

## A Report from MOOTopia

*Peter Sands*

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of utopias.

—Oscar Wilde

If we take utopianism to mean something like “social dreaming,” as scholars of utopianism would have it,<sup>1</sup> or if we take it as having

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**Field(s):**

American Literature, composition  
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**Course(s):**

ENG102 -- composition and litera-  
ture

**Context:**

FY literature-heavy writing course  
(second course in a two-course  
sequence);  
approximately 1100 FTE, four-year  
regional baccalaureate institution,  
required course.

**Intentions:**

--to improve student understanding  
of  
the complex interconnections  
between ideas-in-literature and  
ideas-in-the-world; -- to better  
understand what made some stu-  
dents take to the MOO environment  
and others reject it as a timewaster.

more to do with human desire  
than with impossible scheming,  
then it is easy also to see the  
whole enterprise of education as  
fundamentally utopian. In trying  
to shape each generation, we  
seek balance between stasis and  
kinesis, between preserving con-  
temporary stability and enacting  
powerful social change for the  
better: a utopian impulse. We  
are always setting sail for those  
shores.

Sometimes, we land and find  
there only what we have left  
behind: confirmation, perhaps, of  
something “in the literature.” So,  
in an emerging field, such as  
“computers and composition,” or  
“humanities computing,” or  
“teaching-with-computers,”  
researchers necessarily repeat

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inquiries that have taken place in other contexts to test their teaching practices in the new environment. For example, in the narrative I am about to lay out, my students and I did set sail for utopia, and, landing there, I did find what I already “knew.”

The courses in the story are two iterations of a writing-intensive introduction to utopias and utopianism in American culture, the second in a two-course first-year writing sequence that focuses on *composition-and-literature* in the first course and *composition-and-literature* in the second. In my version of the course, students interact with each other in a real-time, text-based virtual-reality environment, called a MOO or MUD.<sup>2</sup> Although MOOs are often used as low-cost synchronous conferencing environments, like “chat rooms,” they offer significant enhancements in addition to that feature. MOOs have spatial dimensions. People using them are “characters,” “players,” or “avatars,” owing to their earlier use in role-playing games over the Internet. MOO stands for Multiple-User Dimension, Object-Oriented. It is a programming language that is used to create a text-based virtual-reality environment, in which participants can both “chat,” i.e., write a synchronous conversation with other users who may be connected from anywhere else in the world, and can “build,” or create virtual spaces which have literal presence in the MOOspace: rooms, buildings, countries, or other formulations. The language is object-oriented, allowing users to create simple, static objects: books, papers, skyscrapers, which function in the virtual environment much as they do in “ordinary” reality, or to create more interactive objects, such as ‘bots, which mimic the actions of sentient life. This poor description does not do much justice to the experience of being in one of these environments, which grew out of role-playing games on the Internet, but it does illustrate the point that MOOs and MUDs are “constructivist” social environments, well-suited to the critical pedagogy classroom. Of particular interest in that vein is that MOOs are user-extensible: the users can write additional sections of the virtual space, connect their spaces with those written by others, and continually revise the text that comprises the MOO. Participants can create permanent objects with stable features: books, chairs, houses, offices, countries. In other words, MOOs contain within their nature utopian possibility: they can be used to “create” a “utopia.”<sup>3</sup>

In my course, I attempt to create an intentional community online by having students build their own spaces in the MOO, rather than just meet online to discuss texts. We approach the study of certain American utopian literary texts by foregrounding

the utopian aspects of this virtual community, hoping that by engaging in their actual lives some of the problems inherent in making a utopia—negotiating shared space, creating rules or laws, determining the relative worth of different kinds of labor, etc.—students will gain insight into similar problems represented in the literary texts and inherent in almost any form of social organization. My experience teaching two sections of this course, taught over two different semesters with slightly different emphases in course requirements, suggests that student interest and quality of learning about utopian literature increase in proportion to the amount of “building” students do in the MOOspace. It may be that my conclusions *only* apply to teaching utopian texts, at least in the way I am reading the trails left by these two courses. It *may* be that having students build MOOspace will help any class form a “community,” but it is also possible that unless a critical consciousness about the nature of community or social structures is a goal of the course, engagement with course content could be negatively affected by the time-consuming and tangential work on a MOO—time that would be better spent using other forms of electronic interaction, such as email discussion or peer-review of papers. These are activities that the MOO software also provides, but I am limiting my conclusions here to the impact on teaching utopian literature.

In the first iteration of the course, we used the synchronous conferencing aspect of the MOO in class to discuss texts, but actually building rooms in the MOO was only optional for students. In the second iteration, I required students to create a minimum number of rooms, to connect these rooms together in the virtual space, and to attempt agreement regarding design and usage protocols for the MOO. In both cases, I participated in online discussions of the readings; in the course where I required MOObuilding, I held virtual office hours, but absented myself from the group online discussions of “how to build a utopia” on the MOO. Additionally, students were required to write an analysis of what made the MOOspaces they had created “utopian” (or not), and to muse in writing about connections between the shared, communal space of the MOO and the literary representations of utopia we were reading. A student comment from the end of the second course ran:

It was at this juncture that I was introduced to the writings of Judith Shklar. One sentence she wrote further explains my ideas of utopia. She states “The second shared feature [speaking of similarities of utopias] is a

sense of expanding human possibilities" (42). . . . This is precisely how I see the MOO, electronic mail, software programs like Norton Connect, and our individual writing. All of these mediums allow us to develop, expand, refine, and discover our human potential for betterment. . . . utopia is relevant to us everywhere. (Jay B., "Cover Letter" 2)

With respect to his MOO rooms, Jay began his analysis as follows:

My rooms in the MOO, which are appropriately titled "A City on a Hill," "Sons of Liberty," and "Manifest Destiny" are all a working example of a utopia because I have refined my definition of utopia to be as follows: any medium where the overall intention of the experience is to offer an environment which promotes progressive improvement in thought, action, and imagination. (Jay B., "MOO Theory" 1)

This connection of the MOO experience with utopias and progressive social agendas appeared as a general consensus among students who actually built rooms in the MOO (forcing themselves into a constructivist and social relationship with other denizens of the MOOspace), but was generally rejected by students who only used the MOO as a kind of synchronous email. Thus, as might be expected if one were to begin with assumptions from either an "active learning" or "constructivist" approach to education, students who spent the most time actually building objects in the text-based virtual reality environment—in other words, those who worked the hardest to make utopia a reality—also made the most significant connections between the online community, the utopian literature and theory in the course, and the greater social world.<sup>4</sup> Jay wrote also of being "struck by the realization that I could not study and fully understand American history *without* incorporating elements of the utopia . . ."—a key concept in the course. Conversely, those who insisted on seeing the shared online space as personal, pleasure-based, and characterized as "chat," rather than through metaphors of spatiality, made the weakest connections, or rejected MOOs as either utopian or community-building.

My anecdotal conclusion confirms the beliefs of teachers who advocate activity rather than passivity in the classroom—Paulo

Freire, Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, Ann Berthoff, John Bean, for example. These classes suggest to me a connection between an active engagement with the problems of utopia at the level of lived experience, and the successful understanding of both literary and philosophical or theoretical approaches to utopia. To extend this further, students who are engaged in electronic activities that result in artifacts of their own design and creation, rather than just working in electronic environments where they produce artifacts directed wholly at the teacher, produce work that is more substantive and more likely (I surmise) to transfer to their engagement with other texts outside the course. But I stress that my conclusions are tentative and anecdotal, rather than systematic. In the course where MOO-building was optional, only those students who chose that option self-reported that they saw connections between utopianism (and utopian literature in particular) and, say, education, social engineering, or other aspects of "real life." In the course where MOO-building was required, and where students had to actively negotiate with each other the nature of their shared online community, virtually all students self-reported such connections (some grudgingly, some enthusiastically). For students who had the option but chose not to build rooms in the MOO, it was not unusual for them to self-report that the MOO had been a waste of time, or that they simply did not understand "utopia" as anything other than "perfect place," in spite of having read and discussed three utopian novels portraying places that are far from perfect: *Looking Backward*, *Herland*, and *Woman on the Edge of Time*. To fully test transferability, though, would require a more rigorously defined study which examined a specific textual or other behavior and determined whether it was present and reinforced during the course and reappeared in a manner traceable to the course in later semesters.

### Where Is Utopia?

University of Maine at Presque Isle is a remote school—perhaps the easternmost one in the United States, and certainly among the most northerly. Historically it has been isolated from even the rest of the state of Maine by distance; the Internet, particularly email, has cut down that isolation considerably. Related computer applications on both Local Area and Wide Area networks, such as the Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment, Commonsense, or Norton Connect, offer additional powerful means of connecting students with each other and with their teachers, and when I

arrived there in 1996, I introduced a wide range of such computer-supported collaborative writing tools to the students and faculty, including MOO, to which I had been introduced mainly as a tool for connecting other teachers of writing who used computers in their classrooms.<sup>5</sup>

The students in the course had never used MOO before. Many had never used email. None had read any of the utopian texts: Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Charlotte Gilman's *Herland*, and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*; none reported any previous introduction to "utopia," other than through the common (mis)usage of "perfect place." Hence, the course was an introduction to American Studies, to utopian studies, and to the educational uses of information technology, as well as to "academic" reading and writing.

For the purpose of the course I simply define American Studies as the multidisciplinary study of American culture, without taking a position on the place of literary study or its relation to historical or other approaches to American Studies (or Utopian Studies, for that matter). The course takes as a central premise that the United States is fundamentally utopian: that the United States is itself a "social dream," a community that was imagined into existence and that is still being constructed by the hopes and desires of its citizens. This is hardly an original application of "utopia," but as Kenneth Roemer, Tom Moylan and others have noted, it is a way of thinking about the U. S. to which students are unaccustomed. Such unfamiliarity has good pedagogical use: it destabilizes existing conceptions of national identity in the classroom and creates a moment in which student understanding of national identity is complicated by a heightened awareness of the role of ideas in the formation of the nation in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Additionally, because I teach in a computer classroom, and use that classroom as a site of meta-analysis and critical thinking in the course, I connect in class what we do as a community online and what we are studying in the primary texts and secondary resources, most of which are either about utopia and utopianism, or about theoretical understandings of "cyberspace." Thus, a second premise of the course—actively debated by the students themselves—is that when people come together in certain online spaces, they are engaged in social dreaming that creates an intentional community online. One early exchange focused on these communicative aspects and individual goals of the students. This an excerpt from the first session this group had on the MOO; approximately the first 50 lines or speech-acts are "hello" messages, before the group

begins articulating their goals for the semester (MOO session, 14 January 1997):

jay says, "my goals for the semester are to successfully complete this class and graduate"  
 thomas jumps up and down  
 christinaw jumps up and down  
 Mark says, "my goals are to continue to improve my writing techniques"  
 jay says, "my expectations are that I will learn more about writing and literature and it looks like computers"  
 . . .  
 john says, "my goals are too move out of northern maine and keep a job for more than a month"  
 beth says, "My goal is to knock some sense into Tommy boy here."  
 . . .  
 PeteS says, "\*WHY\* are we doing this?"  
 . . .  
 Mark says, "lets be nice we still have three months together"  
 jay says, "to learn how to use this program"  
 Mike says, "because it's a KEWL way to communicate."

But the next session (MOO session, 23 January 1997), responding to the question "What kind of a community do you see developing, and what is its \*possible\* relationship to the ideas of Utopia you've been reading this week?" moved quickly toward discussion of intentional community, after only ten lines of introduction:

Mark says, "well when Jamie is not bashing me I feel I'm a part of this moocommunity"  
 Jaime says, "I don't think that this class is a faceless community. I feel that when we get to know each other then our class becomes closer."  
 Darcie says, "i think that this community will be fine if evryone doesn't have an attitude."  
 TheMike says, "my supporting evedence for this is I'm here, and I will help make it fun and enjoyable!"  
 . . .  
 Mark says, "its better to be faceless, there is no judging of people that is dominant in our society"  
 . . .

Jaime says, "I agree with Darcie-I think we will done great if people try and don't have an attitude!"  
 She-Wolf says, "I see this class as a group of students learning more about each other then in any other class that i have had before"

At this point, one student expresses a common sentiment, starting a debate that lingered until the very last moment of the class, that "utopia" means a boring or oppressive sameness, a society of similar selves, modeled on that of the person who imagines it. This is tied to the notion that utopia is a "perfect" place, rather than a dream or hope of a better place:

robyn says, "I wouldn't like to live in a Utopia, neither would Jaime. I wouldn't like it if everyone looked and acted like I did."

...

Jaime says, "I think that this class is Utopia. We are all trying to do good and work together on it."  
 thomas says, "in a Utopia, I don't think evryone looks and acts the same. I think they share the same ideas."  
 robyn says, "I agree with Thomas."

### A Pedagogical Problem

Some of the problems of teaching are almost universals: how to engage students so that the work they do becomes meaningful and is connected to their lives outside the classroom. Studying utopias or utopianism in American culture and history is certainly not free from such needs: indeed, the very word "utopia" has enough negative connotation (in its common usage, anyway) to make more difficult this task. MOOs and MUDs, on the other hand, are widely viewed as engaging, social, and constructed virtual communities that bear some similarities to intentional communities in the real world of lived experience. By having students develop the electronic space, work with each other in that space, and write about the connections between their own world-building and the world-building—or nation-imagining—inherent in the concept and history of "America," my strategy was to bring to students beyond the abstraction of "utopia" to a better understanding of the nuances, difficulties and value of imagining a better social sphere.

Many critics have pointed out that the "utopian" claims of computer enthusiasts have often proven to be wrong or, at the least,



overstatements. Savvy computer-using teachers and scholars themselves generally question the ability of cyberspace to function as a utopia. But this questioning is often conducted at the level of misstatements regarding the definition of utopia as being “a perfect place.” In the course, we take utopia to mean something like “social dreaming,” or, in the case of literary utopian texts: “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in space and time” (Sargent 9) or “a fairly detailed description of an imaginary community, society, or world—a ‘fiction’ that encourages readers to experience vicariously a culture that represents a prescriptive, normative alternative to their own culture” (Roemer 3).

Given the general misapprehension of “utopia” as meaning “impossibly perfect,” or some such, one of the difficulties in achieving a critical discussion of utopia in the online classroom is the constant slippage of discourse from “social dreaming” to an uncritical representation of utopia as “perfect place” and back again, as when a student wrote to the class listserv: “I think that this is ... linked with utopia in that we are creating what we feel as the perfect place for ourselves . . . . Utopia is tied to the moo because education is utopian in that we are striving to better ourselves” (Bouchard).

This passage for me neatly encapsulates the problem: how to use what amounts to an intentional community online to theorize in class what “utopia” and “utopianism” might mean and to deepen student understanding of those concepts so that they extend to the range of practices that fall under the rubric of “social dreaming”: education, government, etc.

To do this, I combine electronic elements that many others have claimed are tools for generating and sustaining a sense of community in the classroom: email, web pages, and MOOs/MUDs. While some of the early literature on humanities computing and its pedagogical implications seemed to focus uncritically on the ability of the tools to engender community—a stance which reappears on Internet discussion groups and is a mainstay of representations of computer-aided teaching in the popular press<sup>6</sup>—this theoretically naive position ascribes to a particular technological innovation effects that are actually dependent upon human agency<sup>7</sup>. More recent work on computers in the classroom and in professional communities<sup>8</sup> has questioned or given more multidimensional representations of what happens with the introduction of networked computers to the classroom. Still, anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that the tools force teachers into the use of interactive peda-

gogies that emphasize distribution of both power and responsibility in the classroom in ways that advocates of critical pedagogy have for years created and sustained without the use of emerging technologies.<sup>9</sup> Some teachers also report some skills transfer from networked classrooms to traditional settings as well, as they employ more interactive and distributed pedagogies when they teach outside the networked classroom. In the case of both MOOs and email, participants have to work actively at creating and sustaining even the illusion of community—a precept familiar to those who have thought much about pedagogy (Howard 165).

In another context, Lankshear, Peters, and Nobel have noted the possibilities of a critical pedagogy in cyberspace. If a critical pedagogy means something like a pedagogy that helps create in students a questioning, rhetorically aware and socially conscious self, MOOs or MUDs are particularly useful in a critical pedagogy. Indeed, they may offer a particularly useful alternative to attempting to enact a critical pedagogy within the framework of schools and universities which are ill-suited to the effort. As Lankshear, Peters, and Nobel recently observed, the problems with enacting a critical pedagogy in existing institutions is that those institutions, and their reliance on the modernist valorization of the book and its static presentation of knowledge, create “spaces of enclosure,” which “operate in concert to separate educational engagement from wider spheres of social practice” (Lankshear, 145). MOOs and MUDs, as virtual environments collectively constructed by their users, offer a means of stepping outside this enclosure, a moment of possibility in which an online community can form and sustain efforts to break down barriers between individuals. Because MOOs and MUDs are interactive spaces, open to constant revision, and because they thus present a different conception of text, one which relies on a collective agency and responsibility, they are excellent environments in which to foster awareness of the social and constructed, rather than individual and received, nature of knowledge.

Critical pedagogy “asks students to interrogate difference in a politically transformative way by having them exercise self-reflection, usually through the telling of narratives and the interpreting of these experiences in terms of social categories of difference” (“Collaboration” 131). In C. H. Knoblauch’s formulation, a critical literacy is one which promotes awareness of social conditions and the ability to effect change in those conditions (Knoblauch in Lunsford, et al). Giroux and McLaren emphasize the social constructedness of knowledge and suggest that a critical pedagogy is

one which encourages reflexive awareness and a movement from such awareness to taking action in the larger social sphere. Linking their work to Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, Giroux and McLaren explicitly call for a utopian critical pedagogy: one which creates a "language of possibility" and that emphasizes "schooling as a form of cultural politics . . . critically provisional, concretely utopian, and culturally specific." Similarly to my representation of MOOs as presenting a world-view that is always already under revision and re-interpretation, McLaren and Giroux call for "a pedagogy of liberation that is necessarily partial and incomplete, one that has no final answers. It is always in the making" (McLaren 57). Hence, MOOs represent one particularly effective way of working toward this in education.

### **But What Does it Really Look Like in Class?**

Transcripts of MOO dialogues have the character of oral and written discourse. They serve as an excellent example of what Zappen, Gurak, and Doheny-Farina referred to as "rhetorical community"—and are characterized by combining those elements "in a way that intensifies the mix and clash of individual and communal perspectives that . . . is characteristic of rhetorical communities" (Zappen, et al 403). What's more, Zappen, Gurak and Doheny-Farina demonstrate ways in which MOOs become " a public space or forum where individuals can express and explore languages and perspectives that differ both cognitively and affectively and, sometimes and momentarily, can build limited or local communities of shared attitudes, beliefs, and values through dialogue and discussion" (403).

Compare this to Judith Sklar's assertion that "[o]ne might ask at the end of the twentieth century why anyone would yearn for transformative politics, but if one does, then utopia remains very useful, perhaps indispensable." She places this indispensability in utopia's "one significant" use: "It remains a subject for heated controversy" (Sklar 56). Transcripts of class discussions on the MOO—especially when the conversation is about MOOs, utopia, or both—bear this out. An average discussion with first-year students, running somewhere in the neighborhood of 30 minutes, will yield 30 pages—or more—of printed comments. With rhetorically sophisticated writers, this number triples and quadruples without fail.

What distinguishes effective use of MOO from use of "chat" or email discussions, though, is not just the combination of orality and literacy, or the dialogic nature of the space, but also its sense

of actuality—of lived experience or, ugly phrase, virtual reality. Some researchers have commented on the ways transcripts of MOO discussions show a “sense of physical community” despite its being a “very unphysical space” (Zappen, et al 408). Taken together, such research suggests that MOO can bring in a:

multiplicity of languages and perspectives and a consequent challenge to the rhetoric to find the opportune moment to enter into and influence the course of a discussion. . . . MOO has the potential to become a . . . public space or forum. . . . it has the potential not only to transmit information across time, space and cultural differences but more especially to provide a forum for dialogue and discussion among people of vastly different cultural backgrounds and beliefs, to become, if we choose to make it such, a contemporary rhetorical community in cyberspace (Zappen, et al 9).

This view of MOO is borne out in an analysis of the space that my students in the utopias course made, with, again, an important qualification. Students who worked most diligently to actually create their own physical spaces also made the most clear identification in their online discussions and the papertexts they produced as part of their course portfolios between the spaces they imagined and the imagined spaces they experienced vicariously through utopian novels. Students who did not build their own spaces on the MOO tended to assert similar connections, but without offering examples either from their own work or from the texts they read in class. But students who had built their own spaces interpreted and explained their work on the MOO by explicit reference to the utopian worlds presented by Bellamy, Gilman and Piercy, or by direct reference to the scholarly definitions they read by Sargent, Roemer, Moylan and others. This kind of explanatory referentiality significantly differentiated their work from that of their classmates who were less invested in creating an actual experience of what they understood utopia to be, and led me to believe that the building rather than the chatting was the key. Another way of looking at it is by representing the chatting as just that: talk; the building is more analogous to what we view as “writing”: individual, revisable, etc.

Initially, a given class would agree that the MOO was a community space characterized by improved social relations in the class. In one early exchange in one of the classes, the students agreed

that several factors were bringing them together as a community: discussions on the MOO; spending time in class learning each other personally, and learning specifically about hopes, dreams, desires; connecting the MOO and the personal discussions to the literary texts and secondary readings we encountered; and trying to put all of that in the larger contexts of schooling, work, society, etc. On our class listserv, students made predictive statements, such as: “OK, I think that this will be a fun, and enjoyable community to be a part of” or “No other class I have had has had such a sense of community. I think it helps us learn.” Or, “I think that this class is Utopia. We are all trying to do good and work together on it,” which I see as showing consciousness of the social aspect of utopianism and of its hopefulness. As the semester drew to a close, students wrote more substantive analyses over email, such as:

I think that the MOO helped my understanding of “utopia” because it provided a model of a world built from ideas. The MOO room really could be anything I wanted so I had to carefully chose objects in the description to represent the ideal “community”— and that was powerful because it made me think of all that goes on in a society (community) and also it showed me what I feel to be important— what my utopia would be like. Actually, I found that to be the hardest part; it was as if I really was ‘building a utopia” so I had to make sure I was thinking up a good one. . . . Our MOO provided a way of relating in a space that is totally new, open to be created in any way we wanted. Of course, it also showed that people have to think things through and make conscious choices or else we end up not getting anywhere, or with stupid conversations (chat room stuff)

By the end of the term, some students were also starting to make connections between the readings—again, Bellamy, Gilman and Piercy—and their own attempt at a collective effort, as shown in the following comment from a transcript in April: “Well so far this semester I feel that we have only been concentrating on personal and individual utopias more than the flip side. We haven’t really put together a group effort to form a utopian society. Have we?”

This comment, prodded by me, resulted in a 30-minute online session without my being present, in which the students debated whether utopia was such an abstraction that it could only encom-

pass individual visions or whether the concept itself was fundamentally about a collective vision (See Appendix A).

The result was something never reached by the previous groups: a decision to build individual rooms in the virtual reality space but to make certain that they connected to a larger, collective space both through shared themes and through a shared common room and connecting network—a nearly classic solution to similar problems in real-world intentional communities, further solidifying an identification of the explicitly utopian virtual communities with utopianism in other human endeavors.

Neither the large, collective space nor the connecting network was ever built, which I might in a less charitable moment take to be a metacommentary on the impossibility of utopia. But, feeling charitable, I see the idea itself as having something to do with the connections drawn in class between a view of writing process that constructed it as fundamentally recursive and contingent, always already open to revision, and a view of utopian literature that posits a similar view of society itself. I commented toward the end of the course that “studying utopia encourages you to see writing—and your own society—as open to your influence . . .,” to which a student replied, “when you are done revising, someone else will read it, think it sucks and then throw it away,” a reference to the constant revision both of student writing within the course, and the perception of a parallel constant revision of utopian ideas throughout the history of utopian literature.

### **So, What Does This Mean?**

Many people use MOO as an inexpensive “chat” space without taking advantage of its spacial, architectural and virtual-reality aspects, so even anecdotal evidence that doing so improves student learning bears closer examination. My experience in these two courses is that my observations about the value of “building” in the MOO are especially true for those parts of the course in which students had to work collaboratively. This fits with the framework other MOO-using teachers are articulating with regard to bodies and MOOspace (See Burk and Kolko).

I am operating here on the premise that I can learn much from the self-reported responses of my students to the electronic work we were doing, and that I can draw some conclusions from their performance in my class.<sup>10</sup> I am making some background assumptions, however, that may not hold up were this research to be transferred to a more rigorous and controlled study:

- my assessment of student performance in both sections is uniform and reliable
- my presentation of material and instruction in the use of the MOO was equivalent and clear
- student perception and analysis of their work is a valid resource for drawing conclusions about student learning
- students were not simply reporting what they thought I wanted to hear, but were giving honest and responses

Assuming that I did assess student work fairly and reliably, some tentative conclusions become possible. Students typically find it difficult to make the connection between the novels, the critical secondary resources, and the lived experience of cyberspace. It is possible to interpret this as pointing to the “reality” of the experience on the computer: because students are so seamlessly in the MOO, they do not notice it as a kind of ideological apparatus, even in a context where such apparatuses are under study. It is also possible, given the apparent connection between “building” and improved understanding of social relationships/utopia, that the difficulty of connecting those disparate elements is actually increased by the clear disconnect between “chat” and other forms of engagement in the course. And there are students for whom the online environment is so alien, so uninviting, so difficult to interact with that they never see the environment as one being constructed by their experience or actions: they report a real sense of lost agency. This also, I think, points to online environments as having some of the specific characteristics of other ideological apparatuses—specifically, they have some of the same characteristics of the media-saturated, synthetic experience of daily life that results in the nearly cliché idea of the fragmented postmodern self.

Students who engaged the MOO as more than a chat device were more likely to also, in their formal writing, indicate a better understanding of utopian thought, and to self-report a sense that their use of interactive technologies was instrumental in their learning for that semester. Where I noted these successes, students were engaged in an active effort to, as Moylan says, forge “visions of what is not yet realized either in theory or practice.” This, I believe, affirms McLaren and Giroux’s assertion that “critical educators must function as more than mere agents of social critique. They must attempt to fashion a language of hope that points to new forms of social and material relations” (56). It is reasonable to

assume that other “constructivist” or “engaging” environments—such as web pages or web-based threaded discussions, or, under certain conditions, listserv discussions—in which students produce meaningful artifacts through collaboration and interaction with each other, would have a similar effect. As with Zappen, Gurak and Doheny-Farina, I see in such technologies a potential space for enacting that charge.

(Note: See Peter Sands’ “Appendix A,” which can be found at <http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/ctl/>, for extended examples of MOO dialogue that connect personal academic writing with the task of community building.)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In constructing the terms “utopia” and “utopianism” in this way, I refer readers to such works as Lyman Tower Sargent’s “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited;” Kenneth Roemer, “Defining America as Utopia;” Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*; Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*; and even the work of Ernst Bloch. For a useful introduction to Bloch through secondary readings, see Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan, eds., *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*.

<sup>2</sup>This particular MOO, called MOOTopia, is defunct. At one time, it could be accessed via Telnet or a MUD client at [bliss.umpi.maine.edu:5555](http://bliss.umpi.maine.edu:5555). A more recent incarnation of MOOspace that I use for teaching can be found at UWM MOO, at <http://www.uwm.edu:7000> (website) or <telnet://www.uwm.edu:7777> (MOO opening screen).

<sup>3</sup>Though it should go without saying, I use “utopia” as a blanket term that includes “dystopia.” A virtual environment that is dystopian still partakes of utopianism.

<sup>4</sup>For definitions of construction and engagement, see Schneiderman 1-26. Schneiderman defines engagement as “interaction with people” (while those who advocate “active learning” might extend that definition to “interaction with people and texts”), and construction as “students create a product from their collaboration” or “constructing something of importance to someone else.”

<sup>5</sup>At the time, for example, MediaMOO (at MIT) was hosting the Tuesday Café, a weekly meeting of “technorhetoricians”; those meetings have since moved to Connections MOO. These meet-



ings are a good example of MOO being used primarily for synchronous conferencing.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, Beshears. Beshears raises the issues of shallow teacher-student interaction, but emphasizes the ways in which e-interaction “chang[es] the nature of relationships between college students and faculty.”

<sup>7</sup>For a cogent analysis of uncritical deployment of the term “community” with regard to the Internet, see Shawn P. Wilbur, “An Archaeology of Cyberspaces: Virtuality, Community, Identity,” pages 8-9 on the definition of community (Wilbur 5-37).

<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Forman in Hawisher and Selfe. An excellent, if dated, survey of research findings regarding “community” and other aspects of electronic conferencing is Gail E. Hawisher, “Electronic Meetings of the Minds: Research, Electronic Conferences, and Composition Studies” (Hawisher 81-101).

<sup>9</sup>For truly anecdotal discussion, readers might examine the online musings of teachers associated with the Epiphany Project, a grant-funded effort to study and improve the use of computers in composition. See <<http://mason.gmu.edu/~epiphany/>> for the homepage, and <[http://www.georgetown.edu/bassr/p\\_and\\_p/epiphany/cctemp.htm](http://www.georgetown.edu/bassr/p_and_p/epiphany/cctemp.htm)> for a collection of anecdotes.

<sup>10</sup>I am also aware of a certain irony in my own anecdotalism, an approach to research in computers and composition that I am simultaneously attacking. See Sands.

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