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## ABSTRACT

In a feminist classroom an instructor who acts as an "interested party" rather than an authority, fosters an environment of care and connection which can result in life-changing discoveries for the participants. Drawing on David Bleich's conception of a "socially generous research" that removes hierarchical barriers between teacher and student, a study questioned participants in three feminist composition courses at a de-centralized branch of SUNY Empire State College where computer networking was the primary mode of writing instruction. The courses were organized around a set of professional readings concerned with issues of power: Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Glaspell's "Trifles," Rodriguez's "The Achievement of Desire," and Rich's "When the Dead Awaken." Students responded to professional readings through large-group "discussion" and prepared "response writings" for small-group peer review. Sharing of personal experience among disparate individuals on the computer's free space and struggling to be understood in that public context contributed to clearer, more developed writing and also to new voices. One Spanish-speaking student who had lost her voice when forced to speak English in the public schools, found that peer collaboration on the computer allowed a special in-between space, a site for shaping voice through relationship, for responding through mind and heart. Responding to a questionnaire three years after the course was completed, many of the students maintained that the course had had fundamental effects on their lives. (Contains 10 references.) (TB)

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Finding Voice through Teacher-Student Collaboration in a Feminist  
Research Project: Long-Term Effects

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Paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and  
Communication

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## Finding Voice through Teacher-Student Collaboration in a Feminist Research

### Project: Long-Term Effects

In questioning traditional modes of representation in ethnography, feminist anthropologists Frances Mascia-Lees, Patricia Sharpe, and Colleen Ballerino Cohen caution anthropologists about becoming consumed with the individual subjectivism of postmodernism. Instead, they take advantage of this upheaval in anthropology to hold before anthropologists the research agenda of feminists, which structures research with the political aim of working toward the elimination of oppression (8, 20, 27, 33). Even with this goal, Mascia-Lees and her colleagues, citing feminist anthropologist Judith Stacey, note that some subjects may feel threatened by investigations of the more privileged researcher. Integral to the feminist research suggested by Mascia-Lees et al. is the focus on the role of the researcher and the researched. Building upon Gilligan's ethic of care, Noddings grounds this relationship in "fidelity, a precondition for subjectively satisfying relations and a continuing condition for their maintenance." Noddings discusses the importance of fidelity in research relationships as well as teacher-student relationships, explaining that "in educational research, fidelity to persons counsels us to choose our problems in such a way that the knowledge gained will promote individual growth and maintain the caring community (506--508)."

As well as a caring community, feminist researchers advocate a reciprocal relationship between researcher and subject. Describing the research process that led to Women's Ways of Knowing, Belenky notes that the women subjects became " 'real participants,' helping to write the project in 'their words' and to listen to the researchers' drafts of the text" (Ashton-

Jones and Thomas 276). Belenky and her colleagues report that such collaboration led to the empowerment of the researcher as well the researched: "The stories of the women drew us back into a kind of knowing that had too often been silenced by the institutions in which we grew up and of which we were a part. In the end we found that, in our attempt to bring forward the ordinary voice, that voice had educated us (20)."

This model of feminist research follows Bleich's conception of a "socially generous research" in composition that can serve both student and teacher by removing hierarchical barriers between teacher and students and reinforcing the collaborative nature of classroom ethnography. Bleich proposes a "socially generous research" that replaces the participant-observer teacher with the teacher as "interested party" with responsibility "to serve the population that would otherwise be considered as only 'data' "(178, 180).

Such models of research shaped my initial study of the development of voice in a composition course infused with feminist pedagogy and implemented through the medium of computer networking (Fey 1992, 1994). The response was so overwhelming that three years later, I continue to be interested in the dynamics of the curriculum, medium, and research model and their long-term liberatory effects on the participants, both students and teacher. A follow-up, open-ended questionnaire and several interviews reinforce even more the conclusions of my original investigation and suggest the power of feminist research.

### **The Initial Research Project**

As teacher-researcher, I initially investigated the interactions in three composition courses which I taught to adults enrolled at the Genesee Valley Center of SUNY Empire State College, a de-centralized college throughout

New York State with flexible scheduling, individualized and group-learning study, and a student body with an average age of thirty-seven. Together we explored computer networking as the primary mode for composition study. My goal as a feminist researcher and teacher was to respect the subjectivity of participants and to offer a change-oriented curriculum anchored in an environment of care and connection.

The computer program Caucus provided a transcript of all transactions and writings including large-group and small-group collaboration. Although students belonged to permanent small groups as well as the large group, the Caucus program was set so that all students had access to the small-group transactions even though members of those groups were the primary respondents. In addition, students had access to electronic mail (E-mail), offering a site for additional direction, instruction, nurturing, and friendship.

To stimulate discussion of issues of power within students' lives, I planned a curriculum that focused on familiar cultural institutions of family, education, and workplace. Students responded to professional readings through a large-group "discussion" and prepared "response writings" for small-group peer review. Among the readings were Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Glaspell's "Trifles," Rodriguez's "The Achievement of Desire," Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," and Noble's "Automation Madness." Building upon their response writings, students wrote three compositions relating to the cultural institutions under study.

As the students and I became more comfortable with the technology of the computer, the power of that technology's free space became more visible. Students' reflections at the end of the courses and my review of the

transcripts led to an understanding of how the the sharing of personal experience among disparate individuals and the struggle to be understood in that public context contributed to clearer, more developed writing, to new knowledge, and also to more confident voices. Indeed, learning to write for these adults occurred simultaneously with the finding of voice. Voice, an elusive concept, has the power, according to Peter Elbow, "to make you pay attention and understand--the words go deep" (299). Psychologist Carol Gilligan characterizes the development of voice for women, claiming that women speak in a "different voice"--a voice that attends to human relationships in the context of care and connection (18).

The emergence of voice in the electronic "classroom" was apparent in many of these students whose lives had been touched by oppression. For example, Charlotte wrote, "I was probably about forty years old when I first really broke 'away from my parents' expectations for me. I had lived next door to my parents since my marriage which began shortly after I turned eighteen. I did not go to college and my first child was born before I was nineteen." The stories of Renee and Kathleen dramatize the emergence of voice that many students experienced. Both of these women shared the common experience of being silenced through patriarchal education--Renee, through insensitivity to the unique private experience she brought to the classroom; and Kathleen, through "guilt and shame from disciplinary methods" of her authoritarian parochial education.

Injustice contributed to Renee's loss of voice when at age eleven she moved from South America with her mother to the United States and was forced to speak English at school and at home rather than the Spanish language of her father, killed by an avalanche during a rescue effort in a mine high in the mountains of Peru. Renee announced, "I lost that language, and

with it a part of myself [emphasis added]." Her frustration led to withdrawal from school after junior high school. Only at age twenty-six did she return to school and begin experiences with writing. Even at age forty, in this writing course, she struggled with written expression.

For Renee, peer collaboration through the computer allowed a special in-between space filled with relaxed time--a site for shaping voice through relationship, a site for responding with mind and heart. That site, in Renee's case, was from her modest rural home on a land trust, for which payments were made from earnings from three part-time jobs. As I talked with Renee in her home setting three years ago, she explained that there with her computer she did not feel threatened. "Renee later talked about learning to use her voice when she wrote to the class:

As I bubble and write I feel a tremendous sense of personal growth and fulfillment in having a place to express deep concerns about what it's like to live in the United States during a time of tremendous change....

The lifelines of peer collaboration through the computer that enabled Renee's voice to emerge also freed the voice of Kathleen. Initially, Kathleen's independent perspectives disguised her struggle for voice. Behind the mask that Kathleen wore in the photograph submitted for the class portrait was a gifted woman, single, age thirty-six, recovering from the abuses of patriarchy. Her voice had been muted by a series of family circumstances that led to insecurity with strangers. When she spoke in new situations, her voice quivered like that of a "hundred-year-old person." Since returning to school and enrolling in Writing for the 21st Century, her voice was steady: "The earth doesn't stop and stare at me...[and] my voice doesn't voice tremble." Kathleen's participation told the story of this progress. From the initial sentence of her response to Rich's essay, her emerging voice resounded:

### The Voice of a Person Freed

I sit here drinking tea out of a beautiful china cup, and my mind races with ideas about what to write. This project seems permission to unleash to an audience thoughts that I would normally share only with my journals. I mention the china because from time to time I look around my apartment at all the things I have accumulated and I feel a sense of pride that I have done it on my own. I am not married, nor have I ever been, because I had always felt that to profess to be a woman liberated from the old ideas of society about the place of women, meant that I had to succeed without the economic assistance of a man....

She continued with a summary of her experiences after being pushed to leave home at the end of her senior year in high school:

I had to be sharp to survive, to get jobs, to meet stranger after stranger in my days on the road. It was not without its tests. In Arizona I was raped and robbed and beaten senseless. I reported it to the police who told me they didn't think filing a complaint was worth my while because I had probably asked for it all and would never get the case to trial.

For Kathleen, putting her ideas before the group affirmed her thinking. When we talked at the finish of the course, she explained, "Writing for the 21st Century was a way for me to test my own ideas. If I could present them and argue clearly to someone else then that made me sure of what I felt about things."

Kathleen's voice represented the energy that so many students had experienced. Lori had wanted to "jump right in there and voice ...[her] own argument"; Clint promised to take "carefulness and detail" to other writings at work and at school. Mary, now open to "more diverse opinions," planned to "help to change" existing social conditions ; Hank claimed to listen more carefully. Marilyn admitted that "other opinions" had replaced some earlier "narrow" views ; Gary thanked everyone for helping with his "quest for better writing and a more open mind." This excitement led Patti to

acknowledge that the computer networking experience had been "the best class she had ever taken."

### **Long-term Effects of Student-Teacher Collaboration**

The overwhelming response to Writing for the 21st Century and to the research project was a liberating experience for me as teacher/researcher as well as for the students. Now, three years later, I wondered about these students whom I had known so personally through computer networking. Had the experience made any long-term differences in their lives? If so, were those changes in any way liberating? Did students remember the feminist pedagogy and the environment of care and connection that, with their help, I had tried to establish? Had their involvement in the research project been positive?

Twenty-six of the thirty-five students enrolled in the courses were mailed an open-ended questionnaire. Responses from fifteen students provided answers to some of my questions. All had moved ahead in their schooling and/or careers. Patti, admitting that the course had led her to become a "computer bulletin board 'junkie,'" was shifting her career goal from children's librarian to automation specialist in a library environment. Elizabeth was pleased to have a sales position with At & T commercial markets as a second level account consultant, and Lori now held the title of Technology Training Specialist with a school system, and Andrea announced a forthcoming article on family businesses in the national magazine Country Living. Two students entered graduate school and also continued specialized teaching at community colleges.

Most students had thought about the course during the intervening years, remembering it as exciting and enjoyable, even, according to several

students, as their best college course. The environment of care that I had tried so hard to establish was not forgotten. Students commented on the "nurturing" they received from all of us. Patti noted that despite the hostile discussions of two participants, they remained "civil" to each other compared to some of the "really nasty exchanges ...on the national boards." For Charlotte, it was "rather amazing" that we all continued communicating after several sharp disagreements.

Students connected their current positioning to the results of the course. They felt empowered by their knowledge of computer technology and their better understanding of communication. More aware of opinions and thoughts of others, the students were careful to criticize opinions tactfully. They now looked at social issues more closely and were more sensitive to a variety of perspectives. Remembering the hero assignment relating to Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," one student found more instances of unrecognized heroes in her own life. Several students became interested in women's issues, and agreed that even with a similar curriculum the course would have had less impact in a traditional classroom than through computer networking. One student noted, however, that the reciprocal relationship between teacher and student and among students was important to its success, for she had had other computer-mediated courses that did not have the same personal involvement.

Perhaps the most consistent comment connecting the course to students' lives related to the development of voice, particularly in the midst of diverse strangers--an important issue, according to Antonia, as one contemplates the development of the "information highway." One student commented that released from time constraints, the uninterrupted communications of the network freed the mind for "better relations" and

"opened up a new world for learning to communicate openly and honestly." And this new world did not end with the completion the course. Charlotte gained confidence to enroll in a writing workshop organized around peer revision. Today her college major is in creative writing and literature. A seven-page letter from Renee and a personal interview with Kathleen revealed more specifically how this liberatory experience had played out in their lives. .

Renee wrote that she still supported herself through her cleaning business: "It pays the bills, no one to bother me, and my mind is free to think about the issues in the feminist books I've been reading." Recently she had reread Glaspell's "Trifles"--after a local woman was accused of premeditated murder when she shot her husband three hours after he had tried to strangle her with a belt. Renee planned to go to the trial. In the past year Renee referred to her increasing courage to use her voice in the midst of painful circumstance. She had hired a lawyer to re-evaluate her child support payments, explaining, "I had let my ex-husband get away with paying \$100 a month for eight years. Not it's \$300 a month." Even so, she had to expend much energy and extra dollars trying to deal with her lawyer "trained in the powerful bastions of patriarchy." She wrote, "In the end, I stood up to my ex-husband and the lawyer." Looking back, she explained, "Writing for the 21st Century enabled me to articulate my thoughts about certain injustices in our lives. Until that time, much of what I wrote and had to say was only in my head."

Kathleen also continued to use her voice. At the end of the course she expressed that finally having an an audience for her reflections seemed miraculous. For me, it was miraculous to touch and be touched by such a responsive student. Kathleen was more involved with the research than

other students, for she had worked with me on the coding of the original transcript. Several months after the study, Kathleen wrote through E-mail: "I am an independent thinker, and was before joining the writing study. But I was unable to freely share my thoughts with people. The collaboration experience strengthened my nerve, allowing the development of a link between the public and the private...In discussing the sometimes prickly issues we talked about, I felt myself come alive again. Where I had told myself I really didn't care about things anymore, I discovered I had lots of feelings that are vibrantly alive." Kathleen also turned to a Women's Studies network group to explore further some of these prickly issues.

So important was collaboration to Kathleen that eleven months after entering her first electronic message and four hours before her wedding, she telephoned me and, in a steady voice, thanked me for this unique experience in collaboration, including the backstage private support of electronic mail. For Kathleen, age thirty-six, exercising her own voice in this first marriage meant claiming her own name for the future.

Today Kathleen has a new position in a fast-growing electronic service company. Recognizing her talents, the company promoted her from a part-time ware-house clerk to a full-time program manager. Kathleen noted the sometimes subtle ways the liberatory feminist project influenced her positioning at work. Having been made aware through the network discussions that others did not always understand her explanations, she now is more attuned to how others receive her comments, often following up just to make sure that she has not been misunderstood. In retrospect, Kathleen realizes that the experience helped her to develop a language for dealing with the frustrations she feels in her present position when women are expected to perform in their traditional roles of caregiver as well as their regular work

responsibilities. Alone and "buried with women in traditional jobs," she can at least put a name to her frustrations.

When I asked Kathleen about her role in this teacher-research project, she reflected, "It was nice to know I was a part of something for the better, to help the traditional classroom evolve to something that welcomed everyone--even the faint at heart." She reminded me that she had been one of the "faint at heart" and that only in the past three years had begun to develop a public voice.

My conversation with Kathleen confirmed the reciprocal nature of this feminist research, for the project had been liberating to me as well in the role it played in furthering my educational goals and in developing my own voice. Kathleen assured me that she was pleased to have worked with a teacher as a learner, for it helped her to see the possibilities in her own learning, instilling purpose to her educational endeavors at a non-traditional age. Her voice spoke to many of the issues that my own work had tried to express, issues of which I had become aware through my own life experience and through my recent study. As with my students, the combination of computer networking and a feminist composition curriculum encouraged me to be more open with students than in my past teaching--an openness that included a sharing of my writing as well as my ideas. Several students noted this sharing as important to their own growth in voice. It also propelled me to make changes in my own professional life. As together we named and reflected upon our experiences, we began to speak more easily about our lives and our institutions. By establishing a caring community addressed by Noddings and by freeing voices of both students and teacher, this liberatory, ethnographic research project had a feminist turn in addressing the political

concerns raised by Marcia Lees and her colleagues. As Kathleen commented, Writing for the 21st Century was a "a voice for all of us."

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