

# Heterotopias, Panopticons, and Internet Discourse

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## Abstract

As the use of computer-mediated communication becomes more common in the language classroom, more attention is needed to the types of discourse which are engendered on the Internet. Many teachers contend that use of the Internet provides their students with more opportunities for free and autonomous communication, while others claim that patterns of teacher control will reproduce themselves in on-line educational activities. This paper examines the discourse on a group of international e-mail discussion lists for ESL and EFL teachers and students to examine how the discourse community is shaped and what relations are constructed among participants in the process. Two Foucauldian concepts, that of panopticism and that of heterotopia, are used to illustrate the contradictory features which tend to make Internet discourse highly socialized but also highly pluralistic.

Whether or not one concurs that the Internet represents the most significant information medium since the printing press (Harnad 1991), there is general agreement that the impact of networked communication has been profound. Indeed, the amount of time that the average reader of this journal spends on-line is just one indication of how significantly the Internet has changed patterns of communication, at least within the academic community.

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The potential of the Internet for language education has not been overlooked (Warschauer 1995a; Warschauer 1995b), with teachers emphasizing its potential to create authentic audiences (Bowers 1995; Cohen & Miyake 1986), facilitate collaborative learning (Barson, Frommer, & Schwartz 1993; Meskill & Rangelova in press), empower disenfranchised learners (Cummins & Sayers 1990; Warschauer, Turbee, & Roberts 1994), promote effective interaction (Chun 1992; Kern in press), and enhance student motivation (Kelm 1992; Kroonenberg 1994/1995; Warschauer in press). Some contend that using the Internet can help people develop their off-line communication proficiency--for example, by assisting the development of oral (Barson, et al. 1993), grammatical (Kelm 1995) or writing (Sullivan & Pratt in press; Vilmi 1995) skills; others stress that we should teach the Internet in part because on-line communication itself is an important skill for the future (Cummins & Sayers 1995; Cummins & Sayers 1990).

In order to better understand why and how to use the Internet in language education, it is important to better understand the particular features of Internet discourse, and in what ways they resemble or differ from discourse via other media. This of course is no easy task, since the Internet actually encompasses a broad range of communication media; the type of language one would find from glancing through a few MUDs or MOOs or would be quite different than language found through surfing the World Wide Web. And even within one particular type of Internet communication, such as electronic mail, one would expect to find great variation, depending on a number of aspects, such as whether the messages were sent privately or to a group.

## Freedom and Control

Nevertheless, there is one feature that comes up frequently in regard to the use of the Internet in society, and in education, which seems to transcend almost all the various uses of the Net (e.g., Web, e-mail, MOOs), and that is the issue of freedom. There is little doubt that the Internet allows a lot more freedom of communication, if for no other reason than that it provides another channel in addition to previously existing ones. But there are other reasons, important ones, related to freedom of restrictions from time and space (McComb 1993), freedom from the need to request permission or risk interruption (Bump 1990), freedom

from restrictions due to disability (Batson 1993), freedom from restrictions imposed by cost (Tella 1991), as well as freedom due to relative anonymity (Sproull & Kiesler 1991). It is precisely these reasons that there is an ongoing national debate regarding "Cyberporn" and what to do about it.

The flip-side of freedom is control. Though the Internet began as a tool of the military (Warschauer 1995a), it soon was championed by a community of hackers who saw it as a liberating device which would decentralize power and shift it to the masses. This same community of early Internet enthusiasts is now concerned that control of the net will be seized by corporate powers to their own advantage.

Similar issues related to freedom and control have filtered down into the classroom, with teachers assessing both the liberating and the controlling aspects of on-line communication in determining whether or how to use it for education. Composition teachers were among the first to introduce networked communication into their instruction and have generally been very favorable about how it helps create new social dynamics favoring students' freedom and power. "Computers joined in a network can be a means of liberation, particularly for those students who are often marginalized" (Faigley 1990). "Networks create an unusual opportunity to shift away from the traditional writing classroom because they create entirely new pedagogical dynamics" (Batson 1988). "Computer conferences are powerful, non-traditional learning forums for students not simply because they allow another opportunity for collaboration and dialogue--but also because they encourage students to resist, dissent, and explore the role that controversy and intellectual divergence play in learning and thinking" (Cooper & Selfe 1990).

That on-line communication tends to facilitate more unfettered expression, especially by those of lower status, is a phenomenon well demonstrated through numerous communications studies (Finholt, Kiesler, & Sproull 1986; Huff & King 1988; Kiesler, Zubrow, & Moses 1985; McGuire, Kiesler, & Siegel 1987; Sproull & Kiesler 1986)(Finholt, Kiesler, and Sproull, 1986; Huff and King, 1988; Kiesler, Zubrow, and Moses, 1985; McGuire, Kiesler, and Siegel, 1987; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986; for an excellent review see (Sproull & Kiesler 1991). This phenomenon has also been supported by research in the second language classroom, which has found that electronic discussion is more student-centered than face-to-face discussion (Kern 1996; Sullivan & Pratt in press), that electronic discussion is more balanced than face-to-face discussion (Kelm 1992; Kern 1996), and that most students express themselves more freely via e-mail than on paper (Wang 1993). Other second language researchers have pointed to the student control of topics which arises when learning is based on direct electronic communication between partners (Barson, et al. 1993; Kelm 1996).

The issue of control enters in in another way as well, and that is the control achieved through collective monitoring and observation. Again, second and foreign language teachers have found this a benefit of electronic communication, as students modify and improve their discourse as they write to an audience of their peers and their teacher (Bowers 1995; Kern 1996), analyze and reflect on the language they encounter (Kelm 1995; Kern 1996), appropriate the discourse of others (St. John 1995)., and achieve "real-purpose writing with genuine audiences...a collaborative effort [which makes] writing and reading more public, drawing various social and negotiation skills into the foreground" (Tella 1992).

These positive evaluations evoke the perspective of Bakhtin, who wrote that "language learning is a process of assimilation, more or less creative, of others' words" (1986.: 89, emphasis in original) and that "a meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning" (1986.: 7). Bakhtin's close colleague, Volosinov, added that "words, intonations, and inner-word gestures that have undergone the experience of outward expression" acquire "a high social polish and lustre by the effect of reactions and responses, resistance or support, on the part of a social audience" (Volosinov 1973.: 93).

### **Anarchy and Authoritarianism**

In spite of the generally positive reviews, many educators have raised questions about the nature, extent, and results of increased freedom of on-line communication. . Skeptics claim that more freedom of expression may benefit not the most needy, but rather the already dominant students, who use their computer knowledge, typing skills, or dominant personality traits to take control of the discourse (Eldred 1991; Hiltz 1990; Murray 1991). Freedom of expression can turn into anarchy, as students waste their time in trivial discussion, flame each other with insults (Janangelo 1991), or ignore the writings of others and engage in "a set of asocial monologues" (Moran 1991: 51).

Some educators have pointed out how the beneficial control of the collective gaze can in fact turn into its opposite. Janangelo (Janangelo 1991) and Hawisher and Selfe (1991) emphasize this point by drawing on Foucault's (1979) concept of panopticism (p. 195). Designed by Jeremy Bentham for the surveillance of inmates in the French penitentiary, the panopticon consisted of a circular building with a guard tower in the middle and the prisoners' cells arranged around the periphery. The design allowed the guards to continually observe the prisoners without being seen themselves. The fact that the observation is unverifiable makes it all the more powerful. Since the prisoner is never sure when he is being observed, he monitors his own behavior and in affect becomes his own guardian. "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power...; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 1979: 202-203).

Hawisher and Selfe (1991) point out that electronic discussion systems, which in some cases allow teachers constant but invisible access to student discussions, provide a panopticon-type situation in the classroom. "Under certain conditions, without carefully thinking out the theoretical consequences, instructors enter conferences to read and monitor student' conversations without revealing themselves as readers and evaluators...When instructors take samples from network discussions into the classroom and use these as positive or negative examples, they are employing electronic conferences to discipline, to shape the conversations and academic discourse of their students" (Hawisher & Selfe 1991: 63).

Just as Foucault was more interested in describing the mechanisms of power than in judging them, so too can we see both the positive and negative aspects of this type of discipline. Much of what academic life is about involves students shaping their writing and thinking to the modes of accepted scholarly discourse. Whether it represents freedom or not is another question.

Of course teacher authoritarianism via the net can take more insidious forms as well. Janangelo (1991) provides examples where teachers use their access to network resources to determine the exact time when students turn in their assignments (and, with that information, to punish them) or even to monitor the behavior and work of colleagues.

However, another example provided by Janangelo (1991) illustrates that students are perhaps not as easily subjected to the Panopticon's power as he would contend. In this example, students in a course used the on-line discussion list to mercilessly harass an immigrant classmate, with the class ganging up to write phrases like "Ella talks funny", "Ella sucks", "Ella is fat", "Ella is ugly," "Ella is stupid," "Ella is a cunt," "Ella is a slut," and "Ella is a pig" (p. 57-58). As horrible as this incident is, it is certainly hard to square it with Janangelo's metaphor of panopticism which he focuses on in the same article. Rather, perhaps another metaphor of Foucault is more appropriate, that of the heterotopia (Foucault 1986: 24).

The heterotopia, like the utopia, was conceived by Foucault as a site which had "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect." But whereas utopias exist only in the imagination, heterotopias are actual places "formed in the very founding of social life" (p. 24), sites such as boarding schools, carnivals, museums, psychiatric hospitals and cemeteries. These heterotopias "juxtapose in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible"(p. 25) and "always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (p. 26). "These 'curious' sites are socially constructed but they simultaneously recreate and reveal the meaning of social being" (Soja 1990: 8).

For Foucault, the heterotopia is like a mirror, since "In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal virtual space that opens up behind the surface...It makes the place that I occupy...at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there".

The comments by Janangelo's students seem absolutely real, in that they portray a meanness of spirit which is undeniably authentic, and at the same time absolutely unreal, since they break all rules of discourse that would be acceptable in a traditional college classroom discussion. The set of relations which exists in the class has been neutralized, or even inverted, with the students seizing control from the teacher to engage in behavior that offline would be considered totally bizarre.

Post-modern geographers have further developed the notion of the heterotopia. Heterotopia is typified in the post-modern city, such as Los Angeles, a "space in which the drawing of definite centres, boundaries, and regularities is impossible....pluralistic, chaotic, designed in detail yet lacking universal foundations or principles, continually changing, linked by centreless flows of information" (Relph 1991).

Many would suggest that this provides an excellent description of discourse communities on the Internet.

### **The Learner Lists**

To further explore the metaphors of panopticism and heterotopology on the Internet, this paper will analyze the discourse on a set of e-mail discussion lists called the Learner Lists. The Learner Lists are a set of semi-public "listserver" discussion lists for the practice of English language. They are similar in function to academic lists such as TESL-L, LINGUIST, SLART-L, and FLTEACH, except that their purpose is to promote not academic discussion but rather writing practice, cultural exchange, and communicative interaction among learners of English.

The Learner Lists are just one of a number of such projects which have been set up for language learners, some others being the GAKUSEI lists for Japanese (Kimoto 1995), RIBO-L for German and English (Hedderich 1995), and Swahili-L (Kuntz 1995). Some of these lists, such as GAKUSEI-L and Swahili-L were established principally for the participation of non-native speakers, though native speakers are invited to join as well. Other lists, such as RIBO-L, are set up for bilingual communication between native and non-native speakers of two languages. In addition, some teachers encourage their students to participate in ongoing lists which are principally for native speakers, such as the French-language CAUSERIE list based in Quebec (Paramskas 1995).

The Learner Lists were set up in 1994 by three ESL/EFL professors teaching on three different continents. They were established to provide opportunities for students at their universities and other post-secondary institutions around the world to practice English with their peers.

Originally consisting of six different lists, the project grew to include a battery of ten discussion lists for students and one for teachers. The student lists included eight devoted to certain topics (e.g., CINEMA-L and NEWS-L) and two for general discussion (TALK-L for beginning students and CONVERSE-L for more advanced students). INSTRUCTOR-L provided the teachers involved in the project a private channel to discuss ideas among themselves.

By fall 1995, there were approximately 3,000 subscribers to the ten student lists from some 30 countries around the world, probably representing about 1500 people (estimating that each person was subscribed to two lists). In addition, there were approximately 100 teachers subscribed to INSTRUCTOR-L.

### **Erecting the Tower**

When the project was first established, the lists functioned on a more or less ad-hoc basis, with the three owners stepping in to help get discussion going or answer questions as needed. But as the lists grew in size and complexity, it was clear that some kind of monitoring structure was needed to keep the project on track.

A number of issues contributed to the need for some kind of organized structure. First, the sheer size of the project meant that dozens a student a day were signing on and off to various lists and often needed help with technical problems. Secondly, the relative openness of the project meant that an incredibly diverse group was getting involved and the owners felt the need to create protective mechanisms to see that the project met its goals. Among the types of problems to watch out for students getting in extensive private conversations in languages other than English, native-speaking students becoming so dominant on the lists that English learners would feel intimidated to participate, conversation on some of the smaller lists dying out, or students engaging in obscene or racist discourse that would offend the sensibilities of other students or of the sponsoring university, which was graciously lending its staff and hardware to help run the lists.. (The university had reportedly shut down earlier student discussion lists when they found them to be too obscene.)

Eventually a multi-level structure emerged to handle all these issues. At the lowest level were the participating students, whose discourse was always subject to invisible and unverifiable monitoring. A level up were the teachers who could observe student discourse as they wished and comment on it on

INSTRUCTOR-L. At the next level were official teacher monitors who participated on each list and had the authority not only to help students but also to discipline them if they broke list rules (such as no obscenities and no hate speech). The next level consisted of the three list owners (one of whom worked for the sponsoring university), who periodically gazed down at the other levels to see that they were functioning and who had the authority to make policy or to throw individuals off the lists, who were never directly involved but had the constant authority and power to step in and observe and evaluate the project any time they wanted to. In a sense, the levels never end, because the university administrator must be concerned with what the higher-ups believe, who in turn must be concerned with the reputation of the university in academia and in society.

The monitors and owners had a sincere interest in making this a successful learning project, which would provide students opportunities to engage in challenging discourse in a safe and secure environment. Furthermore, they wanted to make the lists a comfortable place for students of many different nationalities and cultures. For these reasons, they often stepped in to try to curb inappropriate (e.g., obscene, hateful) discussion. Nevertheless, in making these judgments it was sometimes unclear whether monitors and owners took action based on their own real opinions of what was right or wrong, or based instead on the need to look responsible in the eyes of those above. Just as Foucault (1979) describes, everyone was caught up in the disciplinary gaze of the institution:

The Panopticon may even provide an apparatus for supervising its own mechanisms. In this central tower the director may spy on all the employees that he has under his orders...he will be able to judge them continuously, alter their behavior, impose upon them the methods he thinks best; and it will even be possible to observe the director himself. An inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon will be able to judge at a glance, without anything being concealed from him, how the entire establishment is functioning (p. 204).

### **Shaping Discourse**

The mechanisms of how power was manifested are well illustrated by the case of David. A student from Latin America studying at a large public university in the U.S., David became one of the most active writers on the Learner Lists. Unfortunately though, many of his early postings were controversial, such as the following example:

I really cannot understand why some women are still virgins when they are older, sex is wonderfull, it burns calories, is a good sports, it kills time, and is very fun.

I recomend women to have a lot of sex, because girl, someday you will be married and you will only have enjoy one pennis.

Men are like animals, they have sex all the time, so you shoulddo the same. Don't let them use you, use them. But please girls, have some sex, remember, someday you will beold and your butt will be wrinkled, so enjoy sex WHILE YOU CAN!!!!

A number of students found David's messages offensive, both because of their sexual references and their offensive content to groups of people (in this message, women, but in other messages other groups such as African-Americans). At least one teacher, in a message to INSTRUCTOR-L suggested that David's behavior could make her look bad in the eyes of her students and colleagues:

I had just gotten most of my students on the learner lists when several of David's sexually explicit messages appeared. After expressing my enthusiasm to my students concerning how much the lists would help them and how exciting it would be to read messages from all over..., you can imagine how embarrassed I was to see the constant topic shifts on David's part. Unfortunately, it discouraged me from really continuing to make the list a part of my course AND, I discouraged all my colleagues from signing on this semester.

The list owners sent David a strongly-worded comment and attempted to expel him from the project. However, the project was using an unsophisticated listserver software program which made expelling students permanently virtually impossible; anyone unsubscribed from one list could sneak back on to another. The owners were able to put some pressure on David, but were unable to permanently throw him off.

The following posting from David appeared about a week later:

Hey Carlos, whats up, Alaska must be a very nice place, eventhouhg it use to belong to the russians many years ago, they were very dumb in selling that state, but hell, they did not know it was full of petroleum, and the problem is that Vladimir Zhirinovsky wants to taket back, he is a bastard, he wants to take out all the former soviet union countrys(Lithuania, Estonia, Azerbaijan, etc). But well, that is life.

Anyway, i recomend you try to get to Rusia crossing the strech of Bering, near the north pole, Rusia is a beautiful country of beautiful people(except for Zhirinovsky, ha ha).

Also, if you are thinking of having a sexual relation with some of the indians, becareful, always use a condom, it is your best protection against AIDS and other STDs(Syphylis, Gonoreah, etc). And it helps to prevent unwanted pregnancis.

Very important, as a person from latin-america, i presume you know about how many of us men get women pregnant all the time, well that is why i always use protection, if i wanted to have a baby i would get married or i would adopt. But i have a freind who whas having sex with a girl and know the poor girl is has not gotten her period, could she be pregnant?. I hope not, ofcourse there is always abortion, but abortion is not the kind of experiance any woman should have to face. I have heard stories of women who get abortions and suddenly they end up very depressed with a sicologist to help them.

Well, i hope to see you around. Bye

David

Compared to the previous message, this posting indicates a more sophisticated attempt to fit into the discourse community. Though the loose references to sexual issues are still seen as inappropriate by many, the insulting language (such as "wrinkled butts") is absent and the serious issues (AIDS, abortion) come through more strongly.

Nevertheless, a number of teachers find this message also inappropriate and one responds in public to the list:

Dear David,

This seems like a personal message for Carlos. Why copy everyone on the list? Also, I find your tendency to include sexual references (2 messages on this list) a little disturbing, especially since your recipient mentions nothing about that. Is anyone else bothered by this?

Laura Stevens

Univ. Of Metropolis

At the same time that David was coming under continual pressure from teachers to sanitize his language, he was also starting to engage in more private interaction with students who found positive things in his messages. This combination of a carrot and stick--teachers threatening his presence on the list, with students showing interest in some of his views--continued to encourage him to participate in a way that was more acceptable. In the following exchange, David decides to seek the permission of the list monitor before launching into controversial topics. The exchange started when, after a teacher posted a message on one list saying that her class was looking for e-mail exchange partners for a project, David wrote to the list "This sounds like the newspaper section of singles looking for singles. Good luck!"

The list monitor, wary of David's previous reputation, wrote him immediately, and the following exchange took place:

Hi David! I'm going to request that people NOT post messages of this type where there is no new information. It's really not worth posting and it just fills peoople's mailboxes with no payoff or relevant information.

Thanks, Evelyn, [name of list] Co-Monitor

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Thanks Ms Evelyn, i hope you did not get mad with me for the joke i put in their unimportant posting.  
Take care, David

-----  
Hi, David--No problem. Thanks. I just don't want people to be discouraged from using the list for its intended purpose when they find messages with no content. --Evelyn  
-----

Since you are a monitor, I need your important permission to do something, id did a lot of reading in illegal industys like the sex industry, and the drug industry. Howeber, this topics are controversial, that is why i need your advice for the choosing of one of the topics.

Take care

-----  
David, I am NOT prepared to give you permission to discuss these topics on [this list]. This is not the purpose of the list. I know also that people are sometimes offended by these types of messages, so I am requesting that you not discuss them on [this list]. Thanks, Evelyn  
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Ok, i will not discuss this topics, too bad, since they are important and i know quite a few about them. But i will do what you say.

Take care!

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Thanks a lot, David!! I appreciate your consideration!!  
--Evelyn  
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This exchange provides a fascinating glimpse at the exercise of power and control in the lists. David, who is starting to develop a stake in participating in the lists, shows deference to the monitor but tries to raise his agenda. The monitor disapproves, taking an increasingly formal and authoritative stand (note that her salutations go from "Hi David!" to "Hi, David" to "David," and back to "Thanks a lot, David!!" after he backs off.) Her tone also becomes more directive, going from a very general admonition ("I'm going to request that people NOT post messages of this type") to a very specific one ("I am requesting that you not discuss them"). In the end, when David accedes to the request, he is rewarded with an enthusiastic nod of appreciation.

David's discourse continued to evolve in a more acceptable direction. In an ironic, but perhaps not unexpected turn of events, given the panopticon model, David took on the role of list guardian himself, helping make sure that other students followed the rules. The following message was posted by David in response to a student who written something about looking for a girlfriend:

What is this?! the personal section in the newspaper?!

My friend, let me give you a few pointers:

- 1) This is a chat line, not a date line
- 2) This could be consider sexual harrasment
- 3) This letter could be consider sexist, "beautyfull girl" is a sexist expresion.
- 4) Be carefull in the future, i used to write like you and i almost got thrown out of here.

Please don't get mad with me, i am just giving you some advice so you won't have to face the troubles i have faced.

David had come full circle. The wild boy who had written of girls getting "wrinkled butts" was now warning other students of sexual harassment. Subjected to a "field of visibility," David assumed responsibility for "the constraints of power" (Foucault, 1979: 202).

As time went by David's discourse, though at times still rough-edged, showed increase sensitivity. He began posting a number of his poems. The following poem, though continuing some of the same themes, shows a dramatic change in tone and content from his earlier messages.

Women!

Women should be respected!

Who holds the baby for nine months?

Who raises the children?

Who cleans the house?

Who give you clean clothes?

Who is for you when you are sad...

angry, nervous?  
The women of course!  
But God did not created women just to clean... Just to raise children!  
Just to be a slave...  
A slave of the home...  
A slave of the men...  
God created women for much more.  
A women is not just a baby machine,  
She can work!  
She can create!  
She can be succesfull!  
Have we forgatten Madame Curie...  
Emily Dickinson...  
Golda Meir...  
Benazir Bhuto...  
Anne Frank...  
Sofia Loren...  
Elizabeth Taylor...  
Many of us have forgatten that.  
And that is why women are still being discriminated. Is an unfair situation,  
Is an unholy situation,  
A man only needs 5 minutes to have a baby, But the women needs nine months of pain. And yet they are still  
discriminated...  
And exploited...  
And insulted...  
Some will use religion to discriminate,  
Others will use force,  
But discrimination is discrimination,  
And injustice is injustice,  
And heaven does not belong...  
To the evil man...  
Heaven is only...  
For the good,  
For the pure,  
For the just,  
You are wrong!  
Some may say...  
But can they prove it?  
There are free women today...  
But some women are still slaves of men,  
Women wake up!  
Break the chain!  
You are sacred!  
And no men can tell you what to do...  
And no men can controll you...  
If you fight for it...  
I am not telling you not to get married... I am not telling you not to have a boyfriend... But find a respectfull  
men,  
Find someone that will treat you right... The way a women should be treated...  
Maybe he won't be so handsome...  
Maybe he won't be rich...  
But he will treat you like a lady...  
He will adore you like a queen...  
And please don't give what he doesn't give... If he is not respectfull...  
Don't treat him with respect!  
If he is not a virgin...  
Don't give your virginity to him!  
Because Men and Women are equal,

And equality...  
Is what this poem is all about.

David

### **Rhetoric of the Tower**

Most would agree that the previous example would show the positive effects of panopticism. Subjected to a field of visibility, always subject to the discipline of the guardians in the tower, David was able to shape his discourse in ways that brought him more positive regard in this discourse community. The following example illustrated that the panopticon served not only to monitor the students, but also the teachers.

One of the issues of concern from the beginning of the project was how much teachers should participate in discussion on the students' lists. Some argued that any participation by teachers would rob initiative from the students, while others felt that teachers should no more absent themselves from the discussion than they should from a classroom. Some of the complexities involved in this decision are illustrated in an exchange which started when a teacher, Joy, wrote to the list to ask what students thought about the death penalty. A student, Paul, replied that he used to be against the death penalty when he was a teenager because he was afraid of his own mortality, but that when he got older and came to terms with his own mortality, then he began to support the death penalty. The exchange continued as follows:

From: Joy Harris  
Subject: Death Penalty

In reply to the message written by Paul, I want to respond by letting everyone on the group know that I have not been a teenager for many years, and that my reasons for disagreeing with the death penalty have nothing to do with my own fear of death. I simply disagree with a system that has been proven to be inconsistent, institutionally racist, inefficient, costly, not to mention that there is no proof that it deters anyone from committing murder. I have read up on this subject, and actually have changed my stance from once agreeing with this form of punishment. It is not the panacea many supporters wish to think it is. Though, this of course is just my humble opinion (MHO).

Sincerely yours, Joy Harris  
Midtown University

-----  
From: Paul  
Subject: Re: Death Penalty

Hi everybody! How are you [netters]?

This is Paul from Western University.

In reply to the message written by Joy, I want to respond by letting everyone on the group know that, even though Joy "has not been a teenager for many years, and that her reasons for disagreeing with the death penalty have nothing to do with her own fear of death", I still believe that most of the people that are against the capital punishment, find the process of putting a criminal to death to be unhumanitarian, because of their own fear of death. The fact that Joy "disagree with a system that has been proven to be inconsistent, institutionally racist, inefficient, costly..." doesn't change my position on the death penalty. I feel, that my position on this subject is not important any more; it's just an opinion of an ESL student, that was given on opportunity to improve his English by using [this list]. I am curious however, about that humanitarian horror, that has been described by Joy Harris, who herself appears as a very mysterious individual. I'm asking for forgiveness and I apology in advance if anything I have wrote so far, or am going to hereon, has been or will be impolite, but I feel that I do have the right to know who is reading my messages, who is responding to them, and who is using my name on this forum...

Joy, could you please introduce yourself.

Are you an ESL student?

If so, what country are you from? If not, who you are? I hope you are not an ESL teacher. I know that questions that follow are rather chaotic, but could you please respond to them.

1) what do you mean by "a system"; do you refer to the United States Justice System;

2) and when you write, that it "has been proven"--who and how proved this; could you provide us with your sources;

3) could you please specify what exactly you had in mind by calling the USA Justice System (or whatever system you were referring to) to be "institutionally racist" and how you relate this to the death penalty; can we assume, according to your statement, that only criminals of a certain race are being put to death (what is that race?).

I don't want to deal with the rest of your letter. It would take to write a doctoral thesis on decadent American in the former Soviet Union to prove what you're assuming "has been proven". I would like to apologize to everybody for my sarcastic tone; I ask for forgiveness from those of you, who do not appreciate my personal and, I guess, a bit emotional style. I am one of millions (political refugees), who found his second home in America, and sometimes I become irritated, when critics use stereotypes, sometimes even without understanding the meaning of what they say.

Joy, please excuse my English. I know it is terrible--probably I will never be able to express myself in such a nice way as you. Your English is fantastic, I admire it. If I may, one suggestion: when it comes to stating opinions on matters of importance, like the death penalty for instance, first think--then write; considering your writing ability, the results should be amazing. Though, this of course is just my humble opinion.

The Most Sincerely Yours, Paul  
Western University

Many of the teachers involved with the project were displeased with Paul's viewpoint and tone, and at least one teacher sent Paul an angry message. This made Paul react even more strongly. In fact, as pointed out by Lepeintre (1995) what teachers had failed to realize was that it was not so much Joy's opinion that Paul found objectionable, but rather her rhetorical style. A former dissident in Eastern Europe, Paul was making his first serious attempt to express his views in written English, on a forum he had been led to believe was a safe one. To his dismay, he found his views sharply challenged by a university instructor who used sophisticated lexical, syntactical, and rhetorical devices. "Paul's protest to Joy's letter is a parody of this rhetoric, from the sentence structure ('In reply to,' 'I want to respond by') to the academic vocabulary ('a system', 'institutionally racist') to the salutation and the addition of an institution of higher learning next to the signature" (Lepeintre, 1995: n.p.).

After Paul protested a second time, the majority of owners and monitors came to the view that Joy had been wrong to argue her opinion so strongly, and all the teachers participating were reminded that the goal of their participation should be to draw out, not drown out, the voices of students. The second teacher who had sent Paul a private message was criticized, and he apologized. Paul and Joy patched up their differences, and, for the next few months, Paul joined David as being one of the most active and leading students participating in the lists. Similarly to David, Paul joined in helping monitor the lists to assure their fair and efficient function, posting occasionally messages instructing students on how to handle the mechanics of e-mail communication, and urging students to use proper net etiquette ("netiquette") when writing to others.

Though trouble would brew down the road, for now, the panopticon--by monitoring not only the students' discourse but also that of the teachers-- had "improve[d] the exercise of power" by making it "lighter," "subtle," and more effective." (Foucault, 1979: 209).

Paul felt that his participation on the net was of great importance to his English and his life. He once wrote that "I find communicating with people via email to be the most exciting experience that happened to me recently. I also believe that it improved my English tremendously. When I started 8 months ago, I was ashamed of sending a simple message to a fellow student and it usually took me about an hour to compose a few sentence letter. Now it takes me a great deal of energy to stay away from the Internet". On another occasion, he explained how his interaction with the teacher was a seminal event for him:

There was discussion going on the capital punishment. I wrote rather personal message saying that in my view people might be against due to, kind of, psychological barrier that they might have carried from teenage years as to for I had been afraid of dying when I was a teenager.

Some woman responded (I suspected it could have been a teacher) with, what I read was to be, almost arrogant message that she had not been a teenager for long and was still against.

I became furious and responded, for the first time in my life, with easy written, sharp letter, using her style (I remember as if it was today, I used her exact words) and, probably instinctively, converting the subject of our argument to what really bothered me -- the she was the native speaker. Actually, the message was so sharp that that poor women (God forgive me) was totaly compromised (later I was afraid that she might have problems at work because of that).

Afterwards, I appologized and we exchanged friendly messages but, God forgive me once more, I really didn't care about what happeded afterwards, because THAT was happening for me right there!!! From that moment on, after I send that message, I new I could write in English.

### **Pluralism and Chaos**

The lists went smoothly for several months until a new participant from Japan innocently asked what people from other countries thought about Japanese culture. A Chinese student responded with a scathing attack on everything Japanese, and included the text of a 10-page paper recounting the 1930s Nanjing massacre in vivid detail. While the list owners were tempted to intervene, they stood back, and what followed was on of the most in-depth and fascinating discussions the lists had yet seen. Students from almost every corner of the globe joined in, addressing questions such as the responsibility of the individual soldier or citizen during war, the responsibility of people today for actions committee by their countries in the past, the relationship of imperialist aggression to particular political-economic systems, and the rationale and justifiability of dropping the atomic bomb.

Unfortunately, this fascinating discussion eventually turned into its opposite, as a couple of extreme nationalist students again and again posted lengthy racist diatribes. It became impossible to move the discussion along, as certain individuals posted 10 or more hateful messages a day. What's more, students were responding to responses of responses, always including the original messages, and the lists were thus filled with large numbers of extremely lengthy messages a day, most of which nobody was interested in reading.

The list owners and monitors tried several ways to bring the situation under control, including posting suggestions to the lists and warnings to individual students. Yet, there was no hope--the lists were getting completely out of control.

Research has indicated that "electronic mail reduces conformity and convergence as compared with face-to-face group discussion" (Sproull & Kiesler 1991: 65). For example, in a face-to-face discussion, the second group member tends to voice agreement with the first one, and the third member even more so, while no such converging tendency exists in online discussions (Sproull & Kiesler 1991). This phenomenon was now playing itself out forcefully on the lists, as the conversation careened in varying directions with no sign of consensus. This lack of consensus developed both in terms of content and in terms of process.

As for content, many of the list members started to agree that what Japan had done in World War II was atrocious, and that the Japanese nation and people needed to acknowledge and apologize for war crimes, but that evil was not a special characteristic of any particular culture and there were limits to the extent that a group of people could be held responsible for the actions of their ancestors. At the same time though, it was impossible to reach closure on this, because several students contined to protest vociferously that Japanese people were by their very nature the most evil people on earth, far more evil than Nazis, and that they should be militarily punished.

As for process, after weeks of repetitive messages, the majority of students agreed that the subject should be dropped and other topics should be addressed. But a small group kept the discussion from going anywhere else, and continued to strain the system with larger numbers of long messages. A large number of messages back and forth between owners, monitors, teachers, and students failed to get things on track. Warning

messages from owners and monitors to students were simply ignored. Finally, the computer system itself crashed from the sheer volume of lengthy messages that were posted every day.

When the computer system got repaired and the lists got back on-line, the owners took quick steps to try to resolve the situation. They immediately posted new rules that for the first time placed strict limits on how often students could post and how long their messages could be. In an effort to avoid further crashes, the rules were strictly enforced and offending students were sent warning and then unsubscribed (though due to the particular software used, they could always re-subscribe anyway). The strict enforcement of the new rules and the expulsion of a number of students led several students to respond angrily. Some immediately rejoined after being unsubscribed and used the forum to attack and insult the owners and flame other students. Though after a couple of months, the situation calmed down, for a time the lists resembled more a heterotopia than a smoothly efficient panopticon.

## **Breakout**

The problems on the learner lists provided Paul with both a crisis and an opportunity. On the one hand, Paul was by now addicted to net communication and couldn't stand a day to go by without kibitzing with his far flung friends. On the other hand, though Paul was playing an extremely active role in the Learner Lists, he continued to chafe at the control of the lists by teacher owners and monitors.

Paul found a perfect solution to the problem; he decided to set up an alternate channel of communication that he would run. As a computer science student, he was able to set up his own discussion list and he placed the most active students on it. Though he originally posed it as a temporary substitute while the Learner Lists were shut down, his inaugural message indicates that he was offering something beyond a temporary substitution:

Hello Buddies!

It's me, the devil himself, born trouble maker and oppositionist to every order in the Univers, David Walzinski -- the rebel!

Hello everybody. What you've just received is the first posting to the underground of converse-l, our own, for and by students run

"List of REBELS",

unique and mysterious -- GATEWAYS.

As a permanent and nasty dissident by nature, I decided to breakaway and form this underground discussion forum for all the students who have been active on converse-l :-)

In a bit more serious manner of speaking (though, really don't know why to be serious, seriously:-) ), I'd like to inform all of you that I was able to compile all our names, as you saw them in my last message, and now we are all a part of the discussion group -- gateways.

Sooner or later the converse-l will be back to serve us, mean while, please, keep on posting to this address:

gateways@xxxxx.edu

All of the people you've talked so far are here so you won't miss any fun. The main difference is that there are no restriction here regarding etiquette -- you can swear at each other or talk sex, drugs, violence -- nobody is going to unsubscribe you:-) ...

All of the names I compiled here I've gotten from converse-l, simply by checking a lot of messages and pasting the addresses to one file. The equipment I've been using for that (I was asked that question) is Sun workstation, running Xwindows under Unix.

Have fun rebels, keep on arguing through the gateways...:-) Though, they're seem to be the back gates only, don't worry, the greatest men used to pass through them: Jesus, Lenin, Gandhi, Solzhenicin, and many more...

The students who Paul had subscribed to GATEWAYS wasted no time in testing out their newfound freedom. One of the first responders wrote that "I'd like to try it whether I can really put rude words in my letters and still remain member of the list....So: shit, aveola, spit, turds, asshole, dickhead, muthafucka. These words aren't to annoy or hurt anybody (this time) just testing."

Unfortunately, with the posting of another student urging everyone to "start bashing" and to "say something nasty", "the freedom to use 'nasty words' became blurred with a freedom to be mean" (Lepeintre, 1995: n.p.). Students indeed starting insulting and flaming each other rudely, and Paul was forced to implement the same type of controlling policies that he had criticized on the Learner Lists. Paul expelled one student who declared that "Hitler did the Jews a favor," and announced a new rule stating that no member can "purposely hurt anybody's feelings." With some new parameters set, GATEWAYS gradually got under control and became a site for interesting discussion. Indeed, discussions on GATEWAYS tended to be more serious and structured than on the Learner Lists, since the former was made up of a relatively stable group of a couple of dozen people, all of them on voluntarily, while the latter included huge numbers of students regularly joining and leaving. including many whole classes assigned to the lists by their teachers.

For a short time, Paul continued to participate on both GATEWAYS and the Learner Lists, and would occasionally post messages to the Learner Lists inviting other students to join GATEWAYS if they needed to share messages which were too controversial or too lengthy for the Learner List rules. Soon, though, Paul became greatly angry at the idea of students being expelled from the Learner Lists, and he decided to dedicate himself to making GATEWAYS an explicit, democratic alternative. He explained his view thusly on GATEWAYS:

I believe that GATEWAYS should be run like a democratic society. Maybe we can not change the REAL WORLD but, firstly -- there is no reason why one should ever stop trying to do so, secondly -- it's not only possible but very simple to achieve that here, in the VIRTUAL WORLD, because this is the world WE CREATE ENTIRELY. If technology is provided (and that's the case) -- the rest depends SOLELY UPON US.

There are two main problems with conventional set up: 1) singly handled power of the list owner who sets the rules arbitrarily 2) double channels of communication while running list

ad1)

The list owner should be:

- a) student (means me:-):-:-))
- b) excluded from making any decisions (means me:-(-(-(-()

Decisions should be made by, lets call it, PANEL -- sort of legislature, a few members elected by majority; we could implement also something like a WISEMAN -- an independent body to break ties in case the PANEL can not decide.

ad2)

People will never truly trust the management, just like in the real world, if the management uses its own channels of communication. My suggestion is that those who belong together to other lists or organizations which forces them to communicate \*behind\* doors, should participate as regular members, not managers.

There is no way to stop people from talking to each other privately. There is very simple way to avoid having management to do so.

To be selected to the PANEL, or to be elected to be the WISEMAN (or WISEWOMAN -- I would surely vote for one myself) one should be obligated to talk about the list up front, so everybody can read it. Any attempt to discuss the list matters \*behind\* the main forum should be treated as highly unethical and resulted in removal from the office.

I would suggest an even number of the PANEL members, lets say 4, so the WISE(WO)MAN would serve as the tie breaker, or odd, lets say 3, without the WISE(WO)MAN -- or starting with the latest as less

troublesome and with the possibilities to develop into the 4 + WISE option open for the future.

The owner would be excluded from making any decisions, he'd serve as a technical implementor, sort of-- weak executive, and carry out the PANEL's decisions. He could serve as a host, but this is not the requirement since the host job is not connected with UW anyhow.

To elect people for these positions we would need approximately a week -- the first, rough idea that comes to my mind is simply to propose a few candidates for each job, let's say 10 people altogether, and start voting. Everything would be done up front, on GATEWAYS, so we can all watch it.

The benefits of having all flat equal, no teachers--spys, are absolutely obvious to me.

Firstly, there is 100% trust, no need to hold back tongs -- means, writing from the guts, not for a grade...

[Secondly], having mixture of natives/non-natives, teachers/students, and all our cultural melange -- all on the same level -- we create a very unique environment, explosive environment; just like the New World, no nobility. Folks, LET IT HAPPEN.

Finally, we would become truly INDEPENDENT. Quite frankly, the management of the GATEWAYS has stolen you, folks, from the Learner Lists. This is not exactly true, I know, we didn't have a place to talk, [the Learner Lists] was down, that's ok. It could be argued both ways. But by proclaiming the new rules we would become an INDEPENDENT, just like the Colonies had broken from the Old World...

I don't want to run GATEWAYS the old way.

Paul

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the elaborate nature of Paul's proposal, it was almost totally ignored by GATEWAYS members. Only one chose to respond, who wrote that

My thinking is: We deal with the problems, when they arise. Why bother figuring out all the details? What if these problems never occur?..... You see I assume most people are going to be passengers on this 'train', by the time when a problem arises, the PANEL members elected earlier might have gotten off the train because real life circumstances have required them to be elsewhere...

Marisa

### **Panopticons or Heterotopias?**

This is not a complete history of either the Learner Lists or GATEWAYS. The Learner Lists, in particular, is a huge project which has provided, and continues to provide, thousands of students around the world the opportunity to practice their English in real communication with their peers around the world, changing many lives for the better along the way.

So this account provides only a glimpse of how these projects functioned, and a glimpse which has focused more on the crises than on the normal everyday activity. Yet these crises and abnormalities do perhaps help reveal some things about the nature of panopticism, heterotopias, and Internet discourse.

At times the Learner Lists functioned as a model panopticon, helping shape the discourse of its members, both students and teachers, to meet the acceptable standards of the community. Students appropriated the language of others and refined their own discourse to meet the demands of a social audience. As seen by the case of David, the development of some student writers was dramatic.

Yet, at other times, the heterotopic nature of cyberspace made it difficult to determine even who was in the Learner Lists' discourse community, let alone to exercise any control. During a time of crisis, the project temporarily broke down into chaos, spawning a breakout. The alternative that rose up to attempt to take its place similarly developed its own mini-panoptic structure, which it is now trying to express via a democratic format.

To a large extent these events are undoubtedly due to the particular history of these lists--the personalities of the teachers and students involved, the nature of the sponsoring university, and even the particular software

used to run the lists. Yet, the results also seem at least partly attributable to the nature of the medium. On the one hand, the highly socialized nature of the Internet seems to suggest that forms of panopticism will continually emerge within its structures. On the other hand, the heterotopic nature of the Internet--pluralistic, chaotic, continually changing, linked by centerless flows of information--poses a challenge to the formation of stable discourse communities. This is a challenge that academia as a whole is trying to come to grip with, as groups experiment with different ways of moderating Internet discourse to bring some order to chaos.

### **Conclusion: Power and Knowledge**

According to Foucault (1979), panopticism is not a totalitarian scheme to be condemned, but rather a simple description of how power is exercised, and knowledge is formed, in modern society. Panopticism has created "a level at which the formation of knowledge and the increase of power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process" (p. 224); it even fulfills a humanitarian role "by immersing people in a field of total visibility where the opinion, observation and discourse of others would restrain them from harmful acts" (Foucault 1977: 153).

It is impossible to draw any formulaic lessons from this one drama, as there are dozens of ways of using the Internet in language teaching (Warschauer 1995b).. Yet since most educators are interested in helping students increase their knowledge--and, one would hope, their power--this analysis does suggest some issues worthy of consideration as teachers design electronic learning projects.

- Electronic collaborative discussion, by bringing the comments of all into a field of visibility, provides ample opportunities for students to adjust their language to a social audience and appropriate the language of others. How can these opportunities be maximized without sacrificing students' agency?
- Teachers bring to electronic forums not only the content of their words and actions, but the tone and register of their rhetoric (Lepeintre 1995). How can teachers intervene in students' forums and projects so that their rhetoric becomes a model but does not stifle initiative?
- Electronic discourse can at times become chaotic, wild, and out of control. What structures can be developed so that pluralism will result not in a noisy dispersion of efforts but rather an integration of perspectives and insight, a situation in which students' "formation of knowledge and increase of power regularly reinforce one another" (Foucault, 1979: 224)?

When asked whether, in the panopticon, "each comrade becomes an overseer," Foucault suggests another interpretation, a Rousseauian one in which "each overseer becomes a comrade" (Foucault 1977: 153). While no technology or medium guarantees any result simply by its presence (Crookall & Oxford 1990; Foucault 1984; Garrett 1991), by bringing students' and teachers' discourse into a field of visibility, the electronic classroom may make more realizable either of these possibilities.

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