



Computer-mediated Communication Across Curriculums and Cultures Among Swedish and American Students

EARLI Writing 2004, University of Geneva,
Switzerland

<http://wordsworth2.net/projects/crossculturalcollabs/>

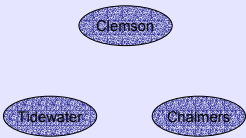
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Absent Friends





A sense of direction ...


- Goals
- Framework
- The design and interface
- Student voices
 - community, anxiety, creative writing
- Insights




Three Instructional Contexts



AA/AS Humanities:
exploring impact of
technology on society and the arts



BA Teaching Writing:
experiencing and reflecting on
diversity of writing



PhD Sciences:
seeing writing issues as such,
not as ESL issues

What were we hoping for?

- *“to encourage self-examination and heightened awareness of the rhetorical situations in which they find themselves as writers in the academy and workplace”*
 - Peer to peer conversation / learning about writing
 - Questioning some of the/their givens about writing, genres, mechanisms, and technology
 - Developing meta-cognitive writerly expertise
 - The possibility of new genres

The possibility of new genres



“Before we know it, the genres we teach today, the essay and the traditional academic research paper may be supplemented with new genres such as hypertext, calling for new ideas on how to teach and how to organize writing instruction.”

- Lennart Bjork, Gerd Brauer, Lotte Rienecker, and Peter Stray Jorgensen in their introduction to *Teaching Academic Writing in European Higher Education* (Kluwer Publishing, 2002)

What we hoped to learn

- To what extent written conversation about writing between disparate groups of students can foster greater understanding of writing related issues
- What students express as expectations and issues with writing when talking to peers
- How computer/communications technology affects writing for these groups of students

Discourse Chart

	Personal Discourse	Classroom Discourse	Public Discourse
Function	Expressive Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-discovery • Inner speech 	Interactive Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversational • Dialectical 	Transactional Writing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informative • Persuasive
Purpose	Explains to Oneself	Explains to Classroom Colleagues	Explains to Distant Others
Audience	Self and Trusted Others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privileges Language of Learner • Accountability to Self 	Classroom Community: Familiar and Known <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privileges Language of Classroom Community • Accountability to Classmates 	Distant and Other: Unknown <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privileges Language of Critical Audiences • Accountability to Public
Genre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journals • Diaries • Logs • Notebooks • Freewrites • Braindumps • Fridgenotes • Post-it Notes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letters • Notes • Questions • Poems • Parodies • E-mail • Presentation Software • Web Discussion Boards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essays • Articles • Reports • Presentation Software • Memos • Multimedia • Web Publications
Response Time	Immediate: Shaping at Point of Utterance	Quick: from “Real” Audience—Visible and Tactile	Lengthy: to Publication or Presentation
Classroom Environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social and Collaborative • Respects Diversity and Risk Taking • Active Learning and Interactive Teaching • Motivation for Reading and Writing 			
Developing Knowledge That Is Personally and Professionally Useful			

Assignment Design

- Informed by the genre of letters
- Progressed from personal narratives via comparison and responsiveness to explanatory expository
- Concluded on a reflective analysis of the letters
- Used in assessment – not an add on

Assignment Design

Letter 1: November 5

Letter 1, approximately 350 words, addressed to everybody in the group and submitted by November 5, 11:59 p.m.

Describe an experience that illustrates your perception of yourself as a writer, perhaps a situation in which writing was **challenging or exciting or otherwise important**. As you reflect on that experience, what were your **expectations** about yourself as a writer and what was the outcome of the experience?

Include within your letter one or two sentences that **introduce** you to the group, for example, your name, which class you are taking, and your academic interest or emphasis.

Assignment Design

Letter 2: November 9

Letter 2, approximately 350 words, addressed to everybody in the group and submitted by November 9, 11:59 p.m.

Read the letters from all the members of your group and write a personal response about some of the issues raised there. In your Letter 2, addressed to your entire group, refer specifically to at least **two members of the group by name**, identifying the elements of their letters that were of particular interest to you. Comment on ways in which their experiences are **similar to and/or different** from your own.

Before you compose your Letter 2, first read any second letters already posted by groupmates. Try to cite two groupmates whose Letter 1 submissions have not already been cited by others when you compose your own Letter 2.

Assignment Design

Letter 3: November 11

Letter 3, approximately 350 words, addressed to everybody in the group and submitted by November 11, 11:59 p.m.

Read the second letters from all the members of your group. Based on the letters and your own further thinking, speculate on the impact that communication technology is having and will have on the kinds of writing experiences you and your group have had in the past and may have in the future. Think in particular of communication in local, national, and global contexts.

Incorporate into your letter:

at least one reference to a groupmate's Letter 2 and at least one reference to a Website that addresses one or more of the issues raised by you and/or others. Copy-paste the entire Web address including <http://> and leave a space before and after so that the discussion board will post it as an active link for your readers to follow.

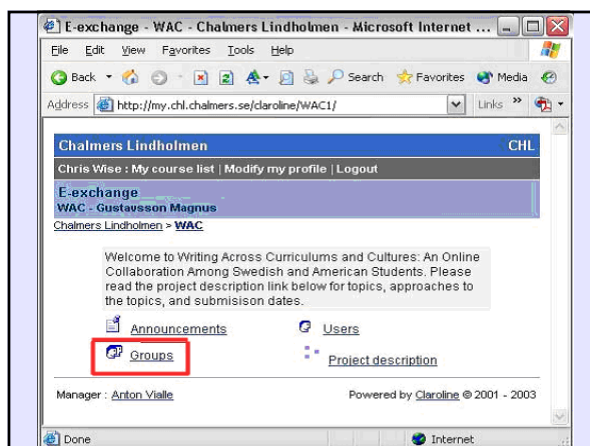
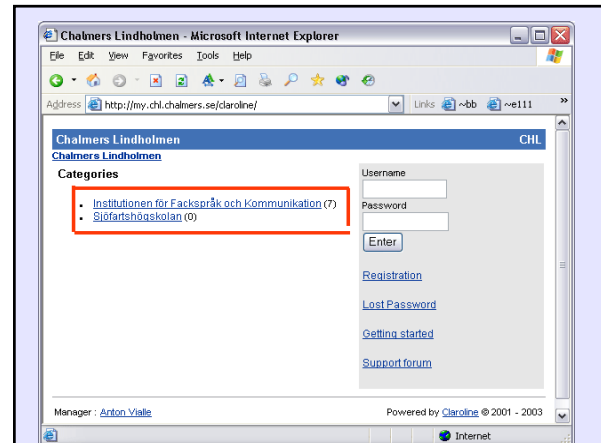
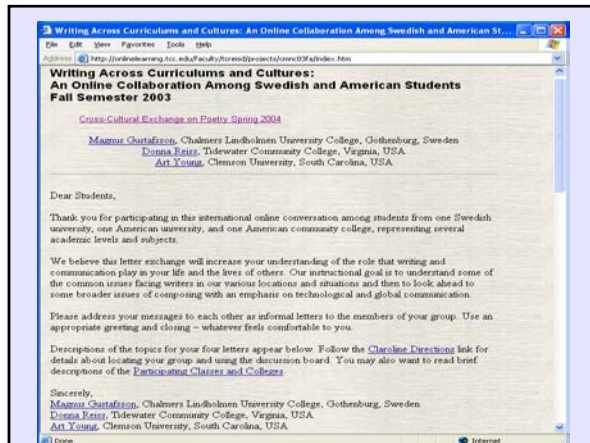
Assignment Design

Analysis and Reflection: November 16

Analysis of and Reflection on the conversation, approximately 350 words addressed to everybody in the group and submitted by November 16, 11:59 p.m.

Read the third letters from members of your group. Then **reflect** on the exchange of three letters among members of your group and **speculate** on the key issues.

Suggested topics for your **Analysis and Reflection** include: What are some similarities and differences among the writers in different locations and as an audience for writing? What interested you? What surprised you? What troubled you? What are some benefits and drawbacks of a letter exchange that uses a Web discussion board? What have you learned about your own expectations about writing for a distant and diverse audience?



Virtual community

In Letter 1 Lindsey (Clemson) uses the salutation “**Dear Groupies**,” and then in Letter 2 Rebecca (TCC) begins “**Hello Groupies** (I believe we should adopt this as our group call sign),” and then a few hours later, Gabriel (Chalmers) begins “Hello Groupies’ (I am **supporting Rebecca’s motion**).”

Gabriel’s first sentence then follows: “**Guys**, I am really enjoying your letters!” Gabriel then says: “It has not been easy to follow such amount of different ideas, comments and experiences regarding writing plays, creative writing, maintenance procedures, résumés, memos, formal and informal letters, and other kinds of impressive writing. I am really learning from you guys.” (Gabriel, Chalmers, Letter 2)

Virtual community

“One of the things I noticed during the letter exchange was that sometimes it was hard to differentiate the age and gender of fellow group members. I noticed that **people referred to Xing and Erin as both he and she**. Sometimes cultural differences make it difficult to distinguish whether names are feminine or masculine. This is a simple example of the confusion that internet communication can cause. **Without knowing the tone of someone's voice, it is harder to sense sarcasm or humor**. It also becomes difficult to know exactly who you are talking to.” (Lindsey, Clemson, Letter 4).

Virtual community

“All of you have reminded me that writing is a part of everyday life (I've been *out of the loop* for a few years with my kids). For those of you in the business world, I am sure you understood Gabriel's reference to **memo writing**. That is something they should teach in college. I know *I have ruffled my share of feathers around the office*. **From sociology I learned about "report talk" vs. "rapport talk"**. Report talk is the exchange of facts and pertinent information where rapport talk is a way of relating information on a more personal level. If we all were able to have rapport with others, then perhaps our reports would be more interesting. I really enjoy communicating with all of you. I hope you enjoy academic, as well as personal, success.” (Rebecca, Tidewater, Letter 2)

Virtual community

“I realize that **"connectivity" is a common and fast becoming trite, technology buzzword**. But the WAC forum is a perfect illustration of the power of this special connection. I am studying to be an English teacher but what I do for a living is community organizing to prevent child abuse and neglect.... What we are trying to do is to put into place a variety of social supports for parents of young children who are isolated as they cope with the overwhelming responsibility of raising their children. The way we are doing this is by trying to recreate the sense of neighborhood. ... **What we have done in the WAC forum has been to relinquish our isolation as individual students and enter into a transaction with students across vast distances in the same sort of mutually supportive way**. Group 2 has created a small virtual neighborhood and this is a powerful thing.” (Tom, Clemson, Letter 4)

Virtual community

“Finally let me try to express my fillings regarding writing to people of different cultures and backgrounds. It has not been easy because after Letter 1 I realized that you guys know much more about writing than I do. **I am a scientist and I have been writing for long, but technical papers, nothing like poems, plays or novels**. What we have been doing here is **completely different**, because is related to emotions, personal experiences and opinions. It scared me but at the same time it **taught me a lot**. Cheers,” (Gabriel, Chalmers, Letter 4)

“Hello Groupies, Instantaneous communication across physical borders and political ideologies allows global access to varying perspectives throughout our world.... American publications almost always refer to anti-American Iraqis as insurgents, whereas *al-Jazeera* describes them exclusively as resistance fighters. These two terms have opposite connotations describing the exact same group to different audiences. Last week, *USA Today's* website headlined the revelation that Jessica Lynch had been raped by her Iraqi captors.... Finally, yesterday [*al-Jazeera*] posted a story quoting Iraqi doctors denying the *USA Today* assertion. Utilizing multiple perspectives via global communications technology allowed me to gain a more in-depth understanding. An open forum with Americans and Iraqis exchanging hopes, dreams and fears may go a long way toward reaching mutually beneficial goals.” (Glenn, Tidewater, Letter 3)

Anxiety – rewards

- “But for some reason, **winning that award did more bad than good**. I placed an enormous amount of pressure on myself” (Michelene, Clemson, Letter 1)
- “This pressure or no pressure thing is interesting. **I come under pressure when writing ... from a lack of interest in writing**. ... once the threshold is passed I really enjoy writing” (Bengt, Chalmers, Letter 3)
- “A conclusion I came to after reading the individual stories, that **although writing can be complicated and frustrating, it has it's rewards (internal and material)**.” (Rachel, Tidewater, Letter 2)

Process - anxiety

"I began putting the concept of the poster together....Also I tried to write on a level so that a wider group of scientists could understand our research and give us input from their point of view. When the basic layout and text were finished I send a copy to each member of our group for comments. My view of what I had written was that it was almost nothing on the poster that they could point out as unclear or unimportant for the understanding of our research. The response that I got from two of the other three members were **full of suggestions to make the text more clear-cut and easy to follow**. I was shocked! After **three more rounds in the ring** with my cowriters we finished the poster. **Still licking my wounds** I realised that I had some more to learn about academic writing." (Mikael, Chalmers, Letter 1)

Process - anxiety

"Writing is big part of my daily activities and has been for sometime now. **I really enjoy the process and I find it is a good release** when you just need to get some emotions out. When most people that know me hear about my feelings towards writing, they don't see it. They see me as an emotionless being, which I must say I know why. I am quiet and usually very calm....**My writing usually takes forms of quick poems or journal entries that I keep in a notebook and out of others hands. I love to write but I hate writing for other people. Writing is my release, and I don't like to share my feelings.** As long as they are written down somewhere, that's good enough for me....**As a writer, one day I hope to be able to write without fear that someone will tear it apart.**" (Charlie, Clemson, Letter 1)

Process - anxiety

"It was **almost as if it wasn't mine** but a little piece of everyone who edited it" (Michelene, Clemson, Letter 1)

"This feeling [Michelene's] can ... lead to that some authors put an **enormous amount of pressure on themselves to not release a paper until it is almost perfect**, thus minimizing the risk of it needing a lot of edition after being revised. ... My experience is that one should spend too much time on writing with correct grammar etc. for the first version, but rather use that time on making sure that all information you find important is included." (Anders, Chalmers, Letter 2)

Creative Writing

"One thing that I have seen so far is a **difference between creative writing and informational writing**. I think a lot of that comes from our different backgrounds. Many people in the group are working on doctorates in pretty technical areas. (I am English major, so anything that doesn't involve poems or novels is pretty technical to me). But I think that **both of these types of writing involve creation**. The written word is powerful. As writers we give our ideas voice for communication, **we create our discourse**. Christine wrote in her entry 'writing becomes a tool to accomplish an end product. Similar to a carpenter's hammer, we use writing to develop an framework of ideas, and build or dreams'" (Scott, Clemson, Letter 3)

It's the writing that does it!

- Students expressed thoughts and shared experiences and emotions they probably would not have done in a face-to-face classroom – 'similarities in variety'
- Students grew comfortable exchanging ideas within a Web discussion board: interactive, asynchronous, communal, conversational, professional, playful, and thoughtful
- Students recognized linguistic cues and cultural implications of their writing—an online discussion with a quality of "talk"
- Students were motivated to write and read letters for a responsive audience
- Students demonstrated their understanding of the rhetorical factors of writing for a particular context and purpose

What We Learned

- Communication technology offered functionality on a topic of mutual interest and enabled conversation and learning.
- The generative effects of a conversation moving from narrative / personal to expository / reflective.
"beneficial because we were required to consider our own experiences and then relate them to others. This provided self-insight and awareness of others." (Mark, Tidewater, Letter 4)
- Peer-oriented conversation enhanced students' self-perception in a rhetorical situation enhanced by international communication.
"the information you gain, but even more important, you get some self-esteem from noticing that people are actually interested in your thoughts." (Anders, Chalmers, Letter 4)

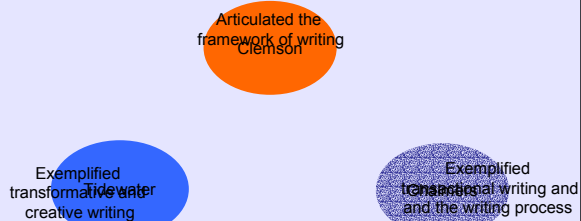
What the students learned

- Rewarding and reassuring common ground of writing or “similarities in variety”
 - Emphasis on process rather than product
 - Tension between anxiety and reward
 - The US students a lot more exposed to transformative writing than Swedish students
 - The impact and power of writing for personal writing, school writing, workplace writing and CMC
 - Stressed their shared issues and promoted the writing process, reflective writing and creative writing

Effects

- Socialization was enhanced by personal stories, conversational language, and the genre of letters.
- Reflection was integral: reflecting on writing while writing; reflecting on communications technology while using technology.
- Emphasis on process, learning, and communication (rather than product—not on “what makes a good letter?”) stimulated interaction among disparate groups.
- Students shared issues across cultural and institutional boundaries as well as time and place differences, facilitated by technology, by small group interaction, and by conversational discourse
- The peer oriented conversation has enhanced the students’ world of writing

Three Instructional Contexts



“we are united in this universal concern” (Daniel, Clemson, Letter 4)

—“the understanding of effective writing skill” (Xing, Chalmers, Letter 3)

What we would like to do next

- “Further research”
 - Discourse analysis of the exchange
 - Analyse the educational value of online conversational writing
 - Explore fora like Claroline as a genre/medium in learning
 - Explore the potential of writing about writing for the development of writing
- Offer an invitation to additional exchanges
 - Other disciplines, other HE cultures, different group set-ups, different approaches
- More than anything, pursue a discussion with you!