

# The TicToc Project: Intersections of the Local and Global

*David B. Downing*

The TicToc Project ("Teaching in Cyberspace Through Online Courses") came into being through what many of us had hoped would be a felicitous intersection of a set of local interests and global concerns. On the one hand, when Jim Sosnoski joined the English Department at the University of Chicago at Illinois in 1995, he began to collaborate with a group of faculty, students, administrators, and staff interested in the possibilities of online teaching and research. Many of their efforts focused around the development of a collaboratively designed electronic department, which they called "eworks." Moreover, the State of Illinois had been encouraging the development of distance learning programs, recently appropriating around \$25 million for projects exploring online pedagogies. Sylvia Manning, the Vice-President of the University of Illinois, was also the chair of the University of Illinois Planning Council, which coordinates University-wide policy, and they were encouraging projects employing technology, especially online telecommunication. The Priorities report which the administration had been actively pursuing called for "a university that is at the cutting edge of knowledge, employing state of the art technology in its educational and research programs." The "Instructional Technology Improvement Program" was thus concerned with upgrading classrooms, student computing facilities, other electronic teaching possibilities. These interests culminated in the UI-Online initiative, a comprehensive plan to improve and develop new forms of telecommunications, distance learning, and computer aided instruction throughout the University of Illinois state system.

The coordination of these local institutional initiatives seemed to provide the ideal opportunity to link them to the general theoretical concerns regarding the impact of the telecommunications revolution on teaching and research. The project was to focus on the displacement of physical classrooms into virtual environments and its effects on teaching practices. The TicToc Project thus emerged as an effort to link the

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practical application of new electronic educational environments at UIC with broad theoretical, social, political, and technological changes. Just as humanities departments throughout the U.S. are actively making their transition into an era when electronic textuality and pedagogy will be the norm, it made good sense for the UIC English Department to tap the many opportunities now being presented towards just such an exploration of new possibilities. The preliminary goal was to build an online workplace that would suit the department's current needs, while providing an open electronic environment with the room and resources necessary to expand efficiently and effectively.

Many educators have, of course, begun to experiment with teaching in electronic environments. In some cases, the Internet is understood to be complementary to the more traditional classroom practices currently in use. In others, the traditional classroom is replaced by a site in cyberspace—an increasingly more common phenomenon. What especially concerned the eworkers, however, was that the rising tide of changes would not necessarily be a smooth transition. In most instances, the conversion of the traditional classroom into a virtual one precipitates a myriad of problems, many of which have yet to be cogently addressed. A central goal of the TicToc project was thus to attempt to identify these problems and seek to develop strategies for resolving them before it was too late. Indeed, the name, "TicToc," was meant to suggest that the problems inherent in the rapid expansion of distance learning are a potential time bomb. We must be as wary of the pitfalls of the colonizing of cyberspace as we are of the opportunities for new and exciting kinds of intellectual exchange.

The basic plan for the project thus involved enhancing the work of the local eworkers through the aid of a group of consultants whose areas of expertise represented most of the important emerging technologies from web site development, to MOOs, to linked teleseminars, to video conferencing, and other forms of synchronous and asynchronous communication. By the spring of 1996, eight consultants had agreed to join the TicToc project, and the basic plan was to conduct an online, listserv discussion through the fall of 1996 and the spring of 1997, supplemented by an archiving web site, culminating with a symposium at the Humanities Institute at the University of Illinois at Chicago. By collaborating systematically with sympathetic scholars around the country and abroad, the hope was to broaden the scope of electronic pedagogies as they were being developed at UIC within the department, to house a national forum on electronic textuality and pedagogy, and to establish UIC's English department as a recognized resource in this area, providing both a model and detailed practical advice to persons who are developing similar programs at other universities.

The plan for the conversations was to be based on a "Cycles Project,"

the name Jim Sosnoski and I have used for several collaborative teaching and research projects. We have discussed some of the features of Cycles Projects in the introduction to the "Geography of Cyberspace" issue of *Works and Days* (23/24), but for our purposes here what was important was that the protocols for the discussion were to identify key issues and problems as we worked towards a concurrence with respect to specific actions that we might take to resolve those problems. That is, the idea was that the discussion and any recommendations that came from it might then lead to specific actions on the part of the English Department at UIC. As Jim said in his opening remarks at the Tic Toc Symposium, "This is not the usual symposium for a very special reason. We expect the conversations that begin now to have palpable consequences....We're not just talking about ideas. We're talking about what will actually happen in UIC's English Department beginning next fall." In short, the local circumstances at UIC suggested that here was a unique opportunity for a national intellectual forum to have a direct impact on the actual teaching and research practices of a specific university. At least, that's what most of the eworkers anticipated.

However, in November, 1997, Jim Sosnoski wrote a memo to the chair of the UIC English Department recommending that the idea of developing an eworks virtual department be abandoned. [See the Epilogue.] Obviously, this recommendation was not what many people, especially the eworkers, had hoped for, since from this perspective the whole project would have to be called a failure. However, if you begin to ask some of the TicToc participants themselves if they saw the project as a failure, (and I have asked many), the answers vary widely. Nevertheless, they tend to follow a pattern: the more positive responses come from those of us not working at UIC, whereas the more frustrating accounts can be heard from UIC participants. Indeed, the differing tone of Ken McAllister's and Gian Pagnucci's respective TicToc narratives with which we begin this issue, reflect this split. We can examine this problem a bit more closely.

On the one hand, those who most enjoyed the online discussion and the symposium tend to be those who do not work at UIC. For them (us, since I am one of them), much of the more interesting developments of TicToc emerged from the interests of those seeking to explore some of the most cutting edge developments in the field of electronic pedagogy, and since some of the leaders of these innovative projects were TicToc participants, it led to some highly provocative exchanges of ideas.

On the other hand, there was often a reluctance on the part of the consultants (at least for this consultant, and some others with whom I have spoken) to provide recommendations to the eworkers and to UIC. Why? Simply put, there always seemed to be an implicit acknowledgment that those at UIC knew better than we outsiders did what could and could not be done within the local departmental politics. Without

that kind of insider's knowledge, it can seem presumptuous to make recommendations. Moreover, the TicToc consultants already shared with the eworkers similar sets of intellectual interests with respect to the shift from print to electronic media. So the problem was all along one of how to have the general theoretical and practical issues that tend to have global implications put before the local administrators and non-eworkers at UIC. Since TicToc was from the start organized to include UIC administrators and staff involved in technological applications to teaching and research, the hope was that this feature would enable us to bridge the usual problem of most intellectual forums. And, indeed, everyone who participated in both the online discussion and the symposium, valued the participation of all the UIC and U of I administrators who quite actively participated in the project. But the problem runs deeper. And, as one might expect, the depths have more to do with economics and politics than with intellectual rationales or educational values.

What I want to suggest is that the differing perceptions of the value of the TicToc project reveal a tension that any one of us might encounter when we seek to change the local institutions in which we work. We could describe this tension as one form of a double bind: you are getting two messages from the same source but that contradict each other. Such a bind is exactly what many of the UIC participants and organizers experienced. That is, on the one hand, the ostensible message they were getting was one of positive support and assurances of financial backing for the project, but the non-verbal message they experienced was a tangible lack of support and little financial backing. In other words, one is caught between contradictory messages from the same general sources: "we support what you're doing (TicToc and eworks) and we would like to see it succeed." Thus, the local supports the global aims. Or so it seems. But of course, there's another message, even if it's silent or non-verbal: colleagues do not show up in online debates or at the symposium, the money to fund eworks never materializes, and the message is that they do not really want the online department. Despite the obvious support for the TicToc symposium itself, it's not really enough: not enough to fund a preliminary TicToc symposium (which we had hoped to have before the online discussions began, but had to abandon for lack of funding) and not enough to fund the time-intensive efforts of the eworkers to build the virtual department. Not having the preliminary TicToc meeting was not, as it turned out, a minor matter. Nowhere did the f-2-f exchanges seem to matter more in light of online discussions, when the pleasure of finally meeting in May of 1997 broke the ice in ways that none of the online autobiographies (that you will find in the opening discussion) could possibly match.

For the eworkers at UIC, they had deep local commitments to what seemed like the possibility of a virtual department. Their local com-

mitments were in sync with some of the sweeping global concerns for the cultural turn towards electracy, yet always a key component of the project was to make the current technologies accessible to members of the department who might otherwise not use them, and to respect the apprehensions of those new to the explosions of cyberspace. Indeed, at the heart of the initial project proposal was a concern for the ways in which UIC English department faculty and students have traditionally worked in print environments, and how they might benefit from the new electronic resources. Besides bringing members of the department into discussion with members of the Computer Center on these issues, the eworkers hoped to set the groundwork for networking the department's online activities in ways that would be compatible with existing programs.

With these intentions in mind, the eworkers announced their plans throughout the department, and they listened in the halls as some of their colleagues wondered about the project, raised troubling questions in casual conversations, lurked on the online discussions, but, perhaps understandably, felt awkward about publically raising those questions online. We are trained to speak within the discourses of our specialties, and to remain silent in the face of expertise. The fear of appearing ignorant, being "in error," or subject to refutation is intense enough within the proceedings of our own specializations, but it's generally not worth the risk to cross borders. And the best of good will cannot overcome the institutionalized practices of isolation. Thus, even though they were repeatedly urged to do so, very few objections or questions from non-eworkers ever materialized online. Other than the administrators in the UIC English department and the eworkers themselves, how many other students and professors participated in the project? The answer is: virtually none. And there's the rub. In his reflective essay, Ken McAllister describes this particular frustration of hearing objections in the hall, but not in the online discussions. So the question is: How can you "teach the conflicts" if you can't easily engage the opposition? Or even the mildly interested? How difficult can it be to work locally when the department is structured not according to shared intellectual projects, but according to isolating differences? How can you build even a community of dissensus within a department, real or virtual, if the only forums for debate are the national conferences?

Although lack of money is undoubtedly the main drawback, the problem of collaboration is not a minor matter. Simply put, any successful form of institutional change requires collaboration. But the road blocks can be enormous: how can you collaborate when the institution is designed to individuate? We are separated into our fields, periods, genres, and other specialties, and compete for rewards on the basis of individual levels of achievement or "excellence." Although most progressive forms of pedagogical theory recommend some form of collab-

oration, it's rare when it actually happens among colleagues within our profession. A recent case in point was brought to my attention by Gian Pagnucci when, after attending a conference on collaboration, he described the many remarks he heard about how no one was collaborating: every session consisted of the usual individual papers about collaboration.

When you get to the local level, cyberspace can actually make it seem even easier to avoid the virtual department website than to avoid controversies in the faculty lounge: just don't log on, or lurk but don't contribute. Concurrence, let alone consensus, is difficult to achieve when those who don't wish to concur don't even have reason to show up for the debate. Again, this is not the fault of UIC, but of departmentalized, "field coverage" structure of the US academy. We remain isolated in our fields even though we may share offices. In short, we face another kind of double bind: cyberspace calls for interactive collaboration, but the institution calls for individual competition. Collaborate, but distinguish yourselves individually, and do so at the same time.

What's the lesson to be learned from these double binds? For one thing, the sobering point is that the general discussion of the educational viability of electronic environments for teaching and research do not typically match well with local circumstances. Through the professional system of national symposiums, conferences, and publications, we can discuss many general theoretical issues by coming together with others in the same field. That is, when one attends a conference or symposium, the social circulation of ideas, if not practices, becomes possible through national conferences and symposia: those with like interests can speak with each other, unhindered by their local departmental isolation due to the "field coverage" model of departmental organization. It's another matter to speak across our fields to our colleagues within our department.

So if the conflict between the local and the global in the TicToc Project is endemic to and symptomatic of modern academic life, we might then view the failure of eworks to become a virtual department as more inevitable than disappointing. We will have to look for value in places other than the virtual department itself. And, as evidenced by this issue itself, there are other places to look. Nevertheless, what I fear may become even more apparent then, is that the local concerns about the fate of eworks at UIC slip even further from view because many of the edited and published versions of the conversation address what for lack of a better word I have called the "global" issues pertinent to any innovations in electronic pedagogy. In other words, one of the key initial intentions of the TicToc Project, to study the impact on UIC's English department that the increasing transformation of its activities into virtual ones may have, and to conclude by making a series of recommendations to the department on ways to employ, implement, and experi-

ment with emerging pedagogical technologies, seems not to have taken place. In the text that follows, this intention often recedes into the background as consultants and eworkers alike address the general theoretical issues.

At one point in the Symposium, Bob Goldstein reminds us that much of our discussion has proceeded from “top down,” and he recommends that we begin to work from the “bottom up.” This is a cogent remark in this context. And in fact, some parts of the eworks project are succeeding, but in perhaps unexpected (or did we expect it all along?) ways. That is, from the bottom up perspective, those most invested in the eworks project have now reformulated their aims, not towards a virtual department, but towards a virtual working space for all those interested. In short, the grass-roots dimension of this project continues to grow even now as a kind of para-institution. That is, to escape the double bind of the modern university, eworks now emerges as what Deleuze and Guattari might call a rhizome, a space for work that grows and subsides as the interests and participants change. The ad hoc nature of this structure works well with ever-changing dimensions of cyberspace. Joe Tabbi now directs eworks under this new rubric. Eworks becomes what it really was all along: a network of affiliations that lives, grows, and dies, and is reborn as the needs of its constituents shift.

Despite these forms of success, we must not forget that the real support for this kind of work requires, as Cindy Selfe put it at the symposium, “big bucks” and lots of time and staff and material. Until the economic and political support is truly behind the innovations, distance learning will likely continue to be a re-packaging of traditional classrooms into virtual ones. In order for new practices to emerge, it takes time, support, re-training, and re-learning. The final irony of this project may be that, and here I speak for the six of us who worked to create this manuscript, the joys of our editorial collaboration were as palpable, both personally and professionally, as any we have known. Despite the problems we encountered, somehow we have all maintained a hope that this published version of the TicToc project will continue to help us find those resources as well as the intellectual excitement to bring about the kind of changes many of the participants to this project would like to envision, and in fact, have begun to bring about. The clock is still ticking.













