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Cyberminga

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Cyberminga*

Master's Project
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in partial fulfillment of requirements for degree of M.Ed.
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* <link to text box, p. 9>
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This project is presented in an alternative format. For some, it may be disconcerting and confusing. Others may liken the format to hypertext -- sans the ability to sprint to sections or references neatly embedded in the text. My decision to divide the pages that follow signifies more than an attempt to be trendy or postmodern. I believe there are issues of power in format and layout. Interfacing with on-line sources has helped me to conceptualize different ways to communicate and construct [my] knowledge. I want to provide you, dear reader, with a simulated hypertext experience. On the right hand side of any page you may find a citation to a book, article, hypertext source, an interview, a personal rant or, at best, a thoughtful reflection. In part this format stems from my dissatisfaction with the proverbial footnote. Other's ideas are shuffled to the end -- how many people stay to watch the credits at the end of a film? I juxtapose Expert/Colleague/Self Reflection by placing them on the left hand side of this page as a way to visually democratize this text. The Critical Arts Ensemble has some interesting things to say about footnotes too... In their publication The Electronic Disturbance the Ensemble states:

"It must be realized that writing itself is theft: it is a changing of the features of the old culture-text in much the same way one disguises stolen goods. This is not to say that signatures should never be cited; but
remember that the signature is merely a sign, a shorthand under which a collection of interrelated ideas may be stored and rapidly deployed." (Critical Arts Ensemble, 1994, p.102)

Please proceed as you like.

Within this paper is a subtextual thread that involves the issue of knowledge production and power. My backdrop are those who live without the very basic; those who will only enter this elite world of CMCs (Computer Mediated Communications) vicariously. Perhaps one may view photographs of people from the Third World on a web site. Most likely we are typing on computers that were assembled in Malaysia or somewhere in Asia. The chips and modems powering our Pentiums and cramming data up our giga-whatever hard drives are assembled by people who will probably never touch a computer otherwise. I acknowledge the severe disparities surrounding technology, the Internet and what will come next. However, I continue to believe in the positive possibilities available through Internet technologies.

The dynamic of shifting power relations within a community of learners and specifically within an online, networked environment is one of the kite tales that I acknowledge here and hope to explore in the future. For me it raises the questions; If we [students, educators, community development practitioners, bureaucrats, technocrats, business people and

Please check Aihwa Ong’s book Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia.
all hybridic variations in-between] are busily constructing our own knowledge, what is there to teach? How will we teach/instruct/facilitate/guide?

Another strand that runs through this paper, informing it and shaping my thoughts about collaborative learning and the possibilities of networked learning is the relationship that Karen Campbell-Nelson, Thomas Zschocke and I* have formed. The learning and knowledge production that has taken place between the three of us is what has sustained me during this project and what has stimulated me intellectually over the past two years. It is my sincere hope that the three of us will continue to collaborate as we make our separate ways.

I may refer to the three of us as a clump. Was David Evans the author of this phrase?

Nada se parece a nada, nada es nunca una sola historia sino una red que cada persona teje, sin entender el dibujo.

Thomas Eloy Martinez
<first the yz (whys)>

Humor me, accompany me as I duck into another ‘scape’ of myself. I need to take you to the development practitioner scape. Rewind to Latin America where the journey that ends where this document begins, or does it begin here?

When I was young and foolish and flush with idealistic notions, I signed up to serve as a volunteer with the Peace Corps. Yes, I know that you have heard the story before and probably so many times. I promise to be brief, please bear with me -- it really does set the stage for the rest of the text.

<link to Pueblo Viejo, Ecuador>

I worked with a women’s group in a small village in the foothills of Tungurahua province. Even though I was not the first gringa they had tolerated, I did take some getting used to... I was supposed to know things,

_pues_. My counterpart made sure that they knew I was a _licenciada_ which means _KNOWER OF THINGS_. Well, I did know some things, for example it’s difficult to plant fruit trees from the cab of a pick up truck and I would most certainly infect myself with ameobas if I drank the juice Doña Teresa offers me but, how could I refuse?

Arjun Appadurai is an anthropologist who studies global cultural flows. He has identified five dimensions of global cultural flows which help him explain disjunctures between economy, culture and politics. They are: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes. I borrow and modify his term here, as I flow into a tributary of my story.

_pues_ translates literally to ‘well.’ It also means ‘since.’

_licenciada_ is a person who has a B.A or B.S. degree.

_i was supposed to know things being a gringa and a licenciada, pues!’
So, when I was asked to provide instructions on how to plant vegetables -- I was shocked. Not that I didn’t know how to plant vegetables, in Massachusetts, in late Spring. Here I was in the Andes, the month of March and they wanted to know how to plant a vegetable garden from me, because I am a KNOWER OF THINGS.

Yes, I do have a problem with the concept of expert knowledge. I learned more from those women (than I have in two years of graduate school?) And I would like to entertain the idea that they learned something from me (at least to question KNOWERS once in awhile).

<link to Minas, Uruguay>

Knowing Spanish and having worked with an income generating project, Peace Corps determined that I would be useful in reestablishing the organization’s activities in Uruguay. Since there were only five volunteers to start out with, we tended to work together. We didn’t have any Uruguayan contacts and they didn’t know quite what to make of us. Besides trying to figure out Rioplatense -- even though I knew Spanish -- and how Uruguayans conducted business, I also became involved in the Natural Resource sector. Astute Volunteers that we were, we soon realized that there were a lot of people doing excellent work in conservation and environmental education, but no one was sharing their knowledge.

Rioplatense is the Spanish dialect spoken in northeastern Argentina and Uruguay.
Seeking out an EXPERT to solve problems was less of an issue in Uruguay. However, they do have a propensity to look to the Continent for socio-political definition. What I perceived to be more problematic was a lack of sharing of information. Seemed like everyone wanted the patent for the wheel...

I promise, I am almost done. I will make my point and you won’t have to read anymore about my experiences in Peace Corps.

One of the many questions that I continue to grapple with from my experience in Ecuador is: How can we as development workers perpetuate the myth that we (resource ravenous folk) have answers for them? Planting corn in Massachusetts = planting corn in Tungurahua? And, as I contemplate the Uruguayan ethnoscape: it seemed to me that people did have answers or potential solutions for one another. Perhaps, not only the mentality to share information was lacking, but, also the mediums to communicate were cost prohibitive.

Back then, I dreamt of a database, some sort of an information resource exchange. I recall heady conversations with fellow volunteers; “The best thing Peace Corps could do would be to create a regional database -- a clearinghouse of information on the environment, education, income generating projects, etc.” Weren’t we suppose to work ourselves out of a job? 

no, that really isn’t the point, is it?
More life history narrative? I promise, only a few more lines...

I spent the summer before beginning graduate studies in Washington, D.C.  
Assumption: I would have no problem finding ‘temp’ work, most likely with a government agency, given my background. Reality: I had no technical skills that most placements required. Face it, I could barely slap together a resume. I don’t think I could tell the difference between Word Perfect and MS Word... I had recently learned to type, in Spanish, on a typewriter that had traveled South a good 30 years before I arrived. Reaction: Wait on tables, spend hours in the Library of Congress and learn as much about information systems as you can. A couple blocks away, Al, Bill and Newt were pontificating about the Information Super Highway... what’s that?

Perhaps what I have enjoyed most about this project is not knowing quite where it would lead me. I have not always felt comfort cloaked in ambiguity, looking for ‘interesting things’ in the data I collected. I am grateful to Mimi Orner. She was the first academic I read who helped me to acknowledge my personal inconsistencies and those of others. In her article "Interrupting the Calls for Student Voice in ‘Liberatory’ Education: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective" she articulates something I had felt and didn't know how to express: that it is important not to "...ignore the shifting identities, unconscious processes, pleasures and desires not only of students, but of teachers,
administrators and researchers as well." (Orner, 1992, p.79)

I find this recognition of our complex selves liberating and empowering. In this journey I am a student, a facilitator and a researcher, I have made a concerted effort to embrace my 'shifting identities.'

There will be more question marks in this text than periods. Figuratively I speak. I have more questions than I do conclusive statements. There are many 'glyphs' I may pick up after this leg of the journey is complete.

<Disclaimer> This will be my story, it is mine in color and tone and depth and lack there of... It may be conversational. It may be cool at intervals, it may get hot. I will be happy if the people's voices that have helped me shape this text are heard. Es una minga, es una cyberminga...

 minga, translated loosely from Quechua means communal act or group effort resulting in social change. The mingas I witnessed in Ecuador included the expansion of irrigation ditches to indigenous people's uprising against government oppression.

<the approach>

My approach to this study was qualitative; I didn't have a hypothesis to test or a destination in mind. When I had the data set assembled (to the best of my ability) I felt like I was in the academic equivalent of a tomb in the 'Valley of the Nobles.' This is a site near Luxor, Egypt where many wealthy nobles, both men and women, were buried. They didn't have all that much gold and treasures to lie with them in their sandstone bunkers. Instead they (or their
families) hired phenomenal artisans who covered the ceilings and walls of their new residences with glyphs of vibrant colors. The stories that the pictures tell has impassioned many an archeologist. The experts claim they know the language of the ancient Egyptians. Are there any definitive interpretations of the symbols and pictures on the walls? Do they really know what the walls depict?

The data I collected are like hieroglyphs on the tomb walls and the feelings, biases and interpretations that I bring with me in my attempt to decipher the data and make meaning of this experience are like the vibrant colors used to illustrate the symbols. Below I explain the different data sets and collection procedures.

<archival, NFP material>

Networking From the Periphery (NFP) was a course offered in the Fall semester of 1996 by Thomas Zschocke, Karen Campbell-Nelson and myself under the sponsorship of Professor Bob Miltz. Our goals were to introduce Internet applications to the Center for International Education (CIE) community and create a virtual forum to explore and exchange ideas focusing on the boundaries or peripheries of the Internet. The following is the introductory piece from the NFP web site, it was called the Seminar Road Map or hypertext syllabus.
"The Internet is growing by leaps and bounds, at least among certain groups in North America and Europe. But how does it look from Africa, Asia, Latin America, or poorer communities in the U.S.? This course intends to use an international perspective to explore issues raised by the impact of the Internet on nonformal adult education, knowledge production and international development."

<http://www.umass.edu/nfp/>

The NFP web site is organized into five categories; Seminar Overview, Seminar Work, Seminar Projects, Seminar Chat and Your Net Guru. Two primary sources of data for this project are located within the Seminar Chat <http://www.umass.edu/nfp/chat/> section -- Seminar minutes <http://www.umass.edu/nfp/chat/minutes.html> and General Discussion <http://www.umass.edu/nfp/chat/discussion/maillist.html>. The Seminar minutes document face-to-face (f2f) course sessions II through X as well as the Inter-Relay Chat session. General Discussion includes postings that occurred outside of the f2f meetings, usually in reference to content issues.

<interviews>

Another primary data source are the interviews I conducted with four seminar participants. I chose people that I felt would be honest with me, given my position as one of the designer/organizer/facilitators. Purposefully, I chose two
women and two men. I was also careful to ensure representation of international students. In retrospect, I realize that the participants' computer/Internet skills level demonstrates several levels. A brief biographical description of each interviewee and their computer/Internet literacy level before enrolling in NFP follows. I have selected a distinct font for each interviewee which will help identify the source in later passages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Bio Data</th>
<th>Computer/Internet Literacy Level</th>
<th>Program of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A WHITE NORTH AMERICAN WOMAN OF APPROXIMATELY 50 YEARS OF AGE</td>
<td>MINIMAL</td>
<td>CENTER MEMBER (STUDENT AT CIE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Brazilian male of approximately 40 years of age</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>School of Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>North American woman of color of approximately 40 years of age</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Center member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nepali male approximately 35 years old.</td>
<td>Low-moderate</td>
<td>Center member</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All interviews were conducted in English. I am acquainted with all of the interviewees on both professional and social levels. The Computer/Internet literacy level is my personal assessment based on my interaction with the participants before the NFP course began.

The interview framework was intentionally broad. My only agenda was to invite some course participants to reflect on their experiences. Three main questions were posed:
1) Why did you take the course?
2) Was it a meaningful experience? Why? Why not?
3) Are you applying what you learned in the class?
   In what ways?

Depending on a participant's responses and reactions, probing questions followed. The interviews were transcribed and entered into 'The Ethnograph,' a qualitative data analysis software program. The program assisted me in several ways. It allowed me to de-contextualize and re-contextualize the data; and it helped me to observe and explore patterns in the ideas expressed by the participants.

<literature>

This component of my research I call the retrospective discovery process, also known as the 'Had I known then what I know now' revelation. Ignorance is a great teacher if you are willing to swallow your pride!

Strands of thought from the readings and concepts discussed in Arturo Escobar's 'Anthropology of Science and Technology' (ANTH 697C, Spring 1996) course and Henry Geddes' course 'Global Communication and Culture' (COMM 791T, Spring 1996) helped me form a critical perspective on the Internet and they surface here.

I did not begin this endeavor with a set body of literature. I sought sources as issues, questions and concepts emerged. It was an organic, iterative process. The categories I will
examine are: collaborative learning, constructivism and on-line networked learning. The sources will be described in more detail as they become relevant.

<i>me</i>

I am a central figure in this study. It is about my participation in the process as much as it is influenced by what emerged from the data. I am grateful for the exposure to several authors for providing me with their own stories; in part it is because of their texts and contact with some pretty amazing ordinary folk that I am empowered to create a framework that includes 'me' in this study.

Kirin Narayan pushes the boundaries of how to conduct research or do ethnography in her piece called 'Participant Observation.' It is an ethnographic fiction which grew from her problematization of anthropologists' practice.

"Anthropologists had written about divining from poisoned chickens, cowrie shells, kangaroo droppings, yarrow sticks. They wrote about how other people made sense of their lives, not about their own quests for certainty."

Narayan's work helped me to recognize that the self can be central in a research project. She insists on an honesty with one's self. In the pages that follow I will refer to

Narayan's work is found in: Woman Writing Culture, edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon neat writings!
Finally, Harry F. Wolcott suggests two approaches to interpreting data by connecting with one's personal experience. The researcher may "personalize the interpretation" (e.g. This is how I interpret what occurred in NFP) or "make the interpretation personal" (e.g. My role in NFP has helped me to think about the ways we produce knowledge in new ways.) (Wolcott, 1994, p.44) Though it may be an ambitious undertaking, I straddle both paths on this journey.

I will be drawing on all of these components; archival material from NFP, the interviews with course participants, literature and myself as a research 'artifact,' to tell this story.

<cyberculture 2 internet applications in education>

Cyberculture, according to Arturo Escobar, is a synthesis of technosociality and biosociality -- "They embody the realization that we increasingly live and make ourselves in
technobiocultural environments structured by novel forms of science and technology." (Escobar, 1994, p.214)

I had no idea when I signed up for Internet and Education my first semester that I would be stepping into a completely new culture. I now wonder if it was necessary to take a course to learn the tools of the Internet. Things like FTP, G-mail, Pine and gophers. It was akin to learning the meaning of the basic road signs. ‘Stop’ = ‘Stop.’ But, how does one interpret ‘Frost Heave’ if you don't hail from New England? I was learning to use tools that I really didn't understand.

Unfortunately there was no critical examination or analysis built into the course. Perhaps because I enrolled in Internet and Education with colleagues from the Center for International Education (CIE) who share beliefs in social justice, indigenous knowledge, gender equity, etc. and were coming from spaces far from academia, making sense out of what we were doing (or simply formulating meaningful questions) emerged from the informal conversations that Karen Campbell-Nelson, Thomas Zschocke, Totraman Gurung and I shared. I tentatively signed up for the class for 1 credit, thinking that if I were incapable of doing the work, 1 credit would be no big loss...
Beyond the professor's long drawn out narratives steeped in nostalgia, when punch card operating systems were the cutting edge, I admired his approach to the Internet. He recognized the quicksand-like properties of the medium but was undaunted by all that he didn't know and modeled an openness to learning about new technological developments. While I may not have learned much about pedagogy or the instruction of technology, by default, his teaching influenced me in how I approached the NFP participants. Encouraging, plunging in and experimenting.

On the flip side of this approach to learning about the Internet I felt frustrated by expectations that I would simply 'catch on.' Frequently I didn't understand what I was doing to accomplish a task even though I had text instructions, received via e-mail, on how to go about doing it.

I realized that the clump had unintentionally expected the participants of NFP to 'catch on' also. As I reviewed the interviews and began the coding process, one of the first codes that I named was assume, representing all of the assumptions that we (the facilitators of NFP) made according to Interviewee 1. Participants were directed to the web site to access readings, technical material, other relevant web sites, etc. The assumption was that everyone knew how to do that, how to access the NFP site. She reflected,
"I think, when I look back on it to the very first class, that I didn't understand 'HTTP.' Something as practical as that. How much did I miss that first class?" My assumption was transformed into a humbling lesson.

I think what was most disconcerting about my experience in the Internet and Education course was the lack of discussion about the technology. The message seemed to be: 'the Internet is here, let's use it in education.' Who is using it? Where is the information coming from? Who has a computer? Who has access to the Internet? We were not thinking about using it, we were just using it without a critical context. For me, that's like trying to understand the 'givens' of a geometry theorem. I could complete the Internet task, but it didn't make any sense.

Almost a year after my first Internet course, my colleagues and I thought it would make sense to synthesize issues dear to the CIE community, relate them to the Internet, and in the process, provide some bare bones instruction on the technology. The following is a list of issues (posted on the web site) that we developed, a wish list, if you will, of the issues we hoped to raise during the semester. Not very ambitious is it?
Opportunities: Increased access to information, New concepts of and spaces for nonformal education, New forms of community-building, New avenues for political activism, Open forum for a diversity of voices.

Concerns: How can public access be created and sustained? What's sexist about the Internet? How can we address the information gap between urban and rural populations? between "First" and "Third" World populations? How do global politics affect the Internet? How must we re-conceive our notions of education and development?

Areas for Exploration: The Internet and education K-100, Networking for change with NGOs, Internet support for community development, The language(s) of the Internet, Redirection of knowledge production

<Action/Reflection/Action = Brick Wall?>

At the Center for International Education, technology was/is a divisive issue. Without indulging in a lengthy position description, I want to state that I was/am technology friendly to locate myself in what I will call a fray. I am not a technophile, I do not think the Internet or any other technology will save humanity from itself. I find the time/space compression inherent to the Internet disturbing. In the Fall of 1995, we did not learn Netscape -- we did not need 'PPP' accounts for the Internet and Education course. By the end of that academic year, surfing the 'Net through Netscape or Explorer was common.
place. The rate of change, the speed is mind boggling. What makes it disturbing is to remind ourselves that the majority of the people on this planet don't ingest enough calories to sustain their weary bodies.

The world's transition into a global information economy means that those in control of or those who have access to information will have power. The more people who have access to multiple sources of information*, power and oppression will be less hegemonic. Therefore, it is imperative that adult educators and development workers explore Internet applications and their embedded political implications.

One of the NFP participants expressed her concern:

"I think that all in all when you have new technology, it is critical that we, those of us that have the ability and the advantage to learn how to use that technology and learn how to appropriate it for things that can increase access that it is critical that we do that."

I don't know quite what to make of the Internet, of how I interface with this technology on a daily basis. I think about how innocuous electronic communication among friends and colleagues has become and what it means to maintain connected to people electronically. In many ways it is a gift e.g. when I am in contact with friends and colleagues in Uruguay, for example, the time/space compression is in my favor. But what happens to relationships with friends and
colleagues when I preface a greeting with, "Did you read your e-mail?"

Wole Soyenko in his speech 'Creativity, Education, and Technology' said, "Now the world is caught up in the throes of another revolution, another quantum leap - - something truly big is happening, but perhaps nothing new, just speeding up the process." Mark Taylor perceives the "advent of the electrosphere as a viral invasion threatening the very body of knowledge and life of a university." (Yemma, 1996, p. 12)

A. Miller aired categoric skepticism of people that qualify the Internet as revolutionary -- as well as of those who refuse to acknowledge its revolutionary characteristics. The Internet is a hotbed of confusion, rife with ambiguities and politicized tension. Can you think of a better place for the Center to be?
"Why is technology not an edge we [CIE] should be cutting?"*

Networking From the Periphery took form during the Internet and Education and the clump's commitment to introduce Internet technologies to the Center community.

On different levels we all became involved in a technology working group to bring CIE into a virtual space -- beyond just having an attractive web site. We began to ask ourselves: How could the institution meld technology and education to best suit its needs? (Zucchermaglio, 1992, p.250) Thought, planning and resources are necessary to conceptualize how we as community effectively interface with the virtual sphere. Do we engage the extensive CIE network? Do we promote transnational cyberactivism? How do we go about integrating technology to promote and strengthen our mission as a community dedicated to social change?

<de•myth•a•fying the course>

Networking From the Periphery was not an on-line networked collaborative experiment. I point this out because most of the literature I found does not specifically address the interface of f2f and online collaborative learning environments. However, the insights I garnered from the collaborative network learning sources have helped me better understand NFP. Compared to what is going on now, NFP was

*thank you, Ann Hartman

cyberactivism is a concept explored by Gustavo Lins-Ribero, a Brazilian anthropologist.
like a Volkswagon Beetle bumbling along the information super highway. The clump had the luxury to meet f2f over the course of the summer, bounce one another e-mails, surf the Web for relevant information and figure out the basics of hypertext to set up the NFP home page a.k.a. the Seminar Road Map.

NFP was a traditional 'Center' course in several ways; we promoted the class by posting fliers around campus, because only five out of the 18 participants were non Center members, there was a pre-existing sense of community, and we met regularly on Wednesday afternoons during the Fall semester of 1996. Although we had communicated our idea to various CIE members in the field, there were no online participants. The technological tools that we integrated into the course format were limited to; e-mail, a web site and inter relay chat (IRC). On-line interactivity was achieved through the use of e-mail and a brief experiment with IRC.

Taking into consideration that the clump had actually participated in an academic course to learn Internet basics, a driver's training course of sorts, we contemplated instituting skills proficiency requirements for the course. Should people at least have an OIT account and know how to send an e-mail? We eventually decided that it would exclude too many people and add fuel to Center members' less than
positive discourse surrounding technology. Had we established requirements, more than half the class would have been turned away the first day. Motivations for taking the class varied; some were looking for a safe, trusting environment in which, to learn the technology, others were hoping to hone research skills. I think it is curious that the content, the issues we addressed in NFP, was mentioned by only one individual. Apparently, the content area was not an important motivating factor for the other interviewees. This is what the participants said:

"PART OF IT WAS [THE] CHALLENGE. INITIALLY, WITHOUT THE CHALLENGE, IT WAS ATTRACTIVE BECAUSE I KNEW I NEEDED IT. I WOULD HAVE GONE IN ON MY OWN BECAUSE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A NEED. BUT I WAS SCARED AND I WAS ALSO AFRAID OF THE TIME. AND I WAS AFRAID THAT I WOULD SET MYSELF UP FOR A DISMAL FAILURE...THERE WAS A NEED AND A CHALLENGE SO THEY WEDDED ENOUGH FOR ME TO GET ME THROUGH THE DOOR."

"I want an alternative than to go to the library all the time. So, I was talking to someone about the Internet, the Internet and I did not know what they were talking about. So I was afraid to take the course. I thought I cannot do it, that it would be hard for me... Once I started the first class, it was very difficult because I was not familiar with the computer systems and I was afraid to make mistakes. I was worried if I did it wrong then everything would be a mess. I was really, really cautious... But later on, I learned by doing it. I learned by my mistakes."

"I wanted to learn how to do research on the Internet and I thought I could much quicker get
information that would take me much longer if I were to go to the library and use the library system."

"I became interested in technology but at the same time I also became interested in what is going to happen with all the countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia where most of the people don't have money to have access to the technology... For people who are interested in going to these countries and participating in a process where there is economic and social development, eventually technology will be an issue to be addressed. I would like to be part of a work group like that."

One of the challenges for us as facilitators was to acknowledge the different motivations that brought people to NFP, engage people with the topics we proposed to cover and somehow help people to acquire the skills they would need to fully participate in an electronic fashion -- to fully engage the medium we would be analyzing during the semester.

In the creation phase of the course, I thought the most important part was the collection of relevant information and resources -- my concern was content. Although I recognized that we would probably have a disparate group in terms of computer literacy, at some level, I am embarrassed to admit, the two issues were separate -- I did not think about the interface between the content and how the participants, 'the users,' would approach the material. I was not the only one to disregard the big picture; Cristina Zucchermaglio has found that "the introduction of
technologies into educational settings tends to emphasize the technical aspects of the technologies more than their cognitive, educative and cultural aspects." (Zucchermaglio, 1991, p.249)

After finishing NFP and the semester, I was exhausted. I looked forward to allowing myself some distance from the course as I commenced work on my Masters’ project. My original idea for a project was to find faculty in the Five College consortium who were integrating the Internet into their classrooms and talk to them about the ways in which it [the technology] was changing the way people teach and learn. I had read and heard about a Technology Fair organized by the Five College Program so I contacted Tom Wargner, the Five College Assistant Coordinator for Information Systems. If anyone had a sense of what was happening in the ‘Happy Valley Academy’ I surmised he would.

I had a fascinating conversation with him, I was reminded of the damaging effects of wearing graduate school blinders for too long. We talk a lot about community at the Center yet we are so detached from the physical community we live in. In that sense, is CIE similar to a virtual online community?

As if the technology could somehow silently, unobtrusively transform classroom interaction. Positing the pedagogical questions in those terms is limiting and confining. Obviously, I wasn’t articulating what I was feeling at that time or conceptually, I just wasn’t there.
During our conversation, he expressed deep concern regarding the Five College community's preoccupation with 'wiring' the campuses. I learned that UMass is a member of a consortium of universities working on a project called 'Internet II.' It is a cyberleap beyond [above?] the technology that we are currently working so hard to keep up with! I wonder: How long before the computer lab on the first floor of Hills South has access to Netscape?! The ability to process words, not just statistics would be nice! I asked, "From your vantage point, what concerns you most about the Internet and technology in general?" His candor was cutting, "Students aren't mentioned." He encouraged me to explore the ways people are "coping with technology." I left that meeting disheartened. Was that what I had participated in for a whole semester, teaching people to cope with technology? Rather than pursue how others were integrating the Internet into their classrooms, I decided it would be worth re-examining the NFP experience...

There seemed to be a myriad of directions I could follow from NFP, the gylphs were rich but also distracting. I had explored the multiplicity of Hispanic identity through the Internet for my Anthropology of Science and Technology, did I want to build on that? What about gender issues of online interaction? I didn't feel impassioned by either
possibility. I proceeded to think about my interests and reflected on my learning process both in Internet and Education and in NFP. I also thought long and hard about how much time I had spent in front of a computer since returning from Latin America where I didn't have a 'virtual self.' How do I negotiate the duality of potential isolation and instantaneous bonding one may encounter by being 'wired.'

I was also attracted to this area as a result of my concern that within the technology, the virtual network, the computer work stations there exists a unsettling duality: the possibility to isolate oneself, to remove oneself from the physical reality and the ability to merge, interface and access the hearts and minds of people all over the world. The interviewees have some interesting perceptions in this area.

"My battle is do I put all those hours in electronic connectivity or do I find human beings on this campus that not only offer me the structure and content but something that a computer can't which is human contact. Because I so much get involved in my work on a day to day basis and then my studying is very individual that to support a system... is another big question for me. I'm just very concerned that the individualism is constantly being forced, people read by themselves, they watch TV by themselves.... We may be connected to people but they are in rooms by themselves."
For another individual, making connections in cyberspace was emotionally rewarding.

"I reconnected with several people. One site I got into and I asked some questions, that person answered and a friend saw that and said, 'B are you there? Send your address!' It was very exciting."

I found this direction fascinating and I was sure that I'd revisit these issues at some point, but at this stage I didn't feel prepared to pursue this direction.

OK, I was feeling lost! Where do I go with this, this thing called NFP? I needed help to make meaning out of the cyberglyphs -- what are they trying to say?! Maybe the participants had insights - I turned to them.

As I described earlier, I interviewed four participants from the NFP course. I wasn't sure where the analysis of the NFP course minutes or the process of coding the interviews would lead me. What would become the focal point of this project? If I wanted to focus on the educational aspects of NFP, I had a general idea of the literature I would review - 'Computer Mediated Communications and Education' or 'On-line learning.' The task of coding my data was incredibly helpful at this point because it helped me see that indeed, there were several themes rooted in the data that were worthy of further exploration; culture shock of going online, the 'lessness' experienced by the novice
computer/Internet user, issues of empowerment and the critical use of technology. Then I realized just how many directions I could take this, the richness of just one interview. Panic! One common thread that ran through all of the interviews was the concept of group learning and this resonated deeply in my experience with the clump. Listening to the participant's voices and my deep belief in the power and utility of group learning I noticed that the concept of group learning was important to each interviewee.

Of course for each of us, the idea of group learning signifies something different, apparent in the interview excerpts that follow.

One interviewee reflected on the importance of group interaction in direct reference to the way she learns:

"I learn much better when I talk to people, when there is a dialogue. I think the way I sort of process. I read and then I start thinking about it and then I need to talk to other people. So the areas that I missed -- it helps clarify things for me, and that opens up different directions. Then I need to go back to thinking about it myself and then I need to meet again."

Another participant valued the community of learners that he did not find in his program.

"I was researching and reading things, articles, but I feel with a course I did it in a very concentrated way. And that was good. I also had the
opportunity to regularly meet with people to discuss those issues which was also very nice."

The importance of group learning for this participant emerged from on-line projects outside of the course.

"We are very sensitive about -- we are studying here and going back there and then trying to implement what we learned. How would you call it ... an 'awakening group' This is how we would like to phrase it, how we need to start thinking about going back. The challenges we will have; how are we going to get connected? How are we going to get support?"

Another participant reflects on the limitations of the virtual environment.


Because of my experience with the co-facilitators of NFP and the learning that I had/have experienced as a result of this relationship, I felt drawn to examine the dynamics, theories and approaches behind group learning. This is the point where I decided to "mark and make the leap." (Walcott, 1994, p.40) In other words, group learning would be the lens that
I would use to interpret the data and my personal experience.

OK, I'm finally ready to articulate the 'research question.' For me the process has been just as important as the 'discovery.'

How does a study of group learning inform online educational experiences and help me identify future directions.

<cooperative learning>

The first thing that I learned is that few in academia are so crude as to refer to the group learning as group learning. The first category similar to group learning I encountered was cooperative learning. My understanding of cooperative learning is that students work together to maximize their personal learning and each other's learning in a structured, facilitated approach. According to Robert Slavin, "Cooperative learning refers to a variety of teaching methods in which students work in small groups to help one another learn academic content. In cooperative classrooms, students are expected to help each other, to discuss and argue with each other, to assess each other's current knowledge and fill in gaps in each other's understanding." (Slavin, 1995, p.2) This seemed to apply more to a traditional classroom environment and specifically with younger learners in mind. I

* See Paolo Friere's Pedagogy of the Oppressed for more information
couldn't identify with the "banking" notion* of "academic content" found within this framework; that there exists a certain empirical knowledge base that requires transmittal. This approach seemed manipulative and dishonest. I then turned to 'collaborative learning' in an attempt to strengthen my interpretation of the interviews with some theory.

<collaborative learning>

Collaborative learning involves a group of peers, joined by common interests - not by a problem or issue that requires 'solving.' It is the process of making meaning through discourse; the process in which we create knowledge through reflection and analysis of personal experience and that of others through text, hypermedia, oral narratives, etc. There are a variety of mediums used in collaborative learning, I am interested in the online environment.

There were stresses/limitations involved in applying this approach to an interpretation of the NFE experience. I have already mentioned the disparities among the participants' computer and Internet literacy levels. Although we suggested a 'buddy system,' not everyone participated and some expected that we facilitators would provide them with 'expert instruction' vs. working together to figure out the technological applications. It was frustrating to have to
remind my colleagues that NFP was not primarily a technology or 'how to use the Internet' course. One interviewee expressed a similar frustration with his colleagues:

"I felt sometimes there was a lack of control, there was so much flexibility and that sometimes the adult learner is childish. "I know what I need." But they are not doing the work. I don't know how to handle it... The same thing is happening to us... That would be something if we started out with articles about adult learning to remind people... They should reflect on it, it makes people think and look at themselves. They don't have to agree with it."

Not everyone is ready to assume responsibility for their learning and many expected us, the facilitators, to set out our expectations of what people should learn [to be fulfilled by compliant 'learners'?

The literature I reviewed that discussed collaborative learning referred to constructivist theory. Without getting too far onto a theoretical track I felt it was important enough to at least investigate. What I discovered about constructivism resonated with my experience in NFP. My understanding of the constructivist paradigm is that people construct knowledge; it is an active process and not a process of receiving, synthesizing and analyzing information from external sources. Experiences inform and become a part of the knowledge that we create; the process of making meaning for ourselves. In essence,
exploring the theoretical tenants of constructivism helped me to discover new meaning in my experience with the NFP course and the clump's collaboration. This tangential venture into theoretical discourse helped me to bring my experience full circle. Working through this has been a process of conscientização -- ass backwards? Perhaps...

So what does collaborative learning have to do with cyberminga? How do these pieces fit together?

_Patience, please I'm getting there..._

'The very nature of the medium leads to problems,' according to David K. Scott, chancellor of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. 'The Web requires a non-linear approach to information-gathering,' he says. 'A book or magazine is linear. You read one page, then you go to the next. But, on the Web, information is fragmentary. You read small parts and then you branch out to something else. Unless the user can integrate, synthesize, and connect information, it is easy to become unfocused and just move from one thing to the next gathering useless information.' What's needed is education in the use of the Web, says Scott. 'We're at a point where the rules and regulations are needed on the responsible use of the Internet.' (Weinstein, 1997, p.B12)

"The more the learner is naturally embedded in the authentic use of the information and has experience in the domain to be able to determine relevance and envision the use of the information, the less we need to worry about providing an authentic learning activity."

(Honebein, Duffy, & Fishman 1993, p.93)
Neither passage refers specifically to networked learning, but I juxtapose these passages for two reasons. 1) I think the juxtaposition illustrates an interesting rift that is occurring in the academy and, in larger terms, a rift in the notion of where and by whom knowledge is produced, consumed and digested and 2) Both statements are equally disputable. They provide me with a frame to locate myself and contextualize my ideas regarding networked learning.

Scott doesn't take into consideration the breadth of applications available to support, augment and potentially replace traditional learning environments. Without a deeper understanding of the Internet it is easy to say, 'endless hours of Web surfing is distracting and has little educational value.' I would agree.

The second statement pushes the boundaries of constructivism -- how do we develop a sense of relevance? How do we make meaning of a concept? Naturally embedded? Authenticity? What does this passage suggest?
I want to take a few steps backwards. To make meaning on a personal cognitive level we need to be able to 'build concepts.' One of the ways we go about building or constructing is by interacting with peers. I think that it is fundamental to have the opportunity to discuss and share ideas. I base this on my personal experience with the clump as well as my interpretation of the data I collected; the interviewees talk about meeting, discussing, sharing and talking about things to clarify issues. I do not pretend that this is any great revelation, group learning has been taking place since time eternal. Learners connecting through the Internet to form networked learning environments is relatively new, certainly new for me.

According to Linda Harasim, "in order to facilitate sense-making and knowledge building within online group discussion activities, the system needs to support three educational processes: idea generating (and gathering), idea linking and idea structuring." (Harasim, 1990, p.55) Based on my experience, I think some parameters are necessary to create a meaningful experience. But experimentation, earnestly working with the technology and trying the various Internet applications [not quite embedding oneself in the technology] is also important. The challenge is to balance the two approaches.

Learning networks are characterized by interactive group communication. The Internet affords "the unique combination of place independent, asynchronous interaction among groups of
people..." (Harasim, 1994, p.979) This new phenomenon is what Harasim calls "network learning" and it introduces a new learning paradigm. (IBID)

Network learning produces several questions, issues and concerns that I will discuss as I bring this paper to closure.

<questions>

1. I have already examined cooperative and collaborative learning. I have ever so superficially delved into constructivist theory. What happens when group learning and collaboration occur online? What happens when we don't have the opportunity to meet f2f, when we are networked and our classroom becomes a computer screen? Are we truly working together? In what ways do the real life context and virtual context merge or interface? Do they interact at all? If they don't, is the experience less meaningful? Are we talking about interstructivism? I think that educators at all levels should be involved in this discourse, on and off line.

2. In what ways does the online network learning environment redefine the role of the facilitator(s)? How do we facilitate effectively? In the online network learning paradigm, does the ever changing technology de-expertize the facilitator/teacher/professor/guru? Or, does the technology
reinforce the expert image? How can educators use network learning to democratize the learning process?

<i>issues</i>

If I participated in the design of a online network learning environment I would consider the following issues:

- **Group dynamics.** Do people know how to work together in a group? Do they have experience on-line? Do all participants understand basic 'Netiquette' (online etiquette)?

- **Familiarity with the current technology.** For example: Are people comfortable with checking their e-mail on a regular basis. Are the participants capable of using a web browser and conducting online searches for information?

- **Broadcasting thoughts and opinions.** People may be reluctant to interact in the 'one to many scenario.'

- **Records.** People may feel inhibited with on-line discussion that is subsequently entered into a data base.

- **Writing.** Do people feel confident writing. The 'Net is primarily text based, at least for some time to come...

- **Internet as a Second Language.** Even though English is the dominant online language, not everyone is comfortable expressing themselves in a language other than their native tongue.

- **Anxiety.** For example: Technology changes much faster than we do, how do we handle feeling like we are lagging behind.

- **Knitting.** How do we piece our real and virtual selves together in meaningful ways?

<i>future directions</i>

I am grateful for this opportunity to reflect on NFP, 'discover' collaborative learning and constructivist theory.
Throughout the journey, I have thought about the broader discourse on knowledge production and issues of power. More than once I have had to remind myself that I write this for my own growth and learning. This statement is not rooted in narcissism. It is my sincere hope that this journey has produced virtual food for thought. As for me, the experiment shall continue. I have a great deal more to explore.
Hi Folks,

I went ahead and contacted several New England farmers who are working in seed bank initiatives. One woman told me that she had been contacted by the lawyers of the Archer Daniels Midland - Dupont conglomerate. They are trying to intimidate the small producers. Can you imagine -- the big boys feel threatened by little fish sharing heirloom sweet corn seeds!

KCN, I think the time is ‘ripe’ to connect as many farmers as possible. I am convinced that they are the key to hegemony in food production. How do we facilitate communication? What do we do with the language issue?

TZ, do you think you could contact people in Malaysia that would be interested? Any ideas how we go about the ‘wiring’ process? BTW, I thought your presentation at the World Wide Well forum was superb. What translation application are you using these days? The English and Spanish versions were excellent!

So, could we agree on a time to have an online video conference? I volunteer to be the bleary eyed one this time. I really think you are onto something, KCN! I look forward to seeing you both soon.

PS. Please send me Sam’s hypertext menu index site, I have a new recipe he may want to test out for his restaurant

All my best, Jane
<references>


<online references>

Networking from the Periphery.  


General Discussion.  
<bibliography>


<online bibliography>