

## Phase II: The Virtual Department

*This thread, although brief, involves a thoughtful discussion of the kinds of benefits and obstacles associated with the formation of a virtual department. Jim Sosnoski's explanation (1/22) of an online corollary to the present English department at UIC provides a useful tool for conceptualizing what a virtual department might look like, what it might allow its members to do, and how it might be governed. The merits of this type of a system are taken up by other members of the group who point out that the automation of departments can have the added benefit of increasing productivity and interaction between departmental members, substantially reducing the use of paper products for communication and housekeeping tasks, facilitating online courses and/or departmental listservs, and housing program requirements, registration forms, and other types of student-oriented information. Laurie Husak (1/24) details the benefits of a paperless department but cautions that such a goal does not come easily and requires extensive planning, training, commitment, equipment, and support. Paula Mathieu (1/28) agrees by indicating problems that occur when resources aren't forthcoming and the lack of compensation and manpower to create and sustain online structures stymies the project as a whole. Joe Amato (1/29) suggests that these problems of finance and faculty motivation are notably endemic to virtual environments and may be the greatest obstacle in effecting a successful shift from our current departmental setup to a fully automated one.*

**Date:** Tuesday, 21 January 1997

**From:** Ken McAllister

**Subject:** Welcome back

Greetings Folks—

Before we move into the next stage of our discussion, I'd like to welcome you all back to the Conversations. I hope that you all managed to have at least a short respite from your work and got a chance relax your

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mind and exercise your body. (My latest form of exercise seems to be helping people push their cars out of snow drifts.)

Anyway, according to the official TicToc timeline, it is time for us to shift our focus from the virtual university to the virtual department. For a short time—only a week or so—we'd like participants to discuss what a virtual department, specifically a virtual English department, should accomplish minimally and ideally.

Unlike our virtual universities discussions, in which I posed three detailed conversational threads that participants were asked to respond to, in this phase I'd like to hand over the threading initiative to the participants. In an accompanying message you will find a few conversation starters that you may or may not choose to pick up; they are threads that seem to begin to get at some of the concerns about virtual departments that I've had over the past couple of months. Whether you address one of the questions here or you create a new one, those of us who are responsible for editing the messages for publication and who are working on the TicToc web pages request that you continue to follow the subject-line protocol:

GENERAL CATEGORY: Specific question.

Using this protocol makes editing and organizational tasks much easier, and we believe that it also makes it easier for the participants to follow conversational threads of special interest. (If you disagree with the practice of using protocols, feel free to take your concerns up with Jim Sosnoski, who has given the idea of protocols in electronic environments a great deal of thought. For more information on the TicToc protocols, we encourage you to visit the TicToc web site.)

I look forward to further spirited conversations!

Ken

**Date:** Tuesday, 21 January 1997

**From:** Ken McAllister

**Subject:** Discussion prompt

As many of you know, e-works is, in part, a prototype of UIC's virtual English Department. For the past year-and-a-half, the e-works collective has labored under the motto "If they build it, they will come," inviting people from all areas of the English Department (faculty from the different programs, staff, undergraduate and graduate students, and administrators) to contribute to the construction of this electronic resource. In the course of this project, we have encountered a number of problems that we have yet to solve. Among the most vexing are:

**POTENTIAL:** What should we expect from a Virtual Department?

**GOVERNANCE:** Who runs a Virtual Department?

**PEDAGOGICAL PURVIEW:** What is it?

As I mentioned in a prior note, this phase of the Conversations will be a week-long whirlwind, so get your thoughts in as quickly as possible. Two weeks from now we will begin discussing what will ultimately comprise the bulk of the TicToc Conversations, namely, thoughts, comments, and critiques of several specific scenarios of on-line teaching. In order for that conversation to be most fruitful, a substantial discussion of the problems and possibilities of the scenarios' larger context—the virtual department—must be in place. So...

Let the Conversations Begin (again)!

Ken

**Date:** Wednesday, 22 January 1997

**From:** James Sosnoski

**Subject:** What is e-works?

## Frequently Asked Questions About E-works

What is e-works? Is e-works a web site? What is the relationship between the TicToc project and the e-works project? What features does e-works presently include? What features are being planned for inclusion? What further developments are on the drawing board? What assumptions govern the building of e-works? Is e-works a self-contained enterprise? Does anyone own e-works? Who are the e-works builders? Can anyone build anything in e-works? Who gets to decide which activities belong and which do not? Who gets to be a wizard? Who gets to be an e-worker? Who decides which proposals and offers of help are acceptable? If e-works is a department, is it organized like a department? Why is the Head of the actual department not the Head of e-works? What powers does the director of e-works have?

## What is E-works?

e-works is the name for a project and its result. The e-works project has as its goal the building of e- works, a virtual department. It is simultaneously a product that its builders never finish building and what has already been built. The "e" in "e-works" is intended to suggest "English"

[department] as well as “Electronic.” The word, “works,” following the hyphen is plural to suggest the multiplicity and variety of the work done in the department.

#### **Is E-works a Web Site?**

E-works is an online environment under construction at UIC which features the work of members of the English Department. At first glance e-works appears to be a web site. However, it is not intended to be a conventional site on the World Wide Web. Rather, HTML code is used to create a *frame* that provides graphical boundaries within which other softwares are embedded for use in the online work of the English department—for example, listservs, bulletin boards, newsgroups, collaborative writing tools, and MOOs. e-works has three primary functions. The first is to be an online site for obtaining information about the English department, its various programs and projects. In this respect, e-works functions as other web-sites do—as a locus of information that can be accessed world wide. Second, e-works publishes the work of the faculty and students of the English department and its adjunct programs. In this respect, it is not only a readable hypertext but also a reference database. For example, one of its features is a glossary of terms used in literary and rhetorical studies. Third, e-works is a place *for* work. In this respect, it is a central agency for ongoing work in various courses offered by the English department. For example, the collaborative tele-seminars taught in the department are housed in e-works. This means that syllabi, “lectures” (texts of the teacher’s explanations and instructions), student and faculty research is entered into e-works by cooperating faculty and students. In sum, e-works is intended to be a virtual English department that provides an online complement to the activities of the physical English department.

#### **What is the Relationship Between the TicToc Project and the E-works Project?**

The TicToc project is a component of the e-works project. As a project, e-works is intended to be self-reflexive so that in building e-works its builders are concerned about how and why they are building it. The TicToc project is the place in e-works where questions about its design, function, and relation to the actual department are discussed.

#### **What Features Does E-works Presently Include?**

A directory of persons who work in the department as staff, faculty, and students a catalogue of information about the department's programs a publication component, Works and Days & an electronic book review, ebr. a built-in self-critical component, the TicToc project a conference component that houses "the TicToc conversations" but will house other electronic conferences such as the "Crossroads" conversations which is in the planning stage.

### **If E-works Is under Construction, What Features Are Being Planned for Inclusion?**

E-works will have a departmental calendar course descriptions a meeting scheduler a photo album a newsletter cartoons poetry and fiction pages a departmental symposium faculty schedules virtual conference rooms virtual "offices" for majors.

E-works will also have a meta-data (information about information) or "reference" component to enable easy access to Internet sites with information germane to the work of the department.

### **What Further Developments Are on the Drawing Board?**

To encourage departmental participation in UI-Online:

1. a TIES initiative: TIES ("Teaching In Electronic Schools") is a project designed to merge writing courses on different campuses into a web publication project administered by a faculty and staff that functions like an editorial staff. The TIES project can easily be adapted to merge courses in other departments or to create inter- departmental projects on environmental, social, and artistic subjects. Paula Mathieu, Assistant Director of the UIC Composition Program, is currently investigating a TIES-like project for implementation at UIC.
2. a COLLAB initiative: COLLAB is a project designed to link seminars at different universities with the same syllabi and textbooks to each other through online discussions and a publication project orientation. Last year e- works sponsored a modest listserv COLLAB involving a course taught "simultaneously" by Gerald Graff at the University of Chicago and by James Phelan at Ohio State and attended by three UIC graduate students as part of a project in James Sosnoski's course.
3. online continuing education courses: Continuing education could provide a non-threatening way for faculty to engage in distance learning featuring topics under the rubric: "What you always want-

ed to learn and never had time for.”

4. [tentative] a pay-to-learn service: Given the difficulties of employing our graduate students, it seems advisable to develop online courseware authorized by the department. Persons can subscribe for a fee, a substantial portion of which would constitute a salary for the graduate student builder. For example, an “interactive” study of Sherlock Holmes (a literary figure of immense popularity with societies devoted to his study all over the world). There would be no credit for such a service and would be aimed at a general public who wished to study subject of interest to them. It parallels the kind of courses offered by schools where you can take a course during the summer months in wine tasting or in cooking.

### **What Assumptions Govern the Building of E-works?**

E-works rationales:

- e-workers build e-works. This is an application of John Slatin’s principle that “If they build it, they will come.” It implies collaboration. Rather than teachers building a virtual school for students or students building their own schools, it suggests that teachers, students, and administrators can collaborate in the construction of shared EEs (electronic educational environments) e-works is a collaborative venture in which undergraduates, graduates, staff, and faculty work side by side on projects which comprise the sectors of e-works and are linked to each other.
- e-works publicizes the work of the department and gives its students departmental visibility as e-workers
- e-works is a place for “creativity” (e.g., poetry, fiction, humor, theory, conversation)
- everyone in the department has a place in e-works. (We give space to all members of the department and are linking as many of them as possible to our pages.)
- e-works is the result of a negotiation between e-workers, members of the department (both sceptics and proponents of EEs), and computer center staff.
- e-works seeks out and maintains links between the English Department’s activities and the activities of departments at other institutions.
- e-works has established and continues to nurture a strong working relationship with the computer center staff.

## **Is E-works a Self-Contained Enterprise?**

No. It is a part of UIC's web which is a part of the Internet. It is also a part of the English department which is a part of UIC which is a part of UI.

## **Does Anyone Own E-works?**

UIC owns the material aspects of e-works in the same sense that it owns the equipment used in the English department. Although it does not yet own e-works as "intellectual property" it may soon do so if the laws make that possible. At the moment, the intellectual property that makes up e-works (the ideas that gave it birth, the words that are recorded in it, etc.) are copyrighted to their authors in the usual fashion.

## **Who Are the E-works Builders?**

The e-works builders are de facto the persons who build some part of e-works.

## **Can Anyone Build Anything in E-works?**

No. Since e-works is a virtual department, only activities belonging to the actual department are intended to be given a home in e-works.

## **Who Gets to Decide Which Activities Belong and Which Do Not?**

A select number of e-workers, called wizards, make this discrimination. They are e-works' governing board.

## **Who Gets to Be a Wizard?**

Initially, the first e-workers, on the advice of Cynthia Haynes and Jan Rune Holmevik who were the administrators of LinguaMOO, constituted themselves the administrators of e-works. Subsequently, the first wizards nominated e-workers to join their group. The wizards have acted as a nomination committee.

## **Who Gets to Be an E-worker?**

Anyone who offers to help build e-works or who proposes to build additions to e-works can be an e-worker.

### Who Decides Which Proposals and Offers of Help Are Acceptable?

In principle, the wizards do. In practice, they are represented by a group of wizards whose project it is to decide which proposals can be accepted.

### If E-works Is a Department, Is It Organized Like a Department?

Yes and No. Departments are organized hierarchically in the following way:

- Head
- Steering Committee (made up of the departmental administrators, directors of the Main programs (Grad, Undergrad, Comp), and faculty who represent other faculty by rank)
- Curriculum Committees
- Ad Hoc Committees
- Grad Student Committee

e-works has:

- a director
- the wizards
- e-workers

The two are alike in that they are organized hierarchically by groups. e-workers need the approval of wizards just as graduate students need the approval of the graduate committee. At the same time, there is no parallel between the administrative groups in the actual department and the virtual department.

It should be noted, however, that if administrators of the actual department dis-approved of the content of e-works, they have the power to intervene.

Another difference between the actual department and e-works is that the latter is project-oriented and the former is committee oriented. The most significant difference in this regard is that, whereas a departmental sub-committee or committee reports to the administrative committee who appointed them for approval of their work, e-works projects are autonomous and do not have to be approved before their work goes forward (though the wizards can intervene if they deem it warranted).



## Why Is the Head of the Actual Department Not the Head of E-works?

Legally speaking, he is the Head of e-works. However, practically speaking, the Head of the department delegates the responsibility of developing e-works to its director who by tradition is elected by the wizards from their own ranks.

## What Powers Does the Director of E-works Have?

The only specified power that the director of e-works has (at this moment in its history) is the power to make a final decision when some action is proposed by the wizards or e-workers. He can, however, be overruled by the Head of the actual department.

Jim

**Date:** Thursday, 23 January 1997

**From:** Marjorie Luesebrink

**Subject:** Lines of communication

Dear Ken and fellow TicTocers—

This semester my sabbatical is, in part, directed toward further investigation into distance education—and how this is carried out in departments. Accordingly, I am taking a multi-media course from an instructor in the Business Department. The technology is Mac platform (with which I am less familiar), and it incorporates an on-line component. I felt that a good way to see what happened with students was to be one. So far, the two e-mail messages I sent to the instructor have been bounced as “undeliverable.” This event, though minor, spurred me to consider the zen of absence. I am sure that the instructor believed he could be reached; however, events far beyond his knowledge were operational. One aspect of our departmental activities that may be important is an ongoing “need to know” status with the larger technology community in the institution. Our college is small, and we have not yet worked out lines of communication in these areas; this may not be an issue for better-organized universities . . .

Marjorie

**Date:** Thursday, 23 January 1997

**From:** William Covino

**Subject:** Paperless departments

In the English Department at UIC, distributing a memo to all faculty, staff, TAs, and lecturers means making 182 paper copies, and stuffing them into 182 different mailboxes. This costs a lot of time, money, and trees. As we build the Virtual Department, should we consider shifting soon to a paperless Department, in which all information now distributed on paper is posted on line? This will require, of course, that the Department members check e-works as regularly as their "real" mailboxes.

Are any non-UIC tic-tockers members of paperless, or nearly paperless Departments? If so, can you tell us something of the promise and problems of such an enterprise?

Bill

**Date:** Thursday, 23 January 1997

**From:** Greg Ulmer

**Subject:** Problems of access and limited resources

Hi Bill

The first step in moving to a paperless Department is to provide everyone with a computer. U of Florida did not make this move until University decided to commit the new IBM computer lab to gen ed writing. Most English Department faculty at that did not have a computer provided by the U in their offices (obviously some had them at home). Starting in 1994 the College budgeted for the purchase of computers for everyone in the Dept. We are STILL in the transition, now doing both paper and online intra- and inter- departmental communicating. The plan is to phase out gradually the paper.

Best

Greg

**Date:** Friday, 24 January 1997

**From:** Laurie Husak

**Subject:** Establishing a successful paperless department

This may be a bit rambling, but . . .

I have worked and taught in several departments, as well as AISS where I am currently employed as a project manager, that have been at varying stages of attempting to implement paperless environments.

AISS has implemented successfully a move to a paper-less environment. From a personal perspective, I have greatly enjoyed this environment and the freedom from being tied to traditional communication means. There is still some paper at AISS, but we manage to function as a department spread across three campuses and still act as a unit. We do much collaborative software development, trouble shooting, research, and discussion without having to be together physically. We are also charged by the President with creating applications that support the business aspects of departmental activity without generating paper. These applications are developed with folks working in a collaborative environment using e-mail, scheduling software, Lotus Notes, conference calling, and other electronic means. None of our internal distributions is accomplished with paper. We standardized on our tools, platforms, and means of communications. This was a huge effort that was not without bumps. On the plus side, from a user perspective, I have much better access to people, their thought and ideas than I had before the automation.

From a strictly departmental perspective, I believe that there are several key issues that are relatively obvious, but are frequently not addressed:

- Planning- There are so many options for each item that a faculty might want to implement, that planning is essential. By planning I am referring to determine up front which platforms, software, server, and communications tools, etc. the department needs to have in place. There are integration issues that will add additional parameters to any decisions made regarding the above mentioned issues. Also, implementation planning must begin as soon as the project itself. When is the cut off date? Will the department need the support of other university organizations? When will that support be needed? There are logistical issues such as who will get set up first, space, dollars and others that must be addressed and planned for at the inception of the effort.
- Training- I mention this issue because so little is done to really insure that people are comfortable with the tools they are trying to use. In a previous role, I worked for CCSO in Urbana. I managed the training efforts for free and paid courses for faculty, staff, and students. I was (am) amazed at how little attention is paid to this important issue. We as an organization need to assist our colleagues and students to participate. The only way they will truly utilize the technology is through being made comfortable with that technology. In a paperless department we are taking for granted that people will have access to information in a strictly electronic basis. Without the com-

fort brought on by training on a system, people will continue to be non-participants, and thus find other means of communicating.

- Department Head/ Dean level buy-in - This issue is a little difficult to define. I think we can agree that in a department, if the department head supports an effort, it will progress more swiftly and effectively. If the department head is only luke warm to the idea, it is a slow and difficult effort. There needs to be marketing work done with the deans and department heads to get their buy-in on the effort, the issues, and the benefits. As a project manager, I know that even the greatest computer program will fail if the people who need to use it, have not bought into the effort. On projects where there is that buy-in from above, the projects, implementation, and entire attitude of those involved with the project are infinitely more positive and rewarding.
- Equipment - The issue here is for both faculty and students. If departments are going to require electronic means of communication, then providing the right equipment is an obligation. I am not saying the department must provide the equipment, but the department must ensure that the faculty and student have access to the right equipment. The departments need to be more vocal in expressing their requirements to the ADN and CCSO and others charged with providing public lab facilities. Additionally, working with faculty to write grant proposals to internal and external bodies who can provide funding. Some departments are better than others at grant writing. Corporations are truly interested in partnering with universities and may provide equipment, funding, and support. There needs to be more organized support for departments to pursue this kind of opportunity.
- Technical Support - Computers do not run themselves. Often the role of the network and system administration person is over looked. Faculty do not have the time to become experts in all aspects of support roles. I worked on a grant proposal for the College of Fine and Applied Arts in Urbana a few years ago. One item on that grant form has always stayed with me. They wanted to know who would be the technical support person for the RS6000's they were going to be giving us, as well as that person's qualifications. Their rationale was obvious; if we didn't have the correct support people out there to support their product, then the new machines would be wasted. Computers require tending. Networks require tending. In an ideal scenario, each department would have a talented person out there who understood the research and computing goals for the department they supported. This person could then continue to work to

support the faculty and student needs for their department. In Urbana, the departments who have such a person or people in these support roles are much more prepared to address and embrace the new technologies. Those departments without, continue to exist on the fringes. In departments where faculty have assumed this role, their own research has suffered and the types of opportunities afforded the department are constrained by the limited time the faculty member assigned this role has to offer.

All in all, I am a strong supporter of the move to a paperless department. Particularly when one is trying to work creatively with others, technology has much to offer in collaboration.

Thanks,  
Laurie

**Date:** Sunday, 26 January 1997

**From:** Ann Feldman

**Subject:** Constructing online composition courses

I've been going through all of the last week's comments on TicToc, most notably Jim's FAQs. I'm trying to sort out and articulate how all of this relates to my concerns as the current Director of English Composition. I want to initiate a conversation on TicToc about how the composition program might emerge in e-works. First, governance. It's interesting how this collaborative venture can turn conventional hierarchies upside down. If I want to contribute, I think I would have to be an e-worker. Is that right? Fortunately, I am in contact with a wizard Paula Mathieu and the composition staff and I will be discussing what the composition program might look like in e-works. Next, pedagogy. What would an on-line composition course look like? Prior to that, would we even want to contemplate one? If I believe that our program offers important and useful instruction, I'd want to make it available to students who are not geographically present. The challenges are many. How could we translate a studio course that depends so strongly on personal interaction and continuous drafting to an electronic mode? I'm experimenting now with a free program called netmeeting in which two or three people can share writing, revise it and talk about it synchronously from different locations. All of the various components Jim describes could also play a part, MOOs, websites, etc. What might we gain from a distance course? Insofar as a composition course focuses on public discourse or a melding of academic and community concerns, could students in a variety of

locations bring even more resources to the writing class? Finally, participation. I simply need to learn more. I'm comfortable with listservs in my classes and am learning how to construct a web page. I'm experimenting with interactive software that could operate across a distance, to somewhere else in Chicago or even to the Alaska bush. More questions

that answers. Look forward to continuing the discussion.

Ann

**Jan Holmevik:**

Hello all,

I am a visiting assistant professor at the Department for Humanistic Informatics at the University of Bergen where I teach Object Oriented Programming, History of Computing, and Historical Informatics. I hold a Cand. Philol. degree in the History of Technology from the University of Trondheim, Norway, where I graduated in the Fall of 1994. My thesis focused on the history of computing, particularly software from 1945 to 1970. My other research interests include Science, Technology and Society Studies (STS), and Humanistic Informatics. In January of 1995 I started Lingua MOO (<http://lingua.utdallas.edu:-7000>) together with Cynthia Haynes of the University of Texas at Dallas, and text-based virtual reality/textuality has since then been a major research interest of mine, both with regard to theory and technical development.

I'm honored to be a part of this group and look forward to an interesting and fruitful collaboration.



**Date:** Monday, 27 January 1997

**From:** Cynthia Haynes and Jan Holmevik

**Subject:** Teaching through MOO's

Ann and others . . .

Some of you may know that Jan Rune Holmevik and I administer an educational MOO (Lingua MOO) that serves a number of rhetoric and composition classes at UT-Dallas (where I direct the first-year rhetoric program). Jan teaches courses at the University of Bergen, Norway in Humanistic Informatics and has used the MOO extensively to teach the history of computing, Java and MOO programming. Others who teach

and research at Lingua use the MOO to varying degrees, from holding office hours online to bringing whole classes online to conduct discussions, work collaboratively, and engage in a variety of activities designed to foster public discourse. Interestingly, in our surveys of teachers and students who use Lingua, we find that they are primarily using the space for discussions (recording those for follow-up analysis), and those discussions are viewed less in terms of "writing" and more in terms of substantive critical thinking activities (which they are). Those of us who use Lingua MOO to "write" (whether individually or collaboratively) understand that other possibilities for writing in MOOspace are vastly underutilized.

For example, on the Distance Learning committee at UT-Dallas, I was

surprised to learn that the Biology department wanted to invest several thousands of dollars in an audio/video setup that would allow remote access for teleconferencing and a component of the system that would allow them to post class notes in a different window while the students watched a talking head lecture. I suggested that if they used Lingua MOO, the teacher could paste a lecture from a word file into a lecture device that they prompt while they attend to answering questions publicly (or by private pages). In addition, the teacher and students could enter class notes easily into readable notes (and/or recitable notes) that could be read by all on their respective screens. Further, if they wanted to collaborate, they could set up shared documents from which to work synchronously or asynchronously. They could even use the in-MOO, MOOmail system to set up a class newsgroup and avoid the hassle of listservs. Finally, Lingua MOO is networked to 17 other educational MOOs, and we have an inter-MOO communication feature that would allow these biologists (for example) to collaborate with other biologists who work online at BioMOO, a MOO located in Tel Aviv, Israel (most of the other MOOs we are networked to host humanities-based classes).

To be sure there are a variety of software programs that enable synchronous activities (mostly as chat windows only), but on the MOO you have unlimited resources available, AND ready and willing administrators who can implement suggestions you have into the existing pedagogical features. When Jan and I co-author talks or papers, we simply log on to the MOO, turn on a recorder and start talking. The transcript is capable of being edited by one or both of us, and the pasting function allows us to import text from other files as well. We can structure the presentation or paper like the dialogue that it begins as, or we can edit it into one seamless co-authored shared document. And, in one room at Lingua MOO, we can archive this text in html and it becomes an automatic webpage through the web interface we have. This Cyphertext Lab area of the MOO is currently under development, though there are a few projects there now. I could go on, but let me propose that anyone interested in a demo please contact us, and we will be happy to explain further how we use the MOO for teaching writing (some are also using it to tutor writing). We could even invite the TicToc-ers to a joint meeting at the MOO if so desired.

Cheers,  
Cynthia and Jan

**Date:** Monday, 27 January 1997

**From:** Greg Ulmer

**Subject:** Response to Feldman

Hello Ann

You posed a series of interrelated questions about why, what, how a composition course might go online. My response is based on what I have seen happen at Florida since we started teaching gen ed writing in our computer lab in the fall of 1994. For better or worse, as I may have said here previously, my department was thrown into the lake of this X-windows Unix environment before we had heard much about swimming. Now we love it (despite drownings, undertows, sharks, lazy lifeguards, people parking on the beach, hurricanes). Sorry, the Florida beach metaphor distracted me.

The first stage of our lab use (5 classrooms, 30 work stations each) was to use the extraordinary tools of the facility to teach literacy (and some folks are still using it that way). Jane Douglas, who was just hired here as Director of our Writing Center, is a proponent of all the ways in which the Web, email, MOO etc may be used to enhance learning to write arguments, essays. Very quickly, however, working within the environment of these tools, many folks noticed that they support many functions that literacy does not support (and vice versa). Most of the other courses that are evolving in this electronic setting are moving towards what I call electracy, to distinguish it from media literacy or computer literacy (using electronic technology to support the practices of writing invented for use with paper and print). One rationale for moving into electracy is that the society around us is doing the same. Some of the skeptics here have been won over when our graduates have reported back about getting jobs based on their knowledge of HTML etc. The world of work is moving away from paper. Nor is there an opposition between the campus course and the distance ed course, as might seem to be the case, since what seems to be underway here is a third option—the move of the university towards making electronic communications the norm. Once that happens, or even as soon as it reaches some level of critical mass, residential and distance learners will have the same experience. It is uncanny how closely our situation in this time of transition between literacy and electracy resonates with *Phaedrus*. You will recall that Socrates and Phaedrus settle down for their conversation at the site of one of the lesser rituals of the Eleusynian Mysteries (oral apparatus); Phaedrus is caught with a crib sheet up his sleeve (literate apparatus). We still have responsibility for the practices of literacy, but also we should be the ones designing the practices for electracy. Sorry if this response is too general, but I would be happy to discuss specifics in the discussion about e-works.



best  
Greg

**Date:** Tuesday, 28 January 1997

**From:** James Sosnoski

**Subject:** Benefits of a virtual department

Yesterday we had a departmental meeting to discuss revising the undergraduate curriculum. It provides a context for talking about how a virtual department could facilitate routine departmental tasks. If the persons involved were willing and able to go online, here are some of the possibilities:

1. The meeting ended with Don Marshall asking us to exchange memos on the issues, commenting that it was a worthwhile departmental expenditure. As Bill Covino pointed out on this list (and in the meeting), this can be done through e-works in a paperless manner.
2. Prior to the meeting Tom Hall, the director of undergraduate studies, distributed a list of questions identifying various issues and inviting responses from the faculty. Listservs are designed for just such exchanges and have a number of advantages over printed memos, especially if software like MhonArc is employed to sort out discussion threads (as in the TicToc conversations). Mail forms automated to go to the list could be attached to each question so that persons could respond from e-works the questions as they review the responses already posted. In the near future Lotus Notes, a very sophisticated software designed for this purpose, will be available.
3. One of the problems Tom identified was that students registered by phone or through the Internet without information about the prerequisites for the course. English majors could be asked to go to e-works and check a form attached to the course which would tell them if they satisfied the course prerequisites. After doing so, they could register directly from e-works.
4. Similarly, English majors could access forms on e-works and download them to determine which requirements they have fulfilled for their concentration.
5. Because they are on campus for only a few hours a week (UIC is mostly a commuter university), English majors rarely consult their advisors. This situation might be helped if students could reach their advisors through e-works which can provide not only information about office hours but also direct links to advisors via email.

General advice could be posted in e-works.

It seems worth mentioning that the problems discussed during the meeting often referred to the commuter aspects of UIC—noting that students were on campus for only a few hours a week which created a variety of communication problems. e-works is designed to meet such problems.

Of course, all of this requires someone's time and energy. Who will do these time consuming, often difficult tasks of coding? Ultimately, the answer to this question is, I believe, "us." The problems discussed in yesterday's meeting cannot be solved by providing information alone. Advising goes beyond information. A virtual department is a place at which persons can meet to address their concerns. When students are commuters, it is often easier to come to a virtual than to a physical department. But someone has to be *there* to respond to the problem even if only virtually.

Looking down the line toward UI Online, we would expect that a problem that concerned many faculty at yesterday's meeting could be addressed in an online environment. The problem simply stated is that students look for courses to fit limited openings in timetables already constricted because they have to juggle many responsibilities—families, children, jobs, etc. As a result, they take courses out of sequence when they can fit them in, creating innumerable problems for teachers who have designed the courses assuming specific prerequisites. Distance education speaks directly to this problem.

Jim

**Date:** Tuesday, 28 January 1997

**From:** Paula Mathieu

**Subject:** Problems associated with eworks

Ann, I'd like to respond to your comment about how projects happen in e-works or in any virtual department.

You said:

>First, governance. It's interesting how this collaborative venture can turn >conventional hierarchies upside down. If I want to contribute, I think I >would have to be an e-worker. Is that right?

Yes, that's right, in the sense that contributing is what defines one as an e-worker. The potential worry I see is that building a virtual department

this way relies primarily on people's individual interests to define what projects get done. On one hand, that's a great thing. The "department" will grow based on the desires of the people in it. On the other hand, this ad-hoc system sets up the possibility of leaving much undone in the way of projects faculty members desire and information students need. Or else, faculty without the time or skills to do the html work might get their projects done by asking people—mainly graduate students, undergraduate students or staff—to do this time-consuming work. What then about adequate compensation? Of course learning html and doing this work can be very rewarding and educational—to a point. When web building ceases to entail learning something new, people should be compensated in other ways for their work. As exciting as building a virtual department is, I think we need to realize there is much "grunt" work to be done. (For example, I was browsing through the e-works program pages, and I noticed that I'm not listed as a student and other people who have left UIC are listed. Whose job is it to maintain those pages?) I think it's important that if the department decides it's a good thing to go virtual, (and have we decided that?) it needs to put resources behind it in one fashion or another to get things built.

To return to Ann's composition pages. We—the composition staff—are now in the process of planning what they might ideally entail. But the problem comes in the building. It takes a lot of time (more than the semester and a half remaining in my staff appointment) and people with skills to realize the ambitious plans that are unfolding. Without those resources, Ann's pages will remain forever in the planning stages.

A similar resource problem exists for UIC's web pages. (see: <http://www.uic.edu>) For a campus unit to be represented on the web page, they must create the page themselves. For example, there is currently no entry for the campus day care center. For there to be one, the day-care center would have to either program the page (which they have little time or resources for) or hire someone to design and program it (which they have no money for). As a result, the current website well represents the administration, the library, and the computer network (i.e. campus units with resources), but does not adequately reflect the needs and desires of students. Left to proceed in this way, the www will follow a model indicative of corporate-owned mainstream media: those with the resources receive representation and those without don't.

For e-works to challenge traditional hierarchies, we need to make sure that it doesn't follow that same corporate model. What can we do about setting aside resources to maintain the pages, so we don't see faculty members "hiring" students through independent studies or asking staff members to build their pages for them? At other institutions, how have

people have worked out the nuts and bolts of building a virtual department?

Paula

**Date:** Wednesday, 29 January 1997

**From:** Joe Amato:

**Subject:** Finance, maintenance, and motivation

Paula, the dept. of humanities at iit has a web site only b/c of the efforts of a single undergrad. student, sean murray, and myself . . . that student was enrolled in a course of mine ("rhetoric of technology") and took it upon himself to propose such a thing . . . which grew over time as the two of us collaborated on same . . . and which is now kind of a dead beast, floating out there in the ether, b/c said student has graduated, and b/c i've never been approached by anybody in my dept. who's asked me to keep it alive (and folks, yknow, it's not a one-horse job, it's not even a two-horse job) . . .

hence your suggestion, paula, that we need to find other, more creative ways of 'financing' web site creation and maintenance strikes me as to the point . . . this is where the "access" issues get sticky—who has "access" to these continuing funds, not simply who has an email account . . . i might also note that it's been extremely difficult to get most of my dept. faculty members to really take note of our web site, and what might be done with same . . . part of the problem here, to go back to an earlier comment, is that our faculty have just not been sufficiently equipped (in their offices) with anything like new computers . . . this is changing, and the dept. is finally getting a single computer classroom . . .

however, the question of resources is not about to go away, and there's no such thing as a free lunch . . . so at the very least, every campus needs leadership that understands the value of online resources — resources that, as eric crump and greg ulmer have indicated right along in their posts, may not result in the same sorts of work that have customarily been associated with english depts . . .

frankly i'm at somewhat of a loss here, and i've sensed for some time now that there's a growing tendency simply to cut what deals need to be cut in order to end up with machines, networks, etc—even if this means that the sorts of educational initiatives i'd like to see pursued won't be . . . i mean, you need faculty motivation, leadership that understands, and money . . . it's one thing to argue for motivation, and for new ways of doing work . . . but this argument, one that i make myself or hear made

in various contexts on a routine basis, comes up against some harsh economic realities . . . the move toward online resources comes when the university system is pretty much talking “quality” and “excellence” (again, i’ll adopt the etiology of bill readings in his book *the university in ruins*) . . . in such a climate, it’s likely that online resources will be allocated only for the most functional of tasks, with the exception of schools that find themselves uncharacteristically well-heeled . . . now you can build, through a sort of self-composed volunteer effort, all sorts of amazing stuff . . . but to keep it going within a material institution (b/c this stuff does have a material basis), with the hope that something wonderful will emerge, is probably going to require sustained support from those who are somewhat at a remove from the more quotidian realities of same . . . and i’m somewhat at a loss, myself, as to how to present such arguments convincingly when academe is busy confronting a host of vocational and privatizing pressures, and when the very people we need to persuade are feeling these latter the most . . .

Joe