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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of technology in a first year college writing class. The class utilizes a multi-user object-oriented domain (MOO) which allows participants to talk, perform actions, thoughts, and emotions, manipulate objects and furniture, and altogether control the online environment. The class holds discussions on the computer in addition to in class, conducts online peer tutoring sessions, holds one-on-one online conferences with writing tutors, and for each online meeting, logs the online conversations and uses the resulting transcripts in further writing and learning activities. A review of class activity logs was conducted to find the extent to which students interact with the MOO environment, by how much they emoted and engaged with objects along with their speaking during each of the online activities. Most students did not freely engage in emoting or object-manipulation. It is important for instructors to show students what the MOO environment can do, both positively and negatively, within the online activity. When the writers actualize the environment, using objects and emoting to become confident and capable online yet focusing primarily on the writing work to be done, the MOO can become one of the most productive spaces for learning that writing instruction has found. (SWC)

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**Actualizing the Environment**  
A Study of First-Year Composition Student MOO Activity

Joel A. English

Presented in Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference,  
"Trends and Issues in Online Instruction"  
3 April 1997

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**INTRODUCTION**

An increasing number of writing instructors are moving toward computer technologies within the classroom because of the learning environments that online instruction offers. Some distance education classes have moved to a completely online format--students and teacher never meet physically--but even many on-campus courses are incorporating online classroom activities into their normal procedures. The wisest of teachers in such environments insist on stopping to ask whether the online spaces have advantages over traditional classrooms; and by capitalizing on the powerful features they find, they can emphasize and enhance the new learning environments.

In the past year, I have incorporated computer writing environments in my first-year composition course including e-mail for correspondence and Web-based research, but especially emphasizing synchronous conferencing in several different ways: we hold class discussions on the computer at times rather than in the normal classroom; we conduct peer tutoring sessions in conferencing rooms rather than in the normal clusters of chairs; we take part in one-on-one conferences with writing tutors on the computer, rather than in the writing center; and every time we hold online meetings, we log the online conversations and use the resulting transcripts in further writing and learning activities. The technology we employ is more than the simple "chat rooms" which allow multiple users to talk to each other (these are called multi-user domains, or MUDs). Our forum is a type of MUD that allows participants to talk, perform actions, thoughts, and emotions, manipulate objects and furniture, and altogether control the online environment. This environment is named MOO (MUD, object-oriented).

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This study assesses these main features of the MOO--its object orientation and its ability to support actions, emotions, and online thoughts--and it looks at the way freshman composition students take advantage of the environmental concerns. By studying the logs of my students' online activities, I will discuss the degree to which students take part in "environmental interaction," actually employing programmed objects and "emoting" online. And I will discern how environmental interaction seems to affect the online activity for the entire community, in order to determine whether the object-orientation and emoting features of the MOO-based classroom actually offer benefits which traditional classrooms and even MUD-based environments cannot.

### **METACOGNITIVE AND ENVIRONMENTAL THEORY LEADING TO THE ONLINE PROJECT**

I first looked toward computer writing environments when I realized that computer-assisted writing could facilitate complicated but important aspects of my composition courses--metacognitive awareness and reflective writing. "Metacognition" refers to a writer's knowledge of the way she writes or how she learns. "Writing about writing" is a complex task for freshmen, but it may well be their key to understanding their writing processes. That is to say, if our writers do not write about how they are learning to develop their writing processes as they are developing them, they may never completely understand why they have improved in their writing in our classrooms, and they will lose what they have gained in our programs soon after leaving it. As David Bartholomae explains, a successful pedagogy "directs students in a semantic investigation of how they as individuals write. . . . The nominal subject of the [composition] course . . . is defined by an issue like 'Work and Play,' but the real subject is writing, as writing is defined by students in their own terms through a systematic inquiry into their behavior as writers" (85). Ann Berthoff agrees that the "capacity for thinking about thinking, for interpreting interpretations, for knowing our knowledge, is, I think, the chief resource for any teacher and the ground of hope in the enterprise of teaching reading and writing" (743). Freshman writers (as well as advanced, graduate, and all writers) benefit from as much writing about writing as they can accomplish, and online

conferencing, which is completely centered around metacognitive writing, can help hone students' metacognitive skills.

In "Students' Metacognitive Knowledge about Writing," Taffy E. Raphael expands upon the definition of metacognition. She says that metacognition builds upon the two most fundamental issues in learning and teaching psychology: "First, metacognition describes the control process in which active learners engage as they perform various cognitive activities. Second, metacognitive or executive control processes may underlie the very important processes of generalization and transfer of strategies learned" (346). Metacognition therefore provides writing students with the ability to describe how and what they have learned about their writing processes, and it allows them to generalize and apply the process to their future writing situations. Metacognitive activity includes understanding concepts about the writing process, knowing how those concepts work in writing, and knowing which situations in writing are appropriate to use particular concepts.

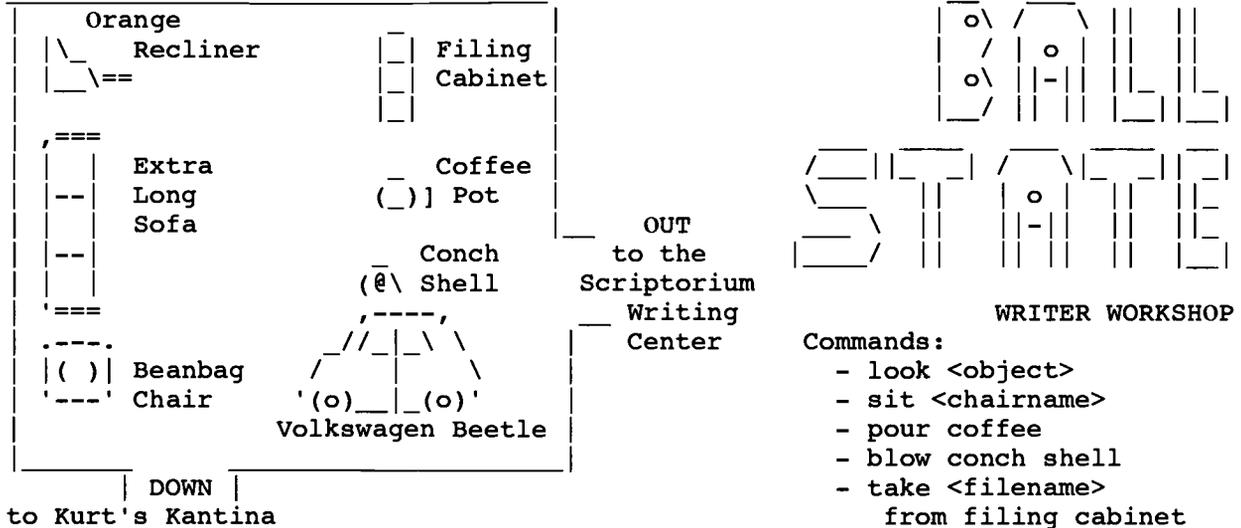
To encourage my students' metacognitive activity, I continually sought new exercises and assignment to lead them in metacognitive analysis of their writing. One metacognitive project I used (which is common in the composition classroom) is the "reflective essay." This is an exposition that focuses on the student's writing process in general or the process during a particular written assignment. Another related type of assignment I used which fosters continual, consistent metacognitive writing is the "writer's journal." Journals are extended, self-reflective logs of thought and meta-thought that students write during a term, not a formal essay to be reviewed and graded. Reflective essays and journals can be powerful metacognitive exercises for freshman writers as they develop their writing and learn why their writing is developing.

But I found that these activities were not enough metacognitive action alone for my students, and more, they weren't situated within an optimum environment for learning. Consider Avon Crismore and Lih (Lie)-Shing Wang's explanation that a program for beginning writers "needs to

possess the following four essential components: (1) individualized instruction, (2) multisensory stimulation, (3) immediate feedback and positive reinforcement, (4) student control of environment" (8). Reflective essays and journals lack *all four* of these characteristics, as does the traditional classroom--there is no immediate individualized instruction or feedback, nor is there a multisensory or controllable environment to speak of in any of those traditional forums. A possible remedy for this lacking environment has been to deconstruct the traditional classroom and ask the students to break into peer groups for discussion of their writing, and the attention freshman writers find in normal peer conferences does indeed fill each of Crismore and Wang's components. Yet it lacks metacognitive writing altogether, which is a vital component to their learning (the format in the traditional writing conference is speech, not writing). Though the journal and the peer writing conference work together in providing all of these aspects of freshman writing pedagogy, I had the need for a single activity that could combine them all.

I found such single, inclusive activities in computer-assisted writing instruction. Because of its object-orientation and its base in emotions along with speaking, the MOO environment--an individualized, multisensory, communicative environment which exists in and only in writing--presents a prime learning environment which requires metacognitive writing when used to discuss the writing process and other issues in composition. Upon logging onto the MOO and entering the Ball State Writer Workshop (our online meeting room), students immediately see the environment, some virtual objects, directions on how to leave, and a short list of commands which prompt them to manipulate the objects:

## BallState Writer Workshop



You see Filing Cabinet, Coffee Pot, and CONCH SHELL here.  
Obvious exits: [down] to Kurt's Kantina and [out] to Scriptorium

And besides being able to sit in a chair, pour some coffee, take files from the filing cabinet, and look or play with any programmed object in the room, the students could freely create their own non-programmed objects and actions by "emoting." To emote, a student types a colon (:) and then a present tense action, thought, or emotion:

The student types

:drinks some diet cola

And the MOO responds to all participants

Joel drinks some diet cola

This kind of environmental interaction provided my students with precisely the kind of surroundings that foster learning, and when we moved the writing conference to the MOO, the experience became a metacognitively-written one. Whether writers met with me, with their peers, or with writing tutors online, the environment fostered learning and metacognition naturally.

Crismore and Wang conclude that "CAI (computer assisted instruction) fills the need for the above

missing components in a composition program, providing a promising alternative to all students underprepared in reading reflectively and rhetorically" (8). When communicating on the computer, writers take part in sustained, substantial written conversation about their writing. They discuss their written projects with tutors, which helps them improve individual projects; they engage in metacognitive discourse, which is usually a complex activity for freshmen but becomes surprisingly natural online; and they conduct all correspondence with cybertutors in writing. Students automatically combine oral conversation and argumentative skills with un-apprehensive writing. The metacognition that takes place during computer-mediated conversation surpasses reflective writing and journaling in that it is interactively instructive and exists in a controllable, multi-media environment; and it has an advantage over traditional writing conferences in that it exists in a text-based environment, stressing the importance of strategic, transactional writing.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The most overt differences between the MOO classroom and the traditional one are in the environments of the forums. Talking, emoting, and manipulating objects online require typing words and sentences, as well as using a simple handful of programming terms. And the environment that results from a classroom-full of students on the MOO is completely dependent upon what those students *do*--what they say, how they emote, what they do with the objects, etc. The environment is more of a "result of the human interaction" than a predetermined set of chairs, desk, podium, and chalk board. The student community has complete authority over what happens within the MOO environment; with his or her online writing, every student has control over the world that the classroom comprises. This is never the case in the traditional classroom.

The important question is, then, what do the students actually *do* with this environment? Allowing students so much control over their learning environment, indeed nearly *all* of the control over it, can invigorate the learning experience if they are taking advantage of their new-found

authority. But do they take this advantage? To what extent and in what ways do students employ the manipulatable environment of the MOO, and what good does this do them?

The question merits addressing in two parts: 1) Do students engage in emoting and controlling objects regularly, or do they tend to simply talk, not taking advantage of the environmental aspects of this forum? 2) What difference does it make to the students who *do* regularly employ objects and emotions? Do those who practice manipulating the environment actually contribute more to conversation? Do they go into more depth with their discussion of the issues at hand? In essence, do the features which allow "authority over environment" help students develop comfort, confidence, and learning online?

## **METHODOLOGY**

I have carefully reviewed the logs of several class activities from one English 103 course, Freshman Composition I, from Fall 1996. My twenty-two students and I held class on the MOO three times during the semester: the first was a MOO practice day on which we experimented, but engaged in no writing content. The second MOO day, we discussed an essay that was read for class. The third day we broke into small groups in separate rooms and discussed actual essay drafts that the students had brought to class. Also, each student took part in a MOO-based writing conference with a graduate writing tutor around mid-term and saved the log of the conference. I used the MOO transcripts to find the extent to which students interact with the MOO environment, that is, how much they emoted and engaged with objects along with their speaking during each of the online activities. I have developed the following scale, which categorizes students as displaying "low environment interactivity," "medium environment interactivity," or "high environment interactivity" during MOO sessions, and I calculated the environment interactivity for each classroom session, peer group session, and tutorial session.

## \*\*\*Survey of Environment Interactivity\*\*\*

- Low Environment Interactivity = Student emoted or used objects an average of 0-2 times in 50-minute class period or conference
- Medium Environment Interactivity = Student emoted or used objects an average of 3-6 times in 50-minute class period or conference
- High Environment Interactivity = Student emoted or used objects an average of over 6 times in 50-minute class period or conference

Type of Activity \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Class discussion, Peer conferences, or Tutorial Session)

Number of Students Displaying, Low Environment Interactivity	_____	Percentage of Class	_____
Number of Students Displaying, a Medium Environment Interactivity	_____	Percentage of Class	_____
Number of Students Displaying, High Environment Interactivity	_____	Percentage of Class	_____

Number of Students Included in Survey \_\_\_\_\_

Next, to study the effect of environment activity for individual students, I first looked at the overall tendencies of students to interact with the MOO environment. That is, I paid specific attention to the places within the MOO logs where a student engaged a programmed object or emoted. I then read the subsequent lines of dialogue to trace the effect of the environment interactivity: Did other students follow by emoting, further manipulating the environment? Did that environmental engagement cause the particular student to continue to be vocal, appearing to make him or her feel more comfortable in the environment like Crismore and Wang indicate that it should? Are there changes in the one-on-one or group dynamics because of the environment interactivity?

Finally, I contrasted those students who consistently demonstrated high environment activity (HEI) with those who consistently demonstrated low environment interactivity (LEI) in order to trace causes and effects of the environment on individual bases. To indicate whether there was a correlation between environment interactivity and how much a student contributes to online conversation, I evaluated each student's contributions for significance, application, and depth within the content of the online conversations. I read the students' dialogue with their classmates and tutors, attempting to find how many contributing comments were related to the specific topic they were addressing online, how many comments provoked topic-related responses from other students or from tutors, how many comments illustrated comprehension and synthesis of the assigned reading material, and other substantial course-related communication. I named these types of comments "substantive comments." I then looked for comments from each of the students that did not focus on course-related material--"un-related comments." For example, I counted chitchat about personal matters, joking, or other off-the-topic talking as unrelated comments. I compared the students' substantive comments with their un-related comments, finding a percentage of substantive comments for each student. I then compared the percentages of the HEI students to each other, finding whether the percentages were similar; I compared the LEI students' substantive percentages with each other, finding whether those figures were similar; and finally compared both groups to each other to see whether I found any noticeable difference between the two groups' percentages. This analysis helped discern whether there was a correlation between students' levels of environment interaction and the substance of their contributions to class discussion.

## **FINDINGS**

The consensus that the MOO logs provide is that most freshman students do not freely engage in emoting or object-manipulation. During full-class discussions, an average of 70% of the students demonstrated low environment interactivity, 24% demonstrated medium environment interactivity, and only 8% demonstrated high environment interactivity. During small-group peer conferencing, the EI increased some: 58% demonstrated LEI, 17% demonstrated MEI, and 25% demonstrated

HEI. However, during the one-on-one writing conferences with cybertutors, the EI fell: 80% LEI and 20% HEI. During all of the online activities during the semester, the mean number of times the students engaged the environment remained between 1.5 and 2.1--consistently low.

Before discussing the apparent results of the activity of those who *did* engage the environment, I want to point out that, though I mentioned the programmed objects to the students before we logged on to the computers and suggested they try emoting during our online class-time, I didn't push the issue or ask that "everybody try emoting for a while." I made a particular effort while teaching them how to MOO not only to allow them to engage the environment at their own wills, but also to withhold some information about the environment, hoping they would explore the functions themselves. For example, though I informed them that they could sit down in programmed chairs in the Ball State Writer Workshop, and I would always sit down in a chair while I was on the MOO with them, I would usually not make the suggestion that they sit down while we were there together; knowing that they saw me sit down, I let them figure out how I did it and do it themselves if they wished. (They seldom wished.) Likewise, I would blow the conch shell (a programmed object that, upon typing "blow conch shell," asks all other characters to briefly remain quiet while the speaker/blower relayed some important information); then I would either drop the shell or hand it to a student. Knowing that the conch shell was an object with some kind of suggested power, yet without being *told* what to do with it, the students would "look" at the object, then employ it for their own purposes, I hoped. I was usually disappointed. I realized that I could have instructed the class, "Now, everybody type 'look conch shell,'" and upon doing that, perhaps several of them would follow by blowing it. But I insisted on leaving environment interaction--and thus the authority of the environment--up to the students, and they rarely took advantage of the environmental features of the medium.

During one-on-one writing conferences, the graduate tutors sometimes ignored the objects and emotions *themselves*. But more often, they employed environmental interactivity to "break the ice"

with the writers. When a tutors did not specifically suggest the writer join in the interactivity (like I didn't), the writers indeed did not. For example, here is Dave, the writer, and Word, the tutor, as they begin a conference:

Dave has arrived

Word has arrived

Word sits yoga style on the table

Dave asks, "Where shall we start?"

Word asks, "did you get the comments over the e-mail? maybe you had some thoughts on them?"

Word began by creatively sitting down, which could have opened a short session of tension-relieving environment play before diving into the work. Dave immediately brings up the work to be accomplished, and Word directly follows him rather than attempting to postpone the work in order to acclimate the team to the environment. In contrast, cybertutor Gable, when beginning his conference with writer rmwilson, opens by teaching some tips about the environment and suggesting that she join him in engaging it:

Gable asks, "Do you know about the dot-dot-dot deal? Like ... that?"

rmwilson asks, "actually, i think i use it too much. I seem to use it instead of a ",". I think it keeps the reader more on the edge of their seat.

Gable says, "Well, I spoze that's true. But if you use it here on the MOO, it means you have more to say, but you're..."

Gable says, "still typing..."

Gable says, "and when you get done..."

Gable says, "you just use a period or other punctuation."

rmwilson says, "that sounds..."

rmwilson says, "wonderful."

Gable says, "it's really helpful when we get to typing longer sentences..."

Gable says, "especially when dealing with El Pokey, my modem."

rmwilson exclaims, "i guess i never thought of the ... thing that way, but you are right!"

Gable opens his book bag and pulls out two cans of Coke. Want one?"

rmwilson says, "sure! thanks"

Gable says, "careful. It got shaken up when my modem wend down."

rmwilson opens the coke very carefully making sure the contents don't spill out."

rmwilson gulps

rmwilson aaaaagggggggggghhhhhhhh

In the conferences in which the tutors took time to actually lead the students in some environment interactivity, more object and emotion engagement naturally took place.

However, the set of online activities that featured the highest rate of EI was the small peer-group session. And interestingly, of five randomly-assigned small groups, all the members of three groups took part in no EI whatsoever, while all of the students in the other two groups emote and deal with objects extensively, demonstrating either MEI or HEI. None of the students or all of the students in the groups took part in EI. It appears that, once one of the students in these groups *begins* to manipulate the environment, the others naturally follow without anyone even having to suggest that they join in. Somehow, the students are able to attain the effect that Gable was able to reach--getting each other to interact with the environment--using the technique *I* was attempting to use--simply modeling the activity without overtly asking each other to do the same. Perhaps the deletion of an authority figure (the teacher and tutor) allows the students to take full control of their environment; there becomes no hierarchy, only community. It could be that, when a teacher or tutor are present, the students naturally wait to be told that it is "alright" to engage in some fun activity, whereas in the peer situation, they all take part in the fun as soon as someone raises the idea. In any case, once the peer groups began interacting with the environment, they continued to collaboratively build the conception of the learning space fully by manipulating it.

A different point about environmental interactivity in the MOO logs is that, during full class, small group, and one-on-one meetings, EI almost always occurred at the beginning of the sessions. As expected, emoting and object-manipulation helped students feel more comfortable with the environment. And it makes logical sense that that kind of comforting activity took place (*when* it took place) at the beginning of the sessions. At the beginning of the full class logs, a few students sat down on the chairs and poured a cup of the programmed coffee. During cybertutorials, the tutors usually started by offering writers a virtual drink or snack, by suggesting they have a seat and make themselves comfortable, or by explaining features of the MOO. But then, as the groups began to discuss the content at hand, they usually traded the emoting and object play for straight dialogue. Again, this seems to be a logical progression: just like, say, traditional writing center tutors begin by asking students to have a seat and get comfortable, by offering some coffee and discussing interpersonal issues, and then moving into the discussion about writing, the cybertutors and classmates followed this natural format when they employed EI.

There were two exceptions to the "EI, then dialogue" format. One type of exception happened when a student used the emoting feature within discussion of the class content in order to express him or herself more clearly or in a somewhat different way than dialogue could allow. For example, while discussing an essay they read about a beekeeper, the class began to pursue the differences between how men and women write. And during this conversation, student BSH found a way to not just *say* how he felt to the rest of the class, but to actually *show* how he felt using the emote feature:

steph says, "the old man did the research and the girl interviewed

him to fink more info about the tpic""

missy says, "who is the girl? i didn't know that there was a girl in the story."

missy says, "hey thanks steph"

Amy says, "the girl is the writer."

steph says, "the girl is the story teller""

lmhoward says, "me neither. i think a guy wrote the story"

christa says, "the girl was the writer of the story""

rlwilson exclaims, "I don't know who wrote what when!"

steph says, "okay so the authors name was thomas"

kim says, "It was written by Thomas, who would name a girl that""

Amy says, I can't believe that a girl would write a story about this. Only a guy would."

BSH says, "Actually, I just looked, the paper was written by Thomas B. Brelage.

Not a girl."

rlwilson says, "someone very strange"

bernie exclaims, "if a guy wrote the story the bees would have killed the old fart!"

BSH feels that Amy's last comment was a bit too sexist coming from a gender who

can spend hours reading articles over makeup in Cosmo.

rlwilson laughs

BSH's final comment functions somewhat as a statement would have. But instead of simply stating his feelings, he allows his character to display his feelings through emotion--a complex use of the emote feature.

Another time that the logs featured EI within the content of the discussion took place within a small group session between students rlwilson, Amie:), and Alicia. This session actually illustrates that EI *should* take place at the beginning and be exchanged for dialogue within the content. Near the beginning of the discussion, the three participants experimented with emotions as they sighed, smiled, and quickly became comfortable talking with each other on the MOO. As they began their discussion (they were asked to talk about their revision processes and to what degree working with their cybertutor did or did not help them revise), they even employ "emoticons"--two or three character symbols which usually represent a face expressing some sort of feeling (for example, :) is a smiley face, :( is a frown, :} is a confused look, etc.). But while the emoticons, another potentially helpful feature of the textual environment, are designed to facilitate

communication, they wound up distracting the participants. In fact, the expressions turned into silliness, which resulted in a loss of the topic and degradation of the learning experience:

AMIE:) says, "We're supposed to tell what we thought of Ashley and how she helped our paper""

Alicia asks, "Well girls, i though Ashley was extrememly helpful...."

AMIE:) says, "Yeah""

rmwilson says, "me too! she was totally honest and I htink she really helped me out on my paper"

AMIE:) sighs

Alicia says, "Okay ...Ashley pointed out grammatical errors in my paper that I would have"

Alicia says, "That sentence was supposed to have "caught" on the end"

AMIE:) says, "Ashley totally motivated me to make my paper the best it could be. She should be in the army! :)"

rmwilson says, "she pointed out grammatical errors in mine too 8-("

Alicia says, "yeah, you're right... Guess I should have paid better attionion in English last year 8(. I like those faces :) :o

AMIE:) says, "P"

rwilson says, "8-}"

Alicia says, ":)... he's drooling"

rmwilson exclaims, ""yummy!!!!!!!!!"

AMIE:) says, "cool, hmmm, speaking of drooling there are some cuties in this class"

The logs demonstrate that too much focus on features of the environment can be distracting to the deliberative conferencing and learning; EI can work like vocal disruption in the traditional classroom--distracting learners and stifling serious conversation about class content.

This is obviously not to discourage EI on the MOO. Since the logs indeed indicate that engaging the environment, especially at the beginning of conferences, helps students gain control and comfort with the online format, EI should be encouraged. In full-class meetings, almost all of the students who did not experiment with the environment contributed fewer substantive comments to the conversation than those who did. The few students who *had* taken advantage of the MOO objects and emotions not only contributed more substantive comments to the class discussions, but they actually tended to keep the discussions on track and helped evolved the directions of the discussions. Because they were already comfortable with the environment, they seemed to be more able to focus conversation, make application to other areas, and learn in the process. The students who demonstrated LEA were more likely to contribute un-related comments or not many comments at all.

Likewise, the cybertutoring logs clearly demonstrate that most of the tutors who did not purposefully lead the writers in early interaction with the environment did not establish a trusting or comfortable relationship themselves and the writer, nor the writer and the learning environment. In a tutorial between tutor Ash and writer, missy, for example, Ash does not offer any pre-work object play or emote-time; she simply begins right away by addressing missy's paper and suggesting issues to work on. Consequently, missy never begins to feel comfortable with the environment, and the communication and learning is severely hindered. While talking about the paper on the effects of abortion on women's lives, both participants feel unconfident with the environment:

missy asks, "I guess I should probably mention death rates now, too,  
along with the effects?"

Ash says, "definitely - side effects, both short term and long term"

Ash asks, "just thought of another source - any idea if there is a local  
chapter of the National Organization for Women?"

missy says, "I don't really know what to say. I feel kinda stupid."

Ash says, "if there is, they are probably in the phonebook - maybe even on campus - I know that they will have recent info"

Ash asks, "what to say about what?"

missy says, "no, but is there a Planned Parenthood in Muncie? They would probably have really good info."

Ash says, "I think I have heard of one"

Ash says, "to tell the truth, I have only lived here since August, so I'm afraid I don't know much about the area"

missy says, "what to say about anything. I'm just sitting here trying to think of questions, but can't think of much."

The odd timing of the conversation and missy's inability to think of anything to say indicate her lack of comfort with the entire format of the MOO conference. She would have benefited from some time at the beginning of the conference to take advantage of the manipulateable, controllable environment. In tutorials in which tutors *did* pay this type of careful attention to acclimating the writers to the environment, the conferences went much smoother and were much more beneficial to the writers. In fact, the tutors' most important time to gain rapport with writers proved to be those first several minutes of MOO-time; when a tutor led a writer in EI and fun interpersonal dialogue, the entire conference usually was clear and communicative for both participants, and the writer learned much about her writing.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Programmed objects and emoting are innate features of the MOO environment. They are what separate the MOO from other synchronous communication forums, and they are the aspects of the environment that can help students become comfortable not only with synchronous conferencing but also with communicating on the computer in general. However, environment interactivity is not innate or natural activity for students *themselves*. Though it can be an activity that begins all productive conferencing online, most students don't to spontaneously emote or engage

programmed objects. Consequently, it is often more natural for students to remain uncomfortable with the online environment than to take the steps toward EI, which will help them become more confident.

The answer for writing instructors and tutors teaching on the MOO, then, is to make sure to attend to students' need for acclimation by helping them engage in EI as they begin online activities. Though I intended to let the students take complete control over their environment with my "passive suggestions" off-line that they might engage objects, the result was that few of them did it, and many of them remained unconfident. I should have gotten the students on the MOO, showed them how to manipulate several of the objects in the room, and then asked them to practice with the objects themselves. Then, I should have engaged them in an "emoting session." Perhaps I wouldn't ask for such an overt warm-up session during each trip to the MOO, but I certainly should have got them started early, with their first visits online, with manipulating the environment, taking full advantage of its possibilities.

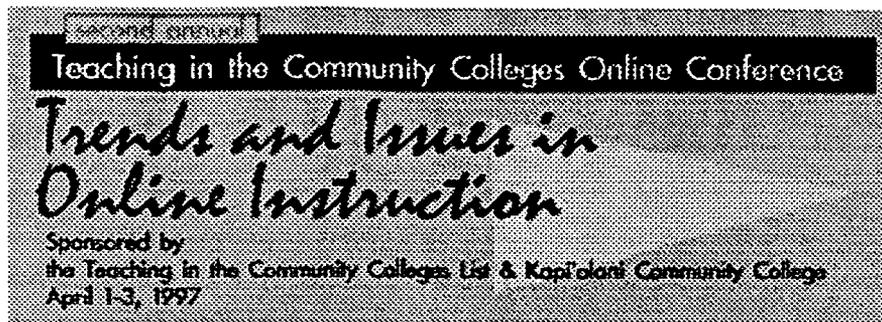
During the tutorial sessions, a few of the tutors led the writers in engaging the environment before beginning work on the writing projects, but most of them didn't. It will be important in the future for cybertutors to take time to do this in order to more insure the writers' online confidence and capabilities. At the same time, it is important for tutors not to over-emphasize EI online. During one of his conferences, Gable used emoting from time to time to pet his cat, which was actually at his physical feet: "Gable reaches down and rubs his cat on the ears. . . . Gable's cat is eating his eraser. . . . Gable's cat carried the eraser into another room. Bizarre." Gable thought this was a clever way to make himself seem more real, comforting, and connected to Alicia, the writer; I thought it was clever, too, when I read the log of the conference. However, upon reading Alicia's expository reflection on the conference, she wrote, "Having the online session with Gable helped a little, but not a lot. . . . When we got on the MOO, I felt like he was kind of rambling. He spent more time talking about things that didn't even relate to my paper." Like his cat. Just

like the constant emoting and fiddling emoticons disrupted productivity one of the small groups during classtime, Gable's over-abundance of emoting hindered Alicia's concentration.

The MOO environment provides the tools needed for freshmen to become confident and capable, more authoritative and vital to the community established there. It is an individualized medium where every participant can individualize it even more by interacting with it; it is multisensory--it can provoke as many senses as the participants choose to invoke through emoting; it relies on written communication between people for its existence; and when used in the writing classroom, it facilitates metacognitive writing applied to individual writers. More, interacting with the environment on the MOO can help students become comfortable with non-object oriented computer communication media such as e-mail, IRC, and classroom software. But in order to take advantage of the MOO environment, teachers, tutors, and writers themselves cannot ignore it while online, nor can they abuse it. While instructors introduce students and tutors to the MOO, it is important that they show them what the environment can do, both positively and negatively, within the online activity. And when the writers actualize the environment, using objects and emoting to become confident and capable online yet focusing primarily on the writing work to be done, the MOO can become one of the most productive spaces for learning that writing instruction has found.

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