



# **(Re)Learning Gender through Expressive Writing and Critical Reflection: Electronic Discussion Groups as Idea Mediators among Students**

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*When I signed up for this class, my counselor (who is a woman) told me that I shouldn't have to worry, that it wasn't a "male bashing class." I wasn't worried at all but this just reveals the attitude that society has toward classes like this.*

(Quote from a male student, 15th week of the semester)

Over the last several years, I have come to the realization that teaching a class that challenges the basis of students' fundamental socialization *must* incorporate pedagogical techniques specifically designed to help students reconcile these "old" and "new" views of the world. This is especially crucial as multi-cultural elements are incorporated into core curriculums in our colleges and universities. For example, with the advent of a revised core curriculum, my lower division gender course (Women, Politics, and Public Policy), which had been an elective, became one of a dozen gender courses that could fulfill the new gender requirement. The course, which had been populated by students "predisposed" to the course material through "self-selection bias" underwent a major transformation when it became part of the Liberal Arts core. Suddenly, I was faced with sections twice as large, populated with mainly skeptical (and sometimes a few hostile) students now predisposed to resisting the theoretical and analytical models of gender that serve as an interpretative basis for understanding women's political roles and policy issues.

Even before the course moved out of its elective status, I required students to keep journals responding to issues raised in the course. My experience with journals initially taught me several important lessons. First, writing challenges most students to think more critically. Second, most students struggle with similar issues. Third, many students use journals to engage in a dialogue (with me) as they search for answers.

Fourth, I found myself acting as an idea mediator between individuals and the class at large; yet, I had very little success in generating classroom discussions on the very topics that were clearly salient to many students.

About a year after the course became a core requirement, I replaced the journal with a computer “discussion group” for two main reasons: (1) the larger size of the class made weekly journal reading and grading simply too time consuming; and (2) even more than in past years students without prior background or interest were struggling with core concepts. There was neither enough time for me to read and individually respond to each student’s inquiry nor time enough in class to address and debate these perspectives among the students.

### **Pedagogical Goals**

Students now write and submit personal reactions to each other electronically (see Appendix A for assignment details and Appendix B for technical details). Every student in the class reads and responds to any entry that captures their interest, or they write about an entirely new topic. This *written* peer interaction has advantages beyond classroom discussions. When we write, we think more deliberately and critically than when we speak (Emig 1977; Fulwiler 1982; Sills 1990). Additionally, a careful, reflective, and interactive mode of communication provides students with (1) the opportunity to evolve, over time, in their thinking about a topic; (2) the ability to respond to topics brought up in class whenever they are inspired or motivated to do so (Hall 1993); (3) the realization that they are not alone in their perspectives and interpretations; and (4) the ability to find peers who can relate to their concerns. Importantly, the audience for this writing component are their peers, not the instructor, and receiving credit for the postings is based upon criteria free of instructor judgment of the content (see Appendix A) thereby allowing students to take intellectual risks (Martin, et al. 1976). The pedagogical goals for the newsgroup assignment are listed in Table 1.

As one of six types of writing assignments in this course,<sup>1</sup> the newsgroup serves a very specific learning and writing purpose: to allow students a forum for *expressing their opinion* (see Fulwiler 1982 for descriptions of different writing purposes). In order to grapple with material that challenges a student’s beliefs about the world, especially when the issues touch their personal world, I have come to believe that students must be afforded an outlet to express their opinion in order to form higher order thinking skills (also see Britton 1970; Martin, et al. 1976). And, after numerous conversations with colleagues over the years, I am convinced one of the most common substantive writing problems we encounter with undergraduate students is the inappropriate use of expressive writing.

For example, too many times students incorporate their personal opinions in analytical writing assignments — seemingly unaware of the difference between stating their opinion versus providing supported arguments. Computer newsgroups — or any sustained expressive writing format (e.g., journals) — serves to address both problems. Encouraging students to engage the readings, lectures, videos, and class discussion from a personal standpoint allows them to confront issues and concepts that cut at the core of their socialization **and** legitimizes this important struggle (also see Gannett 1992). This expressive writing is crucial for struggling and coming to terms with new ideas (Fulwiler 1982) and when this type of writing is directed at peers, who are struggling with the same issues, it serves as a written equivalent to everyday speech. Moreover, I would assert that because the computer newsgroup is interactive (though time-delayed), it actually mimics conversational speech thereby providing a natural inclination to combine purely expressive writing that is personalized, implicit and self-revealing with transactional writing that is public, explicit and product-oriented (Britton 1970; Fulwiler 1982). It is this conceptual movement across the writing continuum (see Britton 1970, p.174) that helps build the foundation for critical thinking (Martin, et al. 1976; Fulwiler 1982). At the same time, forcing expressive writing into a specific writing format helps the student begin to distinguish between opinion, assertion, and grounded argument, thereby providing at least one important conceptual tool necessary for writing papers free of unsupported opinions. Throughout the semester, I stress the importance of engaging the literature **first** from a personal standpoint and **second** from a well-reasoned and theoretically and/or empirically grounded standpoint.

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**Table 1**  
**Pedagogical Goals for COMPUTER NEWSGROUP**  
**Writing Assignments**

*Writing Purpose:*

- To develop expressive writing skills through
  - responding to course content (readings/lectures/videos)
  - questioning information/concepts
  - connecting course content to other courses/own life

*Class Purpose:*

- To create more communication among the students
- To develop peer learning
- To engage students in active learning outside the classroom
- To improve small group classroom discussions/learning

*Course Purpose:*

- For students to help each other reconcile old and new information

Perhaps, the most important feature of the computer newsgroup is providing a forum for interactive peer learning made possible through its design as a student-centered activity (Beauvois 1995).<sup>2</sup> In fact, I have discovered that through this forum students “teach” each other, especially through the sharing of personal stories, on the very topics that are often perceived to be “touchy” or controversial subjects (e.g., gender socialization that constructs and privileges masculinity over femininity). While class discussion often serves a similar purpose, the newsgroup has additional advantages in that it allows *all* students to participate (Hall 1993), provides enough time and space to say as much or little as desired, and allows students to feel free to personalize the issue. In addition, students who would normally not talk in class become known to each other through the newsgroup (even if only by name), thereby creating class intimacy (i.e., the newsgroup helps somewhat to lessen the detachment that naturally forms in larger classrooms).

### **Descriptive Analysis of Newsgroup Learning**

As previously discussed, interactive expressive writing forums such as the computer newsgroup serve a number of pedagogical purposes. My latest interest, however, as I have read and monitored the forum over the last four semesters, is to examine how students relate to concepts introduced in the course, respond to differences of opinions, and present past personal stories as ways of (re)learning (see Jarratt 1991 for a discussion on productive conflict in feminist pedagogy). The remainder of the paper will examine several different topics to illustrate how students engage one another.

**Feminisms:** In my lower division gender politics course, early in the semester I introduce students to what I label as “enduring issues,” which are three main themes that underlie the politics and policies of the women’s movement in the United States. These three issue areas are “Equality versus Difference,” “Gender versus Sex,” and “Conceptions of Feminisms.” My initial pass on feminism is quite unorthodox. Rather than describing the various branches of feminism (e.g., liberal, radical, Marxist, etc.), I start with the assumption that most students have, at best, vague and mostly negative stereotypes of feminists, therefore by association, feminism. “Conceptions of Feminisms” introduces students to three views loosely representing feminism, anti-feminism, and what I call post-feminism. The following readings are used:

Feminist selection: Kamen, Paula. 1991. “Connections to the “F” Word.”

(chp.1) *Feminist Fatale*. New York: Donald Fine. pp.23-53.

Anti-Feminist selection: Schlafly, Phyllis. 1986. “The Positive Woman.”

Barber and Kellerman, eds., *Women Leaders in American Politics*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ:Prentice-Hall. pp.154-164.

Post-Feminist selection: Paglia, Camille. 1992. "The Big Udder." *Sex, Art, and American Culture*. New York: Vintage Books. pp.86-90.

On the day of class discussion, each student is asked to write down on 4x6 cards "three essential features" of each "type" of feminism.<sup>3</sup> The characteristics are then listed on the blackboard under the three categories as students offer up their ideas. A class discussion ensues. After class (during the next few weeks), the computer newsgroup enters into the learning process. Students begin initiating the discussion on the three conceptions of feminism by posting original messages and/or responding to other students' postings on the topic.

Following are selections that illustrate how students think about and come to understand concepts of feminism via course readings and class discussion. Note that many of these entries are highly personal in that students are reacting to the material. As I argued earlier, opinion-laden expression is not only inevitable but necessary so that a student can make the issue their "own" and move beyond the personal dimension. The next set of quotes are typical examples of the postings early in the semester as well as an early grappling with a new issue:

Janis writes:

Many of the attitudes about feminism expressed in Kamen's article I have heard before from friends or other people I know. Most of my guy friends view feminism as being male-haters and bad, while my girlfriends are split. Some are proud to call themselves feminists and others just try to pretend it doesn't exist. I have a problem with this....I strongly feel if more women call themselves feminists, positive connotations will start to develop....After all, feminism is so broad, the only restrictions to it are the ones that people make for themselves. So go out and start calling yourself a feminist and be proud of it!

Shannon replies:

I'm with you all of the way. Before I took this class I was one of those people who said, "I'm not a feminist but..." Now that I see what feminism truly means and how much these stereotypes hurt all women, I can safely say I'm a feminist.

Renee says:

My mother feels feminists are women who can't get a man and associates the word somewhat with amorality. Just a few days ago she mailed me an article detailing how women are really nicer, more moral people than men, and how the

feminist movement was really hurting the world because it was dissolving morality. I cringed. I now believe feminism entails equality (social, political, etc.) for men and women. Having the opportunity to choose one's own destiny or path in life is important for all people, not just women.

Janis appears to have been exposed to the tenets of feminism before and this familiarity probably accounts for her public pronouncement based on personal considerations to "...go out and start calling yourself a feminist...." However, both Shannon and Renee are at an earlier stage in their exposure to feminist thinking and contain their writing within the expressive mode as they begin to try out the ideas for themselves.

Of course, feminism does not resonate so positively in all students. The following excerpts demonstrate the use of expressive writing to create a conversational space of sharing and learning as two students find a way to connect their respective experiences.

Ann writes:

I have found myself to be neither a feminist or a post-feminist. It surprises me because prior to our class discussion, I thought I was. I have found myself to believe strongly in the tenets of Anti-Feminism. I believe the status-quo is comfortable and not in need of change. I fear my boyfriend/future husband will leave me if I am or try to fight for civil rights for women openly and publicly....I have been nurtured and raised as a child to believe that men are superior and they as intellectuals can be the only ones to handle money, contracts...and capable or aggressive enough to be in the business world. I would probably be Schafly's best friend in her anti-feminist campaign. This fact, however, scares me and angers me. I feel too comfortable in this acceptance that men are superior and that my only choice in the future is to be a housewife. I still believe in my anti-feminist tenets but I'm trying hard to escape them.

In response, Deborah says:

So what do you intend to do about this? What types of things will you teach your children? My family was always just easy going but my ex-fiancé's family was totally biased against women. I always told myself that I would never let my kids be subjected to this crap, but with his family they would have felt it. I am now searching for the perfect husband that will know that we all are equal. I am searching for the father of

my kids to raise our children in an environment like mine at home. Don't you think you deserve this, too?

It appears that Deborah has personally experienced the anti-feminist attitudes that Ann is struggling to overcome. Deborah begins by confronting Ann with the dilemma Ann will face in her desired role as a traditional housewife/mother (here "traditional" refers to the patriarchal attitudes and values associated with being a housewife/mother rather than the role itself). While the response has undertones of being judgmental, by Deborah sharing her experience of an ex-fiancé's anti-feminist family and offering up her own future goals (that align with feminist tenets), she provides Ann with both a supportive reaction and an alternative scenario to contemplate. An interaction that did not and would not happen in the classroom if for no other reason than Ann rarely speaks up in class.

While some exchanges mimic a personal conversation between two people sharing their experiences in life, as Ann and Deborah's postings illustrate, other peer discussions are a combination of expressive and transactional writing – a shift to public discourse via the assertion of a personal opinion as a directive to others. Take another look at a set of exchanges on Anti-Feminism.

Nicole writes:

I agree with Phyllis Schlafly....“The Positive Woman looks upon her femaleness and her fertility as part of her purpose, potential, and power. She rejoices that she has a capability for creativity that men can never have.” It is time for women in our society to stand up and be proud of their roles as a female without always feeling offended.

Elizabeth agrees:

I, too, feel that I don't always want to be equal to a man in the sense that I do enjoy some of the traditional things that take place in a man and woman's roles in society such as him opening the door for me....Even though I do want to be able to do things such as getting equal pay in jobs and trying different things, I do feel secure enough with who I am to be feminine.

And so does Alison:

After reading Phyllis Schlafly's view of feminism, I have concluded that I agree totally with her. I am an anti-feminist. I believe that God created differences between men and women and we are to just accept them and I also believe that women should be grateful for these differences.

Here we see Nicole and Alison initially responding to the articles from their personal experience and values but moving toward the transactional space as they de-personalize their emotive response and frame it in terms of values that all women should hold. Elizabeth, on the other hand, remains in the purely expressive mode. It is important to note, however, that none of the women have moved far from the expressive center, as even the assertions come from personal experience rather than structured argument based on multiple evidence – external as well as internal.

The first strongly transactional writing appears as counter arguments offered to the above subset of postings. This posting is done by a male.

Ian writes:

The ideas that you say you agree with in “The Positive Woman” — that men and women are not created to be equal and each has distinct purposes — is not really the point that sets anti-feminism apart from the other conceptions of feminism. In fact, many of these “ideals” can be found in the article “The Big Udder” [Paglia] which outlined our view about post-feminism. Do you agree with some of the anti-feminist beliefs about gender roles in a family, the business world, and politics as well? I personally agree with the idea that men and women are not “meant” to be equal, but I find the ideas that women are suppose to keep men happy at any cost a little dangerous.

Amy then adds:

I agree with Phyllis Schafly that women are biologically different from men and that women should celebrate these differences. I do not believe though that these differences require women to be docile, subservient, and weak. What I basically get from this article was that women are less intelligent, less aggressive, and more emotional than men. I do not believe that this is true. Women will continue to be treated unequal if this stereotype persists. What makes it worse is that it is a woman that is perpetuating this idea. Women will never be able to rise up if we buy into this stereotype.

By the end of the semester, students were still coming back to this topic but with less and less purely expressive writing and more a combination of expressive and transactional writing that increasingly utilized external sources to support their assertions. For example, Stephanie writes:



I respect the fact that everyone is entitled to his or her opinion; however, I must say that I completely disagree with these views of feminism. Have you read “The Handmaid’s Tale?” I think your views may change somewhat after reading it. My fear of the anti-feminist viewpoint (that women should be the only ones to have to take care of the children) is that motherhood can get in the way of allowing women to pursue their own personal goals. So my question is where do personal, private rights and freedoms for women come into play in the anti-feminist position?

As was typical of postings on a subject that generated a lot of interest, students held strong opinions and continually revisited the topic throughout the semester with the intent of not only grappling with the issue themselves (expressive) but convincing others of their ideas (transactional). The previous quote is a good example of how expressive writing moves farther into the transactional space as students acquire more knowledge. While it is still opinion-based, Stephanie is making connections to literature (the novel we read during the last week of the semester) to bolster her opinion (not merely making assertions based only on personal experience), demonstrating that opinion and course material are being integrated to form an initial basis of an analytical argument. It is at this juncture that students are able to move from mere personal reaction (internal struggles), to public discourse (externally directed assertions), to grounded argument thereby forming the elementary building blocks of critical thinking (Fulwiler 1982).

Sometimes students only tangentially address the course material, focusing instead on personal experiences as examples of the topic under discussion. Not surprisingly, stories from high school days are common and usually generate many responses. For example, Renee begins by writing:

Before I entered this class I was told that feminism was a bad thing. I was mostly told this by older male teachers at my high school that basically believed women were to stay at home and that if they worked then they should only do so if their husbands aren’t able to....I think that our society should stress in the school systems that women can do anything they want to and if they want to stay at home then that is fine but if they choose to work, that’s fine also. The bottom line is that women should know they have a choice.

Stephanie adds:

I must say I am extremely disturbed at how I have been reading in several people's entries that their male high school teachers often made anti-feminist comments. Through reading these entries, my memory was spurred as to how some of my male high school teachers, too, would occasionally make slanderous comments about women. Comments such as "females will never be President because they suffer from PMS" to "don't wear short skirts to class because it might excite the boys and you might be putting yourself in danger" are appalling! Yet, I remember hearing these cutting comments on a weekly basis. In high school, I was too uneducated to realize the error of these statements and pretty much accepted them as fact....I think that over Christmas Break I'll go over to my old high school and give the administrators a piece of my mind — and encourage them to require "PC" classes for all of the high school teachers.

Chris (a male) disagrees:

I guess I couldn't help but get a little frustrated while reading your entry. Once guys get to college, they understand how a woman should be treated, and they act accordingly. If you went back to you high school and said something about being (PC) you will make the whole issue worse.

Which generates a quick reply from Annie:

Comments from male chauvinist teachers should not be accepted. Teachers make a big impact and they need to remember that.

While these exchanges do not focus directly on the readings or class discussion, integration of the material (e.g., feminism) and subsequent learning (i.e., re-evaluating prior experiences with a new, albeit very underdeveloped, conceptual lens) is clearly taking place as the students (re)consider their lives in high school through expressive writing.

**Students Judging Instructors:** Approximately halfway through the semester I provide the students with a handout of statistics on how students evaluate their instructors based, in part, on their gendered expectations of instructor behavior and competence. The statistics report a meta-study of 50 studies and demonstrate over ten ways that gender affects these evaluations. These statistics and class discussion should be but one more way to demonstrate the insidious nature of gendering — a topic that is introduced early in the semester as one of the "enduring issues" and reinforced weekly through readings and discussion. Of course, the policy implications of gendered evaluations force students to recon-

sider, again, the social bases of affirmative action policies, and theorize why women's wages continue to be less than men's even after controlling for occupation, educational level, and seniority.

Of all the job-related research we examine in class, the information on student evaluations of teachers hits closest to home. These statistics are talking about them — or not, as most students argue vehemently during the class discussion and afterwards on the newsgroup. In fact, this is the topic that generates the most passionate and defensive writings. The first newsgroup entry on this topic was posted the day after the lecture. Laura writes:

Hearing the statistics on how female instructors were rated by their students versus how male instructors were rated by their students really upset me. First of all, I have no predetermined notions about how a female instructor should be or how a male instructor should be. The way I judge my instructors is fairly simple: Does he/she know what she is talking about, and does he/she explain his/her knowledge in a way that I can understand? If the answer is yes, then the instructor is going to get a good evaluation. It doesn't matter if the instructor is a man or a woman or a dog. If they can teach the material, that's good enough for me....So before anyone starts looking up my address to come over and kill me in my sleep, I'm going to end by saying it's what you learn, not who you learn it from that matters.

This posting spurred seven additional postings within 48 hours. Four of the seven agreed with Laura, though there were interesting qualifiers that students began to incorporate into their thinking about the issue. For example, one student suggested that none of "these statistics apply to Science/Engineering related fields" because she perceives the natural sciences as "fact-based" knowledge (unlike the "let us discuss it liberal arts classes"). Interestingly, the notion of the course content as being "objective" leads students to believe that gender is absent — not only in the course material but in their own subjective experience of the class.

There was one dissenting opinion that attempts to persuade (via transactional writing based solely on opinion) the other readers that their personal opinions are blind to the reality of the workplace.

Janis writes:

I completely disagree with you. How can you say you have "no predetermined notions" on how a male professor

should act versus a female professor? Are you implying that existing ideologies held in our society do not affect your opinions or judgments? Since you don't have any predetermined notions on sex, does this mean you would not be bothered if your male professors taught you in dresses and told you about his family as long as he gave you all the information you needed to know to pass the exam? ... My point is teacher evaluations may seem insignificant to you now, but just wait until you are in the workforce, working in a male dominated field because the people that are giving YOU evaluations aren't YOU! This means they may not be aware of underlying stereotypes or experiences they have had with women before and how those stereotypes unconsciously will show in their evaluations of you.

The postings that followed Janis' demonstrated a reflective quality. A perspective that neither completely accepted nor rejected the statistics presented in class but rather began to consider the possibility that while such evaluative outcomes were possible ("The data is in, and I can't argue with what the results show...") it was the interpretation of the data that was important to consider. At this point, students moved to integrate class material with the hypotheses that type of class (natural science versus social science/humanities) was an important factor in how gender was played out. Rather than argue gender was absent in one arena but not the other, Renee dissects how gender is present in both but gets played out differently:

...I think lower ratings received by professors who are not self-disclosing are a function of the subjects they teach, and that this would hold true for male and female professors (though likely to a lesser degree for men), meaning that male humanities professors who are not self-disclosing would likely be rated more negatively than male math professors who are not self-disclosing (as has been found for their female counterparts)....

By the end of the week, students were writing about and reading from each other more nuanced ways of understanding the gendered nature of performance evaluations. What began as outright rejection of the material (students who spoke up in class overwhelmingly disputed the statistics), was transformed by the students themselves into a problematic phenomenon that was both present AND absent in varying degrees depending upon specific contextual factors.

**Student Evaluation of Computer Newsgroup**

Interestingly, of the six different WAC methods I utilize in the course, the newsgroup is the most controversial. I have spent some time trying to interpret student ratings and written evaluations, leading me to conclude that three factors are mainly responsible for the mixed reaction. First, some students are not comfortable with more advanced features of computers (i.e., non-word processing functions) and the relationship between discomfort and use seems to be particularly salient for the women students (Clawson, Choate, and Rockeymore 1998). Second, despite the construction of the assignment as “writing to each other” (not the instructor) a small group students are uncomfortable expressing their opinions as reflected in their stilted postings. Finally, the size of the class is the strongest predictor of ratings for all the WAC assignments. Nevertheless, the overall ratings and comments demonstrate that for most students the method is effective in meeting the stated goals and objectives as well as providing an engaging writing method.

Before I present the student evaluation ratings, I want to address the themes identified above. First, with regards to computer literacy, it continues to be the case, even in a large research university, that a small but significant proportion of Liberal Arts undergraduate students are wary and uncomfortable with computers. These students are frustrated by the technology and tend to see the newsgroup as a waste of time because they “have to make a special trip to the computer lab” where, they believe, “the same thing could be accomplished by classroom discussion” without the “headache of posting and retrieving messages.” Since the first time I incorporated the computer newsgroup into my course (in 1994), I have worked with the lab technicians to create more user friendly formats. At this point, the technology and its availability to our undergraduates have greatly simplified the process. Additionally, in place of one lecture day, students are required to attend a training session in the lab and demonstrate competence (post and reply) in the system before leaving (otherwise, they must set up an appointment with me during that week to solve their problems). Advances in software and changes in class instruction have lead to higher usage and less frustration; yet, there remains some resistance. Clawson, et al. (1998) discovered a gendered dimension to this resistance: women, more than men, need to feel “comfortable” with the computers in order to use them suggesting additional training should be available for students who lack familiarity with computers.

The second observation that not all students want to express themselves is more interesting from a pedagogical standpoint than is the problem of student discomfort with computers. These peer interaction anxieties could be driven by either the specific content of the course or,

alternatively, these students would find it difficult to engage with their peers regardless of the subject (i.e., on less controversial topics). Written comments referring to things like “the class became more and more feminist [sic] as the semester progressed” suggests to me that the former is a more likely explanation. Yet, this is precisely the reason I instituted the newsgroup so students could begin to work through these difficult social and political issues. As I have illustrated in the main body of this paper, confronting, learning, and sometimes even resolving internal and external conflicts with regards to the controversial topics did happen on the newsgroup. It just did not happen for everyone.

Third, just like student evaluations of courses more generally, the size of the class is directly related to the evaluation of the WAC components. As the data on the computer newsgroup in Appendix C demonstrates, the small class (n=10) received substantively higher ratings than the larger classes (n=41; n=47). On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = “The purpose was definitely met” and 5 = “The purpose was definitely not met,” the average rating for the small class was 1.6 whereas the average rating in the larger classes was 2.3 for a combined average of 2.0 (“The purpose was mostly met.”). The somewhat lower average of the larger classes was due to the extreme negative assessment from a handful of students, which is related to the previous observations stated earlier as well as a rejection of the WAC pedagogy more generally. The larger the class, the more variation there was in student satisfaction due, I suspect, to the increasing instructional and emotional distance between instructor and student. Nevertheless, I think it is important to see the moderate scores from the larger classes as indicating success, too; especially since it was a lower division social science course in a large research university where most undergraduate students *never* have a writing assignment outside their English courses (at most, they are assigned the infamous “term paper” due at the end of the semester). Indeed, implementing WAC in my political science courses requires a sustained dialogue with the students throughout the semester about the “relevancy of writing” to learning course material and developing critical thinking skills — a perspective that most students came to appreciate. Though mostly successful, there are usually a handful of students every semester who insist that my demands for frequent and varied writing assignments are simply “inappropriate in a political science course.”

Despite the small group of disgruntled students each semester, the vast majority evaluated the computer newsgroup positively. Written feedback also supports the mean scores. Frequently students noted that the newsgroup provided the opportunity to create a dialogue with their peers. For example, one student wrote “The newsgroups are great: good opportunity to discuss what is going on in class” and another said “The com-

puter network was also a strength allowing students free interaction of opinions on topics.”

Finally, let me just mention that it is important to note that the newsgroup did not stand alone, as it was one of six WAC methods used in the course for a total of 22 separate writing assignments (see footnote 1). The great benefit of the newsgroup was its contribution to creating a forum where one particular type of writing – expressive writing – could be freely pursued thereby allowing other types of writing, e.g., descriptive, interpretative, analytical to be identified, better understood, and more competently developed. Though students did not tend to think of the WAC assignments in these pedagogical terms, they did articulate other values of using multiple techniques. As one student put it, “The different types of assignments are a strength. They made us *think* and apply the information rather than simply memorizing it” (emphasis in student’s evaluation).

## Conclusion

Expressive writing is a pedagogical technique that can enhance students’ interest and integration of information that challenges (even disrupts) their understanding of the social world. For example, learning how to examine socialization and its effects on women and men’s public and private lives inevitably challenges students’ personal lives, thereby generating strong opinions. This personal engagement and struggle is a necessary component of learning, which can and should be nurtured (Martin, et al. 1976; Jarrett 1991; Gannett 1992). By promoting expressive reaction in a particular forum, students engage the course material in personal terms allowing themselves to absorb the information in ways that transactional writing alone may stifle thinking and learning (Martin, et al. 1976; Fulwiler 1982) Moreover, the students develop the ability to distinguish between mere opinion and supported argument. The use of computer newsgroups as an expressive writing forum provides an additional benefit of allowing students to learn from each other’s struggles. An analysis of entries submitted to a newsgroup set up for a lower-division course on “Women, Politics, and Public Policy,” indicates that over the course of the semester or with familiarity of the subject, most students’ postings to the newsgroup become more complex. As expressive writing merges with transactional writing, reasoned argument begins to emerge. Sustained expressive writing, therefore, has the potential to transform itself from unexamined opinion reactions to the construction of more persuasive opinion driven arguments as students become more comfortable in expressing themselves in weekly postings, experienced in responding to their peers’ opinions, and more knowledgeable about topics.

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## Notes

1 The six components of WAC in this course are (1) Computer Newsgroups, (2) Microthemes, (3) Free Writings, (4) Group Essay, (5) Photo-Collage with Short Essay and Critical Reflection Essay, and (6) Short Answer and Essay Tests. See McLeod and Soven (1992) for a comprehensive introduction to developing "Writing Across the Curriculum" courses.

2 Only the students post to the newsgroup now. I learned from previous semesters that when I posted a message, regardless of the informational type (e.g., clarification of a class lecture, additional information on the issue being discussed, or an alternative argument to consider), it closed down the discussion.

3 This is an example of another WAC technique incorporated into the class: short in-class note card writing assignments to help students focus their thinking prior to class discussion (see Bullock 1994).

## APPENDIX A

### Instructional Guidelines for Computer Mail Entries

*PURPOSE:* The computer facilitated discussions should enhance your understanding of the reading material, lectures, and class discussions by engaging other students in the course to consider issues you find compelling. While there are no right or wrong answers, there are satisfactory and unsatisfactory entries: the talk group is an extension of thoughtful classroom discussion, not a forum for personal complaints about class policies or classmates. Ultimately, this communication forum should help you learn how to *critically reflect* upon the course content and develop more complex views of issues as you write about your opinions on course topics.

Regardless of how often you participate in classroom discussions you must also participate in the computer talk group **at least 10 times** during the semester (participation beyond the minimum will earn bonus points: 1 point per satisfactory entry up to 20 extra points).

*CONTENT:* While the bulk of your "conversation" will revolve around the course material from (1) thoughts regarding the course content, and (2) responses to your classmates, everyone should also feel free to relate this course to other knowledge or situations you have experienced. The mail entries should link issues from the assigned readings, lectures, class discussion, and/or video presentations. The content of and approach taken in writing the entries can vary, but basically I want

you to **FIRST** identify an important aspect of your chosen source and **SECOND** to write your reaction to it. Since this is an interactive medium, many of your entries will be in response (at least partially) to other student's comments. Absolutely no flaming is allowed: courtesy is required.

**MECHANICS:** Three computer training sessions have been scheduled during the first week of classes. You **MUST** sign up for and attend one of the sessions. The dates and times are listed in the schedule of readings.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Guide to Using Netscape in Purdue Computer Labs**

*Netscape* is located within the Applications window. To start *Netscape*, double click on the *Netscape* icon.

The Purdue University homepage will appear. Follow these steps once you are in Netscape:

1. Choose Options from the menu bar.
  - a) Select Preferences from the pull-down menu.
  - b) Within Preferences, select the Mail and News tab.
  - 1) In the appropriate boxes, type your name and email address. Use the mouse or tab key to move between fields. When you are finished, click <OK>.
2. To access the class "talk" group, open the class newsgroup. Highlight the information in the Location box using the mouse then hit the backspace key to erase the information.
  - a) Now type news:purdue.class.pol222 (do not include underline).
  - b) Hit the return key and wait for the newsgroup to appear.
  - c) Once you have opened the newsgroup, click on the appropriate icon.

**Example 1:** If you want to post a new message, click on the post new article icon. A message box will appear. You should type a **subject** on the appropriate line and type your entry in the big box. Do not worry about the other lines; the appropriate newsgroup appears automatically and the "mail to" line can be blank. When you are finished typing your entry, click on Send. Don't be impatient, it may take it a few moments to send your message. When the main newsgroup screen reappears, click on the Reload icon to get an updated listing of postings (including the one you just sent).

**Example 2:** If you want to read a message on the list, drag the mouse to the listed posting and then click on it. The text of the message will appear. To close the message, click on the Back icon. If you want to post a reply to the message, after you open it click on the Post Reply icon.

A new message box will appear. You will not need to type in the subject line because it will automatically use the subject line from the message you are replying to preceded with "Re:" (as in regarding). Type your entry in the big box. When you are finished typing, click on Send. After your message is sent, you will see the message to which you replied. Hit the Back icon to return to the main newsgroup screen. Click on Reload to get an updated listing of postings.

4. Sometimes articles that were listed seem to have disappeared. To find them, go to the bottom of the main newsgroup screen and click on Show Read Articles. After clicking on it the articles you had read that "disappeared" will reappear. You will also notice that the icon will change to Hide Read Articles. If you want to hide articles from the listing that you have read during a session, click on Hide Read Articles.

5. To exit the newsgroup and *Netscape*, drag the mouse to the upper left hand corner of the screen and either double click on the corner [-] marker or pull down the menu from the corner [-] marker and then drag the mouse to Close. The applications folder will reappear. In the bottom corner of the screen will be a log out box. Click on logout when you are done with your session.

**APPENDIX C**  
**STUDENT EVALUATION of POL222 Writing Assignments**  
L.Kathlene

**Instructions for students:** As explained in the beginning of the semester, this class was designed to incorporate "Writing Across the Curriculum" assignments. In order to help me design future classes with writing assignments AND to help the School of Liberal Arts evaluate the program, please take a few minutes to judge whether the following purposes were met. Using a scale from 1 to 5, circle the number that best corresponds to your evaluation, where:

- 1 = Yes, the purpose was definitely met;
- 2 = Yes, the purpose was mostly met;
- 3 = Neutral, the purpose was sort of met/sort of not met;
- 4 = No, the purpose was hardly met;
- 5 = No, the purpose was definitely not met.

If you feel you cannot evaluate a particular purpose, for whatever reason, then DO NOT circle any number, just leave it "blank." If you have specific suggestions for how to better reach a particular purpose, feel free to write it on the dotted line after the statement. For more general sugges-

tions/comments, please feel free to write at the end of the survey. THANK YOU for your thoughtful feedback.

**STATISTICAL RESULTS**  
(of Computer Newsgroup only)

**Mean Scores**

May'95    Fall'95    Spring'96  
(n=10)    (n=47)    (n=41)

*Writing Purpose:*

To develop expressive writing skills through responding to course content

- questioning information/concepts
- connecting course content to other courses/own life

1.4            2.4            2.3

*Class Purpose:*

To create more communication among the students

1.7            2.2            2.4

To develop peer learning

1.8            2.2            2.3

To engage students in active learning outside the classroom

1.6            2.2            2.4

To improve small group classroom discussions/learning

1.6            2.4            2.3

*Course Purpose:*

For students to help each other reconcile old and new information

1.6            2.1            2.4