

# "Sam's Cafe": A Case Study of Computer Conferencing as a Medium for Collective Journal Writing

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**Abstract:** The author uses the example of a computer conference in which she was a participant-observer to examine the potential of computer conferencing as a dialogic form of journal writing. It is argued that computer conferencing can play a key role in the development of a teaching practice that emphasizes mutual support, exploration and sharing but, at the same time, encourages high standards of scholarship and analytical thinking.

The initial goals of "Sam's Cafe," the conference under discussion, were to experiment with computer conferencing as a form of cooperative learning, and to become more familiar with the technical and theoretical language of poststructuralism. The conference was remarkably successful in achieving these original goals. As it progressed, it also became a support network for most of the participants. Reasons for the success of this particular conference, both as a learning tool and as a support network, are examined.

**Resume:** L'auteure utilise l'exemple d'une conference multimedia a laquelle elle faisait de l'observation participante pour examiner le potentiel de la conference multimedia comme outils de tenu/redaction de journal. On propose ici que la conference multimedia peut jouer un role cle dans le developpement de la pratique de'enseignement en mettant l'accent sur le support mutuel, l'exploration et le partage des buts tout en encourageant un haul niveau academique et de pensee analytique.

Les buts initiaux de la conference nommee 'Sam's Cafe' etaient d'utiliser la conference multimedia comme forme d'apprentissage cooperatif et de se familiariser avec le langage technique et theorique du neo-structuralism. La conference multimedia a bien respondu a ces buts tout en devenant un reseau de support pour le plupart des participants. Les raisons pour le succes de cette conference sont examinees tant au niveau d'outils d'apprentissage qu'au niveau du reseau de support.

## Introduction

This article uses the example of 'Sam's Cafe' to explore the potential of a collective electronic journal for students as an alternative to individual journal writing. The author was a participant-observer in 'Sam's Cafe', a computer conference set up through "Participate"<sup>1</sup> to explore issues raised in a graduate course in education. Members used this conference extensively, both, as originally intended, as an informal, interactive pedagogical tool and also as a support network. Research on collaborative learning (Schniedewind, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1987), on journal writing in education (Mattel

& Peteret, 1988; Roderick, 1986), and on computer conferencing (Riel & Levin, 1990; Saiedian, 1992) points to the potential benefits of such an approach. However, some researchers (Dicks, 1992; Rojo, 1991) have found limitations to the uses of computer conferencing despite this potential. Others (McConnell, 1988; Morrison, 1992; Perry & Greber, 1990) suggest a need for further study of the group dynamics of computer conferencing. This article proposes some ways of overcoming the limitations cited by other writers. As well, it argues that computer conferencing can offer the educational benefits of journal writing, while at the same time promoting ongoing dialogue and debate among students and instructors. A description and analysis of 'Sam's Cafe' are used here to illustrate the use of this strategy in teaching and learning.

The value of journal writing as a pedagogical tool has been well documented. It often allows students to discuss course related issues in more creative and exploratory ways than would formal essay writing or traditional class discussions (Martel & Peteret, 1988; Roderick, 1986; Spack & Sadow, 1983; Surbeck, 1994). Martel & Peteret (1988), for example, describe its advantages in the following terms:

[A student] expressed in her journal how she found it so difficult to speak out in class. She was uncertain of her ability to think, to form thoughts and to express them. Those who were dominating the class were also those we (traditionally and unfortunately) had identified as the strong bright students. We have found journal writing an important activity for encouraging participation and confidence in students. Journal writing is another form of interaction, if we request to read student journals (p. 93).

While journal writing as a teaching strategy has indeed made an important contribution to pedagogy, its popularity has sometimes led to a "bandwagon" effect. Over the past few years, based on the author's observations in the Education faculty where she teaches, journals had become increasingly popular course assignments. However, students began to be overburdened with such assignments, and found themselves doing reflective writing on similar topics for several different courses. In reaction, instructors now seem to have moved away from using journals, to the extent that some students in the faculty recently stated that they had no chance to do informal reflective writing in any of their courses, and that they would like to have done so.

Computer conferencing can provide a forum for this kind of informal writing and foster collaborative learning at the same time. Several advantages of this approach are as follows:

1. In a given programme, all instructors interested in using journal writing, or in a particular topic, could be involved in the same conference along

- with students. They would thus avoid both the above noted "bandwagon" effect and the problem of isolation, where one instructor responds individually to many students.
2. It would enable students and instructors to get to know each other in a different way. As well, like other forms of journal writing, it would sometimes allow students who are not comfortable with speaking out in a large group, or expressing themselves in traditional academic ways to shine (Morrison, 1992).
  3. Unlike individual journal writing, it would allow many people to share thoughts and ideas, thus potentially stimulating further exploration and reflection than might otherwise occur. As the same time, it still permits the sending of private messages to one or a number of individuals, should this be desirable.
  4. Like individual journal writing, it would foster a more extensive, yet informal and exploratory, expression of ideas than do most classroom exchanges.
  5. Computer conferencing is part of an ongoing, rapidly developing and lateral or divergent, rather than linear dialogue. Since entries can be made and responded to at any time, it is a dialogue that is not limited by time, space, chronological order, physical appearance or other factors that may limit face to face conversation and/or traditional journal and letter writing (Schaefermeyer and Sewell, 1988; Updegrave, 1991).

Some instructors may be concerned with how to evaluate this kind of course assignment. Students can be given a mark for the quantity and quality of their individual contributions to a conference. Alternatively, a basic level of participation - for example, a minimum of three substantial entries - could be a course requirement without being allocated a specific mark. A third possibility would be to make participation optional, as an after class study or discussion group might be. In the author's experience, if a computer conference is relevant and interesting, students will participate anyway, and the knowledge that their comments will not be marked may foster a different kind of dialogue than would a marked assignment.

'Sam's Cafe' illustrates these points and also suggests some new directions for the use of computer conferencing in teaching. The remainder of this article comprises a qualitative first person narrative, in which the author attempts both to reflect on a rewarding personal experience, and to offer an example and analysis of a useful strategy for collaborative teaching and learning.

In addition to her own experience and the transcripts of 'Sam's Cafe', the author draws on the text of a second conference, 'Reflections', to enhance her personal narrative. 'Reflections' was set up by one of the participants of

'Sam's Cafe' as a forum for discussion of the nature of computer conferencing and its potential as a pedagogical tool.

The next section describes the organization and implementation of 'Sam's Cafe'. This is followed by an analysis of the data from the conference, and recommendations for the use of computer conferencing in education.

### *Description of 'Sam's Cafe'*

As students in a graduate course on poststructuralist theory and its implications for education, some of us decided to experiment with computer conferencing to discuss difficult concepts and terminology. We began very informally by sending each other electronic mail messages but soon our instructor suggested setting up a "Parti" conference. This conference, called 'Sam's Cafe', was introduced by a written description of a fictitious cafe where an argument about theories of language and culture takes place. Although others joined later, initially six students, Bonny, Helen, Alastair, Steve, Danny and I, along with Roger, our instructor, chose to participate in this ongoing discussion. We hoped that this new form of cooperative learning would be fun and motivating as well as useful. It did indeed help us work through the ideas we needed to deal with, to feel more at ease with the often difficult vocabulary of poststructuralism, and to develop confidence in ourselves as doctoral candidates. In so doing, we also discovered that the use of this technology could become an important means of support and a way of alleviating the inevitable sense of isolation associated with writing a thesis. Although most members used the conference in this way later on, when we all knew each other better, from the outset it was a particularly important aspect for the three women involved. Helen and I were both single mothers, trying to earn a living, raise children and do advanced degrees. Helen had often said she felt she had no right to be in graduate school at all, that she had "snuck in". Bonny lived at some distance from the campus and was frequently at home alone with two small children. All three of us often felt cut off from the life of the university, unable to participate in as many formal or informal activities as we would have liked and frustrated by our lack of time to do the work expected of us.

Morgan (1986) describes this kind of situation in terms that are amusing but all too true when she writes of the need to provide

empathic support through the "cognitive dark nights of the intellect" (such nights made even darker by the twins getting chicken pox the week before assignments are due...) (p. 40).

One cannot often call friends, colleagues or instructors at midnight on dark nights of the intellect, either for empathic support or to discuss ideas for an article. However, that was often when we most needed to do the former, and had the only free time to do the latter. In 'Sam's Cafe' we had a support

network that was constantly available to us, a dialogue where there was always an opening, where we knew there would soon be a response. It is ironic that the very technology that is, in many ways, the source of isolation and alienation should also provide solace and support but this seemed to be the case.

The initial goal of the conference, however, was to help each other come to a clearer understanding of a body of theoretical work and to discuss its implications for teaching practice. One of the factors that enabled us to do this successfully was the creation of a fictitious situation, a cafe on a cold winter night, and various personae who took part in the discussion. We sometimes spoke/wrote in the voices of these personae - the cook, patrons of the cafe, a fly on the wall, a spider - and sometimes in our own voices, but still in terms of this imaginary situation. At first, we used the scenario and personae extensively, as a way of overcoming shyness and inhibitions related to exploring new and complex ideas with people we did not yet know well. Thus, an early note to the conference went as follows:

As you may recall, the initial reason why I suggested working together on 'Sam's Cafe' was that I was getting lonely at the terminal talking to myself. There was a pretty arid discussion going on... So here is part of a discussion on the literary canon. I ask the literatus to explain his position: 'First of all I would like to raise the issue of the literary canon. To make clear to our audience here where the differences between our two views lie, perhaps you could give us your views on how exactly this has developed. Why are certain books considered 'literature' and others not?'...

The literatus leaned forward, placing a fraying sweater elbow in a small pool of gravy. 'So you would deny the greatness of thought in Shakespeare, the splendor of poetry in Wordsworth?'...

Alastair

This was followed by entries like the following examples, playing on the humour of the storyline, but also asking serious course-related questions. The initial discussion (and a focus of the course) was about how great literature is defined, and the implications of this for curriculum planning and teaching. Another early goal was to master the use of poststructuralist terminology, for example the notions of discourse, counter-discourse, subjectivity and intertextuality. Thus, in asking and responding to questions, we also tried to use this terminology as much as possible, probably more than we would have in other kinds of conversations. In effect, some of the exchanges involved practising a new language, as one might participate in simulated dialogues when learning French or Cantonese.

I wondered wildly what to say next, clutching desperately at the jumbled straws of counter discourse that remained from those courses I had taken... I felt that the reputation of feminist poststructuralism was at stake as the assembled literati leered at me condescendingly and the cook disappeared back into the kitchen to dish up more fries. Sam balanced a beer on his stomach and smiled broadly.

'First of all', I said, 'you have to understand the concept of ideological hegemony...'

Elizabeth

Thank God you're here, Elizabeth! In all the smoke and intellectual smog I didn't see you. You know, in some ways I wonder if there's any use talking to someone like Sam. After all, we know which side his bread is buttered on, don't we? I mean, we all get a paycheck from somewhere and that somewhere has a big influence on what we believe about the world and the way it's ordered... Isn't that what hegemony is all about?...

What do you say we order some herbal tea and whole wheat biscuits? Do you think they have that here?

Helen

Bonny, who has appeared rather preoccupied for some time, positions herself for her maiden speech:

Sam, I am trying to pull together what people have been saying and the best way I can respond to the discourse is by looking at your arguments in defense of the *Merchant of Venice* and *Huckleberry Finn* quite closely...

Bonny

As time went on we grew more comfortable with each other and with the ideas we were examining, more and more entries were simply straightforward discussion of course material, without recourse to the cafe scenario. Typical notes at this stage began: "Danny, I don't know how to respond to your mighty-multi comments re monotheism/polytheism...", or "Alastair, in reference to the reduction of inter-sexual power relations in computer discourse, a quick thought... ". Along with the theoretical discussion, we also

fell more and more into simply speaking from our own lived reality so that the dialogue sometimes looked more like the following examples:

I must apologize for not responding to the debates in Sam's but I am very much in the "real" world of catching up on some childcare that I have neglected for the past few weeks...

Bonny

and

... Sorry for so many typing mistakes... I'm using my son's computer and modem at the moment. I will, yes I WILL buy one this month and this keyboard is driving me nuts!

Roger

Perhaps this more personal and less elaborate tone was due to the fact that we were growing more at ease both with each other and with the theoretical content of the conference. In addition, as we became more comfortable with some of the difficult academic material, we began to use the computer conference for other purposes. This often meant using it as a support network. Over a two year period, we continued to use 'Sam's Cafe' for a discussion of ideas and theory, but also came to use it for socializing, talking about daycare, computer chit chat and other everyday concerns of "the real world". On a more serious note, by the end of the conference four of us had used 'Sam's Cafe' to tell the news of the deaths of parents or loved ones. This, perhaps more than anything else, seems to illustrate the degree of trust and support that had been built as the dialogue developed.

### *Analysis*

In "Reflections" we began to analyse the learning process that had taken place in 'Sam's Cafe'. Some of the points made by members of the conference as to why it was successful in meeting their expectations are as follows: a) the creation of personae in a fictitious situation and the use of humour and caricature seemed to help alleviate initial inhibitions, promote an exploratory and critical dialogue, and allow for more egalitarian relationships; b) a clearly outlined, yet fundamentally dialogic and open-ended task structure was important for keeping people focused while at the same time giving them enough latitude to ask questions and develop new ideas; c) the availability of conferencing at odd moments and late hours as well as its flexibility and lateral, rather than linear nature, permits people who might otherwise be isolated to participate in an ongoing intellectual dialogue;<sup>2</sup> d) the sense of obligation or commitment participants developed towards the other members

of the conference seems to have begun with their initial pleasurable engagement with the storyline and collaborative exploration of ideas; e) the oddly intimate nature of conferencing, compared in "Reflections" to the art of letter writing and even, more specifically, to the writing of love letters (!) seems to have been another factor in the success of 'Sam's Cafe'. Some of these points have been made by other writers, some appear to be new ideas.

Dicks (1992) emphasizes the importance of a common task and shared interests, suggesting that, without these, "[c]ommunicating by computer can produce very boring exchanges, reflecting a lack of direction and resolution" (p. 34). Riel & Levin (1990) also point to the importance of a "shared goal or task with a specific outcome" (p. 163). Rojo (1991) suggests that there are two main types of computer communication, instrumental (task-oriented) and social (networking and mutual support). Certainly, 'Sam's Cafe' exemplified both types of communication. The open-ended nature of the task and the creative and humorous use of storyline and role play seemed to contribute greatly to the fulfillment of both instrumental and social needs for the participants.

Rojo (1991) further suggests that, although there was a certain sense of warmth and community in "El Cafe", the conference she examines, "some of the issues commonly conditioning inhibitions in face-to-face encounters are also playing a role in Parti encounters" (Rojo, 1991, p. 113). Students participating in "El Cafe" had expressed concerns that they might look "stupid", "presumptuous", and "racist" (p.113). Because of these concerns, they did not take risks or share ideas as freely as they might have wished to. The creation of the storyline and personae in 'Sam's Cafe' and the ability to switch roles at will enabled its participants to take such risks in ways that challenged and deepened their understanding of the concepts they were exploring, thus facilitating both social and instrumental uses of the conference. For example, Alastair, tired of speaking in the conservative voice of "Sam" announced "I don't want to be the literatus anymore. Can I be a fly on the wall or an old drunk in the corner?", and then concluded his next entry with "I am only a fly on the wall and this is off the top of my head. Please treat these remarks with caution at the very least." At that point, Helen brought Sam's voice back into the dialogue, responding to Alastair/the fly with

Hey, look what the literatus is doing! He's muttering to himself over there in the corner. Wait, I think I can hear what he's saying - something about - yes, I've got it. 'What is the world coming to? There's no respect anymore for history, morality, common sense, decency. It all just proves my point. All this liberalization of education just contributes to destroying the fabric of society... If we upheld the study of the canon in schools people would have a sense that... there is a meaning to life...'



Thus the concerns expressed by Rojo as to risk-taking were, to a considerable extent, eliminated through the possibility of speaking in voices other than the participant's own - voices including those of insects who warned that their remarks should be treated with caution, and "literati" who were known to be philosophically opposed to the dominant view within the conference. At the same time, these voices challenged those who *held* the dominant view to rethink and justify their position.

While the elaboration of the storyline and characters in the examples given here may appear to be entertaining but superficial, this kind of dialogue was, in fact, far from trivial. In an article in *College English*, Cooper & Selfe (1990) argue that "the irreverence of the entries is not only a mark of the egalitarian nature of computer conferences but is also central to their success" (p. 857). The fact that the conference was not taken too seriously paradoxically allowed us to make more in-depth explorations of ideas than we might have in a more formal setting. We could hide our insecurities behind comic roles to ask difficult questions, to try out terminology we were unsure of, or to outline our understanding of theoretical points with no fear of being laughed at, precisely because laughter was integral to the conference. Questions would be answered and understandings clarified through interaction with others interested in the same topics. Our instructor, having created the forum, continued to play a key role by periodically interjecting in his own voice or as one of the personae, "What do you mean?" or even, on at least one occasion, "You're wrong!!". Thus, although there was a great deal of exploration, the conference was not without direction.

As the conference developed, its informality and irreverence also allowed us to bring up issues from our own lives and use them to enhance our understanding of the relationship between theory and practice in ways that would not have been possible in most traditional classrooms, partly because of time constraints and partly because of the more academic and impersonal nature of most classroom interaction. Thus, for example, Helen responded to a question I had raised about whether certain themes in literature could be considered universal by drawing on her own experience as a mother:

I mean, isn't it possible that our universal themes, like motherhood and love, themselves reflect cultural and ideological values? For example, we're both mothers, but for me this has always been problematic...

Alastair then returned to the more theoretical course content with:

A fly on the wall comments: 'Your comments about love and motherhood, Helen, raise a very pertinent issue... If I recall, you started on that theme by talking about universals... Bakhtin would have stressed the dialectic of the reproducible meaning and the

irreproducible theme. Foucault would have preferred to discuss the discourse of motherhood and love to show how subject positions are constituted within them...'

Alastair

Another way the conference enabled us to develop ideas further than we might have in other forums was that it was not dependent on time or space. We could read back over previous entries and enter a note whenever something struck us as important or interesting. Again, the entertainment value of the conference is probably relevant here in that we might not have spent as much time going back over it if we had not enjoyed the storyline so much. Thus, for example, on December 3, Alastair responded to questions of intertextuality Bonny and I had raised several days earlier, even though many other notes on various topics had been entered in the meantime. Bonny also suggested another advantage to the achronological nature of 'Sam's Cafe': "I guess one of the nicest things about 'Sam's Cafe' is that I can write to all of you without thinking that I'm encroaching on your time..." This would be a particularly important aspect for less confident or more modest students who might not speak out so freely in class.

Shared goals, seen as crucial by Riel and Levin (1990, p. 163), seem to have been central to the success of 'Sam's Cafe' at both the instrumental and social levels. However, a specified outcome, also viewed as necessary by these writers, does not appear to have been important. Indeed, attempting to bring the conference to a resolution might have been detrimental to the processes of higher level thinking in 'Sam's Cafe'. The question was raised in 'Reflections' as to whether there was a conflict between the task structure of the conference and the inherent flexibility of Parti and the open-endedness of the discussion. Some participants thought that the flexibility might lead to incoherence or to an inability to complete the task or produce a definitive end product (a concern of both Riel and Levin (1990), and Dicks (1992)). There was acknowledgment of the importance of the shared task, but uncertainty as to just how structured and finite the task should be. For example, Roger wrote:

Bonny... your comments about the time bound, linear nature of face-to-face conversation vs. conferencing are quite interesting and relate to my concerns after reading 'Sam's Cafe' if everyone felt they had an opportunity to pull together the issues that had been discussed... because there was no summary product and collective text that one could point to and say... see there... we've worked it through... I was unsure what the result of the discussion was... yet all of you... seem to have felt that the conferencing did function to pull

it all together even though there was no point-at-able integrative test...

Roger

While coherence and some shared goals or values are obviously essential to dialogue, an end product may not be. Rather, some computer conferences could be seen as a form of brainstorming where participants could come to a better understanding of theories and concepts as well as develop and explore new ideas. An open-ended task, then, might be most appropriate for this kind of dialogue. At the same time, however, there should be enough structure and leadership to give direction to the discussion, thus avoiding the on-line chaos described by Dicks (1992, p. 34). 'Sam's Cafe' provided an open-ended yet focused task where there was a specific problem to be worked through (the mastery of poststructuralist terms and concepts) and leadership on the part of the instructor, but where the creation of various characters and "voices" as well as the element of humour and lightheartedness allowed for the free play of ideas. The Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin, in his discussion of the role reversals typical of carnival time when males often dress up as females, blacks as whites and so on, suggested that at such times "seriousness and folly enter into an open dialogue, which changes both sides, as real dialogue does" (Morson, 1986, p. 13). Both the creation of the personae and the humorous situation of 'Sam's Cafe' exemplify the Bakhtinian idea of carnival. The temporary suspension of normal roles and the irreverance referred to by Cooper and Selfe (1990) permitted "a special type of communication" (Morson, 1986, p. 106) where participants could take intellectual risks not possible in a more direct kind of communication. As Bonny put it

I felt that the persona was important to the beginning of the assignment because I was feeling a little vulnerable and liked the idea of hiding behind a dramatic character. It also gave me the opportunity to use "unacademic" language at a time when I was still uncomfortable with my grasp of the concepts of poststructuralism.

In 'Sam's Cafe' most participants did not seem to feel the kind of pressure there would be in a course or formal paper - or, according to Rojo (1991), in some computer conferences - to have the "right" answer. Bonny was the only participant who expressed this kind of concern. She stated

I try to make sure I have a substantial period of uninterrupted time ahead of me before I prepare to participate in the conference. In fact I am very reluctant to say anything unless I think it is a fairly coherent, substantial contribution. I think this must have something to do with writing styles/personality types...

All the other participants seemed to agree that they liked its fluid experimental quality, and felt quite free to play with ideas and speak off the top of their heads. Roger, for example, wrote, "I like the indeterminacy of it all... the sense that one doesn't have to work out a complete response before entering a note." Helen added, "I also really like computer conferencing because it is a conversation to be picked up at any odd moment.... [T]here is so much I want to think about and respond to... I take comfort in the fact that I can print out and chew over stuff later... the words are not blown away on the winds of verbal discourse." At the same time, for someone like Bonny, the fact that the conference was achronological meant that she could take as much time as she needed to prepare her entries.

Although Bonny was the only one to have expressed reservations about participating informally, we all occasionally reverted back to the scenerio and personae when we felt unsure or insecure. Roger, for example, long after we had dropped the regular use of personae, began a note with "It was a cold, dreary, drizzly night... and Sam's seemed just the place to dispell the terror..." He then went on to discuss his doubts about how things were going in another course he was teaching. Most of us resurrected various personae when we began, several months into the conference, to discuss a new topic raised in another course several members were taking.

Perhaps because of the humourous and exploratory nature of the conference, and the possibility of playing more than one role within it, no one person ever seemed to dominate the dialogue, either in terms of monopolising, or of having the "right" answer. These same factors enabled us to practice the terminology, push each other to clarification through constant questioning, and synthesise our ideas as we interwove the personal, the practical and the theoretical in 'Sam's Cafe'. Bakhtin speaks of "the word as a tool for pedagogy" (Morson, 1986, p. 33). Perhaps computer conferencing should indeed be seen as a tool rather than as a task to be finished.

Another factor in the success of 'Sam's Cafe' was its surprising intimacy. In 'Reflections', Roger pointed out that letter writing, like computer conferencing is "ironically often more intimate than face-to-face conversation". Bonny took this idea further in her comment that in a love letter:

Firstly because the author is, by definition removed from the person he/she loves, the writer cannot rely on body language, gestures, eye contact, etc. to convey love/desire. The intimacy therefore needs to be explicated and elaborated upon. Hence, love letters are often more "verbose" than a face-to-face expression of love. Secondly, expressions of desire are used in so many contexts and so many ways that such expressions have a variety of different meanings. A writer has to elaborate on such expressions to convey accurately the mood/tone intended. Thirdly, again because the writer of such a letter

is by definition removed from the addressee, the writer could well be experiencing feelings of loneliness, loss that might generate uncharacteristic expressions of intimacy. One of the issues that I have in the back of my mind is the oft-made assertion that women are better correspondents than men and that women are more "able" to express intimacy than men.

It seems that distance may have forced us to use words more carefully, more expressively and more intimately. This is not to imply that it is of the essence of computer conferencing to do this, but that the potential for this kind of intimacy is there, as was shown by our experience. However, while distance and technology may have colluded to force us into finding new ways of being intimate, it was the flexibility and availability of conferencing that allowed us to do so. The fact that we could gain access to 'Sam's Cafe' at any time made it possible to speak "straight from the heart" and/or "off the top of the head". It also meant that we could respond to whichever entries struck most deeply rather than only to the latest one, as would usually be the case in face-to-face dialogue. And, perhaps most importantly, we were able to "listen" in a new way, going back over entries, taking time for reflection, and then responding. This kind of flexibility in conjunction with a more intimate use of words seemed to enable us to respond more often and in different ways than we might have otherwise.

### Conclusion

The example of 'Sam's Cafe' is based on the somewhat serendipitous experience of a small group of people. However, it serves to illustrate a creative approach to the use of computer conferencing in an educational setting. As well, it shows how, despite the rapid changes in educational technology in the past decade, the teacher still plays a key role in facilitating communication and understanding. Students need informal ways to reflect on their experiences and newly acquired knowledge. Teachers can provide a forum and direction for this kind of reflection through using computer conferencing as a form of collaborative journal writing. Factors contributing to the likelihood that this strategy will be effective include some already well documented in the literature and exemplified in 'Sam's Cafe', and others initially discussed in this article. Factors documented elsewhere include the importance of a common task and shared interests (Dicks, 1992; Riel & Levin, 1990), a genuine need for the conference in the sense that it is the most convenient way for participants to communicate (Riel & Levin, 1990), and the advantages of the non-linear, non-chronological nature of conferencing (Updegrave, 1991). New ideas suggested by the present article and worth further investigation are reiterated in the following paragraphs.

Morrison (1992) writes that "computer conferencing] enables students to reach higher levels of thinking, but only //they are properly prepared to do so" (p. 47). 'Sam's Cafe' demonstrates some ways this can be done. Beyond basic technological preparation, there is a need to find ways of fostering dialogue and creativity within a conference if computer conferencing is to reach its potential as a pedagogical tool. The experience of 'Sam's Cafe' suggests that open-ended rather than finite task structures would be most appropriate for promoting higher levels of thinking, just as they would be within a traditional classroom discussion. The instructor's invention of a humorous storyline in 'Sam's Cafe', and the possibility for participants to switch roles and speak in various voices within the conference allowed for much more exploration and risk-taking - essential to higher level thinking - to take place than might otherwise have been the case with a group of students who did not know each other well and were working with difficult theoretical material. The storyline also allowed us to practice using the language of poststructuralism in a simulated situation before using it in more formal circumstances. Participants appear to have been much less inhibited and concerned about "making a mistake" than has sometimes been the case in computer conferences. It has already been noted that membership in the conference was voluntary and the participants highly motivated. However, the high degree of motivation was due, at least in part, to the way the conference was set up and to the skill of the instructor in initiating, monitoring and extending the discussion.

Participants showed a strong sense of commitment, both to the academic project and to each other, within 'Sam's Cafe'. This may have been, to some extent, simply due to group dynamics and "chemistry". However, it may also have been facilitated by the removal of inhibitions in the earlier stages of the conference, and by the shared pleasure derived from the entertainment value of the conference. As well, the fact that some of the participants were living in somewhat isolated circumstances and could communicate through the conference at any time meant that they came to depend on each other and to look forward to hearing from each other. Bonny suggested that, as with a love letter, participants were forced to develop their thoughts more fully than they might have in face to face conversations. This probably indicates another important factor in the promotion of higher levels of thinking. Helen's statement that, lacking time to reflect on things immediately, she loved the permanence of the dialogue within the conference and the idea that its written words would not be "blown away on the wind", also comes into play here. Ideas both were extensively developed and could be gone back to and reflected on later.

In the context of feminist pedagogy, but in words broadly relevant to all those who are interested simply in good teaching, Schniedewind (1987) writes of teaching

democratically and with feeling. Such teaching rejects what Paulo Freire (1971) calls the banking system that assumes that one person with greater power and wisdom has the knowledge to dispense to others. Feminist education implies that we enter into a dialogue with our students, meeting them as human beings, and learning with them in community (p. 179).

Computer conferencing, of the kind described in this article, is democratic in nature, making a dialogue of equal voices more feasible than it might be in more traditional academic settings. If it can also become the kind of support network it was found to be in 'Sam's Cafe' - humorous, imaginative and sustaining - then it is certainly also "with feeling".

We have seen conferencing compared with letter writing. Its informality, immediacy and flexibility also make it an effective vehicle for the collaborative writing of student journals. Both journals and letters, like conferencing, are forms that can be taken up and put down again, that will bear frequent interruption and that, while often intimate and personal, can also deal quite adequately with the theoretical, as demonstrated in 'Sam's Cafe'. Conferencing, at its best, can serve as "an opening to the stories of the students and of various theories in a clarifying and edifying process. A listening, communicating, translating process in which story informs theory, theory informs story and story informs story" (Mattel & Peteret, 1988, p. 94).

There are important implications here for teachers and students who wish to take a more personal and interactive approach to learning, and for those interested in computer conferencing. The example of 'Sam's Cafe' points to ways of using computer conferencing as an extension and an expansion (not a replacement) of other forms of dialogue, and as an effective pedagogical strategy.

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Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Participate, also known as "parti", is a VAX based computer conferencing system with facilities for e-mail, real time messaging, asynchronic conferencing and the setting up of branches and sub conferences.

<sup>2</sup> It must be pointed out, though, that a major concern in discussing the possibilities of conferencing from home is a financial one. Many students who could benefit from conferencing would not be able to afford home computers. While this article deals with the possibilities rather than the limitations of computer conferencing, educators must be aware that if these possibilities are to be realised, computers must somehow be made available to people who are isolated because of distance, domestic responsibilities, disabilities and so on.

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