

Postmodern Possibilities in Electronic Conversations

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AT THE END OF HIS 1992 CHAPTER ON “THE ACHIEVED UTOPIA OF THE Networked Classroom,” Lester Faigley invites us to think more about the pedagogy that arises from the use of electronic discussions in writing classrooms, “to theorize at greater depth and to take into account the richness of the classroom context” (Faigley 199), and he suggests, here and elsewhere in *Fragments of Rationality*, that such a pedagogy is or will be a postmodern pedagogy. Postmodern theory is most often connected with nihilism: the loss of the centered self, the loss of truth and certainty, the loss of values and responsibility, the loss of the Enlightenment dream of a good society and the programs designed to achieve it. But postmodernist theory has a positive, progressive face—possibilities that open up when we jettison those things that are “lost”—and it is those possibilities that I want to examine as they emerge in a pedagogy that employs electronic conversations.

The use of electronic conversations in writing classrooms—both synchronous and asynchronous, in-class and out of class—has become widespread and much discussed: experiences of them are at the same time reported to be exciting and distressing, promising and depressingly familiar. Faigley’s response to an especially rowdy electronic class discussion captures the feelings that many teachers undoubtedly felt early in their experimentation with electronic pedagogy:

The messages seemed like they were coming from outer space: that beyond the giggly, junior-high-school-bus level of the discussion of sexuality, it had a ghostly quality, an image of the dance of death on the graves of the old narratives of moral order. (196)

Partly this response comes from the emergence of some aspects of student “underlife” into “official” classroom discourse: teachers are simply startled by the intermingling of post-adolescent posturing and off-topic joking with the more familiar earnest comments on teacher-initiated topics. But such responses also indicate that electronic conversations do make significant changes in classroom dynamics.

At first, some of these changes were seen as welcome and even utopian, as Faigley also suggests: the student-centered nature of such discussions was hailed as liberating students from many of the constraints of face-to-face traditional classrooms (cf. Cooper and Selfe) and, more broadly, as leading to “egalitarian classrooms” (Selfe and Meyer 165). More experience with and closer analysis of electronic conversations led to a more sober evaluation that electronic pedagogies deserve our interrogation. The cavalier equation of “decentered/networked” and “egalitarian” results in a failure to acknowledge the strength and pervasiveness of dominant discourse spoken both by students and by instructors. (Romano 21)

Trent Batson best captures the ambivalence most teachers feel, asking whether electronic conversation is “the best friend a teacher ever had or the worst nightmare” (quoted in Sirc 265).

At the same time, as Batson and Geoff Sirc point out, the nightmarish qualities of electronic conversations may also simply represent contemporary changes in writing that may bring new possibilities; Sirc works to uncover “the opportunities for the transformation of our textual strategies available through this retrojective moment in networked technology” (266). That electronic writing differs from printed writing is indisputable, but the nature of the differences and their causes and effects are not as clear. I tend to agree with Michael Spooner and Kathleen Yancey (1996) and Carolyn Miller (1996) in seeing the differences as similar in kind to the differences attending other shifts in medium or technology: the shift from orality to literacy, from face-to-face conversations to telephone conversations, from handwritten to printed texts. Like all writing (and language use), electronic writing responds to cultural changes, including the specific ways that communication technology has been developed: writing online sets up a different rhetorical situation and encourages different writing strategies than writing for print technology does (see also Hawisher and Moran 631). From this point of view, it should not be surprising that electronic writing—and electronic conversation in particular—reflects the postmodern condition of contemporary culture.

Spooner comments:

maybe we should acknowledge that in the postmodern age, the reader, not the writer, is the real tyrant: multi-tasking, channel-surfing, capricious and fickle, free to interpret, misread, manipulate, and (horrors) apply. We’re all guilty; we start at the end, in the middle, we don’t finish, we joyously juxtapose bits of what we read with other readings, other experiences. But the point is that this is our most natural process. Both reader and writer are engaged constantly in making knowledge from a very random world. (274)

And Yancey adds: “Through the technology, we can more easily than ever make the multilayered ‘postmodern’ dimension of writing evident” (274).

Sirc’s analysis of “ENFI-Null” writing delineates some of the characteristics that make it postmodern. He cites Bill Coles’s choice of a student paper to

include in *What Makes Writing Good* as a “highly ENFI-Null piece of writing: drifting paratactically, weaving in dialogue from other speakers, it moves through a series of almost-definitions of the university to arrive at nothing but a more intense sense of being” (274). Postmodernism is, above all, a response to our increased awareness of the great diversity in human cultures, a diversity that calls into question the possibility of any “universal” or “privileged” perspective and that thus values the juxtaposition of different perspectives and different voices and the contemplation of connections rather than a subordinated structure of ideas that achieves a unified voice and a conclusive perspective.

It is just the “unresolved nature of ENFI-Null writing” (Sirc 274), its paratactic rather than hypotactic structure, and the identity-diffusion or loss of authorial authority and responsibility that results from the interweaving of other voices that causes many writing teachers to look askance at what goes on in electronic conferences, to see them as superficial, irresponsible skating across the surface of important issues rather than the in-depth exploration and critique of issues that classroom discussion—and academic discourse—is supposed to achieve. Writing teachers are not alone in fearing the loss of complexity in thought and in the use of language that such communicative strategies seem to demonstrate (cf. Lanham, 227-54). Despite the changes, however, it is not clear that anything of importance has been lost in the move to electronic conversations in writing classes, just as despite claims that it was print technology that made analytic thought possible, researchers have found no evidence that literate people think more complexly than illiterate people (cf. Scribner and Cole). And, in any case, as Richard Lanham suggests, for the time being we are in a period in which the two modes—electronic/hypertextual/postmodern and print literate/modern—alternate, in which we oscillate between them (Lanham, 260), and, perhaps, use both in different ways to make sense of a very mixed culture.

What has been called the postmodern condition is a messy and partial transition that we are still in the midst of from old modernist ways of thinking and acting to new postmodern ways. The new ways of thinking and acting that are called postmodern arise out of the changed circumstances of our lives and are adaptations to these new circumstances—the global capitalist economy that is a result of new corporate strategies and trade policies, the global village that is a result of the desire for and development of new communication and transportation technologies. The postmodern condition does not necessarily represent progress, but it is certainly real (not only virtual; cf. Eagleton, ix) and it certainly requires new strategies if we are to work effectively within the new systems that structure many of our everyday experiences.

In this essay, I suggest that to understand what’s happening in electronic conversations in writing classrooms we need to understand some transitions in assumptions involved in the shift from modernism to postmodernism. As applied to the practices of teaching writing, the postmodern condition involves a transition in assumptions in at least four areas: a transition in

assumptions about knowledge, language, and the self, a transition in assumptions about power, a transition in assumptions about responsibility, and a transition in assumptions about the teacher's role in the classroom.

The transition in assumptions about knowledge, language, and the self has received the most attention in discussions of postmodernism, even though the theoretical work was largely accomplished in the poststructuralist theories of language that presaged postmodernism. Most simply put, the transition involves a shift from the notion of knowledge as the apprehension of universal truth and its transparent representation in language by rational and unified individuals to the notion of knowledge as the construction in language of partial and temporary truths by multiple and internally contradictory individuals. In composition circles, postmodernism became attractive primarily because of its critique of "the tradition of epistemological inquiry founded by Locke and Descartes" (Schilb, 85). John Schilb notes, "it encourages interest in rhetoric, including rhetoric-as-persuasion. . . . For postmodernists, knowledge is always the product of persuasion, and truth-claims inevitably reflect the human exchanges in which they occur" (86). Earlier, Thomas Barker and Fred Kemp also focused on the "maturing epistemology" suggested by postmodernism to develop computer-aided writing "instruction that emphasizes the communal aspect of knowledge making" (2). With knowledge seen as rhetorical, or socially constructed, the collaborative aspects of writing became foregrounded, and any technology that enabled more effective collaborative practices in writing became attractive. Summing up a lot of work that built on this insight, Gail Hawisher and Charles Moran say, "we believe that a pedagogy that includes email will be inevitably collaborative. Our profession is increasingly interested in collaborative writing; email and the virtual 'space' of a network make collaboration easier by dissolving the temporal and spatial boundaries of the conventional classroom" (633).

But more than temporal and spatial boundaries are dissolved, as Faigley suggests; by bringing writing into a public space, electronic conversations also dissolve the romantic illusion that individuals develop a unified identity through aligning themselves with universal truth in the process of contemplation. One of the modernist practices that electronic conversations undermine is that of "classroom acts of writing, especially writing about the self, as part of a much longer process of intellectual self-realization" (Faigley 191). Intellectual self-realization, in the tradition that stretches from Plato to Wordsworth to Peter Elbow, is a process that results in the discovery of the universal forms of truth that define knowledge, and that relies on developing the thought processes of the individual in line with these universal forms. In contrast, in electronic conversations, the individual thinker moves in the opposite direction, into the multiplicity and diversity of the social world, and in social interaction tries out many roles and positions. As Schilb notes, "Modern epistemology . . . also presupposes a human subject who is more or less stable and coherent. . . . On the other hand, postmodern theory evokes a

self who may occupy multiple positions, form various allegiances, and teem with conflicting ideas” (87-88). David Bartholomae comments on the post-modernist selves displayed by students in an electronic conversation that took place in a classroom at New York Institute of Technology:

In a sense, this reads like dialogue in an experimental novel. There are two discussions going on simultaneously—one about rock and roll, one directed at the assigned material. . . . It is important to note that this is not a matter of a few students who want to stay on track struggling with those who want to goof around. Individual speakers (like 1935) produce both tracks simultaneously. Read with some detachment—as the Song of Schooling, for example—the transcript is a striking representation of the competing discourses that inhabit (or, according to some theorists, construct) the sensibility of late adolescence in the nineties. (255)

In this most familiar of shifts in assumptions associated with postmodernism, both knowledge and the self are seen as socially constructed in language and thus multiple, contradictory, divided. The shift was caused primarily by changes in social structures, but it was emphasized and furthered by the particular ways people chose to converse in electronic media.

It is this shift from the idea of language as the transparent window on universal knowledge and the unified self to the idea that language socially constructs partial knowledge and multiple selves that raised the fears of postmodernism as a nihilistic abandonment of meaning. As Jean Baudrillard observed, “All of western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course” (10). Although some postmodern theory does seem to revel in nihilism (Baudrillard is often charged with this), the accomplishment of postmodern theorists such as Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Zygmunt Bauman has been to explore instead the positive ramifications of this shift, particularly how it affects assumptions about power, responsibility, and the role of teachers (or intellectuals) in the classroom and in society.

If knowledge is not guaranteed by some authority—God, priests, intellectuals—the hierarchical underpinning of education (and many other institutions) breaks down. If knowledge is not a stable construct of ideas to be passed from teachers who know to students who learn, the basis for teachers’ authority in the classroom is threatened; and if knowledge is socially constructed, students need to be able to engage in the process of knowledge construction in the classroom. Thus, in the 1980s, teachers and scholars focused on the question of how to restructure power relationships in the writing classroom. In an assertion that later turns ironic, Faigley says that in electronic discussions, “the utopian dream of an equitable sharing of classroom authority, at least during the duration of a class discussion, has been achieved” (Faigley 167). As Cindy

Selfe and Paul Meyer pointed out, the analysis of power relationships in electronic classroom conversations and the attempt to use electronic conversations to give all students more equitable access to discourse in classrooms depend for their success on a better understanding of what power is (188). Beginning with studies of how knowledge is produced in various discourses, Michel Foucault eventually arrived at a new understanding of power, and his articulation of this shift in assumptions allows us to better understand the problems involved in “sharing” power in the classroom.

The modernist assumption that still structures most of our language about power is that power is a possession, that some people have it and can give it to others or share it with them or help them gain it. In contrast, Foucault argues that power functions not as a possession but as a relation, and that it attempts to stabilize power relationships that are favorable to one party that result in power appearing to be a possession. This shift in ways of thinking about power is adumbrated in one of the electronic conversations Faigley analyzes:

72. *Gordon Sumner:* JoAnn, what man do you know that will help in giving away some of his power?
79. *JoAnn:* Gordon, good question, and so power is the issue. What we need is a structure that doesn't make power so appealing, that brings responsibility with it, that mandates the sharing of it.
81. *jane doe:* It is very doubtful that a man will put aside his pride or shall I call it a “macho ego” to help women gain any power because men like where they have women: right under the palm of thier hand. (177)

The assumption that power is a possession that accrues to people in some positions and not to others is apparent in all three of these comments. But “JoAnn” calls for a different way of thinking about power, one that includes responsibility, and “jane doe” intimates what motivates the assumption that power over women is “possessed” by men: because men like where they have women.

The assumption that power is a possession validates established hierarchies. Thus, for example, men's acts of domination over women appear to be natural and inevitable when one assumes that men “have” power and women don't; but when, as Foucault suggests, these acts are seen instead as acts taken by individuals in order to establish dominance, individual responsibility in power relationships becomes visible and available to critique. Foucault says:

The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others. Which is to say, of course, that something called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures. . . . what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not

act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or future. . . . In itself the exercise of power is not violence; nor is it a consent which, implicitly, is renewable. It is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. (1983, 219-20)

From Foucault's perspective, people do not struggle over power in their interactions with one another, but rather continually structure power relationships among themselves through the ways their actions impact others' actions. People cannot give others power or take it away; their actions always respond to the actions of others and in return set up a range of possibilities for other's actions. No power relations are possible in the absolute situations of violence or consent (which are often considered to be situations of absolute power) because in these situations no responding actions are possible; thus "freedom must exist for power to be exerted." In sum:

[A] power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that "the other" (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up. (220)

A teacher who sets up a classroom discussion online is not giving or sharing power with students, but rather is performing an action that sets up a range of possibilities for action by students that is in some ways different from the range of possibilities set up by a face-to-face classroom discussion; and the actions that students take in electronic conversations—and the actions that teachers take in the resulting conversation—constitute relations of power.

How such relations of power develop can be seen when we analyze the conversational moves in any electronic (or face-to-face) conversation. If, for example, we look in this way at what happens in the conversation that Faigley cites as his "worst" experience in using pseudonyms in electronic class discussions (193-196), we see that, as Bartholomae observed of the students at New York Institute of Technology, it is not a matter of a struggle between those students who want to stay on track and some more rebellious students, nor of students single-mindedly pursuing individual agendas. Instead, through their actions students are constructing and reacting to an ongoing situation. Faigley tries to assign motivations to the students, both individually and collectively: he hypothesizes that the students were engaging in "a collective act of opposition," announced by "arm pit" early on ("isn't this so fun. let's not talk about the reading!!!") and most effectively forwarded by "Cherri Champagne," whose "comments . . . divert the sporadic discussion of the sex roles in the *Ladies*'

Home Journal article”; and that “Cherri” is “one of the women in the class who may have decided it was payback time for some of the fraternity men’s previous insults” (196-197). Though not the only possible way to read the transcript, Faigley’s interpretation is entirely plausible and well grounded in his general observations of the class dynamic—but it is focused on figuring out what overall effect the students intend their actions to have on the teacher and on other students.

When I focus instead on how the individual actions (comments) relate to one another, students seem more involved in the discussion of the topic of sex roles at the same time that they engage in intricate moment-by-moment positioning of themselves and others. In the account that follows, I pull out a strand of comments that contextualizes “Cherri Champagne’s” contributions to the conversation to try to demonstrate the multiple and diverse actions she takes and responds to; I want to emphasize that my account should in no way be thought of as a representation of what is “really” going on.¹

“INDIANA JONES” announces what becomes the dominant topic (and then for most of the rest of the excerpt he retreats into a private conversation with “King Kong Bundy” in German), and “Cherri” responds:

- 4. *INDIANA JONES*: Monogamy is a thing of the past.
- 6. *Cherri Champagne*: Monogamy sucks.

“Mighty Mouse” responds to “Cherri” and “joe” responds to “INDIANA JONES”:

- 10. *Mighty Mouse*: Cherri Champagne. How about STD’s?
- 13. *joe*: monogamy is not a thing of the past i mean how can you sleep with a zillion different people with all the creepy crawlies out there?

When “Cherri” asks, “What are STD’s,” “Laverne” and “joe” translate it for her, and in her next comment she seems to be responding to all the ensuing discussion of the perils of sleeping around by qualifying her position on monogamy:

- 25. *Cherri Champagne*: Pick a partner who has come to believe in fidelity through trial and error.

When “Alf” offers a correction to trend of the conversation so far, “Cherri” responds to the new topic of marriage he introduces, and she gets three responses:

- 33. *Alf*: The article is talking about monogamy in marriage. I think everyone wants your husband or wife to be monogamous don’t you?
- 37. *Cherri Champagne*: Fuck marriage. What about healthy, happy sexual relationships?
- 43. *yeah boy*: Hey Cherrie—can we meet?

44. *El Vira:* No wonder society is so screwed up today. Too many people have attitudes like the Biffs, Cherris, and Yeah Boys. You guys are so messed up. You know what happens if there is no monogamy in the world? People run around having sex with every Dick, Tom, and Harry and then there are a bunch of mixed up children with no examples to follow, no family unit and no morals. We might as well have a nuclear war!
46. *Laverne:* Allright Cherri! Are you saying who needs marriage to have sex?

Then “Yeah boy” responds to the conflict he sees between “El Vira” and “Cherri,” and “Cherri” responds to “Laverne”:

47. *yeah boy:* El Vira and Cherri need to meet and duke it out.
52. *Cherri Champagne:* No Laverne, I’m saying that you should not marry someone in order to have sex.

“Cherri’s” next comment seems to continue in some way her critique of marriage as well as responding to an exchange between “Mighty Mouse” and “butthead” (“butthead’s” comment below also alludes to something else “Mighty Mouse” said earlier, in entry 29: “women are the ones concerned with emotion”):

40. *Mighty Mouse:* Butthead. I hope you are not saying that it is easy to sleep with a zillion people!!!!
55. *butthead:* M.M.—It’s pretty easy—a little wine, dancing, some attention, it doesn’t take much. You just have to feed on their emotions.
59. *Cherri Champagne:* Guys are bad lays.

“Yeah boy” responds almost immediately, and “Cherri” in answering his question seems to be thinking of a series of earlier comments on how women are expected to focus on making men happy and how “women carry all the burden in a seriously emotional relationship” (see entries 24, 26, 29, 39, and 41):

61. *yeah boy:* cherri, so are girls better in your opinion?
63. *Cherri Champagne:* Girls know what men want. Men don’t know what women want.

In her entries, “Cherri Champagne” mostly responds to topics introduced by other students: monogamy (“INDIANA JONES”), STDs (“Mighty Mouse”), sex (“joe”), marriage (“Alf”). Although she is active in the conversation (her seven entries are second only to “yeah boy’s” eleven entries) and her entries receive the most responses (fifteen total), it’s hard to see her as dominating the conversation. “INDIANA JONES” entry 4, initiating the topic of monogamy, receives the most responses of any single entry (eleven). In comparison, “Cherri Champagne’s” entry 37 (“Fuck marriage”) receives four

responses and her entry 59 (“Guys are bad lays”) receives five responses, while “El Vira’s” entry 44 defending monogamy receives six responses. In her entries “Cherri Champagne” agrees with some comments, asks questions, synthesizes ideas from the preceding conversation, disagrees, and uses deliberately provocative language. Some students respond to her (and in a variety of ways) and others ignore her, and she chooses to respond to some of those who respond to her and not to respond to others.

Nor is Faigley “disempowered” in the conversation. Though he felt the direction of the conversation foreclosed his possibilities for comment (“they wrote me out of the conversation. I had not planned to remain silent during the discussion, but I had no opportunity to enter it.” 197), thirteen entries directly address the question of what the assigned articles say, and the longest of the entries are among these. And it seems to me that the students in this excerpt were for the most part responding to what they took to be the general topic set up by his opening comment and were discussing sex roles in relationships. “Cherri Champagne’s” last entry seems especially on track, commenting on one result of women paying more attention than men to the success of a relationship.

What Foucault calls forms of power, the fossilized institutional and identity roles of student-teacher and male-female, do operate in this conversation, as in all human interaction, but they operate to open a range of possible actions which the individuals involved can choose to take up or refuse. Just as in the electronic exchanges Susan Romano examined, students do not simply occupy roles prepared for them but instead position themselves in relation to these roles through the actions they choose to take. By asking the initial question, Faigley positions himself as a certain kind of teacher, which offers the other people in the conversation the option to position themselves as certain kinds of students. Many individuals take up this option and respond in various entries as “good” students, “reluctant” students, “rebellious” students, or other more-difficult-to-characterize student roles; other individuals (or the same individuals in different entries) opt for different positions in response to the possibilities offered by people in the conversation other than Faigley. Faigley also has possibilities to position himself in the conversation (he is not prevented in any sense from entering), but he chooses neither to reaffirm the particular teacher position he started with nor to find a different position for himself.

Thus, even though established hierarchies put pressure on individuals to respond in terms of pre-established positions, to the extent that people are free to act at all, power is always an action taken by an individual in relation to another individual’s actions, and thus the shape of power relations is always a matter of individual agency. “Sharing” power is not a matter of giving up something you have but rather of deciding what you want to do in any given situation and being conscious of and taking responsibility for how what you do affects others.

This revision of how we think about power goes some way toward addressing another fear writing teachers have about what goes on in classroom electronic conversations (and in face-to-face classrooms discussions of sensitive issues). In a period of legitimation crisis where there is no universally accepted external authority to appeal to nor any way to establish universal or enduring values and in which people take on shifting identities at will, there occurs, as Faigley says, “an all too frequent distancing of responsibility” for positions and actions taken. In electronic conversations, and especially in pseudonymous electronic conversations, this distancing may be intensified by the sense that these interactions are not “real,” but merely “virtual.” But, again, as with the fear of the loss of meaning that arises out of the modernist assumption that meaning must be guaranteed by some authority, this fear is predicated on a modernist assumption that individuals must be coerced by universal codes of ethics to behave responsibly (correctly) toward others. Indeed, in electronic conversations we do witness “the dance of death on the graves of the old narratives of moral order” (Faigley 196), but that does not mean that responsible behavior is no longer possible.

The transition in assumptions about responsibility that marks the post-modern condition has been best addressed by Zygmunt Bauman, who draws on the work of Emmanuel Levinas to develop a notion of postmodern ethics. Bauman argues that the assumption that individuals have to be forced or coerced to behave responsibly toward others (which dates at least back to Hobbes) and that correct behavior thus depends on submission to established external authorities and an accepted universal code of ethics has been one of the most pernicious of modernist assumptions. Bauman says:

Ethics . . . acts on the assumption that in each life-situation one choice can and should be decreed to be good in opposition to numerous bad ones, and so acting in all situations can be rational while the actors are, as they should be, rational as well. But this assumption leaves out what is properly moral in morality. It shifts moral phenomenon from the realm of personal autonomy into that of power-assisted heteronomy. It substitutes the learnable knowledge of rules for the moral self constituted by responsibility. It places answerability to the legislators and guardians of the code where there had formerly been answerability to the Other and to moral self-conscience, the context in which moral stand is taken. (Bauman 11)

Just as people will not “share” power when power is seen not as something they are responsible for but rather as something that is naturally theirs, so too people cannot be blamed for distancing themselves from responsibility for the goodness or badness of their actions when they are prevented from judging for themselves the goodness or badness of their actions. For example, in classrooms where teachers can be counted on to tell students what they should or should not say, what reason do students have for reflecting on or being careful about how the actions or positions they take affect others?

Bauman, following Levinas, sees morality (as opposed to universalistic, externally imposed ethics) as grounded in a pre-ontological impulse to be responsible for the Other. The proximity of the “face” of the unknown Other imposes an obligation on an individual, and this obligation is the grounding of both signification and subjectivity: responding to the other is the reason for speaking; responsibility for the other (subjecting oneself to the other) is the act that establishes subjectivity. This responsibility for the Other is not reciprocal—not Martin Buber’s *quid pro quo* acknowledgment between I and Thou, not the Christian *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*—but an absolute obligation. Nor is it a matter of a logic of identity, of knowing who the Other is, or what the Other wants. As Levinas says, “Proximity . . . does not revert to the fact that the Other is known to me” (97). And Bauman explains:

The realm of moral command to be responsible (and thus to be free), Levinas calls ‘proximity’ . . . Proximity is the ground of all intention, without being itself intentional. . . . Such an attention, such waiting, is not possessive; it does not aim at dispossessing the Other of her will, of her distinctiveness and identity—through physical coercion, or the intellectual conquest called ‘the definition’. Proximity is neither a distance bridged, nor a distance demanding to be bridged; not a preambula to identification and merger, which can, in practice, only be an act of swallowing and absorption. Proximity is satisfied with being what it is—proximity. And is prepared to remain such: the state of permanent attention, come what may. Responsibility never completed, never exhausted, never past. Waiting for the Other to exercise her right to command, the right which no commands already given and obeyed can diminish. (86-88)

Levinas’s notion of morality is like Iris Marion Young’s notion of a politics of difference grounded on “an openness to unassimilated otherness” (227): it neither conceives of individuals as isolated monads in slave to self-interest nor, despite its privileging of face-to-face relations, denies difference in the way that the ideal of community does. Instead, it allows us to see responsibility for and responsiveness to others as a chance taken up by individuals, an expression of the fundamental sociality of humanity.

But why do people feel obligated to the Other? Levinas sees being responsible for the Other as the action that establishes a person as an irreplaceable individual, the only action one can take that no one else can take. Being responsible thus is not a matter of suppressing one’s “natural” self-interestedness in favor of an effort to be good or to try to follow the rules but rather a fundamental impulse to be an individual agent, to be someone whose existence makes a difference. This, of course, does not mean that people are naturally good or even choose to act responsibly most of the time. Bauman notes:

Uncertainty rocks the cradle of morality, fragility haunts it through life. There is nothing necessary in being moral. Being moral is a chance which may be taken up; yet it may be also, and as easily, forfeited.

The point is, however, that losing the chance of morality is also losing the chance of the self. . . . Awakening to being for the Other is the awakening of the self, which is the birth of the self. There is no other awakening, no other way of finding out myself as the unique I, the one and only I, the I different from all others, the irreplaceable I, not a specimen of a category. (Bauman, 76-77)

Though there are no guarantees in the postmodern world, this notion of morality offers a hope: people who are not prevented from taking responsibility may choose to be responsible in what they say and do, even if they do not always do so. In contrast, in a postmodern world where standards of behavior are invalidated or unavailable, people have fewer and fewer reasons to conform their behavior to any external standard.

In his final chapter on the ethical subject, Faigley also takes up the question of responsibility in writing, referring as I have to Young's politics of difference and also to the theories of Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard (who, like Bauman, draws heavily on Levinas' ideas about ethics) focuses on the questions of justice that arise when different discourses come into conflict: how can people speak to or understand one another across the boundaries of discourses with competing or mutually exclusive assumptions? Like Bauman, Lyotard sees understanding as a responsibility undertaken by individuals rather than a matter of established rules of discourse. Competing discourses offer competing ways of understanding, competing ways of linking phrases together, but this conflict is not resolved by one discourse being more authoritative or legitimate. Instead, as Lyotard says, "It is up to everyone to decide!" (68). The "responsibility of linking phrases" (Faigley, 237) is another aspect of the responsibility for the Other. Faigley concludes:

Bringing ethics into rhetoric is not a matter of collapsing spectacular diversity into universal truth. Neither is ethics only a matter of a radical questioning of what aspires to be regarded as truth. Lyotard insists that ethics is also the obligation of rhetoric. It is accepting the responsibility for judgment. It is a pausing to reflect on the limits of understanding. It is respect for diversity and unassimilated otherness. It is finding the spaces to listen. (239)

Responsibility for the Other in conversations manifests in the way people respond to others, in the way they take the responsibility for the shape of power relations and the direction of conversation as they listen to, recognize, and respect difference.

Using the perspective of postmodern ethics to look again at Faigley's problematic pseudonymous electronic conversation enables us to assess differently students' behavior in this forum. One question that arises is, why do students agree to participate in classroom electronic conferences at all? The modernist explanation would be that the institution of schooling compels or habituates them to doing what their teacher tells them to do: teachers have the power and the right as approved authorities to tell students what to do, and students who want the benefits of being in this institution submit themselves to this authority.

But as most teachers realize early on, this is a very fragile and undependable basis for getting students to really engage in any classroom activity, even if you also assume additional motivation from students' interest in getting good grades. The more I reflect on students' behavior in my classes—and especially in electronic conversations—the more I am impressed by their great good will, their willingness to trust in and respond to my (not always very good) ideas and suggestions. Their behavior does not seem to be simply motivated by institutional forms of power and self-interest, but rather by an impulse to be responsive to and responsible for me and to and for other students, and this impulse seems, at least in part, to be motivating Faigley's students in this problematic conversation too.

Why does Faigley's initial question about whether "the *Ladies Home Journal* article supported or contradicted Hochschild's claim" evoke from his students a "round of messages . . . giving short responses" (192), and why do eight of the nineteen students with entries in the excerpt Faigley published go on to specifically discuss what the article supports? If we assume that responsibility is an obligation to the Other and not a submission to authority, Faigley's students become individual agents responding not to a teacher-authority but to a teacher-person whom they feel responsible for just because he is a person, a person who, like any other person, deserves an answer. As "yeah boy" says, "someone reply to the article" (Faigley, 193). Students feel the responsibility for linking phrases; they listen to and respond to each other's differences and, on my reading at least, support each other as often as they fight with one another. Contributing the most entries in this excerpt, "yeah boy" in particular takes on a lot of responsibility for facilitating and directing the conversation. All of his entries are short responses to others: he supports "butthead" ("you tell him" [entry 19], "you're so macho, what a maniac" [entry 57]); he indirectly asks "Madonna" to explain why she picked that pseudonym and indirectly supports her explanation (entries 36 and 50); he challenges "Cherri" ("if you pick your partner like that you need to see a doctor" [entry 31], "can we meet?" [entry 43], "so are girls better in your opinion?" [entry 61]); he draws attention to differences ("El Vira and Cherri need to meet and duke it out" [entry 47]); and he answers "INDIANA JONES" plea:

- 60. *INDIANA JONES*: HELP! I'VE LOST TRACK OF THE CONVERSATION!
- 65. *yeah boy*: indiana, that's because you've been speaking another language!

"Mighty Mouse" takes responsibility for engaging in and encouraging various strands of the conversation: he questions "Cherri" on an implication of her first entry (she says, "Monogamy sucks" [6]; he says, "How about STD's?" [10]); he joins in the discussion of what the articles said about the different emotional makeups of men and women begun by "Adam Heart" (entry 29); he responds to "butthead's" response to "joe" on the advisability of sleeping with a zillion different people (entry 40); he agrees with "El Vira's" position on monogamy (entry 53); and he tells "INDIANA JONES" to rejoin the public

conversation (“Indiana Jones, will you please write in English!!!” [58]). Finally, to me, many of the responses to “Cherri Champagne” seem not so much angry retorts as attempts to figure out the *differend* that her entries create as she takes up seemingly contradictory positions within what is “normally” said about monogamy, marriage, and sexual relationships.

I don’t want to imply that all these students are always acting responsibly, nor that all students will always choose to act responsibly in their actions in electronic conversations, but rather that, by not tightly policing their behavior in these forums, we can allow them to make such choices and perhaps better prepare them to participate responsibly in other uncontrolled situations. Indeed, if writing teachers have been worried about what happens in classroom bounded electronic conversations, they have been terrified by the possibilities for mayhem that open up when students in classes enter more public MOO and MUD spaces.

Julian Dibbell analyzes the ethical (and ontological) questions raised by an incident of rape that took place in LambdaMOO and draws attention to how the mind-body distinction created in the Enlightenment is dissolved in such virtual spaces. He suggests that his responses to this incident announce the final stages of our decades-long passage into the Information Age, a paradigm shift that the classic liberal firewall between word and deed (itself a product of an earlier paradigm shift commonly known as the Enlightenment) is not likely to survive intact. After all, anyone the least bit familiar with the workings of the new era’s definitive technology, the computer, knows that it operates on a principle impracticably difficult to distinguish from the pre-Enlightenment principle of the magic word: the commands you type into a computer are a kind of speech that doesn’t so much communicate as make things happen, directly and ineluctably, the same way pulling a trigger does. (393-94)

The loss of the distinction between word and deed, which has been under attack at least since Ludwig Wittgenstein equated meaning and use in the notion of language-games and J. L. Austin elaborated Wittgenstein’s notion into speech-act theory, has different implications when contemplated in cyberspace. Poststructuralist and postmodernist emphasis on the way language constructs reality primarily led to conclusions about the death of the real: both word and deed become imaginary, subject to the intentions or whims of individual or collective consciousness. But, as even Baudrillard observes, simulation only “threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’, between ‘real’ and imaginary” (5). When the difference dissolves, the result may just as well be the death of the imaginary, as words and thoughts take on the same character as actions, having real effects and real implications (as, of course, Freud and Lacan pointed out) that need to be taken as seriously as the effects and implications of “real” actions. As Dibbell says, “the more seriously I took the notion of virtual rape, the less seriously I was able to take the notion of freedom of speech, with its tidy division of the world into the symbolic and the real” (393).

Dibbell's account of how LambdaMOO dealt with "Mr. Bungle" (the rapist) is a good example of postmodern ethics in action in an electronic conversation. On modernist assumptions, the results are disappointing, for, even though there was consensus that the rape was intolerable and even though actions were taken to punish "Mr. Bungle" and to attempt to ensure that future offenses could be prevented, there was also a great deal of dissensus and ambiguity and very little closure on the incident. Immediately after the rape, victims called for the "toading" of "Mr. Bungle," which in a MOO involves not only the erasure of the description and attributes of a character, "but the account itself goes too" (Dibbell 383): it is the equivalent of a death sentence. Only wizards, the programmers of the MOO, can command a toading, and in LambdaMOO the wizards had announced four months before this incident that they would "only implement whatever decisions the community as a whole directed them to" (384). Thus, the residents of LambdaMOO held a real-time open conclave to discuss what to do.

Dibbell distinguishes four political positions that were taken in the debate: parliamentarian legalist types argued for the establishment of explicit rules along with "a full-blown judiciary system complete with elected officials and prisons to enforce those rules" (384); royalist types argued for the wizards returning "to the position of swift and decisive leadership their player class was born to" (384); technolibertarians argued for the individual "deployment of defensive software tools" like a gag command (385); and anarchist types (who included one of the victims) argued that toading was not a form of capital punishment but was rather "more closely analogous to banishment; it was a kind of turning of the communal back on the offending party, a collective action which, if carried out properly, was entirely consistent with anarchist models of community" (386). All four of these positions are clearly modernist in their assumptions: parliamentarians, royalists, and anarchists all argue for an ethics enforced by an authority derived from law, innate rights, or consensus, respectively; and technolibertarians argue for an ethics enforced by an isolated, asocial individual who is responsible to no one for his/her actions.

Perhaps predictably, none of these positions prevailed. The conclave lasted about three hours and no decision was taken. As Dibbell describes it: as the evening wore on and the talk grew more heated and more heady, it seemed increasingly clear that the vigorous intelligence being brought to bear on this swarm of issues wasn't going to result in anything remotely like resolution. The perspectives were just too varied, the meme-scape just too slippery. Again and again, arguments that looked to be heading in a decisive direction ended up chasing their own tails; and slowly, depressingly, a dusty haze of irrelevance gathered over the proceedings. (388)

Subsequently, "JoeFeedback," who was one of LambdaMOO's wizards and who, Dibbell surmises, "surely realized that under the present order of things he must in the final analysis either act alone or not act at all" (390), issued the command to toad "Mr. Bungle." How this action affected the community of

LambdaMOO, and the wizards' subsequent institution of a "system of petitions and ballots whereby anyone could put to popular vote any social scheme requiring wizardly powers for its implementation" (391) and of a boot command that residents could use to eject unruly characters is the focus of Dibbell's article, and it appears, on modernist assumptions, to be the ethical "lesson" of this incident: that differences within any community are too varied to be resolved through discussion and that instead either individuals must act alone or a supermajority of the community must vote on a course of action.

But other things of ethical import were happening at the same time as the formal decision making process proceeded. The rape had ended when "Zippy," a character with "near wizardly powers" (377) caged "Mr. Bungle," but another character who didn't know what had happened soon replied to his pleas for help and released him from the cage. Oddly to Dibbell, "Mr. Bungle" returned to LambdaMOO during the three days between the rape and the conclave and even appeared and took part in the conclave. At first, "Mr. Bungle" was confronted with hostile insults and challenges, to which he responded "with a curious and mostly silent passivity" (388), but when he appeared at the conclave, some of the residents asked him why he had done what he did. His response that he had just been experimenting in what was after all just a virtual, not a real, world, led the residents to dismiss him as "a psycho" (389), but he continued in the conclave to express "a prickly sort of remorse, interlaced with sarcasm and belligerence, and though it was hard to tell if he wasn't still just conducting his experiments, some people thought his regret genuine enough that maybe he didn't deserve to be toaded after all" (389). Furthermore, a few days after he was toaded by "JoeFeedback," "Mr. Bungle" returned to LambdaMOO in the guise of "Dr. Jest" (presumably by acquiring a new Internet account), and although he was recognizably the same person (whatever that means), he had changed: "he no longer radiated the aggressively antisocial vibes he had before. . . and . . . he was also a lot less dangerous to be around" (392-93). Dibbell concludes that "Mr. Bungle/Dr. Jest" had "undergone some sort of personal transformation" (393), which he implies was like his own recent transformation from "newbie" status through "developing the concern for [his] character's reputation that marks the attainment of virtual adulthood" (389), and he decided he would like to talk with him about it, but by the time Dibbell made up his mind to do so, "Dr. Jest" had stopped logging in to LambdaMOO, even though he left behind the room he had created there.

Although one might surmise that "Mr. Bungle/Dr. Jest's" transformation was caused by his ejection from LambdaMOO and the cancellation of his Internet account, the ease with which "Dr. Jest" got back to LambdaMOO suggests to me that other factors might have been more important in his change in behavior. The ethical lesson I draw from Dibbell's account—and it is a postmodern lesson—is that the remedy or solution to intolerable behavior in a community is not found in a process of formal decision-making or in an exercise of absolute authority but rather in the process of ongoing

social interaction in which individuals take the responsibility of responding to one another and in which, as a result, the varying effects of the offense become available for conscious contemplation. This is not simply a matter of an individual's conforming to some antecedently decided upon conventions of the community, for, as the conclave made clear, there was no consensus within this community even about such basic questions as whether toading equates with death or banishment. Instead, "Mr. Bungle/Dr. Jest's" experience (which included people who attacked him and people who came to his aid and people who were interested in his intentions and his reactions) taught him that cyberspace offers no escape from the responsibilities of social life.

The lesson that postmodern ethics suggests for writing teachers faced with what they see as inappropriate behavior in electronic conversations is that rather than acting as wizards who enter the conversation only to lay down the law or to establish democratic decision-making procedures, they should put more trust in students' moral self-conscience and should engage in electronic conversations in such a way as to enable students to take up the chance to consciously consider and take responsibility for the effects their actions have on others. The transition in postmodernism in assumptions about knowledge, language, the self, power, and responsibility clearly implies a concurrent transition in the teacher's role in the writing classroom, whether electronic or face-to-face. Teachers who want their students to take responsibility for their positions will not try to set standards, lay down the law, or take responsibility themselves for everything that goes on in electronic conversations. Faigley notes: "Just as in Lyotard's postmodern condition of knowledge, the teacher's role as guarantor of authority—providing the 'metanarrative' that gives coherence—is disrupted when a class makes extensive use of electronic written discussions" (185). This "loss" of an authoritarian role can make teachers uneasy, and rightly so, for it can appear that the only alternative is to stand back and just let things happen as they will. But this is not the only alternative for teachers—again, it is clinging to modernist assumptions that makes it appear so—and, furthermore, what is happening, as I have also tried to suggest, is not entirely bad.

Classroom electronic conversations can be used as forums in which students learn how to be open to unassimilated otherness, learn how to take responsibility for others, and learn how paratactic juxtaposition of ideas and perspectives can lead to a better understanding of issues and problems that confront them. In order to move electronic conversations in this direction, writing teachers will have to give up their *in loco parentis* role of protecting students from and preventing inappropriate behavior.² Instead, they need to construct for themselves an authoritative role that does not rely on notions of knowledge, power, and responsibility as guaranteed by established hierarchies.

As a first step in defining such a role, we might consider Foucault's attempt to define his responsibilities as an intellectual:

My role is to address problems effectively, really: and to pose them with the greatest possible rigor, with the maximum complexity and difficulty so that a solution does not arise all at once because of the thought of some reformer or even in the brain of a political party. The problems that I try to address, these perplexities of crime, madness, and sex which involve daily life, cannot be easily resolved. It takes years, decades of work carried out at the grassroots level with the people directly involved; and the right to speech and political imagination must be returned to them. Then perhaps a state of things may be renewed, whereas in the terms by which it is being posed today, it could only lead to a dead-end. I carefully guard against making the law. Rather, I concern myself with determining problems, unleashing them, revealing them within the framework of such complexity as to shut the mouths of prophets and legislators: all those who speak for others and above others. It is at that moment that the complexity of the problem will be able to appear in its connection with people's lives; and consequently, the legitimacy of a common enterprise will be able to appear through concrete questions, difficult cases, revolutionary movements, reflections, and evidence. Yes, the object is to proceed a little at a time, to introduce modifications that are capable of, if not finding solutions, then at least of changing the givens of a problem. (Foucault 1991, 158-59)

Foucault's description of his method suggests a role for teachers like that described in the Freirian model by Ira Shor, where the teacher is "a problem-poser who leads a critical dialogue in class" (31). The intellectual's role and the teacher's role in this model is to help people understand the complexity of the problems that face them so that they can through patient grassroots action find ways to change at least some of the factors that are causing the problems. As Shor emphasizes, participation of students in their education—"the people directly involved" (Foucault 1991, 158)—"sends a hopeful message to students about their present and future; it encourages their achievement by encouraging their aspirations. They are treated as responsible, capable human beings who should expect to do a lot and do it well" (Shor, 21).

Shor describes a practice that balances the responsibilities of the teacher and the students. Teachers pose problems or present generative themes—they bring the complexities of everyday life into focus—and listen to student responses. From listening to students, Shor says, he learns "the centrality of certain themes in their lives, and re-present[s] them as problems for reflecting on the ordinary in an extraordinary way" (88). Listening to students is crucial in this practice, for, as Foucault suggests, it enables the teacher to unleash the complexity of problems as they connect to students' lives. In order to have "the legitimacy of a common enterprise," the re-presentation of student problems must focus on helping students become aware of the complexities and contradictions within their own discourse on and within their own experiences with the problems, rather than on explicating an official or authoritative perspective on the problem.

This is not to say that teachers should not offer their own perspective or other perspectives that are not known to students, but rather that these perspectives must be clearly connected with the students' experiences and must be offered as perspectives, not as the official or correct view. Enabling students to be conscious of the implications and effects of their positions so that they can take responsibility for them is different from asking students to be critical of their positions—but this can be a difficult distinction to maintain. Shor approvingly describes a “desocializing” history and English course on Columbus (118-23) that at some points moves beyond consciousness-raising into officially sanctioned critique. The course focused on the “Columbus myth” and offered students perspectives that had been left out of the history that they had encountered so far, and the teacher connected the theme with student experience by “discovering” one student’s purse in class and proceeding to “claim” all its contents for his own. But the concluding work on this theme clearly indicated that the alternative perspectives and insights suggested by the teacher were not something for students to use to help them think about the complexities of Columbus’ “discovery” of America, but rather were lessons to be learned. One of the “thinking questions” asks students, “Can you think of any groups in our society who might have an interest in people having an inaccurate view of history?” (121), and Shor concludes, “[the teacher] suggested that thinking about whose interest is served by lying about Columbus may desocialize students from the values such myths encourage” (122). Instead of enabling students to think about the logic of domination, to consider why and how and when some societies have sought to dominate others and why and how and when other societies have resisted such domination, such lessons ask students to accept what authorities tell them about domination and about particular incidents of domination. Rather than “revealing [problems] within the framework of such complexity as to shut the mouths of . . . all those who speak for others and above others,” such lessons fall back on modernist assumptions about knowledge and ethical behavior deriving from authority and simply tell students that the beliefs and values they have been taught and have accepted are wrong.

What Bauman suggests instead is that it is depriving people of the chance to exercise their moral self-conscience that is wrong, and what Foucault suggests is that “the right to speech and political imagination must be returned to” those for whom the problem is a problem. Teachers (intellectuals) have an important role in helping students (people) become conscious of the complexities of the problems that face them, of helping them see the paratactic connections among diverse perspectives, but they cannot legitimately or effectively impose their own hypotactic structuring of the problems on students (others).

This consideration of a postmodern role for teachers suggests actions Faigley might have taken in his problematic pseudonymous electronic conversation. He might have asked students questions that would draw their attention to the problems raised by the positions they were taking—just as some of

the students themselves were doing. I would be particularly interested in their saying more about exactly what monogamy means to them: Is monogamy the same as fidelity? Is it an absolute position you take once and for all or does it develop after some experience? Is it important in sexual relationships as well as in marriage? Is it a moral position or a pragmatic position based on fear of disease? Such a discussion, like the one that took place in the conclave in LambdaMOO, probably would not lead to a conclusion or any kind of consensus, but it would allow students to become aware of differences and of the implications and effects of their beliefs and values.

Because synchronous in-class electronic discussions contain many more strands than face-to-face class discussions and move so much faster, teachers have learned that, in order to allow for the kind of reflection that is necessary to reveal complexities, problems must be re-presented to students in succeeding discussions. These discussions can be conducted electronically or face-to-face or in individual writing, for there is no reason not to oscillate between the various media that operate to structure our transitional society. Teachers can bring transcripts of electronic conversations to class and ask students to talk about what happened in them—and everyone, especially the teacher, can be enlightened about the intentions and effects of what went on. Students can also be asked to respond in writing, individually or in groups, in hard copy or in further electronic conversations, to whole or partial transcripts of electronic conversations that have taken place in the class. And teachers can simply re-present in face-to-face class discussions problems that arose in electronic conversations.

In postmodern electronic conversations in writing classes, we in some ways witness the revenge of our advocacy of process, and the trick, if it is one, in using them productively is to continue the process of discussing and reflecting that they begin rather than regarding them as isolated events. As Foucault said later in his life, “Without a program does not mean blindness—to be blind to thought. In my opinion, being without a program can be very useful and very original and creative, if it does not mean without proper reflection about what is going on or without very careful attention to what’s possible” (1987, 35).

NOTES

1. My judgments about how entries are related to one another rest primarily on lexical and topical analyses of the comments: students often address the “person” they are responding to and they pick up topics and words from each others’ entries. Like Faigley, I more or less arbitrarily assign gender to students based on the pseudonyms they use. I make no argument about the accuracy of these guesses, and I have tried not to depend on assumptions about gender in my analyses.
2. I suspect it’s still necessary for me to point out that I do not mean that teachers should tolerate inappropriate behavior in electronic or any other class conversations, but rather that teachers need to find new ways to deal with it.