A Web-Based Bulletin Board As Edward Soja's "Thirdspace": ESL And LGBTQ Students Claim Home Turf

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Information Literacy Proposal for Burton, Price, Hayslett, Li

Abstract of about 250 words:

As teachers of writing to university students, we aim to help students experience and understand the social uses of information: in particular, how writing interprets, defines and extends cultural space and communicates that understanding to others. Electronically mediated communication, as a means of producing and sharing new kinds of knowledge about students’ social worlds, calls on students to process, interpret, and respond to social information to negotiate cultural spaces.

The students whose writing we examine were from an ESL class in first-year composition and an upper-division class, “Writing the Body.” Both sets of students were marginal to the mainstream culture of GSU: the international students overtly so, through their nationality and second-language user status, and the local students more subtly so, either through their self-identification as LGBTQ or their support of LGBTQ peers. Members of both classes, therefore, faced the challenge of negotiating their cultural space as university students and representatives of minority subcultures.

The two classes were twinned through joint course planning and use of an electronic bulletin board. This cyberspace locus, one of virtual disembodiment, functioned as what Edward Soja has called a “Thirdspace,” a space created by human practice.

One posting, a plea for more “space” for sexual abuse survivors, created a chain of comments and responses. Reading the diverse WebCT entries as a complete text reveals the students’ need to be heard, willingness to find common ground, and desire to claim and inhabit a space on the college campus.

Longer Version of Abstract:

The ideas explored in this paper were generated through dialogue between two colleagues at the Department of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University. Both are writing teachers and researchers, one British and one American; one with experience in teaching ESL university students in Hong Kong and the other in teaching American university students on campus and in classes overseas. Our exchange of ideas gave rise to collaboration in course planning for international and local students, and in the action research reported here.
As teachers of writing to university students, we aim to help students experience and understand the social uses of information: in particular, how writing interprets, defines and extends cultural space and communicates that understanding to others.

Electronically mediated communication, as a means of producing and sharing new kinds of knowledge about students’ social worlds, calls on students to process, interpret, and respond to social information to negotiate cultural spaces. We argue that all knowledge, however, begins with the body, the physical space that it occupies, and the territory that the individual defines as “home.” The taken-for-granted nature of this reality is challenged and disrupted by the experience of moving into a new cultural space, whether this space is defined physically (for example by moving away from home or studying overseas) or in discursive and conceptual terms (for example by writing in a second language or an unfamiliar genre. Cultural space can be seen as an extension of personal identity in more ways than one: both as the set of physical circumstances through which individual consciousness is shaped, and as the set of images and conceptual connections through which individuals construct a world in which they can find a place. Students do not, therefore, enter a writing class – whether in their first or second language – as empty vessels waiting to be filled; in most cases, they already have some experience of cultural space as “home” and some expectations of the new spaces they hope to inhabit.

The students whose writing is examined in this paper were from two classes: an ESL class in first-year composition taught by Burton and an upper-division class, “Writing the Body,” taught by Price. Both sets of students were marginal to the mainstream culture of the Georgia Southern campus: the international students overtly so, through their nationality and second-language user status, and the local students more subtly so, either through their self-identification as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Questioning (LGBTQ) or through their association with and support of LGBTQ peers. Members of both classes, therefore, faced the challenge of negotiating their cultural space as university students and representatives of minority subcultures.

The two classes were twinned through joint course planning and some shared assignments. The professors set up a WebCT area, “Writing our Space,” on which students could post and respond to each others’ writing. This electronic bulletin board functioned as what Edward Soja has called a “Thirdspace,” a space created by human practice.

We wondered if an opportunity to tell their stories to a wider audience would empower our students. In particular, we wondered if the disembodied locus of cyberspace would influence the students’ abilities to write about their bodies. Could losing their bodies enable them to write their bodies? One story posted on the bulletin board, a plea for more “space” for sexual abuse survivors, created a chain of comment and response from both classes. This writing showed a diversity of reactions, but also a willingness to
find common ground and to share perceptions of courage. Reading the bulletin board entries as a complete text reveals the students' need to be heard and their desire to claim and inhabit a space on the college campus.

**Description of Presentation (3 or 4 sentences)**

The presentation will begin with a description of a research project on mediated communication between LGBTQ and ESL students. Pertinent theory from a variety of academic fields will be summarized, followed by an analysis of the research questions and methods. Two students involved in the project will participate in the panel, one in person and one via webcam. The panel will conclude with some general observations about the research.

**Technology Needs**

We will use Power Point and will be having a student in China join the panel via webcam.

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**Gaoqing Li**

**Huazhong Normal University**

**Wuhan, China**

*(video conference participant)*