

Keynote for Faculty Academy on Instructional Technology at Mary Washington College

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My name is Gardner Campbell. I'm an Associate Professor of English in the Department of English, Linguistics, and Speech at Mary Washington College. I'm also a computer-mediated communication addict. This is my story.

I began my downhill slide nearly twelve years ago, in the fall of 1990. They say the first one is free, but that wasn't true for me, because I had to buy my first modem. It was an ATI 2400 baud external modem, and as I remember it cost about 200.00. I first logged onto a bulletin board—remember those?—shortly thereafter. At about the same time I began experimenting with Prodigy—remember that? I quickly discovered that the University of Richmond, where I was teaching at the time, had a secret society of dial-up geeks who used Bitnet—remember that?—for email and for listservs. I got the number, got my account, and signed up for a couple of listservs.

It had only taken about ten days, and I was hooked. I loved the feel of email, its weird hybridity—not like conversation, exactly, and not like a letter, but something in between. Casual, but with time to think. Informal, but not entirely or necessarily off-the-cuff, and with interesting possibilities, like a good jam session. Or maybe it was like messages left in a secret hiding place. Or, with the listservs especially, maybe it was like listening in on a sometimes vexing, sometimes boring, very often fascinating conversation of people with similar interests and obsessions.

Before long I had made a good friend through an email connection. I had learned a lot from many people around the world. The conversations were often rich and rewarding. It felt good—in fact, it felt like school—real school.

Several years went by. Bitnet access became Internet access. The World Wide Web appeared. I moved from Richmond to San Diego and then back to Fredericksburg, to join the faculty here. And all that time I read my email, and participated in my listservs, and taught my classes, and wondered, wondered if there wasn't a connection to be made there somewhere. Little did I know that the next couple of years would not only forge those connections but reveal an entirely new dimension of teaching to me. In short, I was heading for a whole new level of addiction, a whole new world of trouble.

You'll understand about the world of trouble when I drop my first name, Dr. Ernie Ackermann. I had heard that some classes at Mary Washington *had their own listservs*, and that Ernie was the one who could set me up. Of course, being Ernie, he not only set me up but encouraged me, gave me good advice, and made the whole thing pretty painless for me and my students. As near as I can remember, this was the fall of 1996. By then Dave Ayersman was on the scene, and he not only encouraged me but actually pushed me to share my experience with my colleagues. (I guess that made him my pusher.)

But none of that would have mattered if it hadn't been for what happened in the classroom. I had imagined that listservs would enable students to confer with each other easily, and would give me an easy way to communicate with them. Both of those expectations were certainly met. I had hoped that the email interaction would be a good conversation—and for the most part, it was. What I hadn't anticipated was the ways in which listservs would change the entire class dynamic. I got to know the students better than ever before—for better and for worse. I could tell with more precision who was keeping up and who was not. I could correct my own perceptions: that student who looked bored was actually very engaged, the lecture I thought was scintillating had confused more students than it had helped, and so forth. Best of all, though, was

that the listserv conversation, not all the time but a lot of the time, felt like *real* school, the place where the conversation and the learning are rich and intense, where grades and assignments are truly means to an end—that end being a fuller, more intelligent participation in human civilization, human community.

In short, the class listserv was a place where we could all mull things over, together, anytime we wanted to. And many students loved it for just that reason. On our listserv, we could think together more frequently and more expeditiously than ever before. That *thinking together*, a real community of minds, is what I'm calling real school. As far as I'm concerned, the memorization, the assignments, the critical thinking exercises, all the necessary paraphernalia of the classroom are there to support better, more honest, more just, more inspiring *thinking together*. And though the apparatus of education is designed to foster that refinement of our *thinking together*, it's often the case that students think of education as something to be gotten over with, not something to embrace as a way of life. In short, they know the drill when they come into our classes. And knowing the drill often—not always, but often—becomes counterproductive, when going through the motions of education is confused with the messy, exhilarating transformation that real school enables. The classes we teach ought to be beginnings, not beginnings, middles, ends, been-there-done-that's. And listservs at their best can be powerful examples of *real school*, a conversation that is intrinsically rewarding. Students don't come into school knowing how powerful and demanding and rewarding the human conversation can be. Listservs at their best can powerfully model the consistency and extent of a genuine intellectual engagement. Because they're asynchronous, not "chat," listservs offer the energy of a conversation with space for genuine reflection. More specifically, listservs can model the process of *mulling something over* in a way that has the potential to make the product,

whether it's a paper or a presentation or whatever, richer and more sophisticated. And that goes for the instructor as well as for the students.

Let me offer two more ways of thinking about the kind of interaction I'm describing. One is a theoretical concept developed by a linguist and educational psychologist named Vygotsky. Vygotsky theorized the existence of what he called "The Zone of Proximal Development," which he defined as the zone of learning in which one can perform a task while being guided that one could not perform without any assistance at all. Yet in that zone the guide is *not* doing the task *for* the learner. The guide is just that: a guide. In that Zone of Proximal Development, the learner's awareness of the task is informed and her skills are growing, coming under her control. It's a place in which the learner is able to "pick herself up by her own bootstraps," so to speak. It's that paradoxical place where one first begins to know what one doesn't know, and is thus actually on the road to real learning. With a listserv, a class full of people who are either in, or potentially in, the Zone of Proximal Development can have access to each other in that Zone as it's revealed in the class listserv conversation, and thus learn by example the essential lesson of all education, how to teach oneself. In every email, every student, for better or for worse, becomes a teacher as well as a student. And you can see it happening, right there in front of you, and take it into account in your own teaching—the kind of "mindful teaching" that we learned yesterday is advocated by "Just-In-Time" pedagogical theory. With a listserv, students are more likely to do what science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon advised human beings should always do: "ask the next question."

Here's a more metaphorical way to get at what I'm trying to convey. Because it's asynchronous—not chat—listservs offer the space for the entire class to mull over what it's doing. Now "mull" is a very interesting word in this context. It turns out to have had a variety of

meanings in its history. In this context, some of them are comical, some poignant. “To mull” can mean “to grind to powder, pulverize; to crumble. To dull, stupefy. To make (wine, beer, etc.) into a hot drink with the addition of sugar, spices, beaten yolk of egg, etc. To massage. To turn over in one's mind, cogitate upon.” We don't know exactly where this word “mull” comes from. Philologists think it comes from the Old Norse word for “crumble.” “Mull” may be related to the word “meal.” It may also be related to the word “muddle.”

There it is. The listserv is the place in which we mull things over, trying to turn the muddle into a meal. It's the same grinding that makes a muddle and a meal. But in *real school* our community of minds *thinking together* in the context of the vast and intense human conversation stands its best chance of making that muddle into a meal. Maybe even an intoxicating meal. And a listserv at its best models that process.

So if the drug is that good, why did I quit? I almost didn't. I got hammered fairly often over the years without losing heart. I stuck with it through the early years when access was a considerable problem. Now that nearly all of our students bring a computer with them, and there are enough labs to accommodate those who don't, access is no longer a critical problem. I stuck with it when the network was much less reliable than it is today. I stuck with it through the disaster of losing nearly 4000 archived email messages in exam week, just before grades were due. I even stuck with it when Mary Washington College no longer supported listservs and I had to use Microsoft's free “listbot” service, now no longer available.

Last semester, though, enough things came to a head that I decided I would quit, even if just for a short while. I no longer had access to listservs, so that meant I had to use web-based threaded discussion forums on Blackboard. Although such forums solve the problem of mail management—inboxes flooded with 100 email a week or more--in their look-and-feel they don't

much resemble a conversation, at least not in my experience. More like a sequence of statements and responses. Not all of the benefits of asynchronous computer-mediated conversation are lost, but the experience isn't as fast or intense—not as “hot,” to use McLuhanesque terminology—as I want. And the time one saves in managing email is usually lost in the time one waits for access to the discussion forum. Last semester, for a variety of reasons beyond the control of the operators, Blackboard was unusually slow, a lot slower than it had been in the preceding semester. And students complained. Off-campus students reported they were bumped off the system while they were composing their posts. In short, the chorus of student discontent got louder. The worst moment came at the end of the term in my Shakespeare course. These were mostly juniors and seniors, mostly majors. Quite a few of them had had me before and were used to my electronic addictions. This time, though, they had had enough—and I didn't see it coming. As I always do, I asked them to rate their experience of the discussion forum as a supplemental question on the SIR-II's. As I wrote the question on the board, a universal groan went up from the class. It turns out that many of them had absolutely *hated* that part of their coursework, mostly because the technical problems were so great. I was shocked and dismayed, particularly because I thought their electronic interaction has been among the richest and most rewarding I had seen. They were very good students, most of them, but the struggle had become too hard.

I tried for several weeks to solve the riddle. In my professional judgment, this class was using a threaded discussion forum at a very high level, yielding almost the same results as a listserv. I brought their posts into class as discussion starters. The conversation, in short, was terrific. And then I learned that half the class was fed up with Blackboard and all its works. I couldn't solve the riddle, so I decided to back away from electronic discussions altogether in the spring term. Though I had one small electronic component in one class, it was very small, and

not at all a discussion. No one complained. I don't think it was a very effective component, but it was harmless.

So for an entire semester I've been without a listserv or a threaded discussion forum. I've gotten back the hour a day it took to read all the postings. But I've lost a lot of the sense of *real school*. I didn't know my students as well or as soon. I had much less of an idea of whether the classes was actually working or not. And as a suitable punishment from the gods, I had what was probably the liveliest and most engaged seminar I've ever taught, exactly the kind of class that would have taken a listserv or even a threaded discussion forum into the stratosphere.

I am glad to have made the experiment. I know I can still teach, and teach well, without computer-mediated communication. I know I'm not really addicted—I don't do this mindlessly. I also know that I'd rather teach with it than without it. So next semester, older and maybe a little wiser, I'll wrestle the machines again. I'll try to reach out to the students who want to sit at the back of the class and who are upset that in an electronic discussion there *is* no back of a class. I'll do my best to encourage those students who think that a classroom without walls is exactly what they're most afraid of. I'll try to remember that no asset comes free of liability. And I'll try to remember that even though not every muddle becomes a meal, those that do are some awfully good eatin', educationally speaking.

P.S. (2002—included in talk): I should say at this point that I have almost never provided any kind of structure or prompts for my electronic discussions, apart from the stipulation that posts had to be substantive and related somehow to our class work. I don't grade individual posts—if you do the required number each week, usually two, you get full credit. If you don't, you don't. I wanted these listservs to be as *unlike* the normal business of class as possible, to try to get to *real*

*school*, the place where learning happens both individually and socially, and for its own sake. I didn't want these listservs to be electronic journals or "response papers" or "discussion starters," valuable as those things are. I wanted them to be a real conversation. If students complained that the discussion was aimless, or that dull students were simply saying "yes, I think so too" instead of coming up with something thoughtful, I'd tell them that it was *their* conversation, and if they didn't like the way the conversation was going, they should do something about it.

P. P. S. (2016 coda): The obvious question came up immediately: wasn't your class so successful this semester *because* you didn't augment it with computer-mediated communication. There are two answers. One is that I don't think so, and having used varieties of CMC since that semester to extraordinary effect (in my judgment), I continue not to think so. That's my story, that's my experience.

The other answer is "who knows?"