

**"I didn't know there were smart people out there"  
Searching for Signs of Community in a Computer-  
Mediated Writing Project**

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The context for my investigation into writing on the internet is one of a set of on-line curricular exercises designed and facilitated by the Interactive Communications & Simulations Project of the University of Michigan School of Education. The International Poetry Guild, or IPG, links together several school-based groups of writers who share their poetry (in a computer-mediated interaction accessed via the web) and discuss one another's work. Over the course of a 3-month interaction, each school collects poems for a journal of poetry on a theme of their choosing, poems written by poets from any of the schools involved in their "guild." These journals are ultimately published and swapped among the schools in a particular guild.

Now, a story.

I am driving down I-94 with my student, John, on the way to Detroit, where we're to give a conference presentation. John is telling me a story about a high school student he'd recently encountered while leading a group of student participants in this poetry project...

*...he seemed to be somewhat mischievous, somewhat rebellious, smart-alecky, always having a smart quip. And then the English teacher set me up with him to work, to post a poem. I don't remember how that came about. For some reason we were together. And we were walking down to the computer lab, and I was asking him about poetry. You know, was he ever exposed to it, or was he familiar with IPG? And he never had posted a poem; he was not familiar with IPG. But on the way to the posting of the poem, in the hallway, the conversation, just talking about poetry, his whole demeanor had changed. Instead of him being -- because he's actually kind of scary, he's a scary, intimidating kind of guy -- and that whole veneer kind of dropped, and all of a sudden I was able to talk to him on a level playing field. I don't know if that had anything to do with my age, you know, or the fact that I wasn't a teacher, per se. And he indicated to me that -- he did not know me before this -- he felt comfortable enough to tell me that poetry was the only thing that helped him while he had been incarcerated. And I don't know for what reasons, he would not elaborate. But what was important, he elaborated on the poetry. He said while he was incarcerated, you know, writing was the only thing that really helped him,*

and writing poetry was the only thing that helped him go through that experience.

He was (somewhere) between sixteen (and) eighteen. So he had experienced what I've never experienced before, but mind you, he was able to confide in me, and tell me on that level, which I thought was really incredible. Then we went into the computer lab, and he started posting his poem. I showed him how to work the computer and how to post a poem. And then he asked me if he could swear. You know, "Can we swear in here?" And I said, "Well, it 's a good question...let's look at your poem." And I read his poem and it was a big diatribe against love. You know, it stinks. I mean, it was more or less along those lines and it contained the f-word, but just reading him, and reading the situation, I felt for him and I go, "Yeah, let's post it and let's get a reaction and see what happens." And for me, I mean, I still look back on it and go, "Should I have done that or not?" I mean there weren't any serious repercussions, but... you have to think when you're posting poems, you know, about who you're posting to, you have to realize who your audience is and what kind of culture are you addressing this towards? But for some reason, I mean, at that time, for me and with the exchange that we were having, and for him to take the step in posting his poem and expressing himself now onto a larger audience, I decided, you know, let's just post it. And I just went with that....

We are on our way to a conference presentation, and here's John telling me this story, relating his struggle with how to respond to the student and, ultimately basing the decision (correctly, in my estimation) on the poem itself. The language was, he decided, not gratuitous, and the use of the word in question seemed to fit the angry mood of the poem, and enhance the power of the poem. And here I am, the would-be civil libertarian, hearing him go through all the steps I'd have hoped he'd have gone through, trusting his sense that the language suited the poem, applauding his handling of the situation. And there I am, the IPG director, finding my thoughts drifting off. I recalled the words of the teacher from the Catholic high school that was participating in IPG at the time. How she told me that hardly a day's "download" went by without something written by one of the student poets on the network butting up against or crossing the boundaries within which she and her students had to exist. I thought about how she was going to deal with this poem, and how she was going to deal with her students questions about "why them, and not us?" I wondered if this teacher might decide someday soon that this just wasn't worth all the hassle.

For today's presentation, I have chosen some stories to share with you. I've chosen these stories because I feel they are useful in framing important questions, questions I believe merit our consideration as we consider how to nurture and

support young writers on the internet. My belief is that the crucial questions ultimately deal with matters of trust and community.

Here's my formulation:

Trust: The student poets need to believe, at some level, that their work will be treated with respect, and that they aren't risking being "cut off at the knees."

Community: The student poets need to feel that there are people out there who have some interest in their work, who perhaps share similar concerns.

The issue of community gets complex very quickly, as teachers and students wrestle with the fit between the community standards of their school, and the intrusion of on-line "events" that come in conflict with those standards.

Finally, the students are asked to give some thought to the notion of audience, and to grapple with the implications of having their work read elsewhere, by people who will have only their words in front of them.

I have directed the International Poetry Guild project from its inception in 1990. The most significant ongoing responsibility of "directing" this project has been to work with undergraduate students, like John, typically creative writing majors or English teaching certification candidates, who are enrolled in a School of Education class. Their coursework centers around providing feedback, support, and creative strategies to the guild poets. The mentors respond to poems posted by the students, they write short pieces on aspects of the creative process, or the experience of being student of poetry, or whatever else the mentor feels might help the students along.

For the past couple of years, we have worked closely with a nearby district to bring the Poetry Guild into their middle schools. The Wayne-Westland school district is a largely working-class area, where many of the jobs are related to the automotive industry. I recruited university students, mostly former IPG mentors, to go out and work with groups of these middle school poets. These university students were responsible for meeting once a week with small groups of kids, in an after-school setting, and working with them on their poetry and creative writing. In addition, each of these groups participated in the Poetry Guild exercise under the guidance of these university facilitators. During the Winter 1997 term, John signed on to facilitate one of these groups simultaneous with his mentoring of the on-line conference. He has continued the work this year, adding on the responsibility of working with a group of IPG poets at the local alternative high school, from where the opening story was drawn. For the purpose of this presentation, I rely heavily on John's experience as a means of exploring the issues of trust and community in IPG.

Early in his first term, John came to me with another story, one which challenged my fundamental beliefs about IPG. He began by relating his impressions of his student's ideas about audience...

*...it actually feels that the audience is a violation or somehow impinges on their creativity, a sense of being contaminated by outside influences, by the audience. Any outside force would contaminate their own process that they're going through with their poetry. And they indicated that very very strongly. When we started talking, they were angry about one of the mentors saying, "well, maybe you should change this." (The kids) were just extremely angry, saying, "How dare she...she comes off with this tone..." and they picked up a whole different side.*

Later, in an e-mail exchange, John tried to explain to his fellow mentor about his student's reaction to her comments. The mentor had replied that even T. S. Eliot had his work edited by a fellow poet...

*And (a) girl in the class piped up. She goes, "Well, if that happened, that's no longer his poem. It's no longer T. S. Eliot's poem because now it's edited." I thought, wow, that's quite a revelation. I mean, first as an artist to understand, yes, it's always good to be critiqued, and also be critiqued...that's the plus side. I believe also that she picked up on the minus side. That inherently there is a danger in the person losing their own message by being affected, at least at that age, because they're answering to a lot of people. They're answering to authority figures in the school, authority figures at home. Where are they going to find time for their own voice without being impinged (upon) or changed or suggested or analyzed? Is there a safe zone for them just to express themselves without being critiqued, without having something modified about them? Can the poem, as themselves, just be accepted for what it is, faults and all, misspellings and all, curse words and all, without being modified or changed? And that was the space they were coming from.*

At this point, John resisted the impulse to say that the mentor hadn't meant to attack the poet, that perhaps the student was over-reacting, and to leave it at that, so they could move to a less sensitive issue. Instead, he delved deeper...

*Okay, (I said), you're angry. Let's talk about this. What went wrong? How do you feel? And that's when they started talking about being critiqued. I actually went into a little role-play where I was acting like (the mentor). I started reading her response. And all of a sudden the room just got*

*so heavy. Just the words themselves, reading it, had affected them. I don't know what it was in the air, but the room got really heavy, and I had to stop because one of the students I was responding to...was on the verge of tears. And I asked everybody, did they sense this thickness in the air, and they said, "yeah, we did," and one of the students then told me, "the thing that I don't like about the response from the mentor (was) that she didn't understand, and this reminds me of my father. Because my father doesn't understand me." So it got to this personal level too.*

I was reminded of a visit I had made to see a group of students in a high school near Wayne-Westland. I asked the kids a question about whether their participation in IPG, and their ongoing interaction with peers and mentors had had any impact on how they see themselves. The script that plays in my head has kids telling me in response that whereas they once "just wrote poems," the mentors' responses to their work, and the seriousness with which their work was taken, has led the poets to take themselves a bit more seriously as well, and perhaps to think of themselves as writers in a way they hadn't done previously. This wasn't the answer I received, however. During this particular visit, one young woman said that IPG gave her a place to express sad or confused feelings. The responses from the mentors had made it evident that someone understood what she was trying to say. Now, this young woman said, she was getting to the point where she thought she could write poetry about happier things.

Back to John. I asked him what, if anything, he thought *his* students had taken away from their experience with IPG. He related this brief anecdote:

*...there was one student (who) got a wonderful response (from a mentor), and she goes "I didn't think there were smart people out there. I did not think there were smart people out there."*

Simple enough, right? Yet, when you think about it, here's a thirteen or fourteen year old girl, who's talking about university students at this prestigious university, juniors and seniors in a highly competitive creative writing program, who've studied with international figures, and here comes this young woman saying that she didn't think there were smart people out there.

I love this story because it makes me smile, but also because it's a reminder that the kids aren't fragile, and aren't dependent on anyone to make meaning for them. If nothing else, these last few stories provide compelling evidence that the younger writers are well capable of making sense of their

experiences, and that we needn't be overly concerned that they'll be "bulldozed" by the university students.

And perhaps that's the overriding lesson, that the goal is to create a space where students can grapple with important issues in their own ways, and perhaps see evidence of the power of audience in making creative work vital, and in vitalizing the creative artist. Or, as John put it:

...I should not exercise their morals. They should exercise their own validations, their own recognitions. In IPG...(t)hat's the space for it.