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The Literary Machine: Blogging the Literature Course

During the fall 2003 semester, I taught an advanced undergraduate seminar entitled The Literary Machine: Writing in the Human/Computer Interface. This course, in which ten senior English majors enrolled, proposed to explore the relation between the human being—and humanism—and contemporary computer technologies, particularly as they are imbricated in literary representations of computers, newer computer-mediated forms of literature, and theories of new media and their connections to and disconnections from older cultural forms. As part of this course's work, I asked the class to participate in a group blog. I hoped that the blog would offer students a space in which they could delve into, on an ongoing and somewhat informal basis, the materials and ideas they were encountering in the course. I also imagined that the blog would situate students in the human-computer interface that the course was exploring by asking them to confront the ways that computer mediation affected their reading and writing. I have used blogs successfully in a range of other courses since then, but I have chosen to focus on this course—a partially successful first stab at incorporating student blogging into my teaching—to explore the full range of successes and failures of this experiment. The blog produced some exciting interactions among the students, as well as some innovative

uses of the technology. Yet the ways that the blog failed to obtain a full purchase with the students led me to some conclusions about the importance of the instructor's role in the course blog and the ways that blogging needs to be fully integrated into a course's structure.

A blog, or "weblog," according to the most basic, stripped-down definition, is "a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order" (Walker). Blogs can be created by individuals or by groups; they focus on subjects that are personal, political, journalistic, technical, academic, or, often, random; their posts can take a link-and-comment form or be more essayistic; they often include multimedia content, including images, audio, or video. Perhaps the most important feature of blogs, however, is the comment function: most blogs provide readers with the ability to respond to and discuss posts, and it is this space for interaction among readers and writers that makes the blog, as a form of social software, such a useful teaching tool.[1]

Many other forms of computer-mediated communication, including bulletin boards and e-mail discussion lists, lend themselves to student interaction and discussion, of course. The blog differs from those other forms, however, primarily owing to its architecture; the hierarchy of post-and-comment is much more pronounced in a blog, since only the original posts appear on the front page of the blog and the discussion of each post takes place offstage, on a secondary page. One result of this structure is that authorship of a blog post is more significant, more substantive, than authorship of the original entry of a bulletin-board thread; the post somehow belongs to its author in the way that a thread on a message board or an e-mail discussion list never does. Thus students need to be focused in their original posts, to think through what they would like to say in a way that is more coherent and developed than a bulletin-board thread or an e-mail message but less so than a full essay. The comments sections of blogs frequently bear much in common with bulletin boards, but their relation to particular posts makes it clear that there is something particular they are responding to, and thus the comments on any given post tend to be a bit more focused than bulletin-board threads are. Such an organization of primary posts and related discussion often allows students to test out ideas that they will later develop into longer essays.

Blogs also differ from discussion boards and lists by providing for a kind of narrative development and coherence over time, since the reverse chronological order of posts reveals a growth of ideas and recurrence of points of interest. Students are able to link directly to earlier posts and

comments, allowing ideas to gain complexity through their interrelation. Finally, though they can be password-protected, blogs are generally far more public forums than bulletin boards or e-mail discussion lists are and are thus more akin to a student-run magazine than to a private distribution list. As a result, a course blog can often develop a public readership, and the comments of non–class members can encourage students to think critically about the question of audience as they write.

I began blogging in June 2002, on the heels of finishing the major work on a book manuscript. In writing that book, I had accumulated a number of small questions that I wanted to discuss but that I knew would never attain the heft required for an article. Faced with a years-long wait for the appearance of the finished book (and an even longer wait for any reader response) and needing more immediate conversation and feedback than traditional scholarly publishing allows, I started a blog that enabled me to build a network of colleagues with whom I could regularly discuss pedagogical issues and ongoing projects (Fitzpatrick). Excited by the ways that blogging had energized my writing life, I decided in fall 2003 to set up *The Literary Machine*, a group blog for my senior seminar on which all ten students would have full posting privileges; I hoped that the class would find the form as engaging as I did. I intended this blog to take the place of the reading responses or other short pieces of analytic writing I ordinarily assign, encouraging students to direct those often interesting readings of our course texts to one another, rather than solely to me. In addition, the blog would allow students to continue conversations outside the class's parameters, both by opening the "twenty-four-hour classroom" and by encouraging students to bring material related to the course to the attention of their peers through links. Perhaps most important, I meant for the blog to model the material that I was teaching, which focused overwhelmingly on the kinds of changes that computer-mediated communication has introduced into contemporary writing; I hoped that students would be a bit reflective about how their own writing was affected by the process of blogging.

Some of my blogging colleagues have used their own blogs as pedagogical tools, engaging and directing students through their posts on the subject matter at hand, encouraging student response in the comments. I decided, however, in the early days of this pedagogical experiment, to keep the class blog separate from my blog. This decision stemmed in part from my desire that my students blog on their own terms, in their own space, and in part from my sense that the class blog could be more focused

than it would be if it were nested in the wide variety of issues my blog engaged. I was also nervous, as an untenured assistant professor, about the potential consequences of allowing my blog, which I hoped could remain at least somewhat personal, to become a part of the official record of my employment. Thus I hosted my blog on an outside server, and though I knew that some of my students had discovered and were regularly reading my blog, I never discussed it in class. In retrospect, my blogging might have provided a useful model for the class, and I have since become brave enough (and tenured!) to discuss it freely. At the time, however, the distinction between my blog and my class's blog seemed necessary.

In any case, after a few glitches in setting up our *Movable Type* installation, I opened the blog for business two weeks into the semester, demonstrating the software in class and giving students the log-in IDs I had created for each of them. In the introductory post on the blog, I informed the students of my hopes and expectations:[2]

> I'll be posting here as well—thoughts that occur in the off hours, links to various resources, and so forth. I've also built a blogroll for us (the list of links on the left). Do some exploring, and bring us back good examples of blogs that we should be reading.
>
> My expectations for your writing here are as follows: each of you should post (at least) one new entry each week, and should respond to (at least) two of your peers' entries each week. Your posts should be thoughtful, interesting, and well-written. Attention to grammar, spelling, and other conventions of writing is a must.
>
> Finally, remember: we're carrying on a conversation with one another here, but we're doing it in public. Be generous, and keep your broader audience in mind. ("Welcome!" 15 Sept. 2003)

While these expectations and desires seem relatively clear in retrospect, there were two specific problems with the way they played out: first, they needed much more frequent recapping to stay fresh in my students' minds; somehow, the new form of the blog simply did not register with them as a course requirement the way a weekly printed reading response would have. And second, my students were at this stage pretty unfamiliar with blogs and blogging and so were not sure what a good blog post might look like. My plan was to attempt to communicate the forms and uses of blogging by example, hoping that my students would come to their own conclusions about the form and its effects on their reading and writing practices without my leading them too directly to my own

ideas. Accordingly, I said nothing in this initial post about the kinds of self-reflection that I hoped the blog would inspire; failing to indicate that desire, however, resulted in an entirely unsurprising failure in its fulfillment.

Operating on the hope that this modeling would suffice, I posted the next entry to the blog two days later. Referring to a conversation in class about Alan Turing's proposed test of computer intelligence, I linked to the Loebner Prize Web site, on which information about the annual competition for chat bots was posted, again asking my students to post links to other sites with useful information for us to consider ("Turing/Wiener," 17 Sept. 2003). Audre, the only student in the class with any previous blogging experience, left a comment a few hours later, linking to the most recent prize-winning bot and teasing her classmates by saying that "after this experience with Alice, I have to say, I'm more convinced than ever that you're all automatons" ("Turner/Wiener," comments). No one rose to the bait, however, and any potential conversation short-circuited. Another student, Veronica, later followed up with three more comments, but the first of those comments came eight days later, and the other two another two weeks after that; by that time, the discussion had moved on.

The next top-level post, which appeared half an hour after Audre's comment, was a relatively long entry—a mini essay—from Patrick on the origins of contemporary cognitive science, particularly John Searle's "Chinese Room" thought experiment ("The Argument from Consciousness and the Machine/Human Divide," 18 Sept. 2003). Patrick ended this post with an extended series of questions:

> I am not sure that I accept Searle's argument, but it is an interesting approach to forming a distinction between machine processes and human thoughts. Do you all think that thinking and consciousness can ever be achieved by machines? Are these terms loaded with connotations of "what it means to be human" and thus unfair to apply to machines? Despite the complexity of a given machine, is this a problem of type rather than degree? In other words, is consciousness or experience a uniquely human attribute? Or, on the other hand, are humans (in a sense) just extremely complex machines? . . .
>
> . . . Is our "humanity" at stake in understanding the mind in terms of computing machines? What are the implications of this discussion for writing, creativity, and the idea of (inter)textual "networks"?

These questions were precisely the core questions on which the course was focused. Unfortunately, no one followed up Patrick's post with any discussion—including me. My sense was that if I became the first to comment on every post, I would run the risk of inadvertently silencing the class, since the students might begin to write to me, not to one another. Instead, I decided to wait and see if anyone else would respond. Unfortunately, what often works in the classroom—waiting patiently, after asking a question, until everyone starts squirming and someone finally speaks—does not work as well on the Internet, where silence is much harder to read and very easily ignored.

The next post, four days later, came from me. Again, I closed with questions; again, there were no takers ("Remedios Varo," 22 Sept. 2003). Later that morning, during class, I prodded the class to remember their posting and commenting requirements for the semester—a prodding, as it turns out, that should have been repeated much more frequently during the semester.

That day, we discussed Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Millards de Poemes*, and the following evening, in response, Audre posted links to a number of online Queneauvian sonnet generators ("No Scissors, but We Can Still Play," 23 Sept. 2003). I decided to respond first, to see if I could trigger some conversation; my response was followed a couple of hours later by a response from Patrick. At this point, then, eight days into the experiment, only three of ten students had participated in the blog. We did have, however, a guest: François Lachance, a regular reader of my blog, had been following the students' posts thus far and, with my blessing, left a comment about his experiences with the sonnet generators. But the conversation died there.

After another two days had passed, Veronica posted a top-level entry, including an excerpt from an interview with Ted Nelson, exploring the ways that his ideas about hypertext and its relationship to his nonlinear thought processes helped her understand her own struggles with dyslexia and making herself understood in writing ("Hypertexts and the Politics of Writing," 26 Sept. 2003). Fascinatingly, Veronica went on to become one of the blog's most prolific posters and commenters; though she never said so overtly, my suspicion is that the electronic mode removed some of the pressure that she had felt in the past in print-on-paper assignments, freeing her to write and contribute more frequently.

Veronica took the lead on the next post as well, creating one of my favorite posts of the semester; in class that day, we had played with an

aleatory writing game in which each word in a given line of a poem begins with the letters that spell out the last word in the line before. Veronica proposed that we compose another such poem, starting us off with the title "Senior Year" ("Oulipo Poem," 26 Sept. 2003). Audre, Patrick, and I were the first three respondents, but, at last, four other students (Alex, Emily, Evan, and Joy) then joined in, posting for the first time. The poem only lasted those eight lines, but it was far and away our most successful use of the blog thus far. Since all the students in the class were seniors, their common interest in this transitional period in their lives may have produced some of their engagement. Moreover, Audre's first line for the poem, "Young, eager, and restless," alluded to a quotation from a past president of the college that is inscribed on the college gates, insisting that only the "eager, thoughtful, and reverent" may pass through. These two connections, I thought at the time, produced a personal engagement with the post on the part of the four new commenters. What may have been more important, however, was the aleatory nature of the game that we were playing; because there were rules for the poem, rules that had been clearly communicated to the students, they felt safe in commenting on this post. The open-endedness of the blog and of the previous attempts at discussion had left the students uncertain about how to begin.

As this poem was being composed, however, our class work had moved on; we were now reading Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Our conversation in class that day had focused on the repeated scenes of violence that accompany the interpretive act in Calvino's novel, and with that in mind, I linked the students to *Skin*, the project recently announced by Shelley Jackson, for which she sought participants willing to become part of an "embodied story" by having one word (and perhaps a punctuation mark) tattooed upon them. In my response I suggested:

> This . . . project . . . seems to me to do a double violence to the idea of readership—both physically carving the text itself into its ostensible audience (arguably "demoting" them to the unconsciousness of inscription itself) while simultaneously reserving all the pleasures of reading to the author.
> ("On Reading, Writing, and Violence," 27 Sept. 2003)

The two students who responded—Alex and Whitney, who was posting for the first time—both took issue with the project's stated aims. Alex

disputed the notion that *Skin* could constitute a "text," given its distributed form:

> Projects like this force us to ask: to what degree can a text be fragmented and still be considered a text? We seemed to have no problem considering Calvino's fractured narrative techniques, or Pynchon's fragmented sense of objectivity as part of single texts. But what happens when the text itself is fractured. Can a hypertext website be said to form a single "text"? Is the library card catalogue a text? What about the entire internet? ("On Reading," comments)

Whitney further objected to the idea that the participants in Jackson's project could be considered the embodiment of words, rather than the surface on which they were inscribed, finally concluding that "we could do a whole course on this project alone. Can we talk about this in class?" ("On Reading," comments").

Such engaged responses, as well as the fact that, over the next three days, there were four new top-level posts (one each from Alex, Whitney, Joy, and Emily), encouraged me to believe that the blog had finally broken through and found purchase in the class. Comments were sparse, still, but by the end of September, in the first two weeks of the blog's life, eight of ten students had posted, and their posts were interesting and insightful, raising questions that we later took up in class discussions, when they did not get much back and forth online. While the volume of posts and comments was not what I had hoped for, it seemed to be on a steady incline.

As it turned out, October was the most active month on the blog, with fifteen top-level posts and a total of twenty comments, but even this level of activity fell far beneath my expectations; had all ten students participated at the level I had originally hoped for, there would have been closer to forty top-level posts and eighty comments during the month. As it was, a ninth student did later join the conversation with one top-level post (the tenth never posted or commented at all during the course of the semester). Patrick was far and away the most prolific poster, with four posts and two comments in October; Audre was not far behind, with three posts during the month, but was also a prolific discussant, leaving six comments. Veronica posted three times and left three comments, and Whitney, Joy, Chris, Alex, and Emily each posted once. Evan, finally, never created a top-level post but did leave a comment.

November saw a significant reduction in the number of posts—a mere six for the entire month—but an increase in discussion on each of those

posts, with seventeen comments in total. Posts trickled to a stop mid-month, however, as the students became increasingly involved in their independent projects for the course, and the last three posts on the site (which include a lone post from December) had no comments whatsoever.

What happened? I believe the blog's rapid decline was primarily owing to instructor miscalculation: though I read the blog assiduously and though I often brought up blog posts and discussions in class, my last presence on the blog, either as a top-level post or as a comment, is dated 28 September. Because I felt the class had the blog operating smoothly, I absented myself from it, hoping that my students would feel free to make the space their own; instead, as I later learned from their course evaluations, they felt somewhat abandoned, as though I had lost interest in the project. This was a shame, in more ways than one. My students really had begun to get invested in communicating with one another through the blog, but their sense that I was not that involved allowed them, when the semester got busy, to see the blog as optional. More important, the blog had begun to develop some quite provocative conversations, drawing in readers from outside our classroom community, and when the blog died, those conversations died as well. The most significant example of this kind of conversation began with a post from Audre, in which she directed the class to an online version of one of the first pieces of interactive fiction, created during the 1970s, *Adventure*, asking what the experience of playing such a text-only game was like for the *PlayStation* generation ("Adventure," 11 Nov. 2003). Emily responded with a fairly detailed analysis of her experience with the game, pointing out that "in certain ways I feel that this archaic game is more complex and makes better use of the electronic medium than much of the more literary (and more recent) hypertext/e-fiction we've read in class," particularly noting that the "sense of play and interaction" of the game was important to her, finally asking whether "hypertext really engages this quality of the electronic medium—if not, can this quality ever be effectively incorporated into literary hypertext?" ("Adventure," comments). This comment drew a response from Dennis G. Jerz, a leading expert on such interactive fiction, who seconded Emily's sense of *Adventure*:

> [W]hile there are plenty of text-adventure games that don't do interactivity very well, it's probably easier for a lone programmer/author to create the illusion of interactivity in a text environment than it would be for the same programmer to create the same sense of immersion in a visual and audio environment. ("Adventure," comments)

The excitement of this moment—having drawn one of the world's experts on the subject of our class discussion into conversation with us—was unfortunately lost, since my disappearance from the scene left the students without anyone to indicate how significant this bit of interaction was.[3]

Thus the primary lessons I learned from this first foray into using a blog as part of my teaching were about my responsibilities: I needed to prepare the class for blogging by introducing them to blogs and their uses in class before turning them loose with the software; to remind the students, frequently, both in the classroom and on the blog, of my expectations for their participation; to participate actively, not just as a reader but also as a contributor, while being careful not to allow my presence to dominate the blog or let the students off the hook. In ensuing semesters, I put these lessons to work, in classes with similar group blogs and in classes with individual blogs; each time I have used blogs in this way, I have improved the results, both in terms of quantity and quality, since a greater percentage of the class achieves a level of investment in the blogging process. One baseline has remained, however: on average, ten percent of the students in a class with a blogging requirement will participate only marginally or not at all.

This failure to participate in the blog, I believe, has less to do with the blog form than it does with the host of other reasons for general student nonparticipation that also arises in technology-free classes, given the correspondence I have found between the failure to blog and the failure to complete other assignments. A small subset of otherwise strong students are made nervous by the new form, unsure of its parameters, uncertain of its audience, uncomfortable with its public nature. In recent semesters, I have attempted to assuage their concerns by requiring all my students to blog under a pseudonym, such that their identity will be known to the members of the class but not to the outside world. As I explain to them, anything associated with their names will have a surprising durability on the Internet, and I want to ensure that they are free to experiment—and, indeed, to make mistakes—in their blogging without fear that some future employer running a background check will happen onto the site and potentially hold them accountable for youthful errors and indiscretions. This policy reassures some nervous students, but others, including the less technologically sure, require additional assistance in building their confidence in such online activities.

I have used class blogs since then in two very different registers. In some classes, such as Introduction to Media Studies, blogs are a form of

course management software that deliver content to the students. In other courses, such as a course on new media theory that I taught in fall 2005 or Writing Machines, which I taught in fall 2006, I have asked students to maintain their own blogs and have built a central course aggregator that draws their disparate posts together. Now when I ask my students to blog, I am careful to give them a clear sense of my expectations for the frequency of their posts and then to let them know throughout the semester how they are performing in relation to those expectations. I show them many sample blogs, to give them a sense of the range of topics and tones that good blogs can espouse, and I explain my hopes for the kinds of posts that they will produce. I generally require my students to post to their blogs two to three times a week and ask that at least one of those posts be a direct response to the reading assignments; the other posts, I tell them, can focus on anything that is of interest to them—links to related Web sites or news items, responses to class discussion, thoughts about the research they are doing toward their term papers, early drafts of material that will wind up in their essays. Such suggestions, which by no means exhaust the field of good blog fodder, give the students a sense of where to begin, helping them avoid the too common "blogger's block" felt by those who are uncertain whether their thoughts are interesting enough to warrant posting.

What the students who participate in such blogging experiments are able to accomplish is dramatic: they write to and for one another, rather than solely for me; they test out ideas that later find their ways into term papers and projects; they continue conversations long after a class session has ended; they find connections between the work done in the literature classroom and the surrounding culture. Most exciting for me, the students in my fall 2003 class remembered the experience clearly and fondly, three years later, when I wrote to ask their permission to quote them in this essay. The blog caused their work in the course to obtain a public life and a durability in ways that little traditional course work can. In the semesters since then, as I have been able to put the lessons that I learned from this first experience into practice, the excitement for both me and my students of seeing their intellectual work take public flight has only grown.

Notes

1. For further exploration of the relation among social software, education, and the "read/write web," see Richardson.

2. All postings from the class blog, *The Literary Machine*, can be found by date in the archives at http://machines.pomona.edu/170J-2003.

3. By way of contrast, one might explore how Chuck Tryon responded when his first-year composition class's blog suddenly became a topic of conversation amongst the blogs that the course was studying.

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