

The Silent Hours: Exploring the Interactivity of Text, Reading, and Conversation for the Classroom

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Inquiry into the experience of MMDI 405-01, a class conducted entirely in text.

ABSTRACT

When we speak, there is an inherent structure to the information we transfer. This structure is dependent on a number of factors. When we write, the information transfer takes on a visual presence. In the academe, the professor lectures and the students write. This relationship and others like it culturally express power. Though many classrooms employ fruitful and pedagogically beneficial discussion, subverting the verbal paradigm in the classroom produces some curious, profound, and enlightening results. It became clear that running a classroom completely in text necessitated a reliance on technology. That reliance resulted in some unexpected discoveries. Can technology in the classroom (and perhaps in other contexts) assist us in overcoming or subverting normative power structures?

1. INTRODUCTION

The Interactivity of Text or “Mute-tations”, MMDI 425-01, was a special topics class offered to students in the Multimedia Department at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. This seminar explored the subversion of normative power structures by creating the thinking space of the classroom around communicating only in text. Complete reliance on technologies and different content management systems (i.e. American Online Instant Messenger, WebMeeting, WikiSpaces.org, forums, and ‘note passing’) illuminated the

shortcomings and benefits of traditional, classroom-based pedagogy. It challenged the power/ status dynamics student to student, teacher to student. Finally, the experience revealed the range of possibility within each technology required to communicate everything from classroom policies to the abstract ideas involved in using technology to teach about technology.

2. ESTABLISHING TECHNE/ ACKNOWLEDGING VISUAL PRESENCE

The etymological origin of the word ‘technology’ is the Greek word *techne*¹. In order to create a new communication paradigm for the classroom, we defined text as *techne* or “a set of rules, systems, or methods of making or doing whether of the useful arts, or the fine arts” (Bolter, 2001, p.15) because the one of the tenets of our University community as a whole is the integration of process, product, and craftsmanship.

Using the word *techne* to transformed the [Mute-tation]community’s idea and use of text. It elevated our notion of text from a transparent mode of communication (and one we would not notice) to one to where even the slightest variation in weight, caps and color would be highly visible or opaque. It was my intention to draw attention to even subtle variations in text style, meaning, and readability. Without speech, there was some initial confusion about what we were studying. Some

students thought we would be studying typography but just not talking about it. *Techne* identified writing as a communication *practice*; simultaneously process and product. It led us to question our relationship with the way we write, what we write, where we write it and to whom we write.

Transforming writing from a technology to a *techne* was important for the community for another reason. If we were going to rely on anything for all in class communication, whatever we chose needed to be completely stable in its use as an interface to replace allocution. Whatever method we chose had to be unchangeable and mastered by all community members in order to be used as a foundational tool.

The difficulty lie in relaying course materials to the students by dynamic means. There is an immediacy to speech which writing can not rival. In order to accomplish the dynamicism and immediacy required to impart lecture concepts, we had to combine the *techne* of text with an immediate vehicle. On more than one occasion, the layered effect of delivery was at best clear and at worst undecipherable. As with any classroom experience, we were striving to illustrate that what we were studying was at the same time how the material was being delivered. Community members often felt an inability to “filter”ⁱⁱ the information in the classroom discussions, especially in AOL Instant Messenger.

3. THINKING TOGETHER

Roland Barthes, in *Writers and Intellectuals*ⁱⁱⁱ writes “In order to subvert the Law (and not simply get around it), the teacher would the to undermine voice delivery, word speed, and rhythm to the point of *another* intelligibility. Or not speak

at all; which, however, would be to rejoin other roles again—that of the great silent mind, mute with the weight of experience, or that of the militant who in the name of praxis dismisses all discourse as futile. Nothing to be done: language is always a matter of force.” In creating the concept for the experience^{iv}, several things about this quote from Barthes stayed with me. Subverting power by altering the voice delivery, word speed, and rhythm led me to hypothesize that in the absence of allocution, students otherwise unwilling to participate would be more likely to participate in classroom activities *if* they became engaged in both the discussion topics as well as the technology. Next, ‘the great silent mind’ is largely a construct of a pedagogy that discourages dialogic interaction. The [Mute-tations] community was an attempt to honor a pedagogy that would probe the limits of techno-modern praxis and begin to subtly define it while exercising it. Finally, Barthes envisions language as ‘always a matter of force’. Could a learning environment exist that would equalize the minds present and destabilize our preconceived notions of power and how it plays out in the pursuit of knowledge? What could ‘another intelligibility’ be in our context?

3.1 ACCESS: PRIVILEGE

The Internet has been called an ageless, genderless, raceless frontier. It is ubiquitous enough to shape popular culture but not yet ubiquitous enough to be accessed and owned regardless of socio-economic status. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, nearly a quarter of online Americans use the Internet at places besides home or work. More than half of Internet users go online in multiple places^v. However, figures from 2004 indicate that 37.0 million Americans were living in

poverty.^{vi} This represents an increase of 1.1 million. In other words, an American family of four is considered impoverished if their net income is under \$18850.

The official metric for determining poverty is based on both household income and a poverty threshold score established by the Department of Agriculture in 1964. So when The Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that families 'with annual household incomes of less than \$30,000, 28% have logged on from a location other than their home or place or work. School (31%), libraries (30%), and friends' /neighbors' houses (26%) are the top "other" locations identified by this group. On a typical day, 71% of those from low-income homes accessing the Internet from a "third place" do so at a school, with a library and a friend's/neighbor's house each accounting for 12% of other location usage. The figures regarding access to the Internet are only as accurate as the income sample if the benchmark for the measurement family income is set at \$30,000 dollars. The [Mute-tations] community was concerned with equal access to their academic discourse.

The Internet is a public medium but it is not a free one. User economics determine access. For a user with net income under \$18850, or a poverty metric based on having a household, information on the Internet can only be accessed by those with privilege.

3.2 ACCESS: VIRTUALITY

After establishing technology and the inequity of access as primary concepts that shaped the way the [Mute-tations] community was building its knowledge base, the criteria of access began to change. In a chat environment, users are usually

geographically and physically isolated from one another. But this didn't stop AOL buddies from joining the chat or making an attempt. Access became such a persistent issue, I decided to assign each student to 'bring' a chat buddy to class to affect the course of the discussion. In most cases, the AOL buddies were more witness to the discussion because [Mute-tations] community members had quickly developed a short hand and rhythm to their chats. And for most of the guests, the idea of a class conducted entirely in chat was simply too weird to think about critically.

The community was developing their ideas of being 'here' or 'present' or 'non-absent'. For example, one student, rsara, had to travel to another state for a performance but still 'came to class' and was an active member virtually. Another student, newtoncluster made a presentation to our chat and email accounts via text messaging and was not physically in the room. His absence did not reflect a lack of preparation on his part. He'd prepared the material by making his technology opaque.

Though SMS proved to be an unwieldy method for presenting data to a group, the technology enabled him to be present virtually. The difficulty came when each community engaged him dialogically on his presentation materials. The volume of data was more than his phone could process and a considerable delay resulted. Newtoncluster's SMS presentation illustrated the dual nature of technomodern information transfer. We are simultaneously public and private in our transmissions to one another whether we are virtually or physically present.

4 (EM)POWER

Chat rooms have served as ‘laboratories for the construction of identity’^{vii}. The [Mutations] community created its identity as a whole. And members within it began to enjoy the sense of exploration created with the introduction of Barthes’ idea that ‘language is always a matter of force’. Their identities in the community formed quickly as they pushed the envelope of the distribution of power inside the thinking space. What was their shaping power? What were the things that would get them ‘in trouble’? What did they have to do to get a high mark? All perfectly normal with the exception that I would not use my voice and requested that they not use their voices as a ‘matter of force’ within the community. The result was surprising.

Communicating exclusively in text is hard. No doubt about it. Managing a classroom and inquiring into the power relationships of pedagogy make the experience nearly a group meditation. How do I get them not to interrupt the class discussion?

SURROKURE: hi there

K.LYNNE KOVAL-BAUER: hi again.

NEWTON: yes

NEWTON: this is good

SURROKURE: woot

NEWTON: WOOT WOOT

NEWTON: chugachugachugachuga^{viii}

Cross-talk and off task behavior, technology, application compatibility and wireless functionality were the first challenges to address.

SURROKURE: klynne can you invite the other i don't know their screennames

K.LYNNE KOVAL-BAUER: I don't either.

NEWTON: blargh

and then

K.LYNNE KOVAL-BAUER: No. You have an assignment later and an activity to do today.

K.LYNNE KOVAL-BAUER: I'll show you.

CONVERGER: okie

K.LYNNE KOVAL-BAUER: Who's missing?

SURROKURE: donno

NEWTON: wheres the class list

K.LYNNE KOVAL-BAUER: There are some students that are not on it. most of you.

SURROKURE: ☹

NEWTON: does that mean i can go home and play with my kittens?

K.LYNNE KOVAL-BAUER: Wo ist Jonathan?

CONVERGER: is this the whole class? as in, in the room

SURROKURE: wait who is converger

NEWTON: peter

K.LYNNE KOVAL-BAUER: Yes, missing one person who is having drama.

SURROKURE: ah

NEWTON: DRAMA

NEWTON: BUM BUM BUM

CONVERGER: fiddle sticks

K.LYNNE KOVAL-BAUER: New kittens?

SURROKURE: rockonchicago is that darien?

IRISHBROTHAMAN: it will be like "physical text"

ROCKONCHICAGO: everything has to be text? she was using hand gestures earlier

DEREZZZ: oh.

SURROKURE: i'm still not really understanding what we are doing in this class.

Surrokure was skeptical. Another student, kos, was very enthusiastic. The variation between the student responses have to do with the creative practice of each student and experience level in university study. Both students are aptly technical and experienced with WiKi, chat vehicles, e-mail and SMS. I could not sense any technical impediment to student empowerment. By the conclusion of the experience, they'd switched perspectives. Surro felt the class was among the best he'd had and kos was deeply uncomfortable with the class operation as well as the material covered.

Each member of the [Mute-tations] community could see his/her relationship to technology, orality and literacy by the end of the experience. What is immediate, transparent technology intended to do? Each of us had to define this. Each students' comfort level emerged from this core question. In surro's case, he's part of builder culture. Much of the art he creates is information based and done virtually. His work tends to be complex and poetic attempts at self-portraiture done in dynamic information and hypertext. In contrast, kos' practice has a base in performance and RSS. He was looking forward to exploring the performative power of text. By the end of the experience, it was clear that we'd all experienced a 'textual, technical' performance of our power roles and as thinkers. But for both surro and kos, the defining factor was how the technology was used. For one, surro, information technology is the content and method of his creative practice. For kos, technology is

used to *manage* the content content of his creative practice.

This distinction shaped the experience of other community members. One student, rockonchicago, is generally reserved in a traditionally classroom situation. In the virtual classroom, his contributions were frequent, insightful, and informative. For students CaptRocketSauce & discomoeopho their contributions to classroom conversation decreased, both citing a difficulty filtering both the content and the pace of the conversations.

UnrepentantAngel was the only other woman in the class. The gender balance of the group was her first observation:

unrepentantangel (1:05:19 PM):

Am I the only other chick in here?

UnrepentantAngel has an active life online and is very comfortable filtering, processing and socializing online. Her contributions to the chat most often were rebuttals or comments. Occasionally, a male participant would comment on her chat behavior.

miniwonderboy (1:16:51 PM):

angel why add XP after everything you say?

unrepentantangel (1:17:00 PM): It's an emoticon.

unrepentantangel (1:17:03 PM):

Sorry. Habit.

4.1 STRANGE CONNECTIONS & CHANGES FROM WITHOUT

What happens when a person truly from the outside of the community enters the conversation? For converger to fully open

up during our chat, a person outside of our community had to draw him out.

basskitten215 (3:08:10 PM): how did your girlfriend feel by you not really writing anymore

converger (3:08:19 PM): she was pissed at me

basskitten215 (3:08:32 PM): did that make you feel guilty?

converger (3:08:33 PM): she thought i half asses the last letter, which i kinda did

basskitten215 (3:08:47 PM): :-D:-D:-D

converger (3:08:50 PM): yeh

converger (3:08:53 PM): well

basskitten215 (3:09:08 PM): are you still with said girlfriend?

converger (3:09:16 PM): i made her 2 or 3 amazing arty letters/envelopes so i got tired of it, she was getting needy

basskitten215 (3:10:14 PM):
converger

basskitten215 (3:10:24 PM): how do you think your gf would feel about letters vs. journaling?

profgradenko (3:10:35 PM):
interesting, bass.

converger (3:10:42 PM): online or private

basskitten215 (3:10:46 PM): i am in the process of keeping a journal that i plan on giving my bf when it is filled, which could be in another year. it's already been a year.

basskitten215 (3:10:48 PM): private. or online.

For all the members of [Mute-tations], the boundaries of technologies became more visible when DeRezz brought a buddy into the community for whom text plays a central, communicative role. In this class

exercise, in order to explore the relationship between orality and literacy, I posted a sound file online. It was my intention that the students and their class guests listen the file and participate in an exercise that was oral in their respective locations but textual on the screen.

DeRezz (1:34:37 PM): oh...hey everybody...my buddy's deaf

DeRezz (1:34:47 PM): so, passing a sound file just got more interesting

profgradenko (1:34:49 PM): So if I ask you to do an exercise with sound....

unrepentantangel (1:34:55 PM): I'm confused too. Seems to be my constant condition.

profgradenko (1:34:58 PM): how do we include all class and all buddies?

unrepentantangel (1:35:07 PM): Guess we don't.

profgradenko (1:35:17 PM): I don't think that's an option,

unrepentantangel (1:35:18 PM): Unless we chip in for a cochlear implant.

DeRezz (1:35:22 PM): linguistics techne

Until this chat, I think the community had not fully considered the all the possible impediments to participation. We'd thought about economics and inequity. We'd considered gender and the power inherent in language. We thought about reality versus virtuality and location. For DrkStrgr, text held a central role in his communication and reliance on technology. The community went into overdrive to brainstorm including DrkStrgr in the experience.

rsrabhai (1:42:14 PM): there are macromedia breeze conferences that have a text timeline going on, on the left bar

miniwonderboy (1:42:20 PM): it's a 3D chat environment where you can see people, hear them, and read them (IM's, PM's, etc.)

rsrabhai (1:42:23 PM): that keep track of everything being said – like minutes in a meeting

profgradenko (1:42:41 PM): mini, rsrabhai, say more.

rockonchicago 23 (1:43:15 PM): live feed?

rsrabhai (1:43:23 PM): well its like someone can hold a conference online – people can take part – yes its a live feed

profgradenko (1:43:40 PM): should we do this?

rsrabhai (1:43:41 PM): there can be video, audio, text, remote desktop features...

miniwonderboy (1:43:45 PM): well the nice thing about There.com is that people, no matter if they are deaf or blind, can either hear or read what a person has to say

kos (1:43:50 PM): yea, what if we were to do a live quicktime stream, where the audio source is the file playing, and the video feed is that of a computer screen, and someone transcribes

profgradenko (1:43:54 PM): is this an equitable solution?

miniwonderboy (1:44:12 PM): furthermore, the program include gestures which are universal to any country and ethnicity

rockonchicago 23 (1:44:18 PM): where do we get video from

rsrabhai (1:44:20 PM): [\[are/breeze/productinfo/meeting/experience/index_mm.html\]\(http://www.macromedia.com/softw/are/breeze/productinfo/meeting/experience/index_mm.html\)](http://www.macromedia.com/softw</p></div><div data-bbox=)

profgradenko (1:44:24 PM): Can we divide this workflow and make it go?

rsrabhai (1:44:58 PM): check out the breeze simulation online

rsrabhai (1:45:00 PM): its pretty cool

rockonchicago 23 (1:45:02 PM): we're just talking sound and text right now, no video right?

profgradenko (1:45:29 PM): This is open for solving.

profgradenko (1:45:35 PM): I'm ready to learn like the rest of you.

profgradenko (1:45:48 PM): How do we want to use text for innovation and comm

profgradenko (1:46:22 PM): The scenario is.....

rsrabhai (1:46:41 PM): the bonjour feature/scenario on ichtat is closer to verbal communication – since you can see letters as the person is typing

As the session with DeRezzz and DrkStrgr progressed, the community began to expand their understanding of integrating media.

DStrngr (1:53:23 PM): emoticons are the reason why Deaf people like Video Relay services better than IP or phone relay services

unrepentantangel (1:53:28 PM): Well, I haven't seen too many myself. Basically Phantom of the Opera with Lon Chaney.

profgradenko (1:53:29 PM): not until the Jazz Singer by Al Jolson was there sync'd sound.

converger (1:53:30 PM): alright

rsrabhai (1:53:33 PM): but there were also "silent" movies that were

truly silent – the filmmakers didn't want live accompaniment

rockonchicago 23 (1:53:52 PM):
yeah that's what i'm talking about

DStrngr (1:53:53 PM): we are able to pick up on "inflections" from the interpreters

rsarabhai (1:54:03 PM): stan brackage, in the 80's made silent films because he thought the sound, in addition to the images would be too much for the audience to take in

profgradenko (1:54:09 PM):
DStrngr, what do you mean?

profgradenko (1:54:34 PM):
because Controlling the interactivity has more to do with the way text and image make their relationship than the ratio or number of images to text included in the experience.

DStrngr (1:54:35 PM): ok i mean for example u called me using the phone relay... i need to use a tty

DStrngr (1:54:47 PM): i cant see a "face"

classroom by creating a reliance on text and technology, the experience allowed for collaborative thought. Though not a complete departure from the customary power dynamic, the resulting behavior, commonly associated with dominant attitudes about gender and accessibility were brought into high relief during course of chat and classroom exercises.

The silent hours also led the community members to exam their personal sense of privilege. Students discovered that enrollment in an institution of higher learning constitutes privilege. Examination of this privilege led to a heightened sense of social sensitivity.

We also saw the chat space emerge as a laboratory for the construction of identity. As each member derived the character of their moniker, each moniker contributed to the character of the whole.

Finally, the silence produced a thinking space created, moderated, and enriched by students. They drew one another out and produced a heightened sense of understanding.

5. CONCLUSION

On the last day, they spoke. I never did. The discussion began with them introducing themselves by their real names. They'd known one another only by moniker and by appearance. The 45 silent hours of the [Mute-tations] community produced some unexpected results. While hoping to subvert the main power relationship in the

ⁱ Bolter, Jay David. *Writing Space*, 2001. Bolter describes writing as a technology tied into human material culture by cultural practices. He advocates for a broader than common definition of technology to include that which 'includes skills as well as machines'. Bolter's thinking, like the [Mutations] community's, exists because an expanded definition exists by including the machine.

ⁱⁱ Direct quotation. Wicks, Matthew.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barthes, Roland. *IMAGE TEXT MUSIC*. 1978.

^{iv} Technically, the 'experience' was a class offered for credit at the University of the Arts. But even ten minutes into the first meeting, the performativity as well as the interactivity were abundantly visibly. There were skeptics.

^v http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/115/report_display.asp

^{vi} <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty.html>

^{vii} Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, 1995.

^{viii} [Mute-tations] Class transcript 09.02.05 conducted on iChat.app for MAC OSX.