SOCRATES, EXCELLENCE, AND THE CYBER-CLASSROOM

"For excellence," Hannah Arendt once wrote, "the presence of others is always required." Arendt, the great German/Jewish scholar, helpfully reminds us that no enterprise of value can be achieved without the generous, thoughtful assistance of others—your friends, peers, relatives, colleagues. Educators have known the value of building community in the classroom since the time of the dialogues of the early Greek philosopher and teacher, Socrates. While true for all curricula, nowhere is community more crucial than in the English composition class. Writing is a pursuit fraught with ambiguity. For instance, it is an intensely solitary activity even as it is crucially contingent upon society-at-large. We typically write in solitude, yet we seek company for rehearsal and audience. Alone or surrounded—this is the fractured life of the writer.

The Challenge

Let's complicate the picture even more. Let us say you are a senior in a high school that might graduate only a single senior in one year, or as many as ten in a robust year. I teach these students—at several separate, isolated sites. Their towns are lonely, remote, and small. We visit for an hour a day four times a week via an instructional television (ITV) system. I see them, they see me, and we all hear each other. You would think that watching TV during any portion of the day would engage an adolescent; but that's not always the case, as I discovered the other day when I launched into my standard "You've got to work harder" diatribe. I must admit that for the most part they are good people and try hard. I also realize that there are some things that cannot be taught until a person has some years and road miles. Although I am confident that they will get to where they need to be, until they do, my responsibility is to impart what knowledge they will need for future success. They understand this, I know, and appreciate the opportunity to earn college credit while meeting

other folks from neighboring cyber-communities that may, in reality, be hundreds of miles away. This brings me back to Arendt's quote and Socrates: one answers the other—better communities make better students. But how can we develop community in the English classroom taught in the hollow corridors of cyber/media-space? From my personal trials and errors, I have a few ideas to share.

Strategy One: Cyber Collaboration

Some of my students know each other, but it is never convenient to visit. *Convenience*—I contemplated this term for some time as I fussed over how to build community among these far-flung cyber-souls. Last year, I organized a collaborative novel. Each student was responsible for writing a chapter in a Western we titled *After Caprock*. We passed it around to each other with floppy disks and e-mail posts. The only rules were that each student had to be the protagonist of his or her chapter and that the town in which they lived had to be the new setting. I wrote the first chapter, situated circa 1900, before New Mexico was a state in its northeastern area: "Hoss was on the run from the law, blood redly oozing bile-anger from the wound in his belly, and forty miles to go until Tucumcari. Ahead was a man with a dingy, tin star and a gun. On this day: one would pass, one would die." And it goes on and on like this—good fun. For those who do not know, this region of New Mexico is an arid, lonesome place with vistas that can invoke the most sensitive of lyric responses—an area just right to inspire young, budding novelists.

We finished the novel in the spring term and had it published online. We continue to sell the novel, and all of our proceeds are going to charity. This is what I suppose academic theorists call "service learning." The students enjoyed the project and felt good about helping others. We read and edited each other's writing; we worked together of necessity to produce a seamless narrative, and we got to know each other better. Through our novel's characters, we were able to speak to each other about our deepest needs and desires, hopes and dreams in a language which cannot be

heard. I hate to be an unabashed commercialist, but I invite everyone to come and visit our novel. It is a good read, it can be downloaded, and the cause is worthy (the United Way). Our address is <http:// www1.fatbrain.com/shop/quicksearch>.

Strategy Two: Cyber Community

While I thought the novel project worked well, I decided to try something different this year. My students often write what I think are an assortment of clever pieces. I thought: Why limit their exposure to a mere chapter in a novel? Let's see if we can make a larger quantity of their work available *and* build a stronger sense of community. As a result, we designed and implemented a web page where we can post our writing and exchange messages with each other. Sometimes visitors will come and comment upon articles the students have written. The students really enjoy that part. Who would not appreciate the favorable comments of others, especially of strangers with undefined biases? There is also a link available to read a short bio of each student and to view his or her picture. Should you visit <englishitv.net>, you will have to agree that I have a handsome group of students! What I found most remarkable, as a by-product of this enterprise, is the energy with which the students proffer their compositions.

Frequently, students e-mail early drafts to me to critique, in spite of my insistence that they rely upon their cyber-peers. Holding the carrot out, I offer to post their pieces on our web site only when it is good enough. That little piece of pedagogical legerdemain alone is worth an additional revision or two. In fact, one of my students was so determined to get something posted on the page that she revised her essay seven times, four more than the required three! Micah Grau got hers posted. Look up her essay; it is worth it. Now, there are some who will no doubt blanch at the thought of creating a web page. It is not that hard. There are plenty of good self-prompting programs available, and it does not take much time or effort to keep the page up to date.

Excellence in the "Cool Medium"

Still, I wasn't satisfied. TV, being what Marshall McLuhan described as a "cool medium," constantly dictates that every effort towards building community must be an on-going project. As a consequence, I stipulated this year that all of my students must have an e-mail address and check it frequently. This is a clear advantage to the cyber-instructor; and I imagine that if we can do it in one of the most remote places in the continental United States, it can happen most anywhere.

I often e-mail my students, trying to coax greater efforts out of them, reminding them of their many virtues or clarifying purposes or comportment. I sometimes e-mail assignments (which I am sure tends to diminish their unabated excitement for the Information Age), although I like to think that this might make schoolwork a bit more palatable, coming as it does in the form of "mail." And who wouldn't like getting a message from a benign member of your immediate society? We also e-mail our essays to each other for perusal and critique.

Occasionally, we even e-mail just to chat. I like the chatting best and find it most insightful. We write absurd letters to each other in fake dialects or with stilted mannerisms or as maniacal ravings. This is another dimension to my teaching strategy. When I write to students, I assume the mannerisms of an old English don, often using intentionally difficult vocabulary. While they may not admit it, they do look up those terms. After all, who wouldn't want to know what being the south end of Bucephalus going north is? And I must confess, I am just as comfortable with my students now as if they were attending daily classes in person. It is truly a collaborative effort—community—in its finest sense.

With the web site and e-mail, I am using advanced, contemporary technology to facilitate learning and a sense of community with folks separated by vast distances. And I think that I have my students' approbation. They may fuss about all the work I make them do; but deep down, I know that they are appreciative. The main thing is that we help each other, and we care for each other. I think that's what Arendt meant about *excellence* through the assistance of others.

Finally, I think any sentence that compared me to Socrates would be some sort of joke; but in this case, it may not be. I am sure Socrates would be happy with what my students and I have accomplished: the new cyber-classroom, here, in remote New Mexico.

Ted Maier, *Instructor, English*

For further information, contact the author at Clovis Community College, 417 Schepps Blvd., Clovis, NM 88101. e-mail: maiert@clovis.cc.nm.us