

June, 1997 - John Wrynn, History

WRITING ACROSS THE WEB

About a dozen years ago, I recall going with Sr. Grace Eileen Hewitt, O.P., to an all-day workshop at Drew University on the use of the PC in the undergraduate educational process of the university. In fact, the workshop turned out to be a thinly disguised crowing session on how forward-looking Drew's academic administration was in making it mandatory and also financially possible for every incoming student to buy a personal computer. Grace and I drove eastward that evening back to Hudson County wondering how long it would take an institution like Saint Peter's College to replicate such a feat.

To date we have not quite duplicated the Drew program, but time and technology have carried us along by parallel routes to something like the same end. For almost as long as the Drew PC-program has existed, Saint Peter's has been experimenting with a project variously known as Writing Across the Curriculum or Writing to Learn. It has, in the meantime, become a component in the program of all our undergraduates and may well serve as a model for several other distributive requirements under the present curriculum update.

Having tried (and tired of) several strategies in writing-to-learn classes over the previous six years, I thought last summer to combine writing-to-learn with on-line communication in the fall semester, 1996. One might dub it writing-to-learn-on-line. Since all of our full-time students are given e-mail accounts, one need only fill out a brief form at the Academic Computer Center in order to activate it. That was the first assigned task in the w-t-l-o-l Hs 111 section.

Nothing seemed easier in theory than signing an agreement regarding the use of the account. But nothing is simple. Students said: I went there and no one was in the office...I went there and they were too busy and told me to come back. ..I go to work right after class. All right, I answered, e-mail me from work. Oh, ...(immediately e-mail becomes a direct link between Western Civilization I and the real world).

The next step was to communicate with the class by e-mail as well as in class. A distribution list was easy to construct on PINE, an excellent e-mail manager obtained by typing menu on the \$-prompt. Incoming assignments can be sorted and retained in electronic folders, also thanks to PINE. My confrere, Fr. Bill Abbott, first learned to use PINE with his Apple system in Manila. This is a true tribute to PINE's universality: it is found not only in Asia, but useable in Appleland! I remember becoming stoop-shouldered in my early semesters of writing-to-learn from carrying around satchels of journals or essays. No more of that: it's all on-line, not on my back.

One of the standard chores in history classes -but a real contribution to the humanistic education of our students -is the inculcation of a critical approach to the sources one's arguments are based on: Who said it? When was it said? What ax had he/she who said it to grind? In standard historical methods courses the *Sitz-im-Leben* of this critical moment is a dusty manuscript that turns up in the dimly-lit library of a medieval monastery. It brings goose-bumps to the historian, but strikes even history majors as about as relevant as writing with a fountain pen.

Culling information from the Internet however is roaming a mine-field for the easily fooled. The old exercise from historical methods is a matter of life and death for employees asked by the boss to gather information on a subject from the web. Where one might traditionally have been able to trust sources like reputable periodicals or respectable publishing houses, the www or the telnet are truly terrain without a map where anyone may make any claim he/she wants.

Speaking of this wild frontier, this summer's madness includes staking out a piece of the terrain myself. With the coaching that Dr. Calianese gave a group of us last month, I intend to establish my own web-site where I shall post my syllabi and course requirements as well as sources of required reading for students of next fall's classes.