Writing as a Recursive Self-Encounter:

Collaboration and Technology at the Limit of the Classroom

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This essay theorizes technologies of collaboration as catalysts for teaching writing as a mode of dialectical self-encounter. We attempt situated analysis by investigating the relationship between the technologies of the class, the space of writing, and the students' own words. Drawn from pilot sections of hybrid online courses taught with groups of students in Kentucky and Connecticut, we argue that the critical core of writing instruction—the moment of a student's self-transformation through experiencing writing as an externalization of mediated thought—emerges through a self-confrontation that is tied to a conscious recognition of difference. For us, and for our students, collaboration is a useful tool that opens up the possibility for a student to recognize herself as fundamentally other—as an object of self-study, of exercise, of revision. As such, we quickly move beyond collaboration as a moment for working with others to arrive at an understanding of collaboration that is fundamentally situated within a recursive internal dialectical process.

We first began implementing collaboration in (and out of) the classroom in the early 1990s—from process-based tools of group workshops and out-of-class peer groups to email listservs and hypertexts more recently—generating a lot of extra work for us and our students, and not much pedagogical success. Over the years we began to grow more and more suspicious of our seduction by the possibility of collaboration and technology. Too often, our collaborative environments were at odds with our pedagogical aim of generating substantial, reflective engagements with the texts through writing. Instead of facilitating an engagement of careful reflection, collaboration almost always seemed to water-down learning even as it promoted a group ethos. At the same time, though, we began to

recognize the ways in which the classroom limits reflective practices and, more generally, the scope of ideas we can cover, the breadth of discussion possible, and the depth of thinking allowed.

Using the online forum as a tool to make possible what the physical space of the classroom cannot—sustained, substantial thinking and engaged, reflected writing—we designed a shared syllabus in the summer of 2004 that relied on collaboration outside the class and raised our expectations of what was possible within the class, reasoning that intimately connecting collaboration and reflection produces better prepared and more challenging students. And when we assigned our conjoined composition classes the task of writing an essay about the role of collaboration in student learning, we were surprised to see just how much the questions they posted to their shared online discussion forum posed a challenge to any easy understanding of collaboration. Intuitively, collaboration seems to be fairly easily defined as two or more students' cooperative effort. Our students, however, seized upon a much richer, and a much more problematic sense of the concept. Bypassing the practical considerations involved in shared understandings, they directed the conversation toward the thornier issue of what collaboratively producing knowledge implies about the individual engaged in such a process. One student asked,

> "is collaboration only when two or more people work together or is working with your true being (consciousness) also a form of collaboration? That's what I'm trying to unravel. Is working with your own consciousness a collaboration with yourself or does collaboration mean exclusively to work with others? I guess I'm trying to figure out if a student working with his own consciousness is stretching 'collaboration' too far."[1]

"One must work with oneself to transform the self," another student responded, "but I don't think this falls under the heading collaboration. I think it is instead self-reformation, which is related." This student's attempt to distinguish (without, however, disconnecting) collaboration and self-

transformation prompted a third student to ask, "students are aware of the change they must go through, so isn't their willingness to let themselves be transformed collaboration?" A fourth student, extending the connection between self-transformation and collaboration, entered the discussion by asking, "thinking really abstractly, could we consider books to be collaborators of sorts? Does it HAVE to be two individuals?"

Our students' willingness to problematize basic notions of collaboration and to begin to examine the epistemological implications for the individual involved in academic collaboration illuminates something more than their level of engagement in the issues of the course. Their thinking on the forum highlighted, at the same time as it was made possible by, the kind of collaboration our course (and, we're sure, many others) facilitates. Collaborating beyond the limitations of the classroom, students were in a unique position to think about collaboration itself, to reflect (in a way that is improbable within the temporal strictures of the classroom) upon what it means to be a student among other students embarked upon a process of self-transformation. Their interjection of the individual into a discussion of collaboration pointed directly toward the way they understood their successes and failures as learners, an understanding that also emerged out of, and in many ways focused, our own wrestling with the pedagogy of collaboration. In other words, what was important to us wasn't so much that our students were collaborating, nor even what their collaboration produced. Rather what impressed us was how collaboration enables students to practice what is essential in the kind of learning and thinking that transforms them from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers—reflection. Our students aren't talking about collaboration as much as they are thinking together about what happens when one thinks and writes in collaboration.

We now know that our students had put their finger on what Kathleen Blake Yancey and Michael Spooner call, in "A Single Good Mind: Collaboration, Cooperation, and the Writing Self,"

3

"the collectivity of [the] collaborated self" (56). Like Yancey and Spooner (and our students), we recognize that there is no easy definition of collaboration, even though what we want to address—the recursive process of student self-encounter and self-transformation through reflective practices—must include a discussion of collaborative thinking. We want to investigate the ways in which the practical components of student collaboration in an online forum engenders the time, space, and dynamic of engagement necessary for students to reflect upon their practices as thinkers and writers. Collaborating in an online forum facilitates the kind of writing Ann Berthoff describes in *The Making of Meaning*: "a nonlinear, dialectical process in which the writer continually circles back, reviewing and rewriting" (3). Writing as an acknowledged dialectical process employs collaboration (rather than bring it about as an end) to better achieve the goal of producing careful reflective thinking in students' work. For us, then, collaboration should function as one component of a dynamic dialectical process wherein students collaborate in dialogue with their peers online, reflect as individuals upon the ideas generated and tested there, and return to re-engage the ongoing dialogue of the forum. Thus, reflective thinking serves as a shuttle that takes the writing student from dialogical engagements with her peers to dialectical self-engagements and back again. Yancey's definition of reflection as "dialectical, putting multiple perspectives into play with each other in order to produce insight" (*Reflection* 6), implies for us that the collaborative dialogue among students in the online forums is an invaluable tool in shaping and provoking the kind of individual reflection that transforms writing students.

In the following essay, we analyze our students' practices and their shared writing on the online discussion forum to argue that the collaborative work of the forum enables a series of dialectical engagements and encounters in which group productivity and interaction plays a significant role in a process that ultimately defines the reflective practices of individual students. For us, in other words, the role collaboration plays for our classes is to enhance without subsuming the work of the individual, and

to enable the students to recognize the collective and dialectical nature of individual reflection. Thus we understand not only collaboration and individual reflection as methods of dialectical thinking, but we recognize the value in the dialectical shuttling back and forth between the two. Incorporating this into the pedagogy of the composition class is made possible by some underlying features of our co-taught courses that we believe to be indispensable: a recursivity of time and distance facilitated by the extension of collaboration beyond the walls and regularity of the classroom, and an encounter with the self that is born out of asynchronic encounters and engagements between the individual and the collective. In short, we propose that the value of collaboration relies upon and facilitates a process of reflection and recursion, a dialectic of isolation and encounter that enables self-encounters and transformations made possible in the act of writing.

Writing as a Reflective, Recursive Self-Encounter

Donald Schön develops the term *reflection-in-action* to describe "thinking that serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it" (26). Because spatial and temporal context ultimately limits such reflection, we have found that extending the classroom context beyond its temporal and spatial limitations necessarily provides greater opportunity for the transformative power of reflection. The basic pedagogical goals of individual reflection and self-transformation are tied to an ability to return to and reflect upon class material unconstrained by the limits of the classroom. In thinking about the ways in which online collaboration contributes to such recursive reflection we follow Yancey who refines Schön's *reflection-in-action* to include "constructive reflection." Constructive reflection, she argues, is "cumulative, taking place over several composing events. As it takes place, of course, and as response to composings are provided, such reflection has a shaping effect; it thus contributes to the development of a writer's identity, based in the *multiple texts* composed by the writer, in the *multiple*

kinds of texts composed by the writer, and the *multiple contexts* those texts have participated in" (15). Collaboration in the online forums is important to us precisely because it contributes to the "development of a writer's identity." Yet, we want to make clear that the value of collaboration in a writing course lies not so much in the dialectical engagements among students, but in how these engagements illuminate for the writer the means by which to achieve dialectical self-reflexivity.[2]

As Linda Flower and others have pointed out, thinking through the relationship between individual cognition and intentionality, on the one hand, and social context, on the other, should culminate in an analysis that "can explain how context cues cognition, which in its turn mediates and interprets the particular world that context provides" (282). Flower's work reinforces the notion that any effective use of collaboration in a composition class that uses it as a tool to produce better writing students must begin with an analysis of it as a practice that is context-dependent. Therefore, rather than resolve the problem of the individual in collaboration, we examine the practice of collaboration in our conjoined courses to articulate how the very tension this problem produces functions in the pedagogy of composition, and more importantly, how this tension manifests itself in collaborative encounters to produce students who are adept at engaging with and negotiating difference—not only the differences between one individual and others, but the differences that compose each and every individual. Employing collaboration as a practice whose ultimate goal is self-reflexivity and self-transformation does not require a complex theorizing of the problem of the individual vs. the collective. Most theories of collaboration address this problem, but it is often taken up as an epistemological or ontological problem (e.g. the age-old problem of the one and the many) with almost as many proposed solutions as there are theories. Rather than trying to resolve this seemingly insoluble problem we follow Ede and Lunsford who suggest that the use of collaboration be connected to analyses of its situatedness.[3] We constrain our thinking about the relationship between the individual student and the

collective by attending to its manifestations in actual practice. By focusing on the actual practices and online posts of students engaged in collaboration, we feel we can better describe the connection between collaboration and the kind of self-reflexivity that transforms writing students.

For us collaboration (and its attendant tensions) is one part of the larger process that our students enact in the work of the course; it is a means, not an end in itself. Through collaboration, students are afforded an opportunity to do the difficult work of negotiating the differences they hold with others and within themselves: differences in perspective, interpretation, and knowledge, as well as differences in understanding and methodology. There is, we argue, perhaps something even more significant for a student in a composition course who will be assessed as an individual: the difficult negotiations with others in collaboration illuminate the ways in which the self is other. The routine encounters with others in collaboration produces a recursive self-encounter that achieves what we consider to be our paramount pedagogical end: writing as the practice of a reflective self-transformation for students.

A pedagogy that values the multivocality of reflective self-encounters need not embrace (although it is assimilable to) a radical, post-modern critical worldview. In fact, the kind of self-encounter and transformation that we value in our composition courses is fairly traditional and uncontroversial. We believe simply that any well-constructed college composition class include as necessary elements (a) reflection, as a required or pre-supposed element and (b) self-encounter as a methodological principle for self-transformation. For instance, drafting and rereading encourages, relies upon, and presumes reflection as a tool or skill, and self-encounter through a repeated practice. Various theories of writers and writing make reflection an explicit object of course content.[4] Truly productive reflection, however, requires more than contemplative revision. The productive quality of reflection is relative to the spatial and temporal dynamics within which it occurs. Specifically, a student

must extend the classroom as she reflects to accomplish truly productive reflection. The classroom restricts reflection with its physical arrangement of bodies, personalities, and institutional space, on one hand, and the pace of the lecture/discussion, the time of day, and the 50-minute (or 75-minute, etc.) class period, on the other. In the library or dorm room a student is able to reconstruct in a considered fashion events that he was only able to experience in their immediacy in the classroom: student comments, class discussions, instructor explanations, textual references, etc. More than that, this student is better situated to reconstruct these components into a new and coherent perspective that defines her relationship to the course, a perspective that will be transformed and reconstructed throughout the process of her learning. Her success in the work of the class (indeed, the success of the class in general) depends upon her ability as a reflective participant to transcend the spatial and temporal limits of the class*room* in order to recreate the *class* and her role within it. This kind of productive, meaningful, and transformative reflection, we contend, is facilitated in a significant way through the use of online discussion forums.

Extending the reflective work of students beyond the classroom and onto a discussion forum enhances the student's ability to develop a process of reflection and return. Writing as self-transformation thus requires a recursive relationship with oneself, with others (through verbal encounters in and outside of class), and with a progressively reflective encounter with the text, building out of these encounters an engagement which is itself a process of recursivity. The multiple returns (to the self, the collaborative group, the teacher, the text) that constitute this engagement are precisely what initiate the self-transformation composition courses hold out as their ultimate aim. Out of these recursive encounters there emerges a dialectic of engagement, an irresolvable encounter with the words and ideas of others, as well as the words and ideas of oneself. This dialectical encounter is made possible through a particular function of recursive writing and collaborative thinking: its accentuation of

difference. Just as difference informs the productivity of collaboration and the insolubility of the problem of the individual within the collective, so too does difference inform the progressive self-encounter within writing, as well as the progressive encounter with the other that is always a feature of writing. It is this dialectical encounter made possible through recursive writing that enables a pedagogy of self-transformation.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's reading of the Stoics, we believe this recursive dialectical process can be best understood as an *askçsis*, or an exercise in self-fashioning. His work on what he calls "techniques of the self" illuminates some of the principles that remain inchoate in our pedagogical principles. *Askçsis* as a technology or discipline for self-fashioning incorporates recursive acts of reflective engagement with others to reflectively (and recursively) engage and transform the self. These interdependent components of *askçsis* —a recursive self-encounter, a space and time for the reflection that enables recursion to be meaningful, a dialectical engagement with others and oneself through recursive reading and writing, and the attention to the self that is necessary to enable the act of writing to become the act of self-fashioning—are nearly impossible to produce in the classroom alone. Writing, and especially writing as a means of self-transformation, or *askesis*, requires a luxury of space and time, a luxury the classroom itself cannot afford. We contend, therefore, that writing as *askçsis*, as a rational self-fashioning, requires a significant modification to the classroom in order to achieve the goals of that classroom. As we show below, technology offers us some very effective mechanisms to accomplish these very traditional pedagogical aims, thereby overcoming the limitations of the classroom.

In his essay "Self Writing," Foucault describes the role of writing for the individual as one intimately connected to a reflective, recursive process, one "associated … with that exercise of thought on itself that reactivates what it knows, calls to mind a principle, a rule, or an example, reflects on them,

assimilates them, and in this manner prepares itself to face reality" (209). Foucault's genealogy of writing as a recursive practice moves through Descartes and modern philosophy, back through Augustine and the early Christians, to the ascetics and the Stoics. The analysis Foucault develops of the mechanisms whereby one writes oneself is less important for its historical connections, however, than for the ways in which it allows us to see how writing as a practice of self-fashioning develops through habitual acts, repeatable and measurable practices. The most basic principle of writing as a mode of self-transformation is repetition or recursion: "the meditation precedes the notes which enable the rereading which in turn reinitiates the meditation. In any case, … writing constitutes an essential stage in the process to which the whole *askçsis* leads: namely the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as true, into rational principles of action. As an element of self-training, writing has … an *ethopoietic* function: it is an agent of the transformation of truth into *çthos*" (209). Foucault explains writing, therefore, as an ethical practice, or a disciplined shaping of habit. Using a recursive self-encounter, one attends to oneself in the act of writing, in the act of reading, in the acts of reflection and meditation. Repeated recursive acts, then, establish a practice that is able itself to become the object of study.

This approach to writing shares much with the dominant practices of teaching writing in the academy, as a habitual exercise which uses repetition to contain the possibility of self-transformation. We see recursion (reflective recursion and recursive writing practices) as a necessary component of self-fashioning that contains within its practice the possibility for radical self-transformation. In an explicit way, therefore, we incorporate and facilitate recursive practices into our pedagogy through the development of discussion forums. In our conjoined classes we employed the discussion forums as a required, graded element similar to each of the other requirements of the class. Our students' written activity on the discussion forums accounted for 20% of their grade. We required students to participate by writing at least one substantial post each week that classes met over the semester, and to

average two posts each week by the end of the semester, for a total of 25-30. We employed both a quantitative and a qualitative measurement: students who reached 25-30 quality posts with at least one per week were assured of no worse than a B-, with more credit available for superior insight, superior engagement, and superior collaboration. The software we selected, Invision Power Board, provided tools that enabled us to perform statistical analyses of student participation. Our students were aware that the software tracked how often they read and how often they wrote on the discussion forums. At the beginning of each semester, we gave students a 5 page statement of the pedagogical reasoning behind the use of the forums, the mechanisms of assessment, and a technological brief on how to use the forums. Throughout it all, we emphasized that the forums represented a graded space for reflective and collaborative writing, not an ad-hoc space for off-the-cuff discussion. During the semester, we continually guided students to make quality posts that reflected a serious engagement with the problems of the class and the texts of the class, as well as their own essays and other graded assignments. In the beginning, we required students to make their posts within topics for discussion established by us, but after a couple of weeks we allowed students to shape the topics as much as us. While it is difficult to justify the enormous time requirements for shaping a 24 hour virtual classroom, we remain committed to the forum software as an extraordinary tool for teaching writing, as well as for allowing for engaged and motivated students. Our analysis of recursion will supply some numbers to support these claims.

One of the practical enticements to a pedagogy that openly employs recursion as a regular practice is that it is so easily measured using the technology of the discussion forums. In total, there were three classes engaged in the collaborative composition course each semester: 2 in Connecticut and 1 in Kentucky. The enrollment in the classes was variable, from a high of 57 in the Fall semester to a low of 30 in the Spring semester. Considering the requirements of the forums, at a minimum each

student should post 25 times, totaling 1425 posts for the Fall semester and 750 for the Spring. In our estimation, given that some students would fail to meet the requirements and others would make up the difference, we projected that each semester we would read between 1200 and 1600 posts. These numbers proved to be a bit conservative: for the fall semester, 57 participants posted a total of 1726 times, and for the spring semester 30 participants produced 1338 posts. These numbers, however, do not represent an adequate depiction of recursion—they speak of writing, but don't distinguish between writing as busywork and writing as a recursive activity. While the sheer number of written posts might suggest the occasion of practices of recursion, a closer attention reveals a much clearer picture of these activities.

While it is true that the posts for the collaborative composition forums totaled 1726 and 1338, our software enabled us to also track the number of times students viewed or read the topics. We believe that the amount of topic views is directly related to a recursive student engagement—that is, that topics where students read and re-read the responses better indicate a genuinely recursive interest than ones in which students write posts without returning several times to read the words of their peers. The statistic of topic view, then, is a good indicator of a recursive process of reading, reflecting, and writing. While a statistic of one view for each post would seem to suggest a non-recursive writing process, where individuals viewed the topic only enough to make their written posts, students returning to the topic 4 or 5 times for each written post might suggest a robustly recursive act. Yet our students far exceeded these numbers. The number of topic views for the two composition courses were 14,887 for the Fall course and 11,999 for the Spring course, compared to the post totals of 1726 and 1338. This is quite telling: students viewed the topics at a rate roughly equal to 8 or 9 views for each post. This statistic reveals the students' recursive use of the discussion forums over the course of the semester. Students who view the online activities as busy work do not engage recursively in this activity.

If writing as self-transformation requires students to make of writing an habit, a recursive engagement, we can see that this plays out using the above statistics. In 15 weeks, 57 students viewed and read topics on the forums 15000 times, or roughly 17 times per week per student. It is exactly this sort of recursive activity that enables writing to become an habitual practice, a practice that one engages in daily, that one uses to understand the world and oneself.

Using a statistical analysis of our students' use of this technology, we can see the ways in which recursive writing developed through the progressive use of the forums. We believe that recursion was produced through the requirements of the class, the students' desire to succeed, and the built-in attractiveness of a collaborative environment. It's important to note, however, that this recursive activity presupposes an extension of the classroom, giving students access to the texts of the class and the writings of their peers in a time and place independent manner. In order to support recursive writing, a class must extend itself to provide the space and time for the successive engagements that characterize recursion. One way we can see this extension of the space of the class is through a comparison of the class meetings and the written activity on the discussion forums. In the Spring semester, classes met on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays—there were no classes on Tuesdays, Fridays, or the weekend. Yet students wrote, read, and reflected using the discussion forums throughout the week, including the weekends. Over the course of the semester, including Spring Break, students wrote on average 56 posts each weekend, for a total of 828 posts. If we apply even a conservative estimate of 6 views for each written post (well below the average for the semester), we can reasonably predict that there were approximately 5000 topic views, or reads, over the course of the semester and more than 800 writings completed at these times. This speaks to the extent of the recursive participation by these writing students. No traditional class could offer students a space to discuss, to think, and to write in this manner—there simply aren't enough available classrooms on

campus to accomplish this manner of engagement. Yet writing as a means of self-fashioning requires exactly this sort of regular practice—a practice that is necessarily recursive.

We can see, therefore, that the online discussion forums provide an extension of the space of the classroom, making it more accessible to the students. Similarly, the discussion forums also enable students to engage recursively independent of time. This feature, of course, can safely be deduced from the availability of the space on the weekends and at night. But these features speak more to convenience than to any necessary component of recursion. However, we can see on the discussion forums an extension of temporal limitations of the classroom that have nothing to do with convenience. Recursive writing requires an extended time for its return—one can't achieve the same results more quickly. We see this when we acknowledge, for example, that writing 4 essays over 15 weeks is more profitable than writing an essay each day over the course of the first week. The practice of recursion requires a time and a space to return, and that return needs to be at some remove from the first moment in order to allow space for reflection, for reading, for engagement with oneself and others. The technology of the forums allows just this sort of engagement in a way that the traditional classroom could hardly contain. Over the course of the academic year there occurred at least 12 meaningful, sustained discussions of some significant element of the class for more than 20 days. Often students would return to a discussion after a hiatus of a week, using their new understandings to build a better interpretation than they were able to do originally. If recursion is to have any purpose, it must contain within it the possibility of an extended reflection, not merely a quick, ad-hoc exchange. As an extended opportunity for writing and rewriting, for reading and re-reading, extended discussions such as these provide the extended time for recursive engagements in ways that a traditional classroom simply is unable to accomplish. One particular discussion can demonstrate this recursive feature: a topic named "Why can't this be any easier: Despair in Education." This discussion began on March 5

and persisted until the end of the semester, serving as a space for students to formulate fairly sophisticated understandings of the relationship one forms with oneself in education as a struggle. This topic received 76 written posts over this time period, but just 3 students were responsible for 39 of the writings. This topic is not anomalous in this regard—by providing an extended space and time for recursive writing, students were able to engage in those topics which captured their interests, returning again and again to revise and reshape their thoughts and writings. The technology of the classroom enabled it to hold several of these ongoing topics concurrently, something impossible in a traditional classroom.

Recursive writing proceeds, in this way, as a series of encounters, where one is able to return again and again to one's writings, to revise one's understandings and interpretations. While most composition classes feature a recursive attention to writing, the technology of the forum proved especially adept at facilitating the time and space needed for productive recursion. The technology of the forums introduced another feature: because the space for this recursion is a collaborative space, a discussion forum, the recursive return is in fact a series of engagements with others. Through a recursive engagement with writing, then, the discussion forums produce a series of engagements with others that stand in opposition to the normative individuality produced by assessment. There emerges, through these recursive engagements, a dialectic of self and other, of a collaborating self and a self who is the object of the class's assessment. This dialectical tension lies at the heart of the struggle with technology, at the heart of learning through discussion, at the heart of writing alone or with others, and at the heart of collaboration. Instead of resolving this tension, the technology of the forums allows the writing class to use the tension within this dialectic to produce an understanding of the self through writing that is best characterized as self-transformative.

Recursive Collaboration: A Dialectic of Self/Other

For us, then, writing exists as a series of encounters—engagements with the texts of the class, with one's own understandings and interpretations, and with the understandings and interpretations of others in class and on the discussion forum. It is, as many before us have pointed out, a dialogical and collaborative process.[5] The discussion forum, as we've argued above, holds out a unique possibility to produce effective dialogue and collaboration between and among writers. As a routine component of their experience of the class, students learn to embrace the many benefits of collaboration: sharpening thoughts, ideas, and theses; rethinking presumptions; challenging others to produce better thought and writing. What strikes us most, however, is that students consistently recognize a benefit of collaboration that is rarely mentioned in discussions of it: the skill of self-collaboration. As part of a pedagogy that emphasizes and assesses the work of the individual, we believe that this is perhaps the greatest benefit of collaboration in a composition course. In other words, collaboration as a part of our pedagogy aims to produce, out of the intellectual relationships developed between and among students, students who are able to recognize and craft for themselves a relationship with themselves that occurs in and as a result of their writing.

These relationships can be understood through what Foucault calls *askçsis*, or the "training of the self by oneself," in writing (208). *Askçsis* consists of "a principle of rational action" by which an individual synthesizes through recollection the disparate thoughts of others, at the same time he purposefully "constitutes his own identity through this recollection" (213). This kind of "self-writing" enables students to understand their writing as coming to terms with not simply the multiple voices of others they are engaged with but, through transformation, the multiple voices they are composed of. In the words of Foucault, the forum provides students the opportunity "to make [the] recollection of the fragmentary *logos*, transmitted through teaching, listening, or reading a means of establishing a

relationship of oneself with oneself" (Foucault 211). The forum is replete with instances of self-fashioning, with evidences of these accretive self-understandings. For our students, as for us, collaboration is not something that happens only between a self and others, since one can collaborate with oneself.

The most tangible artifacts of our student's work as a process of askesis occur in the several meta-discussions that resurfaced continually throughout the semester. Our students didn't simply speak of the benefits accrued in the practice of sharing ideas with others; they moved pretty quickly to the ways in which one could collaborate with oneself. This understanding of the self is not isolated in any exchange on the forums, but instead surfaces in many of the discussions. One student illustrates this well:

> "So, if we think of identity as, 'a person is who she thinks she is', then for learning to occur, creating a change in one's identity, that would mean that a person's learning experience causes them to alter their own definition of who they are … that whatever they've learned at that moment has altered their perception or changed their mind about something they believed, valued, agreed/disagreed with or has given meaning to something they'd never considered before. I see not only an internal change happening here, but also the opportunity for possible external changes to occur, (in behaviors, attitudes, choices, etc.), as a result of the internal change" (belli 4/27/05 @ 5:06 p.m.).

This student builds her understanding at first through another student's definition of identity as "a person is who she thinks she is" in order to say that learning, as "a change in one's identity," provokes a change in one's self-perceptions. But she doesn't stop there. For "Belli," this is part of a process that culminates in the possibility for self-construction, for self-practices that alter behavior. The change in self-understanding that is the very material of self-fashioning is present, for this student, in changes in

"behaviors" and "attitudes" that reflect and reinitiate these "internal changes." As a series of recursive dialectical encounters, the discussion forums consisted of a robust social interaction on the one hand, and on the other hand a level of reflexive engagement that supported some astounding writing and learning.

This dialectic of self and other plays out through collaborative writing over the course of the semester: at the beginning of the class, students most often engage in facile, un-reflexive inquiry. This writing most often presents itself as a willingness to do no more than offer one's own opinions, reducing all difference to a watered-down relativism. While this is clearly recursive writing, it lacks any sort of attention to the other—to peers in the class, as well as the subtleties of the texts and the relationships between those texts. However, as students collaborate with others more and more, some of them begin a process of substantial engagement, responding to and reflecting upon others' ideas as often as they give their own opinions[6]. This is a significant development, since it relies on a student's attention to the work of another, and more precisely, it instigates a specific sort of relationship between reading and writing that is often lacking in basic writing students: a relationship characterized by an awareness of nuanced difference, and an investment in the interpretive interplay of these differences. Through an engagement with the ideas and words of their peers, students develop an ability to think about other students as *writers* engaged in the act of writing and how best to make a contribution. This remains in many ways similar to the goals of a traditional class, where students develop their authority as writers through a critical engagement with the texts of their peers. Yet, the recursively collaborative class goes beyond this. The forum makes it possible for students to interact with themselves in much the same way that they interact with their peers precisely because the forum serves as a written record. By housing a stable record of recursive engagement, the forum supplies access to an ongoing history of engagements, thereby facilitating a recursive and reflexive understanding of oneself and others. Just as

interaction with one's peers is made possible through an engagement with the written expressions of one's peers, the record of the forum enables students to engage themselves with care, attention, and reflection, through access to a record of their own expressions. A productive relationship with the self is built, therefore, out of this attention. In the reflective space made possible through the marriage of reading and writing, the student begins to internalize the gaze he extends to others (and that has, itself, been shaped by others), developing out of his critical reflection on the work of others a similar relationship with his own writing.

The forum as a record of self-collaboration is made possible by drawing together three principles that Foucault identifies as necessary to produce writing as a self-practice: the association of reading with writing, the recursive practice of encountering the other, and the accretion of an ethos through the appropriation of others' ideas encountered in this reading and writing (see Foucault 211–214). First, while the aid of others is necessary to develop one's ideas, one must also actively internalize these *in writing* for them to become a part of the self. This seems to us like a good basic definition of the process of collaboration on the forums: students encounter the ideas of others, reflect upon them and how they might alter their own ideas, and re-engage them in the act of writing a response. The student can then read this written process any time she likes, reflect upon its impact on her current perspective, and re-engage once again. Secondly, this process involves recursive acts of selection. These acts could include the who's lead singer's act of self-selection, but also acts of selecting those ideas that are most productive or beneficial given the student's particular circumstances (the paper she is writing, the passages she is trying to understand, the concepts she is presently wrestling with). Finally, writing on the forums involves synthesizing or "unifying" these diverse ideas the writer garners through encounters with others, at the same time he uses them to achieve a new self-understanding. The self-aware practice of writing on the forums thus establishes a reciprocal relationship between self and other that involves a

specific kind of self-introspection that is possible only in the presence of others. More than a simple

training of oneself, Foucault argues that writing with others "constitutes a certain way of manifesting

oneself to oneself and to others" (216). Productive and engaged collaboration in writing involves "a

gaze that one focuses on the addressee … and a way of offering oneself to his gaze" (216). In other

words, the writer not only accumulates knowledge in his interactions with others, in his assimilation of

others' ideas, but he objectifies himself in a way that opens him to the gaze of others and, thus, to

himself.

The written and permanent record of the forum, therefore, ultimately makes clear for the

student that the two terms, *self* and *other*, are mutually instantiated. Although writing always entails the

presence of another, writing on the discussion forums entails an irreducible awareness of how the

presence of others shapes one's writing. As a graded space, as a collaborative endeavor, and as a

threaded discussion, the technology of the discussion forum requires students to make themselves

aware of the situatedness of their writing. That is to say, out of the disconnect that emerges in the

relation of the individual to the group in collaboration, there arises an awareness of self as situated, as

constructed by and participating in a moment of inquiry, a moment of self-understanding amidst the

work of others' self-understandings. In our writing classes, we saw this awareness develop in a peculiar

and explicit way. In a discussion on 'despair in education' we referred to earlier, students began to think

about the effects of being graded, and what an awareness of this does to the writer. One student quite

effectively represents how writing as a recursive dialectical encounter produces a new sort of self-

understanding: "We will always be judged wherever we go. However, if we are to truly succeed 'to

accomplish what is attempted or intended' (Webster) then we must first (consciously) judge and or

evaluate ourselves and then be prepared to take responsibility for our achievements and our failures."

(eyespye 3/27/2005 @ 2:06 a.m.) In these remarks we see a student who has accepted the inescapable

20

presence of the other within her own thinking, within her own writing, and has found a way to use that presence to accomplish her own goals and desires—her own ethos. The student above, 'eyespye,' negotiates the recursive engagements required by the discussion forums, producing a recursive engagement with herself. As the student herself acknowledges, this recursive engagement is facilitated entirely by the presence of others on the forums—indeed, it requires the presence of others.

The awareness that one develops of oneself at the moment one becomes aware that one is being observed—this is a complex and significant awareness that has been theorized extensively by Freud, Lacan, de Beauvoir, Foucault, Mulvey, and others. We witnessed the complexity of this awareness at several instances over the course of our collaboration. One student explains that his realization of the presence of others watching what he wrote at first made him quite "tentative," but

> "this tentative nature was first put mostly aside when I was engaged with Belli [another student] on essay I. this brought out the argumentative nature of me, which would not allow me to not respond. The more I responded, the more I was sucked into the thinking taking place, and the better I did in the class. not saying that there still wasn't hesitation; the hesitation factor that was left from the introduction of the class kept me to posting things I thought people might want to think about" (the who's lead singer 5/19/05 @ 1:39 p.m.).

This student experiences the dialectic of self and other in a manner quite different from eyespye— indeed, his mechanism is one of polite contest—but the result is quite similar: an increased attention on oneself as a writer, as a thinker, as an actor within the group of others. Despite the difference in characterization, both of these students participate in a dialectical engagement with others, and use that engagement to develop an awareness of oneself that is productive to the act of writing.

We can see the progression of this dialectical engagement quite readily using the discussion forum. On 11/11/2004, at 11:07 p.m., a student states "the forums give me a better understanding of

21

the essays by being able to see other students' views and opinions … this class has made me aware of the quality of my work and my opinions, because it gives me much room for improvement to better myself as an individual and as a student" (sury). In this message we can see the student relating her understanding of herself to her interaction with other students, as well as her understanding of the "room for improvement" in herself. It's interesting to note the ways in which she develops this self-understanding: beginning with the quest for an understanding of the texts of the class, she then progresses through an understanding of the "views and opinions" of her peers, producing an understanding of her own "work and opinions," before generating the final manifestation, an understanding of "myself as an individual." Through the engagements with others, through the assessment of herself, and through writing for others and herself, she performed a successive engagement with herself. This feature, we argue, is an important and productive feature of writing, one which students notices as well. In the discussion following the remarks by "sury," another student underscores their significance: "That one clicked with me … 'These forums help me understand myself as an individual and as a student' … I think, no I'll be brave here, I know you were thinking about thinking. Wow, that is really cool." (beaches 11/14/2004 @ 11:07 p.m.). "Beaches" is able to recognize the significance of the genealogy "Sury" draws of her self-encounter, but more importantly, she situates this "thinking about thinking" within the task of the classroom. For "beaches," then, an awareness of the encounter with oneself amidst others is in fact a meta-awareness, or as she puts it, "thinking about thinking." She is aware that this is a significant and productive discovery, since she concludes by stating "we'll be saying, and we thought that was really hard, but it was worth it. Trust me on this one." While she may lack the eloquence of an academic voice, she doesn't lack for an understanding of the importance of her own growth as a student. In these written engagements, she witnesses a powerful potential for meaningful success.

An analysis of student writing on the discussion forums demonstrates the ways that writing provides an opening into oneself, an opening for the assessment of others and oneself. The discussion forums, with their unavoidable and almost irreconcilable features of collaboration and assessment, focus this significant but easily overlooked feature of writing. Interacting with others forces one to interact with oneself; reflecting on the ideas and words of others forces one to reflect on oneself. Writing as self-reflection accompanies learning as self-reflexive, and this coincidence was not lost on the students writing on the forums. In a discussion of Walker Percy's theory of learning, two students argue about the relationship between reflection and the acquisition of understanding. In this discussion, one student remarks:

> "Now you're just having a semantics argument. I don't define new facts as knowledge, you define knowledge as any new information. You think that learning happens when you reflect on knowledge. I think that learning only occurs when your self is in conflict with yourself. Fundamentally, it's a different idea. You think that knowledge comes from the outside world, and I think it is entirely internal. What you call new information is meaningless in my theory because unless it sparks conflict within the self, it is the same thing as memorizing gibberish. I just think that learning occurs in a different way, not when we reflect on new information, but when new information causes us to reflect on the self. We're saying the same thing but with a different emphasis. I'm not saying that the acquisition of facts has no place in education, but that it is not learning. Learning happens only when you learn about yourself. (Tread lightly, or else I'll be forced to prove to you that your theory really is my theory, because any real reflection is self-reflection, and that self-reflection is the only kind worth while. lol, I hope you're having as much fun with this as I am.)" (rose34 5/12/2005 @ 9:05 a.m.).

There's an almost dazzling insight provided through this engagement—that any learning involves a self-awareness. While the sophistication of this student's prose may not be representative, her awareness of the relationship between writing, thinking, and collaboration is not accidental, we argue. Through the use of writing as a regular engagement with others on the discussion forums, we argue that students come to see writing as self-engagement, and learning as self-understanding. The dialectic of collaboration makes possible an attention to writing as a special sort of practice: as a recursive encounter with oneself and others that enables a process of self-discipline, a process of self-understanding, and ultimately a process of self-transformation.

The dialectic of collaboration is complete, however, only when the student's awareness of the role that others play (in their difference from him) to shape his thoughts, engagements, and expressions also introduces an awareness of the self as different from itself. Using the forum as the record of a dynamic process of engagements, a student can, if he wishes, witness his own process of transformation in the discursive practices of the forum. He can look at himself, as it were, in dialogue with others as a series of selves that he no longer is and, thus, to imagine himself as a self that he soon may no longer be. Even if the student is not equipped with the right theoretical language to articulate his development as a thinker and writer, he nonetheless may bear witness to this development, recorded on the forum, as one born out of a recursive dialectical process with others. He can recognize and reflect upon the fact that his collaborative practices on the forum engender a critical self-awareness, one that occurs with and through others.

Each time a student revisits the forum, she is able to re-collect, as it were, her thoughts engaged with the thoughts of others, to understand the unfolding of this engagement as a dialectical process and, significantly, to fashion herself anew as she reinitiates this process. She becomes doubly aware of herself—as both engaged in a collaboration with others, and as an individual who is self-othered and,

thus, self-engaged through that collaboration. Following Foucault's genealogy of the care for the self through writing, the attention to the self that the presence of others engenders can be fashioned into a regular practice of self-reflection whereby the student understands herself as something she can work on, manipulate, and construct. Recognizing the malleability of the self through the practices of the forum encourages students to see themselves, their ideas, and their writing as unfinished and incomplete (to paraphrase Freire), as always open to challenge and change. As rose34 put it on May 11, 8:16 a.m., "Learning occurs when some part of our identity, some belief is forced into confrontation with some other part of our identity, some other thing we believe to be true, and a discourse and resolution takes place which results in a transformation of identity." This is precisely the aim of the forum. We certainly value the help students give other students, the body of knowledge that collaboration produces, the number of issues and topics that can be discussed in a semester. But what we value above all is this kind of engaged self-encounter which we believe to be the foundation of sophisticated ideas in writing. There are certainly ways to provoke such practices of the self in a traditional class, but the forum presents it as a daily opportunity for the students. And their frequent and recursive participation only increases its likelihood.

We labor here over this dialectic of collaboration to demonstrate that collaboration can only be productive for writers in a composition classroom when it exceeds the back and forth dialogue between and among students to initiate an awareness of the self as other, as something to be practiced upon. Without this awareness students cannot perform the difficult and challenging work on themselves that is necessary for what we consider to be the ultimate goal of education: self-transformation. We are not saying that poor writers can't become excellent writers without such an awareness, but we are saying that writers cannot initiate disciplined self-transformation without it. Our goal as teachers in the institution is to produce students who are effective writers; our personal goal as

teachers is to produce students who are able to practice the art of self-transformation for the rest of their lives. While the presence of others is a necessary condition for self-transformation, it is not a sufficient one. The dialectic of collaboration must include as its outcome an awareness of the self as other—as composed by the contributions of others, and as disparate in itself—but also that "discourse and resolution" rose34 refers to as performed by the self on itself. Only such an attentiveness to the self and the capacity of writing as a practice of the self creates the possibility for self-transformation.

Notes

[1.] These remarks are taken from the online discussion forum to our composition classes at www.thinkingtogether.org/forums. The discussion of collaboration can be found at http://www.thinkingtogether.org/forums/index.php?showtopic=534 Further references to student posts and discussions will be made by indicating the topic number which may be plugged into the above link after "showtopic=."

[2] Spooner and Yancey enact a self-reflexive collaboration and discover the critical role of the individual as collaborator, not as an entity that loses its features in the collective, but one that develops "multivocality" (60). The approach of Yancey and Spooner to the problem of the individual in collaboration is emblematic of a range of responses. James Porter's discourse analysis in 1986 takes this approach—fundamentally tracing the activity of the discourse community to its effects on individuals. Rather than subsume the individual within the whole, Porter seeks to carve out a space for an understanding of the individual. This seems appropriate to the collaborative team of Linda and Michael Hutcheon, who claim in 2001 that even while there are shifting and multiple roles of the individual within the act of collaboration, nevertheless there remains a need to think of collaboration using the rubric of the individual. Hutcheon and Hutcheon strike an interesting and strange balance—they assume a discursive model, following Bakhtin, yet strive to articulate collaboration as an engagement of individuals, of even individual selves with differing roles. Thus, as with the collective, they emphasize thinking, reading, and writing as an "interplay of ideas," but it is the interplay between (and within) individuals that is attended to by their analysis (136).

[3] Although they are clearly interested in collaboration as a productive form of intellectual labor, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford do not celebrate nor make any sweeping claims about the effectiveness of collaboration in itself. Instead they urge that collaboration always be enacted with an attention to its situatedness, arguing that "collaborative practices, like individual practices, can only be evaluated through deeply situated analyses" (Collaboration 358).

[4.] For a particularly useful account of the role of reflection in a writing course, see Ellen Schendal's "Building Community through Reflection."

[5.] We do not mean to imply that dialogical writing is a sub-feature of collaborative writing. Since the 1980's there has been much work of value theorizing the discursive nature of writing as necessarily diverse, or to use Bakhtin's phrase, heteroglot. See especially the work of David Bartholomae, Thomas Recchio, and Charlotte Thrall.

[6.] Our colleague at Drury University, Chris Panza, has adapted a schema to measure the progression of student interaction on the discussion forums. See his "Thinking Outside the Room," in *Teaching Philosophy*, Dec. 2006..

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