

1995

## On Reviewing Electronic Discussions in Composition Studies

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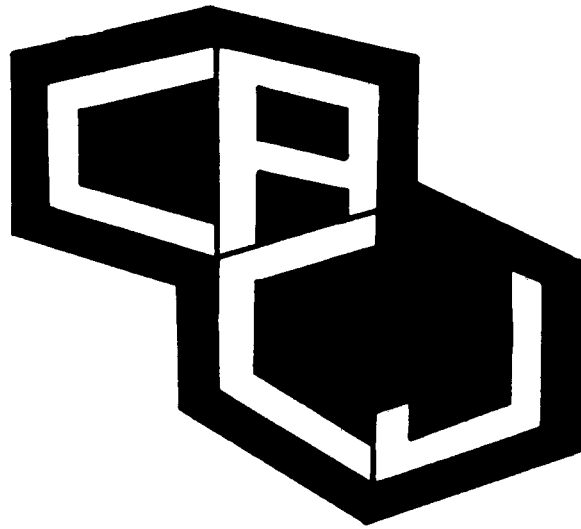
### Scholar Commons Citation

Taylor, Todd and Moxley, Joseph M., "On Reviewing Electronic Discussions in Composition Studies" (1995). *English Faculty Publications*. 149.

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**The  
Computer-  
Assisted  
Composition  
Journal**



**Volume 9, Number 2**

**Winter, 1995**

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Todd Taylor and Joseph M. Moxley

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### Sketching a Framework for a Hybrid Genre: Reviews of Internet Discussions

An excellent edition of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2 November 1994) described the changing complexion of scholarship as a result of the Internet, included reviews of a handful of popular electronic lists, and reported that the Internet features over 2,000 academic discussion groups. These numbers are certain to continue to grow exponentially, and we must work diligently to try to orient ourselves in the changing world of electronic literacy. To that end, in the fall semester of 1994, we held a seminar at the University of South Florida that explored ways in which advanced technologies and literacies are mutually defining one another. A significant part focused on evaluating new resources for the dissemination of scholarship. That is, we looked very closely at electronic interchanges in the forms of listservs, bulletin boards, and MOOs. Each seminar participant selected an Internet discussion group in composition to monitor September through November and then tried to capture a sense of the conversations being conducted at these various electronic meeting sites. As a result, this issue of *CACJ* examines most of our field's major discussion groups through fourteen informative reviews, two of which are authored by contributors from outside the original seminar group.

At first, our intention was simply to gain a deeper understanding of what is happening "out there" in the often wild frontier of the Internet. But as we began sharing our views of the outland, we were struck by the profound lack of road maps, street signs, and compass headings in place for the maybe-not-so-technoliterate. The disorientation associated with something expanding as rapidly as the Internet is not necessarily all bad and is certainly unavoidable to some degree. Still, we think those in composition studies will find value in the sense of the electronic land-

scape provided by these reviews.

In order to write a thorough review, each contributor monitored an Internet discussion for at least three months, acting sometimes as a lurker and other times as a participant in each electronic conversation. We used the following questions to guide our critiques:

1—Is this listserv a creative space for intelligent, professional discussion as opposed to individuals just looking for help conducting research and finding sources?

2—How long are most of the posts and threads?

3—What is the tone of the list? How much *flaming* and how much *netiquette* does it have?

4—Who controls the list? How many voices does the listserv have?

5—Do discussions tend to be primarily professional or social?

6—What are the major topics of discussion?

7—Who is likely to benefit from participation in this list?

Generating informative reviews of electronic discussions proved to be much more complicated than our seemingly sensible list suggested. The formats, conventions, and principles for critiquing such traditional media as books, performances, or lectures are familiar, but standards for those we sought were lacking. We discovered a scattering of reviews on the Internet itself, but these resources did not seem to do much in the way of reaching the novice or those whose workloads prevent them from becoming serious "Net surfers."

The reviews on the Internet were much

like finding a road map once we had already arrived at our destination. While we found those *The Chronicle of Higher Education* described as we were writing our own, the notable exception was that ours were geared specifically toward the composition community.

We bring up this issue of precedents and standards for two reasons. First, as the electronic world continues to grow and change dramatically, we will need to develop and publish more reviews of this type. Reviews of Internet discussions are likely to evolve as a hybrid genre. Second, even though standards and conventions for this emerging genre are not in place, we can imagine that they will eventually take form. Clearly, these new standards will need to be based upon an awareness of the limitations peculiar to the world of the Internet instead of relying on traditions inherited from the realm of print.

Some of the most obvious limitations are chronological and logistical: a critique of a discussion can cover only a discrete period of time, and the quality and focus of a particular conversation are not only *likely*, but *certain* to change over time. For example, Megabyte University (MBU-L), composition's most prominent discussion group, completely erased all of its subscribers on 11 July 1994 to give its conversation a fresh start because the size of the group and the tenor of the discussion had become unwieldy. Thus, a review of MBU-L in June would have painted a false picture of what the reader would encounter by the time such a critique reached print later that year. Of course, if such reviews were published online, their distribution could be immediate and would not suffer as much from chronological limitations.

Such comparisons of the print world and the electronic are important because they highlight many of the logistical problems with writing such reviews. Mixing media brings up one such problem: just how appropriate is *printing* static words on paper about words fluctuating in an international, electronic network of computers? If a discussion group is more akin to a conversation or a dialogue, is critiquing one as we might a book sensible? The words *discussion group* alone indicate a logistical problem located at

the intersection of the print and electronic worlds: vocabulary. We have yet to settle upon words to describe new media such as Internet discussion groups; they are termed variously "discussion groups," "BBSs," "bulletin boards," "listservs," "discussion lists," "newsgroups," and "lists," among many others. No consensus has yet emerged, especially since these entities vary greatly in character. We might easily argue that a BBS is different from a listserv and a newsgroup, but we can find any number of entities located on a continuum of all of these definitions.

As a result of these limitations, readers will notice certain inconsistencies among the reviews that follow. Some of these lists are active on a daily basis; others, only weekly. Some are conventional dialogues mediated through e-mail and administered through standard listserv protocols. Others are merely titles or names for a collection of sites, peoples, organizations, and resources that represent much more than a single type of bulletin-board exchange. In fact, one of them, Netoric's Cafe, is an online conversation taking place through a chat program known as a "MOO," which allows members to read one another's words simultaneously, in real time, as these texts are entered in the network.

### **The Politics of the Academy and the Internet: Should One Join a Discussion Group?**

The publication of these reviews also reflects important issues within the politics of education. While many teachers and scholars are excited about the possibilities that networked conversations offer, particularly the generating of dialogue and the decreasing of intellectual isolation, an outspoken word-of-mouth narrative opposes the proliferation and promotion of discussion groups. Arising out of the disorientation associated with new media, as well as knee-jerk resistance to change, discussion groups have already received a negative reputation among many people in education today. The most common complaint is that one does not have time to add the potentially demanding task of par-

ticipating in a discussion group to an already overburdened workload. Another criticism is that the level of dialogue on listservs is intellectually lacking. Scholars complain that suddenly anyone, regardless of background, education, or experience, can easily intrude on discussions of specialized and relatively "serious" thinkers. Rumor identifies discussion groups, for the most part, as places for graduate students, not sophisticated senior faculty. Thus, the political hierarchies of the academy become very much reinscribed through certain prominent narratives about discussion groups. Yet, opposing narratives have also gained much acceptance: the democratic nature of Internet as a whole and discussion groups in particular has been endorsed as a significant breakthrough toward the promotion of intellectual activity.

While opinions of participants about the value of subscribing to listservs varied in the beginning of the fall, 1994, seminar, by the end, everyone had come to value at least one or two listservs, particularly MBU-L, to which all subscribed. Ultimately, a number of us received calls for essays and conference presentations as a by-product of our participation in various discussions, several of which have resulted in invitations to national conferences.

We should note, however, that some may find listservs counterproductive because they can reinforce procrastination behaviors. Online conversations can provide a convenient excuse for not writing conventional scholarship, as some extroverts find the constant talk too appealing to ignore. Also, we noted a learning curve in being able to handle the information overload that can occur when one subscribes to a number of lists or a very busy one. Near the beginning of the course, many of the reviewers struggled with the urge to read every post to every listserv to which they were subscribed. Of course, this diligence was expected for the listserv that they would eventually critique, yet unnecessary for the listservs they were subscribing to for other purposes. However, as novices become more familiar with the conventions and tenors of Internet discussion groups, they usually began to feel more comfortable deleting entries based on subject lines. One

senior faculty member was pleased to note that a listserv discussion about a book he had published years before provided a more profound sense of readership than any of the more traditional forms of exchange such as book reviews or convention-hall banter.

All of our discussion about discussion groups boils down to, we think, one simple point: no one knows yet exactly how to "review" a discussion list, but trying seems very important. Thus, we hope to offer in this collection something more than just a clerical presentation of different happenings on the Internet today; we hope to present a limited but earnest attempt to begin to understand how certain aspects of electronic discourse alter the nature of what we do as scholars and teachers of writing.

### **A Note on How to Subscribe and Unsubscribe to Discussion Lists**

In the following pages, the authors have provided in the heading to each review information on how to subscribe to each of these discussion groups. While subscription procedures can vary from group to group, they generally follow a uniform protocol. First, you will need your own Internet e-mail account. Using e-mail, send a message to whatever address has been indicated on the "Subscriptions to:" line of the review heading. Often, the address that belongs on the "To:" line of your e-mail post begins with the term "listserv" or "listproc." Each of those two terms represents a software program located within the home computer of the discussion group; these programs administer or proctor group memberships and subscriptions. Be sure to enter the "Subscriptions to:" information exactly as it appears in the review heading. Next, in the body of your message to the "listserv" or "listproc," enter the information provided in the "Subscription line:" of the review heading. Below is an example of an e-mail message that Todd Taylor would send from within his own e-mail account to subscribe to MBU-L:

To : listproc@unicorn.acs.ttu.edu

Cc :

Attchmnt :

Subject :

----- Message Text -----

subscribe MBU-L Todd Taylor

Again, be sure to input this information exactly as it appears in the review. Be careful to note that most characters appearing in the subscription line as an "l" actually represent the letter "l" as in "list" and not the number "1." Do not include any other information whatsoever. Be sure that you do not put anything on the subject line of your message, and, if you have a signature that you place at the end of your e-mail messages, do not include it when you subscribe to a list. Once you have double-checked your message, then send it. Usually within a matter of minutes, you will receive a message reporting that you have either been successfully subscribed to the list or that some kind of error occurred.

If your subscription message was successful, you should begin receiving any posts from the list from the time of your subscription forward. Please understand that these protocols can vary from list to list and system to system and that explaining in this limited

space all of the different configurations that you might encounter while trying to join various groups is impossible. However, one last protocol is important to learn.

To remove yourself from a list, follow the same procedure as subscribing to it, but, instead of using the command *subscribe*, use the command *unsubscribe*; do not include yourfirstname yourlastname. If *unsubscribe* does not work, try *unsub*. The commands *unsubscribe* and *unsub* will not work in all cases. If a list has a unique unsubscription procedure, it should be described in a message you will receive from the listserv when you first join; therefore, you should save any such messages. If you run into any serious trouble subscribing or unsubscribing, consult the administrators or technological support personnel for your e-mail account. The subscription information provided in the following reviews could change at any time but was last verified in February, 1995.

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