sections of the data base:

AXIAL CODING MEMO: Constructing a "writer" in virtual and material reality.

The questions:

Who constructs a writer? My previous research shows that in conversation between tutors and students, students get constructed as writers, so it's the talk and the naming ("as a writer, what choice were you making here?") that contribute to the construction project.

.....

What is a constructed writer? This is an important question, and I will go into the data base and interview some students to ask them what a writer is. I will also ask colleagues who teach writing on TT [Teletechnet]. At the moment, I would say that a student writer is like a novice writer, someone who is trying to play the believing game, trying to buy into the behaviors of a writer without necessarily understanding that there are attitudes and beliefs that go into the construction. Maybe it's the instructor who displays her attitudes in her talk and who, by addressing *students as writers*, begins to convey the concept that being a writer means production and dedication, but also means having a topic or subject that's important enough to want to say something about to others. So writing is a set of strategies and a body of knowledge and a practice that is set in a theoretical framework which is more or less consciously known by the writer. Do more sophisticated writers, more expert writers know the framework?

When does the construction happen? It never does for many students as my earlier research shows. They go thru the motions without understanding what it's all about. What can I compare that to? Maybe like my programming the VCR. I never quite get it and have to start over each time. AHA—the Rankin (1994) anecdote about the new teacher trying to play a video for her class

and confessing that she just doesn't get how it works and never will.

Where does the construction occur? How much happens during virtual reality and how much during material reality? The Cathy cartoon from May 14, 1996, in which Cathy holds up a print out of a love poem from her "online sweetie" while a co-worker says that her husband picked up a sock. All the other workers rush to hear about the sock. The co-worker claims that "reality wins," while Cathy sighs deflatedly, "virtual bumme!"

How does the construction occur? [see memo from day 1 videotape where I talk about calling students "writers" early on.]

How much does it happen that writers are constructed? I will do a count of the times I name students as writers during 327.

Why are writers constructed in writing classes? Why is it important for that to happen? There's something about *virtual and material reality* in the response to this question, too. So many students think of school as not the "real world." So school is virtual and the rest of the world is real. They can play act as students for the time being. Even if they write they are play acting at a task they don't envision themselves doing in the real world. The least we can do in comp courses is talk about these beliefs and assumptions until we throw students off balance about accepting them un-self-consciously. But this begs the question.

Why is it important for writers to be constructed in writing classes? One reason: what we then teach students about writing becomes more important to the students and thus more easily or likely to be "learned." It is parallel to the believing game. We can also talk about the transition from one who writes as response to the prompting of another versus one who writes from a self determined purpose or at least gets excited about being able to tell others what one knows about a subject. The notion of purpose needs to be expanded for novice writers with more emphasis on "What will I get out of doing this writing?" Another reason: language is a medium through which real-

ity gets socially constructed. Therefore spoken and written language are “coin of the realm” for people who wish to shape reality.

Another reason for constructing writers in writing classes comes from the 327 course evaluations: being able to see oneself as more than what one thought one was before is a sustaining event. Some intrinsic or extrinsic reward that matters to the writer (better self esteem or whatever it may be) can make the writing more positive of an experience.

Graphics and Integrative Memos

Graphics (charts, diagrams, balancing matrices) play a role in pushing the analyses further. They work heuristically as the researcher imagines relationships among categories; later they serve as a test of those relationships against the data. (See Figures 1 and 2, which I will discuss in a later section.)

As graphics and coding memos accrued in this study, I revisited them periodically before drafting integrative memos such as the following to record salient concepts and issues:

INTEGRATIVE MEMO

RE: Acculturation to Mediation of distance

As I start to reread the early memos and to think about my conversations with JB and H, I realize the following:

So many things come between the instructor and the student in TT. They are like *sliding screens*:

the camera,

the elmo,

the site director,

the crew,

the mail room people,

the tv screen which reduces my size and the size of my words,

the transmission mechanism which may make my voice fuzzy or intermittent.

the desk I sit behind

the raised dias

the microphone I wear and the ones students use

material delivery thru the mail—I don't physically hand out papers nor do students return them directly to me

voice mail and email conferences versus face-to-face

Monarch Copy center. If they don't get the course pack and syllabus together the way you want it or don't get it to sites on time (do they mail it?), or even the way they put the fac. member's name in small print on the cover, gives them a roll as intermediary

One consequence of these intermediaries is the highs/lows I felt after (and before) each class.

Another consequence is *distance* (it makes sense that this is called distance learning). How far apart are students and I? Time distance, physical (spatial) distance, emotional distance, intellectual distance;

Again, these things are related to how students are constructed as students by the distance ed system which now shapes them as much as an individual teacher does. *The distance system becomes the virtual as well as the material institution within which we shape and are shaped as teachers/learners/etc.*

My sheer force of will and my belief that students learn partially because of *who I am* changes on TT because I am as virtual as my students are!! I can't look students in the eye (JB saying that's why he refuses to teach on TT). Thus, if the force of my “self” (including my experience, my knowledge, my credentials, my people skills) is dissipated by these intervening screens, how will I motivate students to learn? Do I give up on motivation? Are the students in TT self-motivated (there may be a difference between studio and site students in this regard)? Will the material do it? (Probably not in a junior level required course). I will go back and look at evals for TT 327 and classroom 327.

Does this say a lot about my assumptions for teaching writing—the coach metaphor, mentor metaphor, or editor metaphor imply a “personal” relationship between two people (actually between 2 stable individuals).

Maybe TT is the postmodern answer to

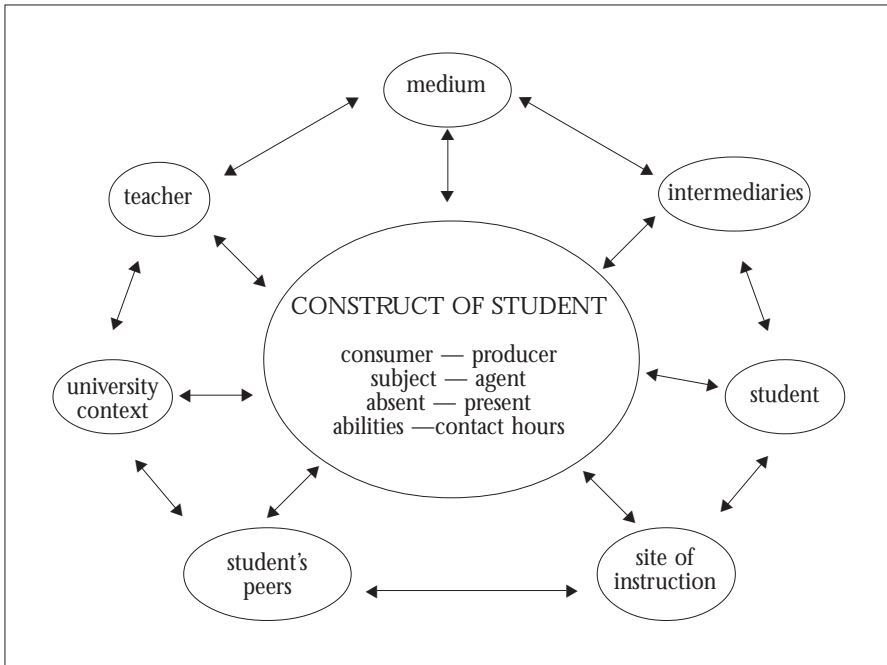


Figure 1. The construct of “student” in an interactive, televised writing class

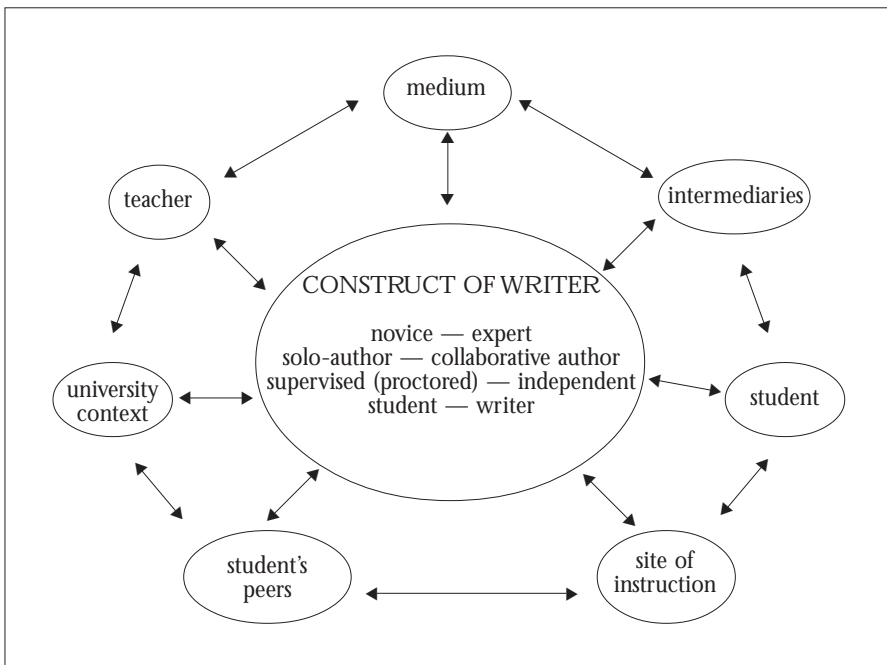


Figure 2. The construct of “writer” in an interactive, televised writing class

fractured selves. Whatever the cause, the consequence is a learning curve that is very noticeable. The virtual/material dichotomy needs to be deconstructed. We know one by virtue of there being the other. Is this a continuum? It seems to be, especially since the concepts of virtual and material are themselves socially constructed

Theoretical Sampling and Reflexivity

The methods of grounded theory are compatible with the notion of research as praxis. Emerging concepts and theorized relationships among concepts are cycled to study participants and to others for response. Both the researcher and respondent gain and contribute insights into the scene of the research. In the best instances grounded theory is a team project to begin with; a group of researchers collaborates with participants throughout a study. In this study I was a solo researcher, but I cycled emerging findings to my graduate assistant, to one of the instructional designers, and to another researcher completing her own study of Teletechnet. I interviewed students, faculty, and staff associated with Teletechnet and asked for their responses to my early categories (see interview questions in the appendix). Over time, the process produced a list of concepts that later led to core categories.

Core Categories

An interactive, televised course is a complex project involving many players and elements. As I analyzed the videotapes, teaching journal, and other data, a long list of concepts and potential category names emerged: Faculty,

Virtual Pedagogy, Students, Writers, Resistance, Human Mediators, Technological Mediators, Institutional Contexts (Teletechnet and Old Dominion University), Historical Contexts, Cultural Contexts. Three core categories had staying power:

virtual/material student-writers
intermediaries or mediating elements
virtual/material pedagogy

Analyses of the core categories via selective coding helped me construct relationships among them. Figures 1 and 2, for example, are graphic representations of the constructs of *student* and *writer*. The binaries listed on the graphics (consumer-producer, etc.) are continua along which representations of a particular student or a particular writer might be located at a given time. Rather than symbolizing one privileged term over another, the binaries express tensions that participants tried to balance (consciously or not) during English 327. Analyses of core categories led to findings about English 327 as a writing class best theorized through close attention to the tensions and contexts that define it.

Results

Data analysis shows that (1) Teletechnet creates a virtual and material space in which students *can* construct themselves as writers, and (2) many people and technologies play roles in whether or not students take up that challenge. In the next sections of this report I move between data and theory as I discuss these results. I simultaneously describe

and theorize students-as-writers in English 327, mediating elements in a televised writing class, and writing pedagogy in distance education.

Student-Writers in Distance Education

A major purpose of this study was to better understand how students are constructed as writers in a televised composition course. Figure 2 outlines what I found to be the contributors to the construct of student-as-writer: the university, the teacher, the medium, the site, Teletechnet intermediaries, other students, and the individual student. The arrows depict the interactions among the contributors to the construct. As mentioned previously, the binaries in the middle of the graphic (solo-author or collaborative author, etc.) are continua along which representations of a particular student might be located at a given time. The binaries express tensions that students balanced during English 327.

The balancing act is situated in what Denzin and Lincoln (1994) see as one of the new communities forming in virtual space:

These new electronic social worlds change the concept of community. They shift its locus away from face-to-face interaction to text-mediated communication contexts. New writing selves interact in this cyberspace, selves lodged and created in the virtual reality of the electronic text. These faceless, electronic selves find themselves located in simulated communities. These communities have their own interactional norms concerning the public, the private, the sacred, the secular, and the rational. (p. 583)

Teletechnet is one such virtual community space which in addition to

allowing "faceless, electronic selves" can also allow for self-constructed selves marked as the creator wishes in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity (see Turkle, 1995). The first day of English 327 provides an example. After calling the roll, I asked if anyone was attending who was not on the roster. A voice from the Virginia Beach site reached the studio, "Duncan McCloud." I dutifully added Duncan's name to the roster and to my grade book and called his name at the next two class meetings. Finally in late September, a sympathetic student told me that Duncan was a "virtual reality visitor," not a real student but an invented one based on a character in the science fiction series *The Highlanders*. While replaying the class videotapes during the analysis phase of this research project, I could hear students at the sites chuckling when I called McCloud's name, but the significance of their laughter escaped me at the time class was in session. Teletechnet students seem able to cross the borders between truth and fiction, between material and virtual reality.

The Duncan McCloud incident raises the question of what it is that defines students as members of a writing class or as writers. A similar instance occurred when I sent sets of papers from students at one site to students at another site for peer review purposes. Some site directors refused to distribute the papers, choosing instead to return them to me with accompanying notes: "These people are not at this site." I must ask in response: Then exactly where are the students of Teletechnet? Who decides whether or not they ex-

ist and whether or not they are writers? Is it the papers they submit, their names on the roster, their tuition payments?

My previous research shows that students are, or are not, constructed as writers in conversations they have with writing teachers and writing tutors and in the language of the assignments given to them by professors from various disciplines (Magnotto 1991, 1995). I found that students were constructed as writers most specifically when they were so named during conferences. For example, a tutor might say to a student, "As a writer, what choices are you making here?" Clark's (1990) explanation of knowledge construction supports these claims:

These two assumptions—that communication is the process of meaning making and that it is a collaborative process in which the meaning that is made is meaning that can be collectively held—express a social constructionist epistemology that defines knowledge as negotiated by the people who are to share it, people bound together by common needs and purposes. (p. 3)

Yagelski (1994) and others (Brodkey, 1987; LeFevre, 1987; Turkle, 1995) complicate Clark's definition by discussing the idea of writing in terms of postmodern critiques of the stable subject. Yagelski writes, "[T]hese critiques question the very notion of the agency of the writer, a notion that lies at the center of the enterprise of teaching writing as process" (p. 204). He concludes that process pedagogy is viable within a postmodern epistemology, and he quotes Berlin's (1992) interpretation of Smith:

As Paul Smith (1988) argues, the unique place of each of us in the *network of intersecting discourses* assures differences among us as well as possibilities for originality and political agency. This does not mean, however, that anyone can totally escape the discursive regimes, the power/knowledge formations of the historical moment. (cited in Yagelski, 1994, p. 212; emphasis added)

In Teletechnet, the network of intersecting discourses can be imagined as materializing in a virtual space and can be captured momentarily in its complexity. My research shows that those who inhabit that space and the space itself (with all its political and historical ramifications) affect the discursive construction of students as writers.

As in a traditional classroom, I, as the instructor, play a role in how I address students. For example, in the August 29 session of English 327, I said, "Writers use resources . . . You can be resources for other writers in the class." I then explained that we would "write to deadline" because deadlines are a usual component of a writer's work life [Memo 5/22]. In a September session of English 327, I asked students to read aloud parts of their first papers that were especially effective, and I did so by addressing students as writers: "Susan (not her real name), your opening paragraph shows how a writer uses a funnel approach." Susan read her paper aloud. Another student followed her, and I commented, "That's a wonderful example of a writer who has excellent details. . . . She pulls me in with her personal experience and ties it to other information we need to know about books for children" [Memo 5/27]. Lat-

er in the same class I said, "I've had a couple phone conversations with writers in this class who are finding that typical essay approaches to this paper are not working as well as they had hoped. So, I'll propose a third way . . ." In each instance I named students as *writers*, a practice that I follow in face-to-face classroom settings as well.

In lecture, discussion, and even in handouts, instructors display their attitudes and beliefs about who is authorized to be a writer and about who is in charge of the process. Goleman (1995) deconstructs "the traditional role of the writing instructor as the master reader of students' truth statements" (p. 2) by putting that notion in dialogue with Foucault's (1980) notion of the specific intellectual. She asks why among composition teachers such a large gap exists "between the high value placed on 'writers' and the low value placed on students who write" (p. 6). The Teletechnet data show that I, for one, gave mixed messages. For example, the syllabus distributed to students enrolled in English 327 states: "The major goal of this course is to improve your effectiveness as a writer." Here I am usurping the setting of goals. I am claiming control over what will get done as though I can, by sheer will, make students into writers. My research shows that I am not the sole agent in the construction project.

Students are equally important in the equation. For them, being a writer may mean the production of texts and dedication to the task at hand. Or it may mean having a topic that is important enough to want to say something

about to others. It may be a set of strategies, a body of knowledge, and a system of practice located within a theoretical framework that is more or less consciously known by the writer himself or herself. Being a writer may be an attitude, such as the ones expressed by English 327 students on a questionnaire asking, "How do you feel about writing?" Students selected from "I dislike writing," "I'm neutral about it," or "I rather enjoy it," and several added personal responses:

I love to write.

I love to write, always have. I love words, and the sheer power of communication through writing excites me. It's been 11 years since I've had to concentrate on my writing and I do have fears of "failure." But my heart tells me this is what I need to do.

I have a rather hard time getting my point across—I know what I want to write, but have a hard time explaining it.

I would like to eventually write children's books.

I enjoy it. I write for many different purposes. On major papers I become anxious and doubt my ability to write effectively.

The medium of television is another player in the construction of students in distance education. During October, 1994, two instructional designers observed English 327 to analyze production values and packaging factors. In a follow-up meeting they suggested that I write fewer letters on each line of the blue pads to improve readability, use different colored pens for emphasis, remove small print items from the overhead monitor when students were reading aloud, call on the distant sites more often during discussion to increase involvement, and re-

mind students to identify themselves by name and site before they speak over the microphones because other participants could not see them. Each of these suggestions was meant to improve the presentation of the course over television monitors and the reception of course content by student-consumers rather than by student-writers.

Paradoxically, in a Teletechnet writing class, student consumers are also producers; the texts they write are commodities of value. The value-added component for written work is related to the physical distances between students and their instructors. Lawson, Ryan, and Winterowd (1989) argue that "student writing is unique in that few other reading situations allow the writer the degree of presence that he or she has in the student paper. The reader is acquainted with and personally accountable to the writer" (p. ix). In English 327 I did not see or speak to the distance students face-to-face. As a result, I placed more emphasis on the written text as the primary communication medium (Newbold, 1993; Oaks, 1995). The physical distance between the student-writers in 327 and me as an instructor-reader more closely approximated the distance in the non-school world where expert writers publish their texts for imagined (rather than known) audiences and where expert readers interpret texts without personally knowing the individuals who wrote them.

I also found that physical distance between participants reduced and complicated some of the oral exchanges readily available in traditional class-

rooms where a face-to-face interaction (e.g., a student saying "I know what I mean, but I just can't get it in writing") often influences how an instructor reads a text. As an instructor who makes it a priority to get to know students, I quickly became aware of the barriers to those interactions in Teletechnet. I never personally met my distance students, and I saw their faces only if they sent a photograph. Instead, I constructed them through their words, both written and oral (voice mail and telephone conferences). Interestingly, some students preferred it that way.

Mediating Elements in Distance Education

In the virtual and material world of a televised writing class, numerous mediating elements (both human and technological) play parts. In English 327 the following elements interrupted (often literally) my notions of authority: technicians, site directors, instructional designers, mail carriers, proctors, cameras, television screens, microphones, and transmission lines. For example, the microphone is a mediator between the instructor and the student in terms of who controls the floor and thus who has a voice during a broadcast. The fact that each distance site has its own floor and that the teacher is only a virtual presence at distance sites further muddies the matter of control. Control is not located in one person or one space because a student can speak aloud to other students at a distance site while the instructor is speaking through the television monitor. The instructor cannot hear the students' conversation un-

less they activate the microphone at their site.

One way to visualize mediating elements in a televised classroom is to imagine them like the windows on software programs. Each window is self sufficient when being used, but it is located within superordinate windows and may itself contain subordinate windows. Users enlarge or shrink a window to suit their work purposes and flip-flop windows by clicking the mouse on a window hidden behind the current work space. These dynamic (and often rapid) flip-flops parallel the salient and receding mediators in a Teletechnet interaction. In a typical scenario the teacher talks, students press microphone buttons to ask questions, the engineer announces that one site is not receiving the video, students at another site complain that their essays have not been returned in the mail, and simultaneously, a producer switches the camera from the teacher to the ELMO or electronic chalkboard. An intricate collaboration results, a collaboration that is not acknowledged in face-to-face classrooms because the assumption is that the teacher has control in that space. In a televised class no one person owns the mouse.

In English 327 mediating elements enabled students to reconstruct traditional notions of presence and absence. One of the thickest folders in the data set contains a semester's worth of attendance sheets from the seven sites where students were enrolled. After the first week of the course, I realized that taking attendance and waiting for students to access microphones to answer

to their names consumed an inordinate amount of class time. One student voiced the same frustration:

Teletechnet presented some difficulties for me at first—it seemed that a lot of class time was wasted at the beginning of the semester due to so many sites checking in. But that improved, although I feel the class would have been even better had it been in a normal setting. (course evaluations, December, 1994)

As an alternative to calling roll, I asked students to sign attendance sheets and mail them to me weekly. I also hoped attendance sheets would encourage students to be present for peer response groups and collaborative exercises. To this end, 10 percent of the final grade was based on classwork that could *not* be made up if a student was absent.

The data show that students sometimes signed their names on attendance sheets for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday whether they were present all three days or not. Likewise, some students sent in a class activity (i.e., freewrite or journal entry) that they had completed after the fact because site directors did not always return student work to the main campus on a daily basis. At first glance these practices appear to be honor code violations, but that conclusion does not hold. In the Teletechnet system flexibility about attendance is a highly touted feature, with administrators encouraging students to watch videotapes of classes they miss. In some ways, then, televised courses exemplify the current philosophical debate about how material and virtual reality (or simulation and simulacrum) are becoming indistinguishable from one another

(Ray, 1993). The pedagogical implications of redefining presence and absence can be glimpsed in the choices of two students in English 327. The first student became ill late in the semester, yet she did not substitute virtual presence for physical absence even though she could have done so by viewing videotapes of the original sessions. She failed the course. Another student had back problems throughout the semester and was frequently absent during live broadcasts. She always reviewed the tapes and submitted her assignments. She made use of voice mail and telephone conferences, and she passed the course by adopting a virtual presence when necessary.

A related issue concerns the typical kinds of feedback from students that I as a teacher depend on in the pedagogical loop (e.g., body language, class liveliness) and the teacher feedback that I give students in quick conversations before and after class or during chance encounters in the hallways. This study convinced me that as a Teletechnet teacher I need alternative methods for the physical and oral presence I am accustomed to in face-to-face teaching. Wagner (1996) does not seem as concerned. He predicts less distinction between distance learners and on-campus learners in the next decade because all students (resident and otherwise) will opt to take some classes as independent study delivered electronically or as videotaped classes they watch in the dorm or as e-mail classes with occasional whole-group, live sessions. As Wagner puts it, "Instruction will become more time and place independent" (p. 11).

Most intriguing is his prediction about student-faculty interaction:

[It] will be used only for those instances when it is needed for learning. The mediation and distance delivery of instruction will encourage faculty to focus on knowledge and abilities that are developed or present in the students. Eventually, the award of academic credit will be based on these abilities rather than on contact hours. (p. 12)

Composition Pedagogy and Distance Education

I think what strikes me the most is my lack of joy. So many times when I teach a face-to-face class, there's a real high when it goes well. Because one never knows how those out in TV land are responding, there's not any sense of joy for a good class. (Coding Memo 6/14/96)

One focus of this study is the impact distance education has on composition pedagogy. What does time and place-independent instruction mean for writing classrooms? In fairness, I would say that Teletechnet influences writing pedagogy, but not necessarily by excluding certain pedagogical choices for the instructor. Instructors who reimagine the classroom as both material and virtual and who understand the power shifts that result can modify their pedagogy within the institutional framework of a televised classroom (actually the virtual world of television promotes such a reconsideration). As a first step, faculty must heighten their sensitivity to institutional ideology. Again, some data from English 327. In Week 12 of the course, I gave an in-class writing assignment that asked students to either (a) evaluate three of their printed sour-

es or (b) demonstrate, through a written dialogue, the multiple sides of one controversy related to their research topic. I explained the assignment to students ahead of time and told them that the paper was an opportunity to explore the topic in their own language without resorting to quotations from sources. Students were encouraged to bring one page of notes to the writing session. In a face-to-face classroom this kind of controlled writing situation happens all the time without much notice. But in Teletechnet there is university policy to follow for controlled assignments; the policy requires proctors at each distance site. So I faced a conflict between my attempts to construct students as writers and the university's position that students are students. Professional writers are not proctored and do not certify that their documents are solo authored. Assigning proctors, rather than serving as the proctor myself as I do in non-televised courses, caused me to rethink my previously unexamined rules for in-class writing, especially in-class examinations. I also realized that proctors, as yet another intermediary in distance education, reaffirm the university's practice of valuing individual or solo work over collaborative work (Bridwell-Bowles, 1995).

Paradoxically, while university policies (i.e., honor code, exam schedules) reify traditional classroom hierarchies that are supposed to apply to Teletechnet as well, the virtual world of television enables students to resist. For example, because Teletechnet instructors cannot see their students at distance

sites, some students take advantage of the power of anonymity. The Duncan McCloud incident discussed earlier is one instance. Another was relayed to me by an instructor whose students at a distance site applauded when a classmate from another site complained over the air about the difficulty of an exam. The instructor could hear the applause, but could not see which students were clapping.

Televised instruction challenges traditional notions of power on a physical level, too. Students view the instructor on a monitor that reduces the instructor's image to screen size. The studio technician selects the type of shot (head, full-screen, etc.), while the overhead camera limits what the instructor can display on the virtual chalkboard. As one student wrote on the course evaluation:

I did not enjoy the telnet business at all. It was quite annoying to be "beaming in" students from other sites. However, the presence of the television sets and stereo speakers was quite beneficial because it permitted one to hear and see from all regions of the room. Also, I felt my tendency to let my mind wander while I listened because I was focusing on the television screen. What does this say about the television generation?

On the positive side, televised instruction provides an opportunity for faculty to rethink, and possibly resist, the power of traditional schooling. But that means sharing authority with students and others, which tests whether faculty are as enthusiastic about power shifts as they sometimes claim they are. My Teletechnet graduate assistant, Katie Sigler, wrote the following response about her visits to the distance sites:

The community the students formed at the sites is a possible support/asset to their writing. They learned to see each other as friends and colleagues and thus were able to develop their writing identities in close connection with people other than the teacher/evaluator. All of the students I spoke to at the sites mentioned this as a positive aspect of Teletechnet (personal communication, May 6, 1997).

The Past and the Future

Distance-education is an important site for composition research. By investigating English 327 I became more aware of the medium's challenges and potential. I learned that classroom authority was not mine alone but a shared responsibility with technicians and others who delivered the course to distance sites. Adjusting to changes in one's authority is not easy, but systematic study of my instructional milieu made it possible for me to be an active participant in the process.

As for students, this research shows that Teletechnet as a delivery medium did not prevent students from representing themselves as writers. On their final exams several wrote about their writerly selves:

English 327 has been a very challenging class. It has brought me through an academic as well as personal stage of development.

... It has also helped me believe that there is a bit of a writer in me, when I once thought there was none. (F., 12/14/94)

I feel more confident in myself as a writer. ... Furthermore, I will try to influence my [own] students so that they can realize their strong points. (W., 12/14/94)

"In the Mainstream" is one of my best works and the best example of my style as a writer in this semester. (C., 12/14/94)

My attitude toward myself as a writer has changed. I am more aware of the labor it takes to write well. I don't feel it is a "gift" or "give up" endeavor. There is much that I can learn or be taught about writing. (M., 12/14/94)

In future Teletechnet classes I can project how I might encourage students to connect their personal participation in distance education to how writing and authorship are socially constructed in educational settings. Cross-site research teams might be set up, research logs could become part of the data base, and drafts of reports could be cycled through reviewers at different sites. Projects of this sort would make use of an opportunity for students to better understand themselves as researchers and writers who produce as well as consume knowledge in higher education.

Intermediaries figure prominently in distance education, and the roles they play deserve further study. Human intermediaries can be included on research teams formed for this purpose. As for technological mediators, they are ever-changing; two-way video, individual learning stations, e-mail, and listserves are already in place at some institutions. Each of these mediating elements merits its own close examination for the role it plays in composition pedagogy.

As for assessment, market surveys and student evaluations have been the primary means of evaluation for the Teletechnet program. Long-term field studies would allow this rich and complicated medium to be understood in more depth.

In this study the ways I perceived and manipulated the medium, the ways I imagined the subjectivities of my students, and the ways intermediaries affected my authority all influenced my Teletechnet writing pedagogy. Equally interesting is the impact that teaching on television has had on my teaching in face-to-face classrooms. For me the change is represented by the pedagog-

ical metaphors I have appropriated during my twenty-year career: the coach metaphor, the mentor metaphor, the editor metaphor. All rely on a personal relationship between two stable individuals. Teletechnet has taught me to think differently about who I am as a teacher, about who my students are, and about the spaces in which we enact our teacher-learner subjectivities.

Author Note

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. What do you notice in a televised setting that is different from non-televised courses you have participated in?
2. Did you visit any of the sites? What similarities and differences did you notice among sites and between sites and the studio?
3. Do you think any of the “mediators” (the television itself, the instructional designers, technicians, site directors) affect teacher-student interactions?
Why? How?
4. Do you see students and faculty adapting to these “screens”? How?
5. Which teaching styles seem to be effective on television? What would you tell a teacher to do or not do?
6. I'm looking at “material” and “virtual” education in my study. Do you have any comments about that?

Additional Questions for Technicians

7. Who decides to play music between classes? Who picks music?
8. How do you decide what to display on the screens?
9. Do you ever tell faculty if the print is too small to be seen?
10. What do you think would make classes better? Why?

African American Read-In Scheduled for February, Black History Month

On Sunday and Monday, February 7 and 8, NCTE will join the NCTE Black Caucus in sponsoring the tenth national African American Read-In Chain. This year's goal is to have at least one million Americans across the nation reading works by African American writers on February 7 at the designated hour of 4:00 p.m., EST; 3:00, CST; 2:00, MST; and 1:00, PST. Monday, February 8, is the date designated for read-ins in schools.

The event is an opportunity for schools, libraries, community organizations, businesses, and interested citizens to make literacy a significant part of Black History Month by hosting and coordinating read-ins. These activities may range from bringing together family and friends to share a book to staging public readings and media presentations featuring African American writers.

For further information, write Dr. Jerrie C. Scott, National Coordinator, African American Read-In Chain, 322 Administration Bldg., University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152; or Dr. Sandra E. Gibbs, NCTE Coordinator, NCTE Director of Special Programs, 1111 West Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.