ADVENTURES WITH "ROBIN HOOD": GENDER AND CONFLICT ON A FIRST-YEAR BULLETIN BOARD

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The interplay of power relationships within the classroom has been a concern of feminist theorists and researchers for some time (e.g. Belenky et al., Flynn, Frey, Gilligan, and Homing). Increased use of computer or electronic discourse (sometimes called "computer-mediated communication" or CMC) in writing classrooms has added to concerns about such power relationships. While Schriner and Rice note that CMC "appeared to reinforce the centrality of audience in the writers' consciousness and make more evident the social construction of knowledge" (475-476), Curtis and Klem question the early positive reviews of electronic conferencing by saying, "the teacher/researcher enters with the best intentions to witness the democratizing force of the software, only to watch 'helplessly' as the class devolves into the sort of sexualized and aggressivized 'wilding' behaviors reported by Kremers and George" (159). Moran offers a personal testimony about struggles with authority and control: "I thought I had outgrown, or at least suppressed, this need for control in my writing class" (63); he speculates that "technology is neutral" and cites the increase in "unknowns": "with more unknowns in the equation, we may fear loss of control and hold on tight" (68). Undergoing a similar rise in "uneasiness" as he watched electronic discussion move from Schriner and Rice's "collaborative learning" to conversation as struggle, Faigley thought of Lyotard's postmodern theory, where "conversation is inherently agonistic and to speak is to fight" (185). Faigley seems to suggest that living with "unease" is part of the

postmodern writing teacher's job, as writing courses begin to incorporate more electronic discourse.

From my experience, Faigley has it right: using electronic discourse adds more to a writing course than it detracts in uneasiness about student language behavior. Schriner and Rice quote a colleague who said that CMC promoted "a new sense of community rather than isolated study" (478). There are, to be sure, problems in this community, and teachers of writing need to avoid the overly-rosy expectations that welcomed computer technology into writing classrooms over a decade ago. But the problems associated with encouraging students to write and communicate with each other do not outweigh the benefits of allowing students to, in the words of Schriner and Rice, integrate "school life and life outside the school" (478). Moreover, given the presence of computers in many households, some students come to class more experienced with electronic discourse than we are; familiar with Internet "newsgroups" and bulletin boards (bbs), they understand fully Lyotard's idea, "to speak is to fight." The student voices which Schriner and Rice called "natural as opposed to imitation academic language" (474) now include voices or personae which emerge from the rough arenas of electronic discourse, unfamiliar with the manners and mores of the academic classroom.

This essay is about one of those students, a young man with the moniker "Robin Hood," who came into a first-year composition class with plenty of experience on "the information superhighway," familiar with communicating over e-mail to relatives in Minnesota and Massachusetts, a veteran participant on campus and Internet bulletin boards, even to the point of knowing, as I learned in a post-class interview, about a bulletin board "In North Carolina that has everything—even Monty Python jokes." Robin came to the course uneasy and only stayed because of the electronic network which I set up as an extra-credit option for students to discuss assignments, continue class discussions, and generally talk about their writing. Robin brought to this class bulletin board his experience on other bulletin boards where, "you have to think about how a reader will respond . . . because if you don't, people are going to chew you apart." He already had developed

a fine sense of Lyotard's "to speak is to fight," summarizing through reference to a popular Sunday comic strip: "You say the wrong thing and your opposition goes *blmpht!*—they pounce all over it. You know how Calvin opens the door and Hobbes goes KAPPOW!"

Robin easily wrote more than the other students, but those other students were very important to him. Robin had a utilitarian understanding of "social construction": he felt that he could put his "raw ideas," like unformed clay, onto the bulletin board, and the comments of his classmates would help him mold them into an essay, as a potter molds clay. Robin's metaphor suggests he viewed the network not just as a way of talking with others, but as a technology in itself. During the course of the semester, however, these dual concepts—the network as technology and as social connection—came in conflict as the several assertive voices in Robin's "Sherwood Forest" became more of a cacophony. As the conflict increased, I wondered about my own role. I had consciously withdrawn myself from the network journal and only responded to direct requests for information (usually about assignments). Should I intervene as students verbally "fought" more on the network? Or should I allow the students to participate in Lyotard's dangerous postmodern freedom of expression? This was the focus of my concern—a focus many teachers of writing face as they uneasily watch the student voices on their computer screens. In this case, it seems that Robin's enthusiasm and leadership on the network—even though his motives were as much opportunistic as socially motivated—elicited similar connections from others, and the network survived.

What I and other teachers are afraid of on electronic networks is harassment of an individual or group based on race, gender, sexual orientation, politics or what-have-you. Such harassment is commonly called "flaming"; Batson has another metaphor for it: "the beast" (cited in Kremers, 33–34). Although teachers hope for an exchange of ideas, they fear an exchange of insults and attacks. Moreover, some research questions whether electronic networks ever increase "democratization," especially for women. When Herring studied the participation of male and female participants on an academic network, she discovered that "a small male minority

dominates the discourse both in terms of amount of talk, and rhetorically, through self-promotional and adversarial strategies" (10). She found that "rather than being democratic, academic CMC is power-based and hierarchical" (10). Faced with such findings, some teachers of writing may want to structure their students' use of computer networks so that not only is "flaming" outlawed, but female students are privileged to compensate for the power-based, patriarchal influences of society. But others wonder if placing such limits on electronic discussion would stifle the expression and exchange of ideas we want to encourage. When should teachers of writing intervene to protect some students from other students' violent speech?

This study concerns an asynchronous, voluntary bulletin board in a first semester composition class at Northwest Missouri State University. Hawisher's 1992 survey of electronic conferencing shows more research into classroom uses of synchronous than asynchronous networks; indeed, outside of Hiltz's use of a network in a management course, other research into asynchronous networks took place in business and professional settings. In the 1980s, Northwest Missouri heavily invested in computer use outside the classroom. Describing itself as an "electronic campus," Northwest has networked terminals in all faculty and administrative offices and in student dormitory rooms. Many students who come to Northwest—from Missouri, Iowa, and Nebraska—choose the university because of the network; others rapidly become familiar with it, using e-mail for getting dates. With terminals in dorm rooms and few electronic classrooms, a voluntary course bulletin board seemed appropriate. Much like the CONFER software Schriner and Rice used at Michigan, Northwest's software allowed students to write and read messages on the network bulletin board at their convenience, sometimes at hours which are no longer within the lifestyle of middle-aged instructors. I limited my participation; my assumption was that the network would be part of the students' learning, not an extension of my pedagogy.

With this *laissez faire* approach, the electronic bulletin board was used intensively by about half the class, with most others reading it. It didn't take long for students to figure out

who "Robin Hood" was (or any of the other students with "handles"). Robin became the leader, inviting his classmates to write, answering their questions, and even telling them when they were using the bulletin board for personal messages that could be handled by e-mail. However, Robin's expansive network persona was quite different from the way he acted in class: reticent and passive. Indeed, Robin said that he would have talked even less in class without the electronic network. By semester's end, surveys of student opinion revealed enthusiasm for the bulletin board and no apparent opposition to Robin (see Appendix for results of survey). At one point during the semester, Robin's expressive style and choice of an essay topic touched off a period of violent rhetoric—not quite "flaming," but disturbing. Like Moran, I wanted to exert some control, to step in and protect those students. However, I hesitated, and in that hesitation, one of the students I had wanted to protect asserted herself: she effectively closed the violent speech and reestablished the web of relationships in the network.

In some ways, I am like the early teacher/researchers cited by Curtis and Klem: this was my first experience with an electronic network (and the first network to be used in a composition course on campus); but unlike earlier researchers, my expectations were tempered as I planned to survey the class for attitudes about the network and interview major participants ("Sandi Lee," "Mary," and "Feasable"—all student names have been changed, though student pseudonyms have been retained). It became clear to me that a case study of Robin's development was interconnected with gender issues raised by the network. "Socially constructed" in a way that made some social constructionist theory seem pale, Robin's writing was, to him, quite literally "constructed" by the network. In exploring his writing development, I found myself exploring related issues of gender and authority which always appear in a social constructionist perspective.

Ways of Interacting: Early Connections and Expressions

Network journals are a different species from their individual, reflective journal counterparts. Because they are literally social constructions from the beginning, they implicate social issues from the outset. Early in the course, aspects of gender and authority became apparent. Along with students responding to argumentative essays in *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* on pornography, abortion, and sports, they also discussed the televised Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings. Longer posts appeared more frequently, as questions evoked defenses and attacks about students' positions on current issues. As Herring notes, "A very long message invariably indicates that the sender is male" (4). Although Hawkeye and Kent also wrote long posts, Robin wrote the longest posts and wrote them frequently. Also as in Herring's study, female posts generally received less response than male posts. On this network, however, one factor modified the gender dynamics and power relationships: Robin. Unlike other males, Robin made a point of responding to *all* posts, and responded to female posts when no other male did. Robin's responsiveness was probably due to his Internet experience and to his belief in network technology; as he trusted his peers to help him think through and socially construct his essays, he reciprocated. The best example of his responsiveness may be Bess's survey of her network peers on their attitudes toward date rape and what should be done about it. Robin was the only male respondent. While other males may have responded privately (though too few—Bess dropped her survey from her essay), Robin's public responsiveness may have contributed to a sense of gender equity, which in turn led to greater gender parity in network participation. Indeed, when debate grew most strident, the conflict was ended by Bess's plea for a halt in the arguing. The last forty posts on the bulletin board showed roughly twice as much female than male participation: 66 percent female to 33 percent male.

Robin, Bess, and Hawkeye exemplify various degrees of communication style: from support and connection to assertiveness and aggression. Robin, as leader, was both

aggressive and connected; Bess, a supportive participant, was highly connected to others through the network; Hawkeye, highly aggressive, used the network not to connect with others but to assert himself in those "self-promotional and adversarial strategies" Herring found. Posts from Robin and Bess showed a standard pattern of responses to others' questions, followed by new ideas and questions. Hawkeye's first post, however, did not follow this pattern; it consisted of questions and expression, with few answers and less support. The bbs was Hawkeye's place to do battle, Bess's way of developing relationships, and Robin's tool for writing. Between Bess's connectedness and Hawkeye's aggression, Robin found himself in difficulty when Hawkeye's aggression led to conflict on the network.

Students seemed unconcerned by the fact that Robin wrote so much. This attitude may have been due to the fact that he was true to his network "handle": questioning authority, actively engaged in the "clash of discourses," resistant to "socialization into a narrowly conceived form of academic discourse" (Cooper and Selfe, 867). Indeed, using the network as a place to develop his ideas, encouraging questions (inviting his classmates to "rip (him) apart"), responding to objections and questions—his participation made writing on the network seem easy. Although Robin's posts seemed at times the "more writer-based prose" which Eldred cites (55), his first post established an easy-going persona as he talked about the essay assignment, a review:

> *Hello fellow classmates and professor . . . How's those papers? Mine going pretty good, but I was wondering . . . Is it essential to the paper to know co-stars names???? I'm doing my paper on a book I read several years ago and the lib. doesn't have it, and I can't remember the names of the co-stars . . . I know the plot, time, place, and the people . . . . but I can't remember their names . . . Now I know the main character and the significance of the others . . . What do the rest of you think??? Should I change books??? I have another, but it's not as intersting as my current one . . . . Desperately seeking some advise . . . Robin Hood*

Robin clearly knows that his instructor is reading, but he stakes out a discourse space which does not belong to the "professor" but to himself and his classmates. He is informal, inviting his classmates' responses both generally ("What do the rest of you think???") and with a practical question ("Should I change books???"). The additional question marks, the use of ellipses, the references to movie culture ("co-stars," "Desperately seeking"—a reference to an early Madonna film) underscore the fact that this discourse space is informal, conversational, and resistant to academic or professorial culture. Robin's first post takes the discourse out of the hands of the "professor," creating a space where students can "talk," making the network safe for that "underlife" which Robert Brooke (1991) discusses as a fact of writing classrooms: those whispered and unspoken objections to teacher's authority which students share among themselves. Sirc and Reynolds discuss the conversations of their basic writers as forming a "subculture . . . whose style can be seen as a form of resistance by marginalized, subordinate groups against the dominant authority"; they note that "the use of 'in group' markers such as 'cuz' or 'basehead,' even when used disparagingly, serves to define a subculture identity" (63). And yet, as he staked out this "subculture" space, Robin also followed his instructor's requirements for the network: a place for students to talk about the class. Robin's "subculture" discourse space, therefore, replicates the authority of the classroom.

In the second post on the network, Bess followed Robin's pattern but with a more supportive way of offering advice, one which suggests that she did not want to offend. Beginning with a cheery "Hi Everybody!" she first proposes that Robin "go ahead" with his topic, but then she changes her recommendation in a couple of sentences:" . . . I think [Robin's] paper is a good idea, but since he doesn't really have anyone else doing a book review he might not know what to expect." Although they both respond to others' questions before discussing their own ideas, Bess's sense of audience on the network differs from Robin's. As she writes about the classroom workshop groups, she implicitly compares the network and the groups:

I know that the groups we have in class help me a lot. The other students catch my errors and I do the same for them. I have learned so far in this class that it is not really that bad to write. I really dreaded having to have an hour of English Composition because I didn't like to write and I never felt good about writing, if that makes any sense to anyone. Now, I like coming to class and discussing the reading material and thinking about the different ideas the writer's try to get across to their audience. My paper is coming along and I look forward to seeing you in class tomorrow.

Unlike Robin, Bess seems to see the network not so much as an instrument to help her writing but as a way to be connected to other students, to develop the same kind of relationship she has in the classroom writing groups. Bess offers Robin plenty of options, leaving the decision up to him and focusing on the relationship she wishes to establish rather than on any single piece of advice. Robin, however, seems to provide information because that is the "rule" of the network—that's how a network "works": everybody puts in ideas and the ideas get better.

Different from both Bess and Robin, Hawkeye, in his first post, does not offer any advice; instead, after using the weather as an opening appeal ("pretty bad weather out don't cha think . . ."), he focuses on his own problems:

Well, I'm kind of in a trap. I think I over researched my topic. I have so much information that it's coming out of my ear. I don't know where to start. I guess there's a lesson to be learned here—if you over research your paper, you don't have much thinking to do. This makes a problem because you can't write down other people's work. You have to use your own and if you don't have to think what do you put down on paper. Oh well I'll try to manage . . . .

Hawkeye's reference to the weather may seem a small thing, but his lack of response to his classmates stands out: he seems unaware of the network ethos which came to other students more naturally. Hawkeye is concerned with authority (his remark "there's a lesson to be learned here," sounds appropriately patriarchal). In a conference, Hawkeye said that

his own ideas weren't good enough; he asked if he could make his essay a collection of other people's comments. I thought he was making the assignment more difficult than it was meant to be and tried to assure him that his ideas would be good enough for the paper. Sandi Lee agreed: "Hawkeye, why don't you forget using the info that you looked up for now, and just write what you know. Then when you are finished, add in some facts that fit." Although Robin worked with Hawkeye in a workshop group and wrote advice on the network, with hindsight I can see the anxiety behind Hawkeye's quest for "information": he wanted to write a correct essay with "real" authority. On the network, he copied Robin's expressive style but lacked Robin's network ethos. Unlike Robin, Hawkeye did not view the network as a place to test and revise ideas, but as a place to assert and maintain a position; unlike Bess, Hawkeye did not view the network as a place for relationship. Instead, he fought verbal battles.

The differences in stance and tone between male and female students suggest the "hierarchy of values" and the "web of connection" which Carol Gilligan develops in *In A Different Voice*. For Robin, the hierarchy and web seemed intertwined: he saw the network as part of his achievement. While he would propose ideas and defend them, he did so in the context of his network ethos. As Hawkeye pursued his own rhetorical battles, the network ethos deteriorated, causing pain for Robin and others. The conflict within Robin reached a climax later in the semester when he "screamed": "Hawkeye, OPEN YOUR MIND DUDE, geez I've never seen any one KILLJOY mania press an issue for this long. usually they endup killing the person they are arguing against long before this." Robin's comment hit the mark: Hawkeye's participation on the network seems fraught with male territoriality and privilege. His aggression eventually undermined the cooperative ethos which Robin and the other students had established. The problem was more pressing for Robin than for the other students, since in Hawkeye, Robin could see himself: a young man with a desire to take a strong stand and argue a position; indeed, the two became friends outside of class. The difference between Robin and Hawkeye lay in Robin's ability to adjust, to learn from his respondents

and his connection to his audience, both on the network and in the greater world.

Robin's Sherwood Forest Becomes New York City

Later in the semester, for a proposal paper, Robin chose a topic which elicited much protest and debate; he wrote screens full of ideas to answer his classmates' objections. His proposal, modeled after the violent film *Escape from New York,* was to place all hardened criminals in one location, wall them in, and leave them to their own devices. He began his post with evident delight: "Oh boy have I got one hell of a post for you people, so let's get started . . . ." His remark is interesting for its combination of three aspects in Robin's network style: an innocence ("Oh boy"), a tough guy pose ("one hell of a post") and an identification of the network as an engine for his writing ("let's get started"). As with his first post, that last remark could be taken as a teacher's comment, an expression of friendly authority, but authority nonetheless. True to form, Robin first maintains his network connections: "I'll answer some questions asked and request a few things from some others." He needed all that nurturing of his connections, given that the topic he had chosen came as something of a shock to several of his readers (including his instructor):

> *Well as for myself, I'm doing my paper on Population control of prisons. how can we solve the current problem and look out for the future . . . I have told several people of my solutions and they just laugh and say "But it'll never happen. It's not possible." I never said it would work, I just said that it was a realistic solution.*

The rhetoric of Robin's post seems at odds with the topic he puts forward. His rhetoric is connected to others, even nurturing. For "Malcolm," who is proposing adding African Studies to the curriculum, Robin's support is immediate: "Malcolm, Great topic, I like the idea of equel *(sic)* time for everyone . . . I do think we, as students and humans, should learn about everyone, not just the Europe people, etc. I know

very little about the other continents history and what actually happened . . . . "And for Bess's proposal about addressing the increase of rape on campus, Robin gives a screenful of answers to her survey questions—the only full set to appear on the network. When Robin finally gets to his own proposal, he understands it will provoke opposition, as he answers some opposition questions even before they are asked:

> *You say that they have done this before and Australia is the product, well this is a little different, but with the same idea, it's different by the fact that if you come too close to the wall your target practice. (*a lot like the Old Iron Curtain huh?? you bet*) give them a chance to live, let them farm for food, let them build houses for protection from weather, and let them protect themselves from other prisoners. . . .*

At this point, I had some serious reservations about having encouraged students to say whatever they wished. Robin seems to know he needs some special indication of provocative comments; several times his asterisks surrounded "joke" or "grin" as signs that his ideas should not be taken too seriously. Early in this post Robin cracks a joke after he spells *hypocritical* correctly: (*god am I bad with words and spelling or what??*). His joke signals to his network peers (and to me) that Robin is aware of his notorious spelling as he "cruises" in his typing; moreover, his joke contains the "street" usage of "bad," a rhetorical gesture to his network peers' part of their shared subculture. Robin may have known his topic would cause confrontation. Indeed, without the network, Robin may not have chosen this topic at all. His meek classroom demeanor suggests that Robin used the network not only as a place to develop ideas, but also as a place to develop another persona: tougher, more expressive and assertive. However, Robin's topic, a creature of Robin-on-the-network, incited increasingly strident argument, forcing him to move from his role as agent provocateur to conciliator.

Robin's proposal led to an immediate, sustained series of posts, generating a conflict which took on a life of its own. The conflict began with Hawkeye's dismissal of Robin's idea as mere "Hollywood" and a call for even tougher measures:

We have to remember that Hollywood is fantasy and doesn't solve problems . . . . It doesn't matter a criminal is always going to be a criminal no matter where they are put. The solution is the death penalty. Oh no OH no we are to civilized nation to allow this to go on, we can't kill a human being. Give him counseling show him love. He was hurt when he was a child, just show him love, something thats been lacking in his life . . . .

Hawkeye's enjambed syntax and sarcasm suggest an emotional response to the general topic of crime and punishment. When other students attacked Hawkeye's position, Robin responded by making an appeal to Hawkeye ("First Hawkeye, The death penalty is an optional solution, thanks for bring that to my attention") before distancing himself from Hawkeye's position ("The big thing about the death penalty is that too many people disagree with, as Malcolm says, "where to draw the line"). The rhetoric of Robin's response follows his general pattern of responding to other peers' ideas first, and even adopting other peers' ideas; for Robin, all positions have a place on the network and can be used to further define his own position.

Robin's network ethos, however, soon begins to fade, overtaken by intense debate. It begins when Sandi Lee doubts Robin's proposal ("Sounds like a good idea to me, BUT, How can this work? . . . "the BIG PRISON may be a BIG EXPENSE . . . "), but attacks Hawkeye's endorsement of capital punishment, which elicits a grim response from Hawkeye, and then a rejoinder from Sandi Lee:

Sandi Lee: *Hawkeye ! ! ! ! !*
No person has the right to act as God! You can't just kill people! All we can do is find ways to protect society from them, that's all. When they die, they will pay for their mistakes. But no person has the right to kill someone for ANY REASON ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! ! !
Hawkeye: *Sandi Lee – What about killing babies? Is that OK? What about killing in war?? What about killing in self defense? Killing is a NO no? I don't think so. , , What would you rather have . . . In your words "wierdos" living comfortably on our tax dollars. I would rather see them in the ground. I don't know*

where you are from but where I come from I've seen people younger than me carrying guns and flashing them.

Sandi Lee: *No, I don't believe in baby killing, or abortion as some call it. I don't believe that we are better off killing everyone that makes a mistake, even a big one. I don't know how else to explain it other than, ANY KILLING IS WRONG. That includes wars and everything, I know that people die in wars, that doesn't make them right. I know people kill there babies, that doesn't make them right, I don't know how else to get you to understand that we do not have the right to take a life, to throw it away because it is in the way. People are not disposable ! ! ! ! !*

As if this argument wasn't enough, "Feasable" attacks Robin's idea for its not being "feasable," and Kent attacks Robin with even greater stridency, comparing Robin to Hitler and ending with "It is an extremely sick idea that you have come up with. I would honestly be afraid to ever spend any time with someone who could see this as clear rational thinking."

Clearly, this was more response—and different response—than Robin had hoped for. His reaction was to accept some of the responsibility which accompanied his ad hoc authority:

Hawkeye I agree that the death penalty is a possibility and PARTIAL solution. Some criminals can be reformed on that point I agree with Sandi Lee. You have to be able to know when to Quit though. You can't say, "ok well they didn't learn this time, so . . . ." and then proceed to reform them over and over. I believe that they should have only so many chances to learn, or so many chances to be reformed. Murders and Rapeists only get one shot at reform, as far as I'm concerned, after that they took the rights away from 2 or more people. They don't deserve another chance. They obviously can't grasp a concept of sharing freedom, so take it away perminatly. don't kill them just make them live a life without rights. Which is my proposal . . . .

Some of this is more of Robin's tough talk ("one shot at reform"), but already he has started modifying his position rhetorically, conceding a point to Sandi Lee ("Some criminals

can be reformed") and stating his case in a somewhat less offensive manner to her ("don't kill them just make them live a life without rights"). As in an earlier conflict with Mary, Robin seems to listen carefully to suggestions from his female respondents. While Robin may "hang" with Hawkeye outside of class, he listens more closely to Mary and Sandi Lee.

Robin's post continues with two screens full of development of his proposal, complete with "Today the average cost to keep a prisoner behind bars is roughly $27,000 a year," the amount of acreage (400 acres) for the prison, a comparison with reservations ("we have been doing similar things to the original inhabitants for the past 50-100 years, and the Indians are supposed to be normal citizens. We treat them worse than we treat the criminals, let's switch things around."), and a plea that his proposal is actually a moderate position (between Hawkeye and Sandi Lee): "I am tring [trying] to show these two sides a middle land, but I seem to be getting pushed aside. Come on Class members jump in a speak your mind, it can never hurt." Robin's proposal—based on fantasy, but connected to the real world—was a reflection of his network discourse: violent imagery in language that was trying to make real connections. However, his insistence that speaking their minds "can never hurt" sounds forced.

With Hawkeye and Sandi Lee yelling at each other about capital punishment, Mary and Kent argue with Robin about forced sterilization—another aspect of his prison plan. As Robin begins his next post on his proposal with "Ok here's the last one," the strain on the network is apparent. Although he has stated his position in black/white, either/or terms, Robin clearly wants to maintain his relationship with Mary, who sees the issue as more complex, fitting into a web of concerns about human rights. Robin asks her to re-read his previous post and then appeals to Mary on her own terms: "I believe In love and I believe that people have morals, but there comes a time when that person should learn the hard way to their actions, which they are responsible for." Robin starts with a direct assertion but soon marshals clichés from the authoritarian rhetoric that stands behind his proposed topic: "there comes a time," "people should learn the hard way," and "actions, which they are responsible for." Ultimately, Robin can see the problem only in

terms of an either/or, not the web of nuances which Mary has suggested; while asking for a way out of his either/or, he still is committed to it:

> *If you still don't like the idea of sterializing those prisoners, going into the BIG PRISON, then please give me another solution. Right now it's either:*
>
> *A – Sterialized Prisoners*
>
> *B – Children inside the prison.*

There may be a "mirroring" quality to Robin's network discourse; his language changes as he responds to his peers. While his rhetoric toward Mary is calm, his rhetoric toward Kent is less gentle, a mirror of Kent's own previous attack ("Robin Hood you plan has more holes in it than a piece of swiss cheese"; "I think Mr. A will chew your paper into pieces"):

> *Kent, you say it's genocide for sterialization of women, and children shouldn't be part of the prison, so I need to come up with another solution. right?? Wrong!! I can live with these sterialized prisoners, if you can't then do something you haven't done yet, TELL ME A BETTER SOLUTION TO THE ENTIRE OVER-CROWDED PRISON PROBLEM! ! ! ! !*

Unlike Kent, who attacked Robin as much as his ideas, Robin does not attack Kent. Perhaps the reason is Robin's underlying belief in the network, the possibility that someone will say something that will give him a new idea and lead to a better paper. Robin's all-capitals sentence ("TELL ME") is as much a matter of begging as of commanding. His rhetoric suggests that he—or that rhetorical part of him—is willing to revise, to change even as his tough stand on the prison inhibits the possibility of change.

After the *sturm und drang* of thirty-five posts over four days, the essay which Robin produced is remarkable for one overriding fact: few traces of all the violent rhetoric and struggle. What emerges is a remarkably calm, rhetorically conservative document that keeps at bay the violence of the topic and the violence that had surrounded it, under a rhetorical veneer of understatement and classical rhetoric. It's

ironic that all of Robin's "in-your-face" expressiveness should yield this document. Here is the first paragraph and the central part of the proposal:

> *Criminals are roaming the streets in America as they please, due to the problem of prison population. The United States of America has a very serious problem. That problem isn't going to go away, it's going to get worse. Criminals are turned [out] on probation when prisons are too full. That means murderers, rapists, and other felony criminals go back out onto the street, where they can commit more crime. America's criminal system needs to be changed to cope with the higher number of criminals. The current way of handling a criminal isn't working. Compared to ten years ago, there is a 30% increase in the number of repeat offenders. There is also a 22% increase in criminal activity since 1981. I have a three part solution to this population problem: stricter laws, rehabilitation, and a new prison.*
>
> . . . .
>
> *The final part of this solution to this problem is to create a place to put those criminals who refuse to abide by the laws, and refuse to rehabilitate. This place would create a society consisting strictly of criminals. It'll be different from a prison in many ways. There will be no cells, one wall, and no way out. This place will consist of one wall surrounding a large area of land. This wall will be at least four stories tall. In this wall, there will be guards. There will be buildings outside of this wall with equipment for detecting those prisoners who try to dig themselves out. Inside of this wall there will be a "No Man's Land" where the prisoners will be shot if they tried [to put a?] foot onto this part of the land. "No Man's Land" would consist of an area starting at the base of the wall and going in one hundred yards. This land would be burned of all vegetation and covered with sand or rock. Beyond "No Man's Land" the prisoners will eat, sleep, and survive. The prisoners will be forced to grow and hunt for food, because none will be provided from the outside. The only thing the prisoners will be provided with when they enter are clothes, seeds for planting, and their lives. In order to be sent to this prison the criminal must have*

had a chance at rehabilitation, committed a felony, and spent time in a prison.

If I had received this essay without having watched its progress through the "clash of discourse" on the network, I would have thought the prose simplistic, even juvenile in places, and might have also wondered why he didn't spell-check it. However, within the context of the foregoing struggle, I read the essay as some latter-day rendering of that battle-scarred consciousness in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" ("Nick slipped off his pack and lay down in the shade. He lay on his back and looked up into the pine trees. His neck and back and the small of his back rested as he stretched. The earth felt good against his back." [213]) After all the questions and objections, Robin is trying to be as clear as he can be, repeating "There will be" in Hemingway's paratactic style. Even his repetition of "No Man's Land" evokes World War I connections. Beyond his pained description, Robin structures some sentences with that classical rhetorical scheme, the tricolon, where three item lists add detail and provide emotional emphasis. Four tricolons throughout the "big prison" paragraph emphasize defining aspects of the prison:

1) physical: "no cells, one wall, and no way out"
2) prisoners' activities: "eat, sleep, and survive"
3) provisions: "clothes, seeds for planting, and their lives"
4) prisoners' qualifications: "had a chance at rehabilitation, committed a felony, and spent time in prison."

Each of Robin's tricolons provides emphasis and *gravitas* to his proposal and helps distance it from his peers' objections and the emotions which strained the network. The paragraph structure reinforces its main ideas; a rigid essay outline helps contain a bigger and more complicated proposal. A closer look at that outline reveals the connection between this cold, detached document and the network discussion: Robin has organized his essay around the objections from his peers:

I. *Introduction: problem statement leading to thesis statement ("I have a three-part solution . . .")*
II. *First Part: Stricter Laws: defines "criminal" and rejects rights of prisoners (answers Kent)*
III. *Second Part: Rehabilitation through Work: defines different crimes (answers Bess and Estelle)*
IV. *Third Part: The Big Prison: developed in logical, classical style (detached and impervious)*
V. *Consequences of Prison: 1. use as deterrent to crime; 2. ultimate logic of lawlessness: a place with no law*
VI. *Answers Opposition: Stricter Laws: they would undermine other people's freedoms (answers Hawkeye)*
VII. *Answers Opposition: Sterilization: "Children don't deserve to live in this kind of society" (answers Mary)*
VIII. *Concession to Opposition: Money: "Money is a problem for building this big prison" (answers Sandi Lee)*
IX. *Rebuttal to Opposition: "A cheaper, but less ethical way of dealing with repeat offenders is the death penalty" (answers Hawkeye)*
X. *Conclusion: concludes with a trope on "law": "If the criminals break the laws again, it is our duty to . . . put them in a society where the only law is the law of survival."*

The above outline demonstrates how thoroughly Robin's essay was socially constructed in response to the local constraints and questions from his network peers. It is one of the ironies of this study that Robin's essay is so thoroughly socially constructed, and yet Robin began the essay with little regard for the cultural sensitivity which informs so much social construction theory. Instead, the traces of classical rhetoric—in schemes, in arrangement, and in voice—seem more suggestive. Given the violent rhetoric that surrounded Robin and his topic, I could not help but speculate about how classical structures may have been a means of protection for Robin—protection from the violence on the network. Could it be that the careful structure of classical rhetorical sentences and arguments points to some need, long ago in the early days of Greek democracy, to protect young men psychically from the violence in themselves and from their peers? Is there a connection between such rhetoric and such a stereotypically "male," violent topic? Certainly, it's

doubtful that the classical structure of Robin's essay derived from the overview of argument in *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* or the little overview of argument I gave in class. It was a structure which Robin did not reproduce in any other essay.

Robin after the Storm

In his post-class interview, I asked Robin if he had chosen his topic in order to be provocative, and what he had thought about when he became the moderator for others' debate:

> *I was looking for a topic with a feasible solution. They offered options and said what was wrong with my idea. soon one side was saying "Kill 'em" and the other side was saying "Rehab 'em" so I became the moderator. Was it provocative? Yes and no. I had had the idea before, but I also chose it to get ideas off the* bbs. *I didn't have a set proposal; I only had a rough idea. It was like I had a lump of clay and I put it into the molder, the* bbs, *and I brought it out and printed it and Viola!*

Robin's reply suggests an innocence about the network. He does not seem to see that the topic of his proposal was provocative, although he says he chose it "to get ideas off the bbs." Robin sees the network as an instrument, a "place" detached from other social constraints, perhaps a "thing" detached from his peers who wrote on it. Robin's metaphor for his writing process—taking a lump of clay and placing it in the "molder"—suggests a "fit" between Robin's composing and social constructionist thought. However, there is more technology than society in Robin's "constructionist" viewpoint. Robin's expressive style and easy manner may have been his own construction of who he wanted himself to be on the network, rather than a more genuine reaching out to his classmates through the network. He may have viewed the responses of his peer as part of the technology—part of the network itself, not expressions of individuals. When the debate on the network became heated, he saw his position as leader change to that of mediator, but Robin's commitment to the "constructionist" metaphor may have been a commitment to the

efficacy of the technology—and a commitment to his position within that technological framework.

Much of this combination of technological distances and rhetorical intimacy may have had its roots in an earlier exchange between Robin and Mary, where the network was used to reestablish strained relations after a harsh discussion in the classroom early in the course. It was an odd moment for both Robin and Mary: their disagreement suddenly happened, and it seems to have scared them both. The experience may have led him to respect Mary on the network; similarly, Mary, while disagreeing with Robin developed ways of couching her disagreements in a supportive ethos. There is a curious irony to their relationship: while Robin believed in the network as a way to construct thought and language, Mary did not. Like a "good girl," she admitted in her post-course interview that she often wrote her posts in longhand before entering them on the network; she thought through her relationship with her audience before speaking in what was always to her a public forum. With further irony, Mary's sensitivity to her audience led her to maintain her support for Robin, thus encouraging his identification with the network, his use of it as a place to think through his ideas, and his authority on it.

Bolstered by his use of the network to overcome his and Mary's classroom disagreement, Robin tried to moderate the disagreement between Sandi Lee and Hawkeye. His comments to Sandi Lee were supportive ("Sandi Lee, you have a good mind to help everyone. I respect that . . . " followed by a play on Lincoln's maxim: "You can satisfy some of the people some of the time . . . "). His comments to Hawkeye showed his exasperation but were essentially friendly ("Hawkeye, OPEN YOUR MIND DUDE . . . "). Clearly, Robin did not want to surrender his expressiveness—or anyone else's; however, he also did not want to see the network discussion die. In perhaps the most appropriate irony of the network, it was not Robin who closed the debate; it was Bess, whose post is a heartfelt cry, full of her own desire to maintain the web of connections threatened by the Hawkeye-Sandi Lee conflict:

> *Can we let the prison issue rest, since our papers are done now? Thanks!! Some people can be talked to and talked to but*

they won't change their position and you have to know when to stop and just say enough, I've done all I could, so please, no more arguing. I just hate to see people at each other's throats that's all.

Bess does not demand an end, but requests it, calling for collective, cooperative action. Her post, with its enjambed syntax and exasperated close, suggests that all the emotion on the network had been frightening for her. Hawkeye, Sandi Lee, Kent, and Robin had given new life to the cliché "at each other's throats." Watching the stridency increase, I debated whether or not to intervene and calm things down. I felt I should step in: after all, regardless of the students' creating their own "space" on the network, I was ultimately responsible, not they. However, I hesitated, and in that moment Bess asserted herself and changed the network. Bess's post made me see there was value in the students themselves handling the issue before I could. Bess's plea for an end to the argument was clear and effective. That Bess could make such a pained request indicated the freedom she felt to assert her own presence and identity on the network. While Robin could start the network, encourage discussion and debate, he could not end an argument that had gone too far; he was too tied to his own expressiveness, assertiveness and belief in the network as intrinsically good. The acrimony on the network was stopped by a woman who saw the network as less important than the relationships among the participants.

Conclusion

Robin seemed caught in an issue of authority and gender: he did not want to give up his positions (either in his argument or in his authority on the network) nor did he want to exercise too much authority (could he tell people to stop arguing? would that hurt his connections to others?). He seems to have valued greatly the network's connection to his classmates, but he may not have seen that the network was more a matter of personal relationships than technology. If for most men, as Gilligan suggests in a thumbnail summary, "Relationships often are cast in the language of achievement" (154), Robin's

identification with the network led to a sense that his "achievement"—his authority on the network—was "cast in the language of relationships." The confrontation between Hawkeye and Sandi Lee endangered the achievement because it endangered the relationship. Significantly, Robin could not end the discussion; his vision of the network—based as it was on his internal experiences and his free-wheeling expressiveness—did not encourage him to develop a balanced view of expressiveness and rhetorical sensitivity. That balance was only reestablished when Bess, who had been Robin's first respondent long ago, asserted herself and her more connected, "web"-conscious perspective.

My experience watching Robin and his classmates on the electronic network suggests that networks have their own power, that they create relationships and webs of meaning. True, it may be that Robin's opening invitation and constant reaching out to his peers established the web of meanings. It could be that if Robin had been more like Hawkeye, the network may have begun as a place where males struggled for position, excluded women, and generally replicated the power struggles and inequities of the larger social context. However, it seems that Robin's previous experience on Internet and elsewhere led him to value the network as a place to construct ideas—as an ongoing exploration; he saw it as a place where he could both assert opinions and connect with others. The replication of power struggles, as in Herring's study, seems to depend on network participants using the network more than valuing it; that is, they see the network only as a carrier of information, not a place where ideas are created. Robin always held on to the possibility for growth and change. He brought ideas to the network so they could be shaped; Hawkeye brought ideas to the network to use as weapons. If our students see the network only as a means to an end (no matter how noble that end may be) their sense of exploration and possibility will be limited, and the network itself will be seen as only a carrier of information. If, however, we encourage them to see the network as a place for experimentation, they will probably create their own "web of meanings" and find ways to overcome conflicts which threaten that web. Electronic discussions, therefore, should be seen as extensions of class

discussions; issues raised on the network should be integrated into the classroom; print-outs of network messages can be brought into class to help students better understand their own ideas and arguments through more casual—and less heated—discussion.

These rather common sense approaches to integrating electronic discussion back into the classroom may seem to undermine a clear focus on CMC in order to understand it further. However, that is just the point: does the technology of electronic discourse matter more than the sense of community that it can foster? For the teacher of writing, all this means more of the "uneasiness" Faigley discussed: a passive rather than active oversight. Perhaps this is what Batson means when he says "the way to deal with the beast is not to shoot it dead but to jump on its back and attempt to steer it" (cited in Kremers 33). The problem is knowing when to jump and when to wait, to see how the students' discussion unfolds. Allowing students to assert themselves can be as valuable a lesson in writing as anything we might assign for a grade. Bess's action was more powerful than mine could have been; her assertiveness maintained the network and also seems to have led to additional assertiveness by other female students as the semester ended. We need to allow enough time for students to have a chance to construct themselves on the network in positive ways. We need to provide opportunities for men like Robin to learn that the web of connections means more than the technology of electronic discourse; we need to provide occasions where women like Bess can assert themselves against strident rhetoric and argument that threatens the connectedness of electronic discourse. And, perhaps most difficult of all, we need to learn what it means to live with uneasiness as postmodern teachers of writing.

APPENDIX

Survey on Bulletin Board Use

(This is a reproduction of the survey used at the end of the course, with a tally of responses.)

Following is a survey about your use of, learning from, and attitudes toward the bulletin board system which has been an elective option for this class. Please think about the following questions; this survey will be used as part of some research I am doing on the use of bulletin board systems in Freshman Composition.

I. First, please indicate your use of the bbs by circling the appropriate category:

frequent user	sometime user	frequent reader	sometime reader	non-user
8	2	3	1	2

II. Please indicate whether you Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), are Neutral (N), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD) with the following statements by circling the appropriate number 1–5. If the statement is Not Applicable to your situation, then circle NA.

1. I have enjoyed the bulletin board being part of this course.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
8	8	3	–	–	2

2. I believe the bulletin board should be an *optional* part of all writing classes.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
10	7	–	–	–	2

3. I believe participation on the bulletin board should be *required* of all students.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
1	3	8	7	–	2

4. I have learned a lot from reading what my classmates have written on the bbs.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
9	10	–	–	–	2

5. Reading the bbs has helped me to write some of my essays for this class.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
6	10	2	1	–	2

6. *Reading* the bbs has helped me to think through some of my ideas for essays.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
6	12	1	–	–	2

7. *Writing* on the bbs has helped me to think through some of my ideas for essays.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
7	6	1	–	–	2

8. I have not written on the bbs because I was afraid of being criticized.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
–	4	5	6	2	4

9. I have become more aware of my own writing because I participated on the bbs.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
3	7	5	1	1	4

10. I feel more comfortable arguing my ideas because of reading/writing on the bbs.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
5	8	2	2	1	3

11. Using the bbs helped me to learn from my fellow students.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
9	7	3	–	–	2

12. Using the bbs has helped me become a better writer.

SA	A	N	D	SD	NA
5	7	6	–	–	3

III. Please use the back of this page to write any further comments you might have about using the bbs: *(following are all the comments written in response to the survey).*

- *I liked the bbs and I think it helped us think through our assignments more thoroughly. Not only that, but also it gave us our other classmates views which helped.*

- *WELL, I FEEL that the BBS was a lot of fun. Seeing what others had to say about the stories really helped and when I was confused. I would really like to see BBS boards be a normal thing because it helped me grow in the class even though I was just a reader rather than a writer.*
  It was fun.
- *The BBS has done more than help us write. It brought the class together and made it much easier to express ideas to each other. I think this is an excellent way to use our computers as much as we can and to make student*(s) *learn about how to use them. I enjoyed using the bbs.*
- *I feel the bbs is very useful and has helped me tremendously. It is a major reason why I chose Dr. A– as my professor for Comp. 112* (the second semester writing course).
- *I think the bbs* (a reference to Academic Computing, given the following:) *should possible think of having an academic bbs so that things like current affairs, student forum etc.* (campus-wide bulletin boards) *wouldn't take up space for other English Comp classes or maybe Speech. I believe the communication is good for the students and I know I have bettered from using the bbs. Students don't know what they are missing. My roommate told me her English Class couldn't get on the bbs for a board b/c there was no more space. So maybe there should just be an Academic board – who knows!!*

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