ON-LINE CONFERENCING
SUCCESSSES, FAILURES, AND COSTS

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The expanding use of computers as a communications tool raises the question: How can we use this new communications medium to improve our teaching in Asian Studies?

I first experimented with on-line conferencing and e-mail exchanges in my survey class on Eastern religions (Fall1997). Consistent with subsequent research, we experienced both successes and failures, including unforeseen costs. I recount these experiences so instructors may judge whether the pedagogical benefits are worth the significant costs of using the new technologies.

Discussion threads

We began with a conferencing program called Motet. Like its successors, Microsoft's NetMeeting and Netscape's Conference, the software allows faculty and students to participate in on-line conferences through a web browser (e.g., Netscape Communicator or Internet Explorer) from any Internet connection. Participants can organize their postings along different discussion topics or "threads." Posting to a discussion thread is easy: a form is provided at the end of each thread in which readers can type in their contributions and responses. These are then automatically added to the discussion thread for subsequent readers to see.

Previous experience made clear the need for basic ground rules for conversation, both in class or on-line. These were introduced on the first day of class. Students found the rules contribute to a free and open discussion that respects divergent views and beliefs. (The ground rules are posted on the class home page, http://www.drury.edu/faculty/ess/eastern/relg201.html)

For our first conference, the class divided into two groups; one read selections from Patanjali's The Yoga Sutra and the second, Sankara's Atmanbodha. The students then responded on-line to simple questions presented as the first posting in a conference "thread." (See the discussion archives of these first two threads, linked from the class home page.) Initial contributions were useful as the students themselves raised questions that they then sought to answer through their own reading and discussion of the text. In fact, the discussions were rich enough to justify devoting an entire class to student comments. In addition, this first exchange succeeded in maintaining a positive tone, one that further allowed for significant critical responses to one another's postings. These critical comments, including critiques of relatively technical issues such as effective use of quotes, were likely more powerful as they originated from cohorts rather than from the instructor.

Server failure

The initial successes, however, were accompanied by several problems. Students complained that my opening instructions were not specific enough. In addition, students demonstrated widely varying abilities and levels of use. One off-campus student could not easily dial into the campus network and access the system; two students, despite explicit instructions to work through Motet's on-line tutorial and help system, found the conferencing software too difficult to use. For that, the remaining seven students found the software easy and straightforward. We also encountered the serious problem of unstable technology: several times through the semester the Motet server failed precisely on the evening most students attempted to do their electronic homework.

Finally, students did not participate in the on-line conference at equal levels of seriousness and contribution. Indeed, one student, who clearly contributed the most to her group's discussion thread, expressed frustration and anger with those students who were less responsible to the group. This suggests that neither discussion ground rules nor the on-line conferencing system, by themselves, solve a common problem in group work, i.e., the problem of student(s) who let others undertake more than their fair share of the labor.
A second discussion experiment focussed on the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Unfortunately, problems familiar to us from the first round reappeared the second time. In particular, our server failed twice in the middle of the assignment, and a much less satisfactory exchange occurred on-line. (See the *Bhagavad-Gita* discussion archive, class home page.) Nonetheless, we made a third try, this time, with a group choosing to use a simple e-mail list in place of Motet. Students divided into three groups, each providing a summary overview of “their” Buddhist tradition (Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana) as well as a careful description and analysis of how this tradition changed as it migrated out of India and into Asia.

### E-mail as the conduit

Despite a brief server failure, results this time were far more encouraging. The discussion threads on both Motet and the e-mail list were far richer and more satisfying from every perspective. While there were still some variations in the level of participation, student contributions were more detailed and clearly organized.

The dialogical openness of the on-line conference, fostered in part by more practice in the conversational give-and-take encouraged by the ground rules, was also manifest in the classroom. The students’ collective constructions led to exceptionally productive class discussions and group presentations (see the class home page). In addition, as the subsequent summary and writing assignment make clear, the class developed a far more extensive and detailed understanding of these three traditions and the complex interplay between pre-existing cultural patterns, social and political structures, and “religion,” than any previous class (see “Buddhism: Notes, Writing Assignment [Theravada, Mahayana,Vajrayana, Zen]” on the course home page).

### Assessment

Recent assessment of the real pedagogical impacts and actual costs of using the technologies are consistent with these experiences. One study suggests, for example, that the use of electronic conferencing improves student participation for only about 50% of the “quiet ones” (Marincovich and Nash, 1999). In addition, the time and energy costs of bringing course materials on-line are significantly greater than the costs of more traditional lecture/discussion, i.e. 18 hours per 1 hour of Web instruction, in contrast with 2-10 hours to prepare a 1 hour lecture/discussion (Boettcher, 1998).

Our experiences suggest that the encouraging pedagogical successes of on-line conferencing are indeed bought at the considerable cost of reliable technological infrastructure and support, as well as costs in time and energy for faculty and students learning new media. Presumably, as the technologies improve, these costs will go down. But the lessons learned in these first experiments may remain relevant. In addition to the energy and enthusiasm of the instructor, such innovations require clear conversational guidelines, reliable software/hardware and technical support, clear and detailed instructions, ways to encourage roughly equal participation in group work, and a good back-up plan if, as it often seems to, the technology fails. And we should recognize that technologically based pedagogies, like other pedagogies, will not work for all students. Rather, we should be ready to use a variety of approaches, so that one might work where another one fails for a given student.

### References


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