Bridging Distances, Breaking Boundaries: Teaching South African Literature in Canada with the Aid of Web CT (Course Tools) Technology

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My aims in this paper are threefold. I would like, first, to map out the ways in which the use of Web CT (course tools) technology has enabled me to confront and begin to address a number of challenges (theoretical, pedagogical and contextual) that I faced when launching a course on Southern African Literatures of Transition during the 2000-2001 academic year at Brock University in Canada.

Second, I would like to work through the theoretical and pedagogical implications of the work I am presently doing with a consultant from the university's Centre for Teaching and Learning to try to enhance the use of Web CT technology for this particular course. This work includes reviewing and refining the uses of the tools I have already incorporated into my course pages, finding ways of enhancing their supplementarity, introducing new tools developed by the English Department at University of Texas in their Critical Tools software, and developing a CD ROM featuring multi-media materials which serve to contextualise and dialogue with each week's assigned readings. I would also like to raise for discussion the possibility of opening chat rooms or places for dialogue with South African students, of perhaps running a course collaboratively between two or more institutions, or of finding some other way of tapping into the possibilities offered by the virtual classroom.

My third, and perhaps most ambitious and longest-term objective is to explore ways of using the technology as a means of facilitating ongoing dialogues and explorations, for instructors and students alike, of a number of issues that arise in teaching South African literatures.

I. A Glimpse at Pedagogical Issues and Approaches

I begin with an anecdote which may at first seem tangential, but which hopefully gestures towards the heart of what I'm seeking to explore. Earlier this year, Len Findlay, the Northrop Frye Professor of Literary Theory at University of Toronto for 2000-2001, was invited to Brock University to speak to the Humanities Research Institute. While addressing the question of budgetary cutbacks and restructuring of research funding by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, he remarked that a productivity model of research and its attendant privileging of research 'superstars' or ultra-specialists comes at a substantial cost to the Humanities in particular. He suggested that by methodologically and discursively emulating the sciences and technology in order to authenticate our claim to academic credibility, those of us in the Humanities perhaps unwittingly buy into and sustain the very premises (i.e. globalist and multinational capitalist) that underpin the social and economic ascendancy of those disciplines. By neglecting to critique this particular manifestation of the hegemony of free market ideology or to examine our own implication in the hierarchies of value and of power perpetuated therein, we run the risk of abnegating social responsibility, and of accepting the academic division of labour that distinguishes not only the 'superstars' from those who are, by implication, lesser scholars, but which separates also the generation of knowledge from critical thinking which enacts some form of social engagement, and divorces the academy as an institution from the society it ostensibly seeks to benefit[1]. In the process, Humanities scholars are reduced to instruments of production rather than agents of change, and, in the name of rigour or 'excellence' (to invoke the parlance of global capitalism), are encouraged to function as automatons rather than living—and exploring—the vexed, fluid, ambiguous, often unpredictable and always multivalent condition of being human.

[1] In 'Runes of Marx and *The University in Ruin*' Findlay (1997:678) writes, 'The effect on a literary scholar and teacher like myself is to encourage me to assert the traditional text-centred privileges and responsibilities of the humanities within and beyond the University, but also to register the threat of enfeebling or evasive critique, the danger that the University will understand its autonomy and divide its labour so as internally to enforce and externally to evince intellectual rigour and political inconsequence, promoting, under the aegis of the academic, the interests of those marvellously constant companions, wealth creation and social control'.

Contending that the importation of models from the sciences, technology and business was inappropriate (if not antithetical) to the kind of enquiry in which we are engaged, Findlay urged those seeking research funding to exercise a degree of recalcitrance in filling out grant applications, suggesting that although it is difficult for academics to do so, ultimately it is beneficial for each of us to examine carefully our limitations in terms of knowledge base, theoretical understanding and methodological procedure, and to use these as important sites of learning and exchange. The productivity agenda forces us to shore up any doubts (or at least render them invisible), to posture as 'experts', and somehow to package our scholarship quite disingenuously as a hermetically sealed and often ethically 'disinterested' body of knowledge which we vigorously defend as our own 'field', even while we speak the need for modes of learning and exchange that are quite the opposite of what we practise. In becoming such disciplined bodies and guardians of academic territory, as well as competitors for resources and for release time from teaching and administrative duties, we may inadvertently reinforce the hierarchies of value imposed upon us, compete with one another rather than opening channels of communication between us, and perpetuate a notion of autonomy (of ideas, of researchers, of academic institutions) which turns a blind eye to the complex interconnections of each to both the systems of power in which universities are situated and the communities they seek to serve. Findlay suggested that the admission and addressing of limitations—both individual and collective—was in fact what Humanities research should be all about, that if we believe in the public role of the intellectual and in the potential of the academy to be instrumental in forging an active and engaged practice and understanding of global citizenship, it is the socially responsible way to proceed, and that it could be a particularly fruitful exercise at the juncture of disciplinary boundaries.

I was reminded as he spoke of the benefits of addressing individual and collective limitations of my experience of teaching Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*. It seems to me that it is precisely at those points where Krog exposes her vulnerabilities and uncertainties and struggles to find a language or methodology or conceptual framework in which to situate the issues with which she is grappling that an emergent understanding of her implication in systems of oppression is registered or deepened, that existing boundaries and hierarchies begin to break down, and that possibilities for empathy and dialogue and re-vision come into being. I believe that this is why I have found it to work so well in the classroom. If it were just a sophisticated political

analysis which presented itself as an authoritative or definitive account of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, students would probably become daunted by its complexity and tune out, or express admiration for its subtlety and move on to the next text. What happens instead is that they become emotionally and intellectually engaged by those moments of collapse or confrontation with limitations, they empathise or become angered or distressed, they feel directly challenged by and implicated in the issues raised, and they return again and again to these 'sites of struggle' as the course unfolds, invoking them as significant points of reference. It is at those moments where Krog's autobiographical narrator confronts her emotional, intellectual, linguistic and imaginative limitations that the text becomes most dialogic and other voices are introduced: those of colleagues whose cultural backgrounds and experiences of apartheid differ diametrically from Krog's own and who potentially offer diverse approaches to or interpretations of the issue under consideration; psychologists and psychiatrists whose insights she seeks in order to glean better understandings of such notions as guilt and shame, or the associative affects of trauma; and even a fictional lover through whom she explores the workings and ramifications of betrayal. In my experience, these are also precisely the moments which engender dialogue beyond the text. I am well aware that many South Africans feel a considerable degree of anger about the book, and that it raises a number of questions about voice and appropriation, but it seems to me that such anger can also be a productive site of learning. The point is that *Country of My Skull* stages one subject's confrontation with the limits of her subject position in the space of her desires for community, belonging and accountability, and that it continually gestures towards the very different ways that other subjects might reach their respective limits in forging new visions of community and citizenship. In doing so, I believe the text provides a valuable pedagogical model for teaching Humanities subjects in general, and teaching South African literatures in particular.

II. Teaching South African Literature in Canada

After returning from a year's sabbatical where I was based in Cape Town, I launched a second-year English course on South African Literatures of Transition, which ran for the first time from January to May 2001. In an institution in which I teach a number of survey-style courses, it was a unique privilege to be able to focus on my own area of research in such a sustained

way, but I worried that prospective students might see the course precisely as self-indulgent on my part, or as too historically and culturally specific in its focus to be of any immediate relevance to their own lives and interests. I should mention that the university in which I teach, which is located in the Niagara region, is principally an undergraduate institution, and that the student constituency in Humanities courses is predominantly white and middle-class. Our students are often the first generation to attend university, so those who opt to take Humanities subjects usually do so because of a love of reading or a personal interest in a particular topic or subject area, rather than because of a long-standing family tradition of commitment to the liberal arts.

Teaching South African literature in Canada meant that the limitations with which I was confronted were considerable, but this turned out to be in many ways advantageous. Most of the students enrolled in the course had heard of Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Steve Biko, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, F.W. De Klerk, and perhaps one or two other key figures in recent South African history; most knew about apartheid but very little about specific policies, modes of enforcement or tactics of resistance; and some had heard of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but knew almost nothing about the way it came about, the terms of its mandate, or the specifics of its actualisation. Many felt quite overwhelmed by the complexity of the history involved and by the enormity of the problems left as the legacy of apartheid, and I needed to keep reminding the students that I was in no way an 'expert', was learning along with them, and also felt daunted by the magnitude of the challenges with which South Africa continues to confront me, but that I felt it was therefore all the more important as a focus of enquiry. I had never had the opportunity to begin a course with such a level playing field, where no student had greater experience or expertise than any other. I believe this made dialogue and sharing of resources all the more desirable to them, which is always a fortuitous circumstance for a teacher.

I found the teaching experience to be the most rewarding of my career thus far, and was immensely gratified to discover, when course evaluations were returned to me, that the students had found the experience similarly valuable, if challenging. Several commented on the fact that they had begun with the assumption that they would be taking an in-depth look at a topical but remote and historically specific context, but that they had been surprised to find that they learned as much about Canada, about fundamental issues of citizenship and about what it means to be human as they had about the complexities and specificities of the South African situation. Two or three

commented on the value of the interface between history, philosophy, literature and other forms of cultural production that the course afforded, and saw this as a helpful way of contextualising their own critical work and assumptions about the role of the arts in society. Tacit in their comments, and perhaps more explicit in class discussions, was an emerging recognition of the importance of an ethical criticism, of a politics of responsibility and implication, and of the urgency of formulating some notion and practice of global citizenship.

III. Introducing Web CT

Given the ascendancy of technology—and particularly Information Technology—in this era of globalisation, and given the fact that university administrators tend to view the virtual classroom as a potential vehicle for increasing revenues and extending student populations beyond the reaches of geographic catchment areas, often at the cost of depersonalising and dehumanising the learning experience, the decision to incorporate technology such as Web CT into curriculum design has to be taken in full consciousness of the ways it might serve to advance rather than to critique the prevailing agenda in tertiary education. On the one hand, looking to the specific context of my own discipline, it is clear that virtual space provides a potential forum for extensive open-ended and ongoing dialogues about the ways and means of understanding and practising global citizenship, and for examining the relationship between such forms of community building and meaning-making and those conventionally assumed and fostered in the space of literary criticism. On the other hand, the counter-hegemonic possibilities afforded by the technology need to be considered in conjunction with a number of other concerns and potential limitations of its use, on an ongoing basis. Questions of access, of course, are of paramount importance, as are considerations of the kind of communication that becomes possible (or probable) given that the Internet is not an open and transparent medium of communication. We might ask ourselves how the use of the technology impacts on modes of representation and the way that people tell their stories or express their understandings. (The modes of e-mailing and instant messaging, for example, clearly affect tactics and practices of representation.) We might also consider how the factor of anonymity impacts upon the kind of exchanges that might emerge, especially where accounts of trauma and suffering are at issue, as they inevitably are in teaching South African literature. If we are dealing, as

Shoshana Felman suggests, with different forms of testimony—provisional avowals through which we work towards understandings—in different discursive media, the whole question of modes of address becomes important. With such *caveats* in mind, what follows is an account of my introduction to, and implementation of Web CT technology in my courses.

I have for a number of years required students to bring to seminar meetings questions or comments for discussion that pertain to the assigned reading for that particular week. These contributions count as a substantial portion of the seminar mark. I do this for several reasons. On a practical level, it prevents students from just skimming the texts, and forces them to read attentively. It also enables them to come to the discussion feeling as though they already have a stake in a given text. Those students who are less confident orally feel that they have something formulated already, and are more likely to contribute to discussion, which goes some distance towards addressing the perennial problem of seminars being dominated by a few confident speakers while the other students lapse into deeper and deeper silence as a course progresses. From an instructor's point of view, it ensures that the learning is student-driven, and means that even texts that are taught year-in and year-out do not become stale, as new perspectives and approaches are constantly introduced, and new problems or difficulties are brought to light. Perhaps most importantly, however, it enables students to monitor their own processes of learning, as they have a written record of their initial impressions, against which they can measure their evolving understandings of the issues and ideas in question. In effect, I am asking them to make a record of and open for discussion the points at which the text pushes them to the limits of their understanding upon a first reading, if indeed it does so.

I found, however, that as students became more sophisticated readers, their comments and questions became more and more elaborate, and often at least half of the seminar time was taken up just going around the table so that each student could air his or her questions and comments, leaving far too little time to take up and develop upon the points they had raised. I decided it would be helpful if these questions and comments could be made available prior to the seminar, and thought that perhaps posting them on a web page might be helpful, since access to computer labs is not a problem at Brock University. I went to the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning, and was directed towards Web CT (or Course Tools) technology. I decided to use Web CT pages for all of my courses, but opted, since I was a neophyte, to restrict my experimentation to use of only some of the basic tools available. I will outline

these now in order to give some idea of how the technology enables students to track not only their initial impressions of a given text, but also their evolving understandings of the issues raised therein as they proceed through seminar discussions, reflective summaries of these discussions, essay writing, collaborative projects, and through the opportunity to engage with one another's essays or their own previous thoughts in the second course essay and the final examination paper.

Web CT operates through an Internet browser. I use Netscape Navigator, but any will do. I, as the instructor, am registered as 'course designer', and can give similar status to any of my teaching assistants if need be. This means that we have access to a number of functions beyond those available to the students. We can change the design of the course page, add or delete features, register or de-register participants, upload documents, track student participation, etc.

To access the Web CT course page, I log on by using a URL address. In this case, it is the Web CT site set up by Computer Services at Brock University.

I then enter my user name and password, and my personal Web CT home page appears. Each of the students will have a similar page with all their courses listed. If mine is the only course in which they are enrolled that uses WebCT, only my course will appear on their home page, but they may also have, for example, courses in Biology or Computing or Communications listed as well.

Clicking on the course title and number (in this case, English 2P53, South African Literatures of Transition) takes them to the home page for that particular course.

I have used 5 icons on my home page, although I could add many others. These are:

1. Course Outline: This feature gives students access to the course outline if they don't have a hard copy with them. If they need to make reference to recommended readings, or course aims and objectives, or to a list of suggested essay questions, or to the marking scheme, or remind themselves of a due date, they can do so any time they are near a networked computer.

2. Calendar: The calendar can be set by the instructor and only viewed by the students, or it can be interactive, as you choose. I have opted to keep the calendar interactive. I post each week's seminar topic, and once students have

signed up for one seminar to lead and another to write-up, I list this information on the calendar. I also post essay deadlines, the exam date and any other significant dates. The students can also post anything they feel is significant. If one of them discovers that there is a television programme, for example, on Mandela on the History channel, or a special documentary on the radio, or a relevant article in one of the daily papers, he or she can post this information so that the other students, if they check in, can take advantage of such supplementary materials.

3. Additional Resources: this is a place where students can compile their own course bibliographies. If they find any materials that might be of interest to the others, whether these be essays, web cites, books, videos, newspaper articles, or reviews, they can record this information here.

4. Student Essays: Students who feel comfortable posting their essays can do so at this site. I encourage them to read one another's work, and offer options on the exam which enables them to dialogue with the writing of their peers. [This past year, for example, one exam question read, 'Using another student's essay on a given text or texts, respond to and expand upon the argument put forward. This requires a careful engagement with the premises on which the argument is based, an outline of its further implications, and some treatment of how it has illuminated your own interpretation of the text(s) under consideration'. I also gave students the option of reviewing their own initial impressions of course texts in the following question: 'Choose your three best web CT postings, explaining why you feel they helped to open and extend discussion, how they have helped you to develop your understanding of the issues and text(s) in question, and how you may have changed or qualified or refined your thinking since posting them originally'.]

5. Seminar Discussions: This is perhaps the most important of the icons. Each week's topics for discussion are listed by the week number (from 1 to 12) and by the names of the relevant authors. I ask students to post their questions and comments for discussion at least 24 hours prior to the seminar, and earlier if at all possible. For each seminar, one student is assigned to be leader (in some courses, where enrollments are high, there are two or three leaders working together). The purpose of seminar leadership is *not* for individual students to prepare a presentation or a mini-lecture, but for each leader to involve fellow students in a focused and meaningful discussion of

the assigned reading. Students sign up to lead a session during the first seminar meeting, and the schedule is posted on the Web CT calendar as soon as it is finalised. The leader is responsible for going through the questions and comments posted by his/her classmates in advance. At the seminar itself, the leader must introduce to the group significant ideas and points for discussion that have been brought forward in the questions submitted, and make connections or draw contrasts between these, where appropriate. The leader is also responsible for facilitating discussion, for drawing in as many perspectives and voices as possible, while at the same time enabling the group to explore the issues and ideas raised in a focused and probing manner.

To submit a posting, students click on the topic and number of the appropriate week, and then click on the 'compose message' box. They can edit and preview their submission. They can also attach documents if they so desire. They can simply contribute their own questions and comments, or they can reply to those of their peers, or both. The programme will enable any user to follow the thread of an ongoing discussion easily. I ask them to be specific in assigning a subject line to their messages—for example 'the relationship of empathy to evil in *Disgrace*' or 'narrative voice in *Ways of Dying*' so that if students wish to review messages when they are preparing essays or revising for the exam, they can locate relevant contributions to the discussion quickly and easily.

Each student is also assigned to provide a write-up of one seminar discussion. Students are not to write up the same seminar that they lead. The write-up is to be posted, with the subject line 'write-up' and names of the texts covered, within a week of the seminar discussion, in the same section as the questions and comments appear. The write-up consists of a summary of significant points and questions raised in the course of the in-class discussion, as well as an extension of the discussion. This could involve a comparison of the discussion that particular week to an earlier discussion of another text or texts, or a meditation upon points that were raised but didn't get addressed in a sustained way during the seminar hour, or a consideration of the further implications of the class discussion.

This page becomes a course archive. When students want to write essays, they can go back to the questions and comments raised by their peers in relation to a particular text, as well as reviewing the write-up. They can consult the 'Additional Resources' page to see if there are articles or multi-media materials they might like to draw in. And if they are preparing for the

second essay or the exam paper, they can also refer, where possible, to other student essays dealing with the same text.

IV. Supplementary Materials: Developing a Course CD ROM and Integrating Critical Tools

I am presently working with a consultant from the university's Centre for Teaching and Learning to try to enhance the use of Web CT technology for this particular course so that I can further extend discussion beyond the lecture and seminar contact hours; build upon the existing course archive of student essays, comments and discussion questions for seminars, and seminar write-ups; so that I (and they) can track their processes of interpretation from their initial impressions of a text through participation in group discussions and on to essays, collaborative projects and retrospective overviews of their engagement with the issues raised by the course; and so that I can provide students with access to multi-media materials which serve as background for—and which dialogue with—course materials in significant ways.

One facet of this project, on the practical side, is the development of a CD ROM which integrates a number of multi-media materials I collected while on sabbatical in South Africa from June 1999 to June 2000, which I continue to update, and which provides links to a range of web sites, recordings of radio broadcasts, original reviews of the course texts, newspaper articles, television broadcasts and documentaries, political cartoons and visual images that are of particular relevance to each week's readings. The materials are organised according to each week's assigned readings. We have also set up interfaces where passages from a given text reference texts in other media. So, for example, the first chapter of Mike Nicol's *The Waiting Country* includes a description of Jane Alexander's sculpture 'The Butcher Boys'. We have mounted an image of the sculpture beside which Nicol's text scrolls down. This not only enables students to visualise more clearly what is being described, but also affords possibilities of setting essay or exam questions which ask students to assess the differences between the two modes of representation and their respective treatments of the themes in question. Similar questions could be set asking students to do comparative discursive analyses of excerpts from TRC Amnesty hearings, for instance, and David Lurie's sexual harassment hearing in *Disgrace* as a way of beginning to unpack the kind of commentary the novel offers on processes of reconciliation and reparation.

I have also recently been introduced to Critical Tools, a package similar to Web CT that has been developed by the English Department at University of Texas, and which can be used in conjunction with Web CT. Three of the features are of particular interest:

1. Class Contact Page. This page enables students to register, on a voluntary basis, their e-mail addresses and contact details. If others enrolled in the course wish to contact them, they can do so directly through the course page. This feature enables students to share information, and to extend dialogues, if they so desire, beyond the Seminar Discussion page, which may be somewhat restrictive in that it operates according to assigned weekly topics. Students in the process of writing essays or preparing for exams may wish to revisit certain points raised at an earlier juncture, or to discuss a specific aspect of another student's posting, long after the week of the seminar discussion in question. If students from South Africa or from other universities were to join the course, the contact page would enable students on either side of the Atlantic to direct questions and/or enquiries to specific recipients, or to deal with practical issues which they may not wish to raise or see as appropriate to post on the Seminar Discussion page.

2. Bibliofile. This feature will replace the existing 'Additional Resources' icon. It enables students to input information about articles, books, reviews, web sites, audio and video recordings, newspaper articles and any other relevant materials. Once entered, the contributions will be formatted according to MLA guidelines, and will provide a useful course bibliography.

3. Annotator Page. This feature enables instructors to post a text (or excerpts thereof) for viewing, and students will be able to highlight any words or phrases or passages that seem to them particularly significant, and to post as a footnote their comments or queries in response to the selection. Instructors can set passwords so that only their students will be able to submit annotations, or the page can be kept open for any contributors to use. If it is incorporated into a Web CT page, only students registered in the course or granted a password by the instructor will be able to access the document in any case. Anyone who accesses the document will be able to see all the annotations that have been submitted to date, and to provide further annotations to the text or to the existing annotations themselves, so the potential for carefully unpacking a text and fleshing out a close reading is excellent. The document could be a primary

text (a passage from an essay or novel or short story or poem or play), or, alternatively, it could be a passage from a student essay or seminar discussion comment. The Annotator Page encourages close reading, and enables students to look carefully at specific tropes, patterns of imagery or other stylistic devices, as well as enabling them to unpack specific uses of diction or terminology.

V. Extending Communities of Learners

Web CT technology also makes available the possibility of opening chat rooms or web sites where dialogues with South African students who are studying the same or similar texts could take place. There is also potential to run courses collaboratively between two or more institutions. In the long term, Web CT technology could also provide a forum for facilitating ongoing dialogues and explorations, for instructors and students alike, of a number of issues that arise in teaching South African literatures. These include issues of responsibility, implication and ethics. The students I have just taught, for example, were very conscious and self-reflexive about their own positions, especially at this distance, as potential 'voyeurs' witnessing narratives and accounts of suffering and trauma, and about the ways that their roles as literary critics could potentially serve to sustain such a stance and to reinforce distances between divergent subject positions.) I am interested in exploring issues around the ethical considerations attendant upon teaching these materials; issues around the associative affects of trauma as accounts of violence and suffering are disseminated to audiences who are at increasing removes from the histories in question; and issues around the kind of work that literary texts perform as they recount and mediate atrocities past and present, whether real or fictionalised.

A gesture that is repeatedly indexed by and within the texts themselves is an attempt to find ways of creating conditions for dialogue, empathy and redress across the vast divides that separate communities within South Africa and that served during the apartheid years to keep South Africa largely isolated from the rest of the world. Texts such as Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother*, Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, Njabulo Ndebele's essay 'Guilt and Atonement: Unmasking History for the Future', Ivan Vladislavic's 'Propaganda by Monuments', Ingrid de Kok's 'Small Passings' and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, to list but several examples, work towards finding languages or gestures or ethical paradigms that might serve to bridge

gulfs which have historically divided communities from one another, and to break down boundaries which have reinforced distances between communities and individuals. If the texts themselves seem to offer a powerfully suggestive model for bridging the distances between communities that have been historically, geographically and psychically divided, perhaps this model can be extended enablingly through the aid of Web CT technology to bridge the distances between students such as my own, the histories and stories with which they are engaging, and other communities of learners.

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