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Being Virtually Human: Teaching Early American Literature Online

When we cannot see the faces and emotions—the humanness—of our students, it can be difficult to judge our effectiveness as teachers. A number of the frustrations teachers feel about teaching online literature classes has to do with the disjunction between our philosophies, whether stated or unstated, of the humanities, and the methods with which we must “deliver” an online course. No matter our discomfort with such disjunction, online literature courses are in demand, and we teachers are often required to teach them. In fact, according to the latest statistics from the Sloan consortium, this past year has revealed a marked increase in the number of online students. In fall 2005, 3.2 million students were enrolled in at least one online course, an increase of nearly one million students from fall 2004 (5). With such demand, many teachers may fear that online instruction is more market-driven than traditional instruction and that its demands will reconfigure the traditional student/teacher interaction to a consumer/deliverer model. Knowledge, especially self-knowledge, many feel, is not a skill to be obtained, but a process through which to see and feel and know the world and other human beings within it. Many of us enjoy teaching in the classroom and being able to interact with our students in an immediate way, to (re)create knowledge on the cusp of the minute. We fear that our abilities to do that may be severely hobbled by the online environment. Indeed, Marjorie Perloff, in her president’s column in the Winter 2006 *MLA Newsletter* acknowledges such a pervasive “suspicion” of technology in the classroom: “[T]he term *wired classroom* . . . raises the specter of gimmicky little PowerPoint displays where information, conveyed digitally, is packaged and simplified and where instructors let the Internet do the work they should be doing” (3). She, however, views the Internet as “a distribution tool” (3), not merely a shortcut.

Many believe we must discover the most effective ways to teach online courses, which offer greater opportunity for the humanities—through the study of literature—to reach a more diversified audience. Online courses create the potential for greater classroom diversity because they are not bound by geography or time. The online environment also provides opportunities to practice what we preach about de-centered teaching. Truly de-centered classrooms are difficult to achieve with the physical presence of the expert in the room. Yet, the online environment makes a teacher hyper-aware of her presence in discussion so that extracting or inserting herself into conversations is perhaps more conscious than in a traditional classroom. These are only a few examples of the potential the online environment provides literature teachers to disrupt the stereotypical view of English professors as idealists unresponsive to the outside world and the practical skills demanded of our graduates.

Unfortunately, many teachers have reported anecdotally that the time demands of online literature classes can be extreme. Monitoring and responding to all discussions, writing out all lectures instead of being able to speak them off the cuff or from notes, and responding to hundreds of personal e-mails from students all place considerable time demands on teachers. And too often, meeting these demands is a teacher's unseen work. Students—and Deans—may not appreciate such work because they are unaware of its existence. Moreover, technologies that make teaching a survey course, for example, asymmetrical may also interfere with the depth, breadth, and variety of instruction possible. Despite Blackboard's discussion forums, Elluminate's capture of lecture, and the potential of Pod-casting lectures, teachers' abilities to vary instruction according to students' learning styles may remain limited simply because we

cannot see the faces of our students. More importantly, the community aspect of the humanities course may be much reduced or completely lost.

The popularity of online degrees is growing rapidly, however, and those of us in English departments stand to lose a significant number of smart, qualified, dedicated students if we resist the technology too much. How can we retain the human-ness so integral to studies of literature when we are bound to teach with a technology that relies on “virtual” presence instead of physical presence? How can literature instructors teach well within this online environment and retain the essence of a humanities education? Rather than righteous resistance, literature teachers must consider the positives of the online environment, adjusting their pedagogies and their technologies to reach students efficiently and effectively without losing the drive towards self-knowledge and world knowledge as a process. Retaining a humanities focus is vital to the important work we do as literary scholars and teachers; remaining aware of that goal and our textbook tools is central to our success. In the following essay, I concentrate on teaching early American literature as an example of how one might achieve both humanities and online goals in one course through careful selection of texts, varied instructional styles, and a clear sense of pedagogical philosophy communicated to students early in the semester.

The Written Word

For teachers of early American literature, a subject that challenges students with culturally, historically, and stylistically unfamiliar texts, achieving humanities goals within an online environment can be particularly difficult. Studies have shown that students must be quite self-directed to be successful in online classes, yet teaching even highly self-directed students is difficult when texts, histories, and historical aesthetic shifts are particularly unfamiliar.

Nevertheless, we must teach these students and strive to further the perhaps un-measurable goals of the humanities. As in a traditional classroom environment, choosing the right text is very important. In an online class, the textbook is perhaps more of an authority than the teacher because it is physically present with the student when the teacher rarely is, if ever. In a 200- or 300-level survey, then, which often enrolls students outside of the English major, a good textbook is vital. Volumes A and B of the *Heath* anthology are particularly good for a survey class because they offer cultural context and “clusters” of readings on different themes, as well as a healthy collection of major texts from contact in the Americas to 1865. The anthology can be used a number of different ways, and because it clearly has a political slant to (re)cover writing of women, indigenous peoples in the Americas, and African-Americans, it is a source of discussion in itself as a textbook.

Online course delivery requires students to focus more upon the written word to gain knowledge. Unfortunately, many students who take the survey of American literature before 1865 struggle to understand the literal meanings of the texts and thus find it difficult to engage in the types of discussions for which Blackboard forums are most appropriate. In a traditional classroom, a teacher might be able to slow the pace of discussion to account for these students while still attending to those who are beyond such literalness. The inevitable time-delay of the online environment, however, will make identifying these slower students much more inefficient. By then, the class has moved on to the next set of texts. Keeping up with discussion forum responses, noting when students do not respond or respond very thinly, and requiring a set number of responses during a particular time period all help to keep all students contributing and involved. Commentators argue that the online classroom de-centers the teacher, radicalizing

traditional pedagogy and putting the focus upon the students' "desires" (Miller 326). Perhaps so. But online courses also emphasize the text, which has often been left out of discussions of even literature classroom dynamics mainly because it is not a human player on the stage. In an online environment, the text must become primary because it is through text that students and teacher mediate their relationships. For literature teachers, who sometimes must struggle to help students focus on the textual features of the literature instead of only contextual features, the online environment offers truly radical potential.

Despite the limitations of the online course delivery system, teaching online with volumes A and B of the *Heath* anthology offers good opportunities to reduce the written or oral lectures required within an online class. Both can be enormous time-consumers for teachers of online classes. The *Heath* anthology offers explanatory sections for regions of the Americas, as well as clusters of materials that illustrate scholarly viewpoints within and about literary history. Some of us are perhaps a bit leery about using introductory material. It feels lazy. On the other hand, many of our "lectures" in class utilize this same material. Assigning the cluster, period, genre, regional, and biographical introductions greatly reduces the time necessary to prepare lectures. A benefit is also that a teacher can specifically reference the introductory material in discussion forum questions, especially because in the *Heath* anthology some of the information is arguable or, at least, is slanted enough to have interesting meta-discussions about the text. Using such material also frees time to respond to students rather than to devote to preparing a lecture for the next text.

I often ask students in my online survey course to thumb through the anthology and then go to Donna Campbell's American literature Web site, which has some of the best timelines

associated with American literature. I instruct them to read over the timelines up to 1865 and then write about the value of dividing literature into eras or movements, such as the anthology and the above Web site does. Then, I ask that they choose one of those divisions and determine what its relative value as a category might be. With this forum assignment, I am attempting to alleviate some of the inevitable pressure students put on survey classes to explain everything. I want to disrupt the authority of the text to a certain extent because anthologies (and survey classes) can artificially inflate the divisions between literary times, movements, and geographies. Students may not often articulate a frustration with such divisions, but they feel it, and it often creates problems in discussion because a student will defer to the division between time periods or regions, for example, as articulated by the text. Or a student might insist upon certain beliefs of Puritans without considering the incredible shifts in their doctrines or without considering the schisms within Puritan communities. With this forum, students begin a discussion that offers space for disrupting the divisions scholars have, for a number of reasons, created. Students feel empowered from the beginning. They begin to theorize their own class. A similar approach works within a regular classroom as well, but the discussion takes on some added importance in an online classroom where interpretation of so many types of texts is important to student success. The anthology and the written texts produced within the course—discussion forums, e-mails, drafts of student essays, syllabi, assignment sheets, writing tips, etc.—all assume a place of greater importance as written texts than they might within a physical classroom setting.

For online students, the instability of any category may seem keener because students are not gathered together in a physical setting and because they must depend upon what they write to gain authority among classmates. Facial expressions or quick responses to the teacher's

questions are not present in the online environment. Words become more carefully chosen once the academic venue is defined as distinct from a Weblog or instant messaging. In “How Near and Yet How Far? Theorizing Distance Teaching,” Susan Miller argues that the online environment still works primarily with the written word, explaining that “to bring oneself to presence only with written words, either to a teacher or peers, is equally to set the tenor of class discussions and individual exchanges” (323). Once an opinion is articulated in writing, it becomes somehow more permanent, a more lasting figment of one’s virtual personality. It doesn’t matter if that is a false persona, a mask; it is this mask that becomes stable in the minds of other students, at least for the duration of the quarter or semester. Each class may produce other faces with the same names; online students are quite aware that they are (re)new(ed) each semester.

The survey class is unlike some other literature classes as well because it is particularly easy for it to devolve into discussions that the literature suggests rather than making the literature the focus of the course. Most of us do not want literature classes simply to be book clubs. We want students to focus on *how* the texts make meaning, not just what they say. With a survey class, however, students want to make sweeping generalizations about the Puritans or about the Great Awakening or about Indians without considering how representative the single text they are reading is. Any anthology encourages this simply because it is a smattering of texts within a time period or region or genre. This is particularly problematic in an online class, which often enrolls students other than trained English majors. For rich discussions, directions in a particular forum often need to be open-ended, yet those open-ended questions may not be answered with the specificity—the proof—that we’d like. On the other hand, if the questions are too closed-

ended, students may answer them as quiz questions, which again produces very little discussion in the forum.

Finding a balance is difficult sometimes, yet if we remember with each question we write that we need to encourage specific responses and broader contextual awareness, then we may get the results we'd like. Here is one example of an open-ended forum question that encouraged good early responses from a survey class: "One of the threads of this course is how America is 'global.' Consider specifically how de Vaca's narrative illustrates 'global awareness' in the details of the text. What are some of the results of such 'awareness' for the European conception of the New World and its indigenous inhabitants?" Most students responded with at least two paragraphs, and these incorporated details from Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca's text, reflection upon our course of study, and reflections upon how the narrative may have indicated important European attitudes about colonized peoples. Students referenced not only the literature from the anthology, but in some cases, the previous discussion forum, which had focused upon the anthology's cluster "America in the European Imagination." In the physical classroom, threads that weave a community of students occur in part *through* the text by referring to previous discussions or to discussions from other classes. This particular cluster of readings is strong because students have some familiarity with More's *Utopia* or John Donne's "Elegie XIX." Including artwork, such as "America c. 1575," also gives students a sense of colonial culture. The anthology provides a number of short cuts that teachers appreciate, especially because it retains a *present* physical expertise and authority an online teacher may not have. Through literary discussion, albeit online, students can find a virtual community. But if the students are not actively participating in forums, making connections to other classes and texts, then the

classroom community is weak at best. If a teacher jumps into discussion forums too often, however, that radical potential is lost because the teacher again reminds students of the power structure of the traditional classroom, and stifles the student-to-student interaction within discussion forums. As Margaret Mazzolini and Sarah Maddison suggest in “When to Jump In: The Role of the Instructor in Online Discussion Forums,” teachers should find a middle road as a “guide,” instead of a “sage,” the vaunted expert, or a “ghost” who rarely appears within the discussions.

Encouraging students to be very active takes some work, much of it invisible. According to Kristine Blair and Cheryl Hoy in “Paying Attention to Adult Learners Online: The Pedagogy and Politics of Community,” creating a community online means much more than the discussion forum. In their study of the interactions between students and teacher in an intermediate writing class full of non-traditional adult students, they found that e-mail interactions may be more helpful to retaining online students and teaching them writing (32). In my experience it may take up to a third of the term to get the majority of students to answer broader questions with specific textual detail. That means responding personally in an e-mail to their public responses in forums, explaining—sometimes repeatedly—why their responses are weak or unsatisfactory. It may mean responding publicly as well, praising students who have written a particularly detailed response. Some students find this helpful, but I use caution with public praise because other students may feel intimidated or the student may feel embarrassed. Usually, if the praise is incorporated with a teacher’s own response to the content of the posting and a furthering of the discussion, however, the negative effect is mitigated.

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Running a successful online literature class means working *through* the text and recognizing how the written word can assume a more powerful position than it may have been allotted in the physical classroom. The anthology is not the only word, however.

Supplementing textual materials with online sources, such as historic maps and primary documents, provides flexibility for teaching a survey course online, particularly one in early American literature. A number of Web sites are devoted to the study of early American literature and history. Digests and annotations about these sites are helpful to determine their utility. Two digests are particularly helpful for American literature teachers: *Voice of the Shuttle* (American literature) and *Literary Resources—American*. Determining a site's value is sometimes a challenge, but as we know, Web addresses that end with .org and .edu are most reliable as scholarly sources; however, the more popular or government-sanctioned Web sites are also useful as texts students might analyze. Especially in online classes, using the Web as text ripe for analysis makes much sense because it also encourages students to reflect upon their own fragmented personas within the virtual classroom. The Internet is an environment flush with texts for multiple types of audiences. One activity I ask students to complete is to go to the White House site and read the profile of Andrew Jackson, which is, according to the site, "taken from the book *The Presidents of the United States of America* written by Frank Freidel and Hugh S. Sidey (contributing author), published by the White House Historical Association with the cooperation of the National Geographic Society." Then, in discussion, I ask students to consider Jackson's "First Annual Message to Congress, 8 December 1830." What, I ask, are the rhetorical moves Jackson makes in his speech? Why do you think his government-sanctioned profile does not reflect Jackson's arguments or, indeed, Indian Removal as one of the most important aspects

of his administration? The advantage to using Web sites as texts for analysis is that students can perceive a real audience for writing and for (re)writing history. Words and public face are important and change with the times. Literature comes alive for students who can see the real, practical value in cultural and historical understanding.

Many of the texts of early American “literature” are historical documents as well. Fruitful, interesting discussions often come from the student who questions why Jackson’s speech or John Smith’s *Description of New England* are literature. Pairing such texts, which often appear in anthologies, with other primary documents available on the Internet also illustrates to students that the borders of literary study and especially of *national* literary study are quite permeable, especially in early American literature, which, arguably, is not “American” until the constitution is ratified in 1788. Students can find primary documents important to colonists relatively easily on the Internet. For one assignment I have asked students to choose one source from Rick Gardiner’s collection of materials that American colonists may have known. Gardiner entitles the page, “The American Colonist’s Library.” He divides the list into sections according to time period (classical, medieval, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, seventeenth century, and eighteenth century), acts of parliament, sermons, various important personages (including Franklin, Sam Adams, Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Paine), and American Revolution military documents. Students must choose one of the primary documents in Gardiner’s list and another from their anthology. They must then create an argument that demonstrates how the earlier document influenced the later one. Again, this assignment makes students even more aware of the historical import of language and literature,

as well as how unstable national and generic categories can be. It retains an emphasis on literary history, however, as well as a subject threaded through two western documents.

Maps are very important in any early American literature class. Many of our students are woefully unprepared to discuss geographic history. Good contemporary and historical maps provide a backdrop for discussions of literature—particularly the historical and social movements that intersect the literature. Online students have at their fingertips some of the best maps—ones that would be quite difficult to use in a regular classroom unless it was equipped with a computer, the Internet, and a projector. The American Studies site at the University of Virginia includes cultural maps, including a regional map of “the south” and territorial expansion maps. Although these can be useful, I also like to have students look at the artwork of maps and to interpret how historical maps indicate the map-maker’s worldview at that point in time. The University of Illinois Library and Press and the Newberry Library has collaborated on *Historical Maps Online*, a site that collects a number of American maps. Often these maps focus on Illinois and the Northwest Territory, yet a teacher can search for maps about Mexico, Canada, the Louisiana Purchase, etc. The collection is not exhaustive, of course, but it is an important resource. Even more historic maps are available at the University of Georgia Library’s Hargrett’s Rare Book and Manuscript collection. I have also used a number of other maps. One that is particularly valuable is *Olaudah Equiano’s Travels*. The text may not emphasize as the map does the transatlantic connections so important to the study of the colonial and post-colonial Americas. I have used a graphic representation of these travels to discuss Equiano’s motivations, the value of maps generally, and how his narrative is itself a narrative, psychological, and cultural map. Finding pedagogically appropriate maps is occasionally difficult, but sometimes is

as simple as using Google. A fruitful experiment might be to have students submit links for maps they have found, as well as interpretations of them compared to the literature. Maps are a different type of text and particularly important to offer as historical context. They are also particularly appropriate for the student who is a visual learner.

Online Learning Styles

In a traditional classroom, not only can teachers vary pacing more efficiently, we can also match learning styles more effectively with students. The online environment makes this perhaps seem an insurmountable challenge. In the online literature classroom, we rely upon discussion forums for the majority of the class content because they most replicate the physical space of the classroom. The biggest difference, of course, is that the environment is asynchronous. Dena Beegley, a teacher of graduate students in a literacy class, has found the asynchronous environment advantageous for her students. She says that “electronic discussions provide things [she] cannot provide in class, such as varying the amount of time individual students have for reflection and responding or providing opportunities for students to participate in ongoing discussions” (19). Indeed, many students are reflective thinkers, and the spontaneity of thought demanded in classroom discussions can sometimes inhibit their participation and eventually impact their grades. The online environment allows those students to participate in discussion fully, although not immediately.

The most successful online learners are often ones that prefer to process information visually. Taking advantage of the capabilities of the online environment caters to that learning style. As with any classroom situation, however, students’ learning styles are varied. The online environment has the potential to slow the teacher’s recognition of different learning styles simply

because we have no physical cues as in a regular classroom. Yet, if we vary the methods of instruction within the online environment, we need not determine the individual styles of students. Designing and preparing course materials may very well take more time than we might allow in a regular classroom, however, and often teachers have limited time and technological resources. Kenneth Edwards in “Virtual Versus Classical Universities: Liberal Arts and Humanities” argues that the humanities are slow to embrace online teaching technologies because markets are small and do not justify the resources of money and time that must be devoted to course development. He explains that the humanities involve subjects that are “least likely to be regarded as being commercially or practically useful” (605) and so would receive the least monetary support. The Sloan Foundation, of course, is geared towards the humanities, at least in the United States. One of the most important concerns of faculty, Edwards says, is the time that must be devoted to putting a course online, including the usual prep work and the need to sift through Internet sites and to use multimedia resources, again with the costs not “justifiable unless the market is large” (605). Despite these challenges, if we must teach an online course, we need to do it the best way possible. Using music or art or video or audio clips may reach students who have grown up in the Information Age and are used to these types of information delivery. Of course, students also gain important skills by less flashy methods of reading, analysis, and discussion within online forums. The key is variety.

We cannot create the perfect online course. As with most courses, we modify and hone our approaches based on student comments and concerns and our own sense of what went right and what went wrong in the classroom. The sheer amount of information on the Internet concerning various historical and cultural intersections with early American literature makes it

quite difficult to be aware of all the best sites and best media. As part of my daily prep work for the survey course in early American literature, I peruse the Web, often using Google Scholar, to find museum sites that contain artwork salient to the historical and literary figures we will discuss. I may ask specific forum questions about how the texts we read and the pictorial renditions of Pocahontas illustrate cultural shifts in perspectives about this legendary figure, for example. Or, we may have discussions about how Thomas Cole's "View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)," painted in 1836, compares to Washington Irving's descriptions of the Catskills in "Rip Van Winkle." A quick search on the Internet reveals accessible electronic versions of Cole's paintings. Information for which obtaining copyright in a textbook would be difficult is easily and readily available on the Web. Online students can benefit from such accessibility. On-the-ground students can as well, but many of our classrooms are not "smart," connected to the Internet and a projector. This is only one example of the many ways in which an instructor can use visual information to buttress discussions. There are other Web sites that have produced radio plays of "Rip Van Winkle" or, for the second half of the American survey, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper." (One of the best sites available for dramatic audio adaptations of nineteenth-century women's stories is called *Scribbling Women* and is produced by the Public Media Foundation.)

Of course, much of this prep work is time-consuming, but we build a repertoire of such sites and methodologies as we continue to teach the course online. Online teaching is dynamic, as should be any teaching. We should constantly reevaluate our methodologies as we teach to keep ourselves connected to the subject matter and to our students' styles of learning. The online environment perhaps simply makes us more aware of our choices as teachers.

Pedagogical Philosophies

Many humanities teachers want students to engage in the content of literature courses because we want them to connect to other times and cultures, discovering and empathizing with others across time and place. The classroom gives us a microcosm of such social and cultural interactions. It is a place of power. Achieving that place virtually is difficult without the physical presence of others. Retention rates in online courses are notoriously low compared with on-campus classes. Why? Researchers hypothesize it is because the social glue within an on-campus class is not consistently present in an online class. Students can feel isolated because there is no immediate feedback from either students or teachers.

In humanities classes, this trend is particularly disturbing. We have lofty goals beyond those skills of writing or analysis that we teach. We want our students to change the world. But this goal seems particularly unlikely if the virtual classroom shifts primary emphasis from a person-text-person relationship to a student-text relationship. Indeed, removing the teacher from the virtual classroom is not likely to be successful, despite its radical potential for de-centering the classroom. Achieving a sense of community in the online environment is important to how students perceive the value of the class, as well as how much they actually learn. A.P. Rovai and M.J. Wighting suggest that “improving the quality of a student’s experiences in the classroom is central to student retention” (108). In the online classroom, they argue, cooperative learning activities improve quality “by nurturing intimacy among class members and strengthening sense of community” (108). This is an argument for retaining small groups within the online classroom for discussion of texts, completion of group projects, and review of peers’ writing.

According to a 2006 study about students' sense of connectedness in the virtual classroom, the teacher is particularly important to how students perceive the class as a community. Peter Shea and his cohorts report that "a strong and active presence on the part of the instructor—one in which she or he actively guides and orchestrates the discourse—is related both to students' sense of connectedness and learning" (185). The authors say that teachers who are actively involved in discussion forums, directing responses and debates receive higher scores from students who "report higher levels of connectedness and learning. Further when students report that the instructor is reinforcing student contributions, injecting their own knowledge, and confirming student understanding, they are also more likely to report a better sense of learning community" (185). Of course, they also say that "student perceptions of effective instructional design and organization also appear to matter in regards to a sense of connectedness" (185). In two smaller studies in 2003 and 2005, Mazzolini and Maddison also find that student perceptions are tied to the amount of teacher intervention in discussion forums. Yet these are student *perceptions*, not indicators of how much students interact within discussion forums or the quality of their posts, both markers of how much learning is achieved and/or how much community is established in the online environment. Students appear to expect online what they would get on-campus. At least, their perception of a good teacher is—not surprisingly—similar to what they've had much of their lives.

Despite students' self-reported desire for a teacher-centered virtual classroom, teaching online has radical potential to change our perceptions of ourselves, our students, and our content. The methodologies of virtual classrooms put in stark relief the importance of our students' "desires," and thus emphasize the radical political potential of the de-centered classroom. Will

students recognize this potential or simply blame the class and the teacher for the discomfort of the postmodern student identity? Miller calls for writing teachers specifically to theorize online course instruction, and she theorizes how the online environment affects identities and pedagogies. She says that “images of students and learners will be complicated as we rearticulate purposes for teaching writing” (322). What often concerns us in the humanities is creating an online community of learners, but that community is inevitably impacted literally by how one writes oneself, the ethos obtained through writing. Miller cites Derrida and Baudrillard to explain how this emphasis is problematic because “writing only approximates absolute meanings” (insert identity for meanings). Online learning, she asserts, defamiliarizes and revolutionizes language/writing, as well as the teacher and student identities in the classroom. Simply speaking, the online environment is disruptive to the traditional identities assumed by institutions.

My concern is that, especially in humanities classes, such fragmentation can be too disruptive and isolate students so much that they cannot achieve an important goal of social and cultural understanding. Indeed, Miller says that “as the fragmentation attached to virtual classrooms further detaches events and people from their situated temporal beginnings, cultural groups also will be fragmented [D]istance classes . . . may be seen to disarticulate . . . conventional assumptions about teaching that make it appropriate to hope that students’ practice texts will display more than parodies of a ‘real’ or ‘sincere’ self who controls expressive language” (324). Many of the assignments we ask our students to produce for the literature classroom are academic. They have a very narrow academic audience, and, at least for undergraduates who would take a survey course, are not “useful.” Students will likely *not* be asked to write literary analysis in the marketplace. Yet, these writing assignments train students

to be analytic writers who can synthesize arguments. Miller believes that the online classroom will make teachers think again about their pedagogical philosophies, especially when it comes to writing. She wants students to “display more than parodies.” This postmodern identity deconstruction seems a good thing, especially if students can wallow in the process of identity and create texts indicative of that process. But will the texts students produce ever be anything but parodies? Many of our students are novice writers without the knowledge of academic genre conventions necessary to produce “sincere” texts or even self-aware parodies. Indeed, even professionally produced “sincere” texts are often unwitting parodies of the many genres that have come before. They merely seem “sincere” products.

Many of us want our students to understand beyond the course content, to (re)produce knowledge, and to (re)articulate themselves in the class and in the world. This is an important humanities goal, yet, as Miller notes, “[I]n distance teaching it will be difficult to persuade students to believe that the payoff for taking a writing course will be enlightened activism, acumen rather than enhanced textual actions” (325). Indeed. And that’s why I’m concerned that literature classes online will further isolate students from cultural context, even if a parody within the classroom. Disruptive isolation can be productive, like the Phoenix, but it is also quite destructive. There is no easy answer to how to embrace the disruptive, deconstructive influence of the online environment, yet many of us must teach within it, negotiating what students perceive as “real” content teaching and what we postmodern teachers might feel is good for our postmodern students. The common interrogative refrain about deconstruction remains: Where is the content? Online students do not often appreciate the “find yourselves” construction of the online environment. We are teaching novices, not experts, and there is some need for

disciplinary content—some rules of study—in order to disrupt them purposefully. Moreover, we need to feel that each of us appears to be a singularity if not a single identity; although the online environment has the potential to clarify how hybrid our identities really are, we nevertheless create a single face within a virtual classroom. That appearance is important to deliver course content as a practical endeavor, no matter how we theorize the online environment itself.

Miller notes also that although students and teachers report close relationships, they are rarely personal. Instead, “distance courses . . . overturn humanists’ assumptions about the time needed to assimilate a ‘real’ (ethically transformative) education as opposed to mere training, and they recalculate the time needed to obtain an educational credential” (326). Students thus assume that the humanities goal of “ethically transformative” must occur outside the classroom through other institutions or conversations, not through the academic institution. However, the literature classroom cannot be divested of the “ethically transformative.” Besides, I don’t want to separate them, no matter the format of course delivery. To me, *discussing what is transformative and how it is so* is the point of literature study.

Online learning, as Miller argues, exposes student desires instead of subsuming them as the traditional classroom, with its teacher-on-high pedagogy presumes. She says: “[T]he new, content-oriented curriculum in distance courses portrays education as training for productive, not passive, consumers whose adult desires are herein literally unavailable to academic palace guards” (326). Online education, moreover, “sets aside intimate Socratic education by making learning identical to virtue only when teacher and student share the same class, politics, and expectations about social identities” (326). The teacher is not the authority; the classroom is de-centered. Indeed, she says, that online education does “not socialize students into an academic

personae of any sort” (327). This may be difficult for many of us literature teachers to accept, but it is nevertheless the truth. We cannot depend upon the “normal” student (at any time), especially when it comes to online education. Nevertheless, we can articulate our philosophies of teaching literature specifically in an online classroom and include that statement within one of the most important texts of the literature class—the syllabus.

So, in such an imperfect instructional environment, how can literature teachers effectively utilize the online format and continue to instill a sense of the importance of human interaction to the humanities? One of the most obvious ways is, as with any course, choosing the best texts. But it is also to use the technology to the best of our ability, efficaciously, not wantonly. Without knowing if students are visual or auditory or tactile learners, the best bet is to vary instructional modes as much as possible, just as in a traditional classroom. Although the online environment may not be the best way for all teachers to teach or all students to learn, certain teaching methods and textbooks can be effective within the online setting.

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Tena L. Helton
University of Illinois, Springfield