A Qualitative Journey into Cyberspace

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Abstract:

Educators should move from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning, from isolated work to collaborative work, and from factual knowledge-based instructions to critical thinking and informed decision-making. The high tech classroom should be more interactive and encourage active, exploratory, inquiry-based learning, as opposed to the didactic mode in which teachers feed students information. (Valenti, 2000, p. 85)

The influence of technology in schools is growing as quickly as the students it impacts. As a pioneer in an e-learning high school, I hoped to better understand the effects and influences of this learning tool in the English classroom. Using interpretive ethnography as my main frame of reference, I examined the role of technology in a grade 9 Academic English class environment. My role was participant observer as I worked with 4 students in the Laptop Program at St. Augustine Catholic High School. Through interview, observation, journaling, and thick description, I undertook a journey into cyberspace. I documented the experiences, the frustrations, and the highlights of being in e-learning along with my students. In this study, I specifically considered the issues of teacher training, administrative support, technology support personnel, resource availability, the role of the teacher in a constructivist classroom, and the benefits of the laptop computer as a learning tool in classroom and school.
Acknowledgements

Throughout the 4 years of this Master of Education degree, I have had the support of a number of people who have made it possible for me to pursue this part of my journey. A special thank you goes to my mother and father, Patricia and Garry Sheahan, whose financial support and encouragement helped a great deal, not to mention the number of hours spent looking after Jet, my black Lab, so I could take courses after a long day at work. I would also like to thank Carmen Shields, my thesis supervisor and professor of a number of courses. She inspired me to take a qualitative journey by bringing my own voice into this research. Thank you as well to Milree Latimer and Michael Manley-Casimir for their support and suggestions along the way. A special thank you to the students and staff at Saint Augustine CHS, especially my principal, Mary Puopolo, whose initial vision of a technology-based school provided me with a place to conduct research and continue my journey in teaching. A final thank you goes to my 4 participants. Their honesty, enthusiasm, and ability to share their voices certainly made this journey more interesting and challenging for me.
“That Station”

By Robert J. Hastings

Tucked away in our subconscious minds is an idyllic vision. We see ourselves on a long, long trip that spans a seemingly endless tract of land. We’re passengers on a train, gazing through windows at life. We drink in the passing scene: cars, children playing, cattle, row upon row of corn and wheat, valleys, mountains and rolling hillsides. We travel through city skylines, in biting winter and blazing summer.

But uppermost in our minds is the final destination. On a certain day at a certain hour we will pull into the station. There will be bands playing and flags waving. And once we get there, so many wonderful dreams will come true. Our wishes will be fulfilled and the pieces of our lives knit together like a completed jigsaw puzzle.

“When we reach the station, that will be it,” we cry. Unfortunately, once we get it, then it disappears. The station somehow hides from us.

Sooner or later we must realize there is no station, no one place to arrive at once and for all. The true joy of life is in the trip, the station is but a dream. “Savour the moment,” is a good motto. Stop pacing the aisles and counting the miles. Instead, climb more mountains, eat more ice cream and go barefoot more often. Swim more rivers, watch more sunsets, laugh more and cry less. Life must be lived in the journey. The station may never come.

(Source Unknown)
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CHAPTER ONE: “ALL ABOARD”

Packing My Bags

I have not always thought of my life as a journey. There was a time, not too long ago, that I kept waiting to get to “that station.” And though I cannot pinpoint the exact moment when my view changed, I know it has. It seems ironic to be using the metaphor of a train journey in this thesis because such an old form of travel does not seem to have a place in the technology-based environment that I teach in, yet, somehow, the melding of old and new seems to be a wonderful fit as I set out on this “Journey into Cyberspace.”

I started teaching 14 years ago by default. I had finished university with no real direction. I tree-planted in Northern British Columbia after graduation, and since there is nothing else to do but spend time with yourself and think, I thought about where I would head next. Teaching seemed a logical choice based on a degree in Physical Education and English and numerous summers spent working at camps with children. I ended up at Memorial University in Newfoundland and, surprisingly, fell in love with teaching.

First Stop: St. Elizabeth Catholic High School (1989-1994)

I graduated at a time when teaching jobs were plentiful and had my pick of regions to work in. I started in 1989 at a new high school in Thornhill, Ontario called St. Elizabeth Catholic High School with a crew of young teachers; this would be the first stop on my journey—a stop that lasted 5 years. Much of my life’s focus at that time revolved around being active and involved in coaching and playing sports. Technology did not play an important role. I never took a computer course in high school or throughout university; I typed my essays on an IBM electric typewriter—how I wish I had
had a computer then! When I started teaching, many of my handouts and tests were handwritten. I graduated to using a computerized marks program in the mid 1990s and started to become familiar with word processing then too. These tools certainly made planning and photocopying easier, but I never looked at the computer as a tool to be used inside the walls of my classroom.

As a classroom teacher, I think I was very traditional—teaching as I had been taught at a private girls' school. The teacher always stood at the front of the classroom and the material was delivered for students to digest and regurgitate on demand. I, too, found this method the easiest way to wade through heavy curriculum, though I think my sense of humor did allow for some less than traditional lessons to occur. Reflecting on those first few years of teaching now, I consider them lessons in trial and error. There was no mentor program in place, and learning how to handle discipline problems was often the topic of dinner table conversation in my parents' home.

I taught Physical and Health Education for 5 years and then became bored and exhausted by the constant demands of the subject. I decided to try my hand at my second teaching subject—English. Circumstances in my personal life also dictated a need for change, and so I applied for a transfer to a new high school in Maple, Ontario—Saint Joan of Arc Catholic High School.


This second stop on my journey of teaching created a change in subject area and school that also precipitated a change in my teaching methods. The student population at Saint Joan of Arc Catholic High School was not academically focused, and many students were quite needy. The lecture method did not work well, and so I began to
implement changes to my teaching practices. I found letting go of the traditional pedagogy difficult, but the benefits were clear—students were more engaged in their learning and more involved. They were taking control of their learning and becoming critical thinkers (students who could express an opinion and share their voice). I had never been taught to be a critical thinker, and so it was a new and liberating experience for me as well. It was not until I started my Master of Education studies in 1999 that I realized that my opinions and experiences mattered in my writing, and this notion was soon reflected in my classroom. My students were learning how to write using "I," and they were coming to understand that they had valid opinions and life experiences that made a difference when they responded to the literature. I think my pedagogy began moving in a constructivist direction then, and I was pleased by that change.

At the same time I was undergoing change in the classroom, I was moving through a transition in my personal life as well. My personal relationships were missing something—I was successful and confident in my work life but lacked confidence in my relationships. I was not as communicative or expressive as I wanted to be and often felt as though I had no input or control over my connections with others. I wanted to be more relaxed and less riddled with anxiety. I also needed to learn how to better my relationship with my family, so I decided to learn more about how I could change by speaking to a professional counselor. Though she did help me learn to interact with my family more effectively, I think the skills I learned made me a better person and teacher as well. I was no longer taking responsibility for my students' shortcomings and problems—I was helping them learn how to deal with them just as I was learning to deal with my own. I was learning to be proactive instead of reactive, and I could see change in
my teaching and my general demeanor. I could finally leave some unwanted baggage behind as I moved forward on my journey.

While all this was happening, I was still somewhat dissatisfied with the school I was teaching in. I felt the department head did not want to see me further my career. Through further examination of the works of literature in our courses, I also believed there was little vision when selecting literature for our students. For example, there was not one strong, female protagonist in any of the course texts. All the characters were white males, and I felt the English courses were not adequately representing the different cultures, genders, or sexual differences of the students we taught. I wanted to see this change—I wanted students in our English program to leave high school with a broader understanding of the world we live in—one which does not consist only of white, male characters.

During the final 3 years I spent teaching at Saint Joan of Arc Catholic High School, I tried to build changes into the curriculum. I introduced *The Stone Diaries* by Carol Shields into the Ontario Academic Credit (OAC) course, and the novel *Bad Boy* by Diane Wieler came into the Grade 12 General English program. In this way, a strong female protagonist and a gay teenager were introduced to our students, and both novels were well received. In my last year at Saint Joan of Arc Catholic High School, I started to think about the need for technology to become part of my teaching. I can connect this move to a job I was applying for at the time. I decided to apply for a Vice Principal position with our coterminus board, and one of the questions on the application asked me to comment on the implementation of technology in my teaching. I realized then that I did not use technology at all in the classroom. I did not get the position, but decided it
was time to integrate technology into my teaching. Technology-based activities would bring me one step closer to creating a well-rounded, constructivist classroom.

I tried to build a web-based assignment into my grade 9 English course. Though I had support and assistance from my teacher-librarian, what I found was that I knew very little and I got increasingly frustrated, as did my students, when it came time to put things together and use the technology. Though I had very little use for this tool, I was envious of some of my students who were so comfortable and knowledgeable with computers. They had no fear, whereas I constantly worried I would hit the wrong button and send everything I'd ever written into cyberspace, never to be seen again.

I abandoned this use of technology quite quickly and decided to focus on my career path instead. In the fall of 2000, I was enrolled in the Principal Qualification Course–Part 1 and needed a practicum project as part of the course requirements. The Teacher Advisor Program was just getting under way as part of the new high school curriculum. I was teaching in a school of 1,500 students, and I thought that organizing and implementing this program at my school would be a perfect practicum. I was also nearing the end of my course work in my Master of Education degree and thought this would be an excellent topic around which to complete my exit project. The Teacher Advisor Program was considered a waste of time by students and teachers alike at my school and, though it did not hold great interest for me, I thought I could “kill two birds with one stone.” I did not really think about what I was going to accomplish or why it would be important; I just wanted to finish my courses and my degree. And now, here it is–2002–and I find myself on a completely different track and embracing every minute of it.
Next Stop: St. Augustine Catholic High School (2001-Present)

The opportunity for another position of leadership arrived in early April of 2001 with the posting of department headships at St. Augustine Catholic High School in Unionville, Ontario. It was clear that some experience as a department head would be of use before applying again for a vice principal position, so I decided to apply for the position of Head of English and Modern Languages. A position of leadership was what I was striving for, but working at a technology-focused school was not what I considered to be my ideal job. St. Augustine Catholic High School was tagged an “e-learning” school. My computer skills were limited to basic word processing and e-mail sending. If pressed, I could put together a rudimentary PowerPoint presentation. I was definitely not comfortable with technology and had no real idea of how to use it, as attributed to my poor attempt at Saint Joan of Arc Catholic High School. I decided to apply and deal with the technology angle of things later!

Looking back, I never thought I would find myself in the place I am today. And so it is with humor, pride, and irony that I look back over the last 2 years and bear witness to the incredible progress I have made as a learner and teacher at St. Augustine CHS. I am definitely glad my train stopped in Unionville and that I disembarked. And though I’m not sure how long I will be here, this school has become a true haven for me—a place that has rekindled my passion for teaching.

Arriving in Unionville

The first time I drove along Rodick Avenue, I had not yet heard if the position was mine. It reminded me of my house-hunting days. I saw my home and had already started thinking of all the places where my furniture and collected history could go, even
though the offer had not yet gone through. I wanted to see the school just in case the job became mine. From my first view of this almost-finished building, I thought, this is a place for me to hang my hat and set up an English Department with new philosophies. I would be able to unpack my bags and finally be rid of the "old boys" mentality that I had spent the last 12 years under—I would be able to put all the female authors I wanted into the program, and it would be rich in cultural diversity and contemporary literature. The decision from the Board that I was the successful applicant arrived in early April, and from that point on, I drove by the school on a weekly basis.

The first time I drove to the school, I had been so focused on finding it that I never noticed the neighborhood that surrounded it. The houses looked fairly new—lawns were well manicured and healthy, and rich, green shrubs dotted the yards. The trees along the boulevards had yet to take on that stately atmosphere of entities that had been around and seen all that the houses had to show. The cars in the driveways were late model, luxury vehicles, and most homes had three-car garages. I was already forming a picture of the clientele I would be serving—the neighbourhood appeared to be the perfect environment to launch an e-learning school, as the area seemed one of affluence.

When I hit the four-way stop, I paused to take a good look at the building that would be my second home for the next few years. It was a blend of red brick, concrete, and glass, but it did not bear any resemblance to the shopping malls that my previous two schools seemed modeled after. It was two floors, spread out over a panorama of suburbia. A subtle cross was embedded into the wall to the right of the main entrance—the only real hint that the doctrine of Catholicism was the foundation upon which the teachings of the school would be built.
It looked and smelled new—it had that new car feeling. Every window sparkled—not yet fallen victim to teenage hands and projectiles. The driveway was freshly paved, and the speed bumps lay in wait for the teenagers who would eventually challenge them every time they entered or left the school grounds (See Figure 1). Playing fields span the west side of the school, and there is an ostentatious back entrance into the cafetorium (See Figure 2). My practical side cringes at the heat loss from all those windows that reach for the sky.

The inside of the building is no less magnificent. I think that if only these students could see the high schools that most of us attended in the 1970s and 1980s, they’d realize how truly fortunate they are; but to them, this type of building is the norm. Upon entering the front doors, there stretches a foyer with a staircase that puts Scarlet O’Hara from Gone With the Wind to shame (See Figure 3). It will make a wonderful entrance for a graduation processional. The foyer is surrounded by glassed-in computer labs, and to the right sits a small chapel; I think it may have a difficult time convincing the growing population to visit. The school spreads left and right from the foyer—go left to the Arts and Technology wing or head right to the Religion and Physical and Health Education areas. Straight ahead, under the staircase, is the cafeteria and drama stage. Take a risk and head up the stately steps and you will find yourself peering into the school resource center (historically known as a library). Though there are few books on the shelves, it bustles with activity. It boasts a full computer lab, seminar rooms, and lots of natural light. The librarian has a vision of kites and flags falling from the ceiling, and in time I think it will be an inviting and magical place. The second floor also hosts the
Figure 2. The back entrance to the cafetorium.
Figure 3. The front foyer of St. Augustine CHS.
Math, Social Science, English, French, and Science classrooms, not to mention a rubberized track that rings the corridor.

Interesting enough, I wondered if my initial impressions would be accurate, since I had been teaching in the building for almost 3 months when I first wrote them down. I took the opportunity to ask my student teacher at the time, Andrea, what her impressions were, to see if we held similar views. The interesting thing for me about gathering Andrea's opinions is that she taught as an unqualified teacher at the same school as I did last year, so she, too, was coming from that same environment. She described the school in a similar manner. She was able to smell the newness of the building and the fresh paint and commented on the tidiness of the building overall. She did note that parts of the school felt deserted, because lockers were bolted shut and many classrooms were empty and remained locked. Architecturally, she liked the building—the centrality of the library and cafeteria and the foyer has a welcoming and open feeling. She also commented that “the computer labs in the foyer give visitors a sense of the school’s commitment to e-learning” (A.Ledvinka, personal communication, October 15, 2001). My classroom is down one of these halls, a place of enjoyment and learning—I hope.

How does one describe the typical institutional-looking classroom? The pale green, yellow, or blue walls; the desks; the chairs; the smell of chalk dust and dirty blackboards—though it was brand new, it still reminded me of the many classrooms I have sat in over the years. I do not think schools have changed that much in the past 50 years, though my room is slightly more affable. Its walls are adorned with poetry from the Toronto Transit Commission, courtesy of an advertising company. The bulletin boards are decorated, and past student posters grace the walls (See Figure 4). An oak bookshelf
Figure 4. Two views of my classroom
rescued from my parents' basement sits by one window, and a fancy tv/vcr stands in the corner. The curtains would not be my first choice in home decorating, but they keep the light out when necessary. Along one wall, I have photographs of the classes I have taught over the last 8 years; sadly, I never thought of taking pictures right at the beginning of my career, but the students who come in take pride in knowing their pictures will one day adorn this makeshift display wall. They love to look at whom I have taught, and though this school does not have a history yet, I know it will someday, and these students will be part of it. Andrea zeroed in on this feature as well. She notes, “the personal touch of the teacher with a bulletin board full of pictures of past classes, schools, school events, classroom presentations, and the inclusion of the teacher’s personal life with a photo of her dog give the room a warm, caring, and welcoming feel” (A. Ledvinka, personal communication, October 15, 2001).

It’s generally a busy place. My charges chat a lot and tell me about their lives, and in turn I share parts of my life with them. They are intrigued that I have a life. They know all about my dog and my education and the friends I have. They give me tips on how to make an essay look longer than it is by changing margins or font size. They listen with delight to the stories of the mice in my basement and the skunk that died under the back porch. They know about my nephews and niece, and I try to glean a little more about them each day. I think they enjoy my class, some days more than others, just like I enjoy teaching some days more than others. Our best classes are the ones that fly in a different direction than anticipated, and when the light clicks on during the third act of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, I know they will remember it. They will remember the speaker from York Region’s Children’s Aid Society who came to tell them about foster
care because we are reading Ellen Foster; they will remember the goofy antics of the Second City Troup that arrived to teach them about communication and team building. All of these events and many more make up room 203, but there is another area of the school they must venture to on a regular basis—the e-learning lab in room 110.

Meeting Cyberspace Face to Face

Room 110 initially reminded me of Room 101 in George Orwell’s 1984. For me, it was a place of unknown terror (remember, my computer skills were less than stellar) and my worst fear—technology. For the first 2 and a half months of my new school year, I have been madly scrambling to learn about technology and to put together webquests, online discussions, e-folios, post resources, and on it goes. I have become intimately connected with my laptop computer and the Internet. I have become a computer nerd with élan. The lab does not have the same welcoming atmosphere as my classroom though. Three teachers share this room, so it is a little more difficult to make it my own. The students each have a port with multitudes of wires snaking out around it; it’s a wonder class even gets started at all with all this connecting and logging on (See Figure 5). They also have a rolling swivel chairs—I can just imagine what activity that leads to. Whoever thought that a chair like that would be conducive to good classroom management? They will eventually hook up their laptops and away they will go. And it is at this point that my skills will be tested by the toughest critics of all—my students, who collectively know a great deal more about technology than I do. Once I came to grips with this fact, I was not so overwhelmed. Though I would be initiating and directing many of the activities, they would also be teaching me a great deal through this process of e-learning, and I would be heading in a new, collaborative direction with my students.
Together, I think we will become better students and, I hope, more curious learners, but time will tell if my prediction of acumen will come true.

The Philosophy and Culture of St. Augustine Catholic High School

To describe a building and its rooms gives only part of the flavour of a school. It is the people and the vision within a school that really create the community of learners. St. Augustine Catholic High School opened its doors in September of 2001 to a community of 412 students in grades 9 and 10, 25 teaching staff, and 13 support staff. I had always taught in large schools, so opening a new school and starting with such a small population was refreshing. The staff had been brought together from a number of different high schools in the region, and we had only one first-year teacher among us. Twelve of the teachers were designated “laptop” learning teachers and would be responsible for implementing the program within the school for the grade 9 students involved. While it was exciting, the challenges that faced this group of teachers, me included, were many.

The students are a varied group. The grade 9 students arrived from five different Catholic elementary schools in the area as well as from some public elementary schools. The grade 10s arrived primarily from our sister high school, Brother Andre Catholic High School, whose walls were bursting at the seams; the opening of our school provided some welcome relief to their growth problems. Having to move a second time in 2 years did not sit well with most of these students and, even though they were coming to a palatial, new environment, there was some definite anger and attitude displayed during the first few weeks of the school year. Not surprising, the students adapted fairly quickly to their new surroundings and got involved in all kinds of activities from sports to newspaper
Figure 5. Room 110 – The laptop lab.
to social justice clubs to arts night. Though they were young, they quickly developed a sense of leadership and responsibility towards their personal education. Both Andrea, my student teacher, and I noticed a different attitude than at our previous school—one filled with respect and academic focus. There is a strong sense of school spirit developing. One thing Andrea thought was missing was that sense of tradition that comes with an older school—I hope this will develop as the students grow into their new place.

Our population is also fairly ethnic in nature, with a predominantly Asian flare. Approximately 50% of our students are Asian–Chinese—and the rest of the population is a blend of Portuguese, Italian, African-American, and Anglo-Saxon. Having taught in a predominantly Italian school for the past 7 years, the mix of cultures was refreshing and enlightening. The socioeconomic background of the majority of students is upper-middle class. Though there are some students whose families struggle financially, the presence of a school uniform helps to downplay this disparity. And though there is a technology focus in our school, it is clear that the students can offer much more than just computer skills, and sometimes I worry that we are losing sight of the balanced individual in this bid for technological advancements.

Like any school, St. Augustine has a mission statement and a vision for its future as well.

St. Augustine Catholic High School is a Catholic community school committed to academic excellence. Students will be supported in their pursuit of spiritual, intellectual, physical and social growth through diverse learning experiences. Our graduates will attain the essential academic skills, information technology skills,
and spiritual characteristics to become lifelong learners and positive contributors to Church and society” (Puopolo, 2001).

The teachers and students work to put this mission into place, but there is definitely a stronger focus on the aspect of technology—there is an entire vision in place for this very entity. According to the Continuous Growth Plan for the school (Puopolo, 2001), the vision of technology at St. Augustine is:

- to integrate the use of information technologies in the classroom as a tool for the enhancement, extension, and application of the curriculum. Information technology use has been shown to aid in the development of research and writing skills and to foster curriculum integration. Information technologies in an ‘anywhere, anytime’ learning environment will equip student – learners with the advanced skills required to meet the challenges and opportunities offered by the 21st century” (p.1).

It is this vision that created the basis for the laptop program at my school.

The laptop program is open to any students entering grade 9 at the school and enrolled in an academic program. It entails making a 3 year commitment, and students must purchase or lease a specific model of IBM computer for the program (this is so students are working with the same images and programs). While the program is voluntary, cost factors might inhibit some students from participating, so there is a bursary program in place. In the first year of the program, two students were on bursary. In the second year of the program, there will be total of six students on bursary. The money for these student computers is raised through donations within the community, and this also shows the commitment to the focus of the school. In its first year, 112
students were in the program; 2 were later expelled from the program for hacking-related incidents. Approximately 10 students will not continue into grade 10 laptop learning, as they found the curriculum too difficult and will move to the applied stream where the program is not available. To date, there are 140 new grade 9 students enrolled in the program for its second year, 2002-2003. These students were selected based on an application, marks from grade 8, and learning skills which attested to their character and work habits.

The school is equipped with five laptop labs and a number of rooms with smaller hook-ups available. Students move from lab to lab and log on to their computers at the start of class. While their programs are enhanced by this tool, it is by no means the only tool they use. Approximately 40-50% of their program is delivered with the laptop computer. “Laptop students are expected to not only acquire a higher degree of technology skills, but should also be able to apply these skills in all their programs” (Chin, 2001). I think it is also important to note, however, that nonlaptop students are also exposed to technology within their programs. The school also boasts “e-place,” a classroom with café-style tables and chairs, where students can go to surf and socialize. It is the laptop program that I focused my research on, but it is still important to understand how technology impacts St. Augustine on a broader scale in order to understand the culture of the school.

All students entering our school in grade 9 are required to take a Business and Technology course that will teach them some of the basic skills needed for good technology use. They learn fundamental keyboarding skills, Internet Research skills, Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. The students in the laptop program are required
to take Communication Technology in grade 10, where they learn web page design, FrontPage, Netscape Composer, and Flash. They may also become familiar with Photoshop and CorelDraw. This course is available to nonlaptop students but is not compulsory. While it is the responsibility of the Business and Technology teachers to teach these programs, as a laptop teacher, I, too, need to have some working knowledge of these programs. I examine the area of teacher training in Chapter Two.

While I mentioned the support of the community earlier with respect to our bursary program, St. Augustine Catholic High School also has other corporate links that help enhance our technology focus. There is ongoing discussion with the Town of Markham to link with high-tech firms in the area. IBM Canada, K-12 division, has adopted St. Augustine, and they have helped launch the Laptop Learning Program, provided some technical support that I review in Chapter Two, and they have provided guest speakers to meet with students for career planning too. Palm Canada has donated 30 Palm M100 units that are being used in the grade 10 Applied English and History classes in semester one and the grade 9 Applied English and Geography classes in semester two. Texas Instruments has given our school a grant for the Navigator Program.

Our school is also involved in the Clarica Scholars Program and Canada’s SchoolNet Network of Innovative Schools project; the latter is a grant given to 30 schools for demonstrating leadership, commitment, and success in integrating technology in innovative ways to improve learning. Our school was the only high school in Ontario to receive this grant. Unionville and Markham are both affluent regions, and so support for the programs at the school is often readily available. Clearly, this is a school committed to technology-based learning, which makes my role all the more challenging.
I am excited to be part of this vision, though I am still in the discovery stages of this innovation within my school. There is much to write about in terms of research and my student participants. The train has stopped at St. Augustine Catholic High School, and I will climb aboard again when I am ready to move on, but for now, this is where I want to be—on a "Journey into Cyberspace."
CHAPTER TWO: A MAP FOR THE JOURNEY

Introduction

Disembarking at St. Augustine Catholic High School has presented many challenges for me as teacher, but it wasn’t until I put on my hat as researcher that I realized that the field of e-learning would be so interesting. The whole phenomenon of e-learning seems to be taking the education system by storm. Society has shifted from an Industrial Revolution model to an Information Revolution, and with this change comes the need for change in our school system. According to Gilster (2000):

Digital Literacy is a necessary knowledge because the Internet has grown from a scientist’s tool to a world-wide publishing and research medium open to anyone with a computer and a modem. It is the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computers. The concept of literacy goes beyond simply being able to read; it has always meant the ability to read with meaning and to understand. It is the fundamental act of cognition. (p. 215)

Had you asked me a year ago about such an issue, I would have balked at the value that educators and governments are placing on technology. But today I look at the phenomenon through a very different lens—I am a pioneer teacher in an e-learning high school. I did not intend to become immersed in e-learning, but my position of responsibility as a department head opened a door for me, and it seems as though I have walked through that door and into another world—one that revolves around technology and laptop computers.
Because I now find myself on the cutting edge of e-learning in the English classroom, it seemed only fitting to weave my Master of Education thesis around this topic. I have been unable to find any conclusive research on the impact of e-learning in the classroom, and so I believe I have a number of important issues and potential questions to address. I definitely need a map or some direction for this journey, so I think the best place to begin is to try to define what I think e-learning is. To me, it as an extension of regular learning that should empower students to become effective and independent critical thinkers. I am curious to discover if it is just that in practice.

Westreich (2000) said that “it’s the pedagogy, not the technology that is the key” (p. 30), and I agree. But I do think that the technology has the potential to become a tool to enhance the pedagogy and to create an enhanced learning environment for students.

Wiske (2000) comments

Advocates tout computers and the Internet as instant remedies for dry curriculum and didactic instruction in schools. Alarmists worry that computers will replace teachers and that the World Wide Web will poison the minds of young people.... People shape the impact of computers in school more than the features of hardware and software. (p. 69)

Will the integration of this technology improve education or make our system more effective? There seems to be very little conclusive research to support one belief over the other. I have looked at a number of factors that complement the curriculum and assessed whether students are more engaged in their learning. Larry Cuban (2000) notes that the fundamental issue is not whether new instructional tools are more efficient at accomplishing current goals with conventional methods, but instead how
emerging media can provide an effective means of reaching essential educational objectives in the technology driven knowledge based economy of this new century. (p. 178)

I also think that as part of this study it was critical for me to examine my own learning and reflect on how I can become a better teacher in an e-learning environment. There are different stages of learning for teachers, such as entry, adaptation, and transformation (Coughlin, 1999), and I wanted to understand where I fit in and how I could become a teacher who exemplified best practice in her classroom in terms of e-learning. I felt that, as a participant observer in my study, I began this process. Kleiman (2000) says that “computers are powerful and flexible tools that can enhance teaching and learning in innumerable ways. However, the value of a computer, like that of any tool, depends upon what purposes it serves and how well it is used” (p. 8). Teaching in a constructivist classroom, it was my belief that success in learning would follow because students would be empowered and engaged in their learning. I thought the laptop computer might be a tool to help produce such an environment. According to Pea (2000), technology is viewed not as a tool for improving the efficiency of traditional instructional methods based largely on the unidirectional transmission of isolated facts and skills from teacher to student, but as one element of a new constructivist approach in which teachers concentrate instead on helping their students to actively construct their own knowledge bases and skill sets. (p. 5)

There are so many issues that fall under the umbrella of e-learning that reach beyond the walls of the classroom. Because of this, I also look at the need for resources, administrative support, teacher training, and the role of teacher as facilitator in a
constructivist classroom. I hope to draw some personal conclusions about the benefits of e-learning for students and, in turn, share the potential benefits of using the computer as a new tool in a constructivist classroom.

A Look into e-Learning

When I set out to research the phenomenon of e-learning, I was surprised at how little conclusive research there was to draw from. Prior to the 1990s, there was only a small body of knowledge around this topic in the school system. During the 1990s and into the new millennium, the volume of research grew, but not as quickly as I thought it would have. With the explosion of the Information Revolution, I assumed that academics across North America would embrace this topic, but what I am discovering is that much of what is out there does not provide solid conclusions and often repeats the same patterns. I thought I would be forging my own path to a degree, and though this excites me, it was also somewhat overwhelming. I continually reminded myself that I was on a journey of discovery and that there would not always be clear directions to get me places.

In Pea’s book, Technology and Learning (2000), he notes that “technology change is proceeding at an exponential pace, and outstripping the capacity of society and social institutions, including schools, to deal with its ramifications” (p. xxii). With this in mind, I think it becomes increasingly important to examine the impact that using computers in the classroom might have. Discussion around this issue is ongoing, as noted by Goodson and Mangan (1996). They comment:

The debate about the role of the new technology in society and in schools is not and must not be just about the technical correctness of what computers can and cannot do. These may be the least important kinds of questions, in fact. Instead,
at the very core of the debate are the ideological and ethical issues concerning what schools should be about and whose interests they should serve. (p. 66)

We know many of the applications that computers are capable of, but it is more important to be sure that they are being used to serve students' learning needs in broad terms. I believe the educational goals of a school must be clear and the curriculum objectives must be met. The goals of the curriculum are outlined by the Ministry of Education, and most of these can be met in a regular classroom (one without laptop computers), but it seems to me that the goals of the school are the critical ones for an e-learning program to be successful. As I outlined in Chapter One, St. Augustine Catholic High School has set certain goals for its laptop students. In grade 9, they should be competent in fundamental keyboarding skills, Internet research skills, Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. The students in the laptop program are also required to take Communication Technology in grade 10, where they learn web page design, FrontPage, Netscape Composer, and Flash. They may also become familiar with Photoshop and CorelDraw. If students have a solid understanding of these applications, then they should be successful in solving many of the problems presented to them through the use of the laptop as a tool in their other core subjects. The actual curriculum may still present difficulties for some students though, and this is where the laptop may not enhance their learning. If the computer is a tool that can serve both these purposes—the curriculum and the goals of the school—then I believe it should be embraced.

One other problem is that "technology changes the culture of the classroom, the children, and teaching" (Gordon, 2000, p. 84). If the system and educators are not prepared for these changes, then the value of technology in the classroom will be lost and
the money spent on this initiative will be wasted. This notion is further supported in Gordon’s book *The Digital Classroom – How Technology is Changing the Way We Teach and Learn*. Gordon comments that computers are powerful and flexible tools that can enhance teaching and learning in innumerable ways. However, the value of the computer, like that of any tool, depends upon what purposes it serves and how well it is used. Computers can be used in positive ways – such as to help make learning more engaging, to better address the needs of individual students, to provide access to a wealth of information, and to encourage students to explore and create; or in negative ways – such as to play mindless games, access inappropriate materials, or isolate students. (p. 8)

Deciding on whether or not to implement technology in the classroom comes with many ramifications. The students I teach are more comfortable and much more savvy with respect to this tool than I am. Knowing how to use a computer and to access information will become “increasingly necessary to effective social and economic participation” (Becker, 2000, p. 84). Students definitely need exposure to this tool, but the question of how much and for what purposes appears still to be determined. There is a worry that the use of technology will further separate those in poorer socioeconomic areas, and there is concern over whether all schools and educators can meet the growing demands of the information age. Though we have a large number of students in the laptop program, I am certain that there are a number who did not apply simply because they could not afford it. To date, the cost of being in this program is approximately $3,000. This amount covers the cost of purchasing or
leasing a laptop computer. Students still need Internet access at home, a printer, the cost of cartridges, paper, CDs, and discs. While St. Augustine Catholic High School does offer a bursary program for families with a lower income, it certainly cannot cover everyone who might need it. For this reason alone, I have made certain, as a department head, that all our nonlaptop English courses have a great deal of technology integrated into them as well. This just furthers my belief that it is important for students to be exposed to technology in their English course.

As I researched this phenomenon, a number of key topics or issues raised by many researchers provided me with a sense of direction or a framework about what to examine in my own study. The cost of outfitting a school or students with computers is paramount, and Boards of Education must determine whether this is the best area in which to spend their decreasing funds. Once a technology initiative is implemented, the issues of on-site technical support, teacher training, availability of resources, and administrative support all become part of the mix. The availability of computers also leads to equity issues. The role of teacher as a facilitator becomes a key area to address. While all of the aforementioned topics seem to cast a shadow on technology in schools, many researchers seem to think that the benefits of using technology in the classroom still outweigh the problems. I explored many of these issues with respect to my own classroom and school. I wanted to see what the impact of a technology program on student learning was and whether it seemed to be worth all the effort.

At this point in time, St. Augustine CHS is certainly reeling under the expectations of the e-learning program. The growing pains of a new school are
compounded by the implementation of our technology program. As a teacher in this school, I am experiencing many of the issues I have been reading about in my research.

Cost of the program, the lack of technical support, administrative support, teacher training, a lack of resources, and the role of the teacher all impact the program and need to be examined.

**Cost Factors**

The decision to implement a technology initiative in any school is one that must be carefully thought out. As schools and boards of education try to budget with decreasing government funding, it becomes an even more difficult decision. While I do not want to spend too much time focusing on this issue, it is one worth mentioning. The school I teach in has earmarked a large amount of money for a technology initiative and the focus of the school is on technology, yet what has become clear is that the amount of money allocated was not enough. The program is becoming popular, and the needs are much larger than first thought. In the second year of operation, the teacher-librarian and the head of the Religion department volunteered to rewire many of the laptop labs and the cross-curricular labs. It was necessary for them to undertake this task because, had the principal waited for the school board to make the necessary changes, it would have taken months instead of weeks. Yet, in my mind, this should have been done in the summer prior to the school opening in September of 2003. It was 3 weeks before my laptop students were actually using their computers because of this. And while the teachers are dealing with these delays, what is yet to be determined is whether this initiative will afford significant educational advantages for the students involved in the laptop program, making it difficult to justify spending large amounts of money on a program that is still in
the early stages of development. Mary Puopolo, the school principal, notes that her main worry for the future of the program in terms of funding is that "finding the funds to maintain the Laptop Bursary Program and the funds to purchase laptops for the staff" will always be a concern (M. Puopolo, e-mail, September 21, 2002). In addition to this, as a laptop teacher, my laptop is already outdated, as I do not have the same model or image that my current grade 9 students have, so there will be times when they are using programs that I do not have access to on my own computer.

However, the advantage to teaching in this program at St. Augustine Catholic High School is that the technology is readily available and portable. Students travel from class to class with their laptops. This program is open to all students, but clearly the ones who come from the more affluent families have a distinct advantage in being involved in the program simply by being able to afford it. It is open to everyone, but there are not enough funds to ensure that everyone who wants to apply will. "Proponents argue that personalized laptops can open doors for shy students or others who blossom by working on their own. But they can also offload the cost of technology onto families, causing inequities" (Sheppard, 1998, p. 86). It would be interesting to determine the difference in grades between students in the laptop and nonlaptop programs. I did not come across any research that focused on this, and while I do not want it to be my focus, some initial statistics from the first year are available. In the first year of the program, there were eight sections of grade 9 Academic English running at the school. Four of these sections were laptop and four were nonlaptop. The course medians for the laptop classes were approximately 4-8 points higher than the nonlaptop courses in the first semester and 1-2 points higher in the second semester. It is curious that the exam medians were 1-2 points
lower in both semesters for the laptop classes (St. Augustine Catholic High School, 2002). It is difficult to determine why this might be, as the complexion of the classes varies so greatly. From personal experience, I know I had a stronger academic class first semester than I did second semester during the first year that the program was running. Students cover the same curriculum; it is just the delivery that is different. I hope I can address this issue through my participants.

A key decision in implementing technology also lies in the understanding that it alone does not change school practice—a school still needs curriculum goals, materials, resources, assessment and evaluation policies, and teacher development (Wiske, 2000, p. 70). All of these factors must be taken into consideration and, as with everything, they do not come cheaply, so determining where to spend funds is a critical issue.

While the e-learning program at St. Augustine Catholic High School has had much success in its first 2 years, there are a number of problems as well. I do not think that the York Catholic District School Board really looked at this phenomenon as carefully as they should have. I do not think they fully understood the magnitude and popularity of the program and so did not provide proper funding and infrastructure for this technology-based school. The Board Internet speed is extremely slow; Markham does not yet have access to highspeed Internet; the consultant in charge of computers in the classroom was moved back to the classroom in the Spring of 2002, and no one has been hired to replace him, so that there is not a contact person at the board level who is a voice for technology. As well, not enough money was earmarked for teacher inservicing. One other concern lies in the fact that warranties on teacher laptops ran out and were not renewed. No insurance was provided for these machines and, from personal experience,
my own insurance company will not insure the laptop as I did not purchase it. So while nothing has gone wrong yet, I wonder what will happen when the first teacher laptop is stolen or crashes. While a program can still be in place, these shortfalls raise concerns about the sustainability of the program.

**Lack of Technical Support**

"Imagine if every Thursday your shoes exploded if you tied them the usual way. This happens to us all the time with computers and nobody thinks of complaining."

*(Jeff Raskin)*

Another fundamental issue that the research addresses is the necessity for technical support in a school with technology-based initiatives. A school can have a multitude of computers and enthusiastic, committed teachers, but without on-site technical support, the program is doomed. Bobowick (2001) notes:

> The use of technology in schools requires continual professional development to acquaint users with new software, new hardware, and how to effectively integrate technology into curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Further, technology requires just-in-time support to deal with hardware and software problems. *(p. 75)*

Teachers need support and so do students, so that when problems occur, they are remedied immediately or within a reasonable period of time-not days later. From the research and personal experience, this seems to be the one area that will enable a technology program to be successful. To bring the importance of this issue to light, I simply have to look back at some of my journals from the opening days of my Grade 9 laptop program:
The kids arrived—all abuzz—excited to begin—they were finally going to use their computers. They hooked up, and lo and behold, 12 ports were not working. I sent Andrea, my student teacher, to the office to report it. (Thankfully, she is here right now because, without her, I would not have been able to leave the class, and often using the phone does not help as the secretaries are extremely busy and do not know the whereabouts of the technician.) Surprise—a technician was actually in the school. He came to look, but in the meantime, I’ve got 12 out of 25 students who can’t log onto the network to begin the lesson I had carefully planned. I try to show them the activity anyway, using the projector and my laptop. I have them share with someone who has a working port. Things seem to be running ok. I’m showing them how to copy and paste html code from e-library into their e-folio sections—something I have practiced numerous times in preparation for today, but, of course, it doesn’t work. My screen freezes and the template disappears. Meanwhile, the technician decides it’s not the ports—it’s a bigger problem. We packed it in and the kids talked for the last 20 minutes of class. I just wanted the bell to ring and I wanted to toss my laptop out on the Don Valley Parkway on the way home. I have never been so glad to see a day end. What will Monday bring? (Personal Journal, November 17, 2001)

I have encountered far too many frustrating days like this one in the classroom, where students experience technological difficulties and there is no one available to fix them or assist us in the classroom. The principal, Mary Puopolo, is well aware of the situation. She “has to constantly inform senior administration that technical support is crucial for
both staff and students and that we cannot afford to run an efficient program if the support is not available when problems occur” (M. Puopolo, e-mail, September 21, 2002).

At St. Augustine, the laptop technician is in the school only two mornings a week. Often, the problems just arise as you are working through something and I have to stop teaching to address them, which is really quite ridiculous as I know very little about the technical side of the machines and am unable to help the students. It means having to phone the office or library to find out if someone is around—class is interrupted—the kids get off track and then I have to pull them back in again. I'm finding the support is next to nonexistent from the technical side. Now that I'm finally feeling comfortable with the activities, the problems are occurring with the machines! (Personal Journal, January 11, 2002)

This type of frustration does not bode well for a program that will have an enrolment of 310 students for the 2002-03 school year. Wiske (2000) summed it up appropriately when he commented:

If we want new technologies to foster significant changes in the content and process of learning, we need to devise ways of changing the professional culture of teaching. Changing curriculum standards and materials, revising assessment devices and policies, supplying schools with technical infrastructure, and hiring appropriate technical personnel will all be necessary but not sufficient. (p. 74)

All of this is necessary as long as it is matched with ongoing dialogue and professional learning by staff and administrators.
To add to this problem, in May of 2002 the Board did not renew the contract with the technician supplied by IBM. While I know it was primarily a money issue, the impact of this is incredible.

*The technician is the one who images computers with all the necessary software and fixes the students' machines. He is also the one who has been paramount in capturing our hackers in the school. I am pretty frustrated but it just doesn't seem worth losing sleep over. If the board and the principal expect to run a solid program, then something needs to be done to keep him at our school* (Personal Journal, May 10, 2002).

This technician has spent the first year with us, helping iron out the kinks of the program. It is critical to keep this continuity in the program, or the teachers are inevitably going to withdraw from it. I do not think the Board realizes the gravity of this situation. I do not think they understand how frustrating it is to try to teach a well-planned lesson only to have to pull some other trick out of my sleeve to compensate for the perils of technology!

When school opened in September of 2002, I was relieved to learn that the school board had hired back the technician, but not through IBM. I did not care who hired him as long as he was going to be there to help us through our second year. It was almost as though a weight lifted off my shoulders to know that he was going to be there to help me and the other new teachers in my department. It is still not clear though how often he will be present, and this continues to be a problem that our administration is constantly bringing to the attention of senior administration at the board level.
Administrative Support

In conjunction with technical support, for a technology program to be successful, a school must have a supportive administrator or administrative team. In their book, *The Connected School*, Means, Penuel, and Padilla (2001) note that the principal helps develop strategies for promoting technology use among staff and helps acquire resources to support technology use in schools. This may include funding from outside corporations (p. 49). They also comment that the principal “is active in setting the vision for technology’s role. She/he keeps in touch with networks of technology using schools and with curriculum and school reform movements” (Means et al. p. 49). The school I teach in has a strong partnership with IBM, and the program would not be viable without that connection. It seems to me that the private sector will become more and more involved in technology initiatives as schools look for funding from other sources and not just the government. “In the new knowledge society…, the walls – literal and metaphorical – that make up a traditional school will become far more permeable as practitioners from the outside become more involved in the educational process” (Cuban, 2000, p. 178). Yet no matter how much outside influence comes into play in a technology-based school, the research seems to show one common factor—that when local administrators support changing technology, schools are more successful (Valenti, 2000, p. 84).

At St. Augustine CHS, the principal, Mary Puopolo, is extremely supportive. The whole vision of the laptop program and an e-learning school is one she wholeheartedly supports. Certainly, many of the initiatives and support for the program come from her enthusiasm and belief in technology as a tool for enhanced learning in schools. It was her initial vision of a technology-based school that set the wheels in motion for St. Augustine
Catholic High School. Within the Continuous Growth Plan for the school, Mary Puopolo has highlighted a list of Hallmarks of an Innovative School that she would like to implement at St. Augustine Catholic High School. These were developed from a research paper from the SchoolNet Network of Innovative Schools on Technology and Learning. They include:

- technology being available and used to support various types of learning
- sufficient Professional Development opportunities for teachers to learn how technology works and how it is integrated into the curriculum
- an adequate framework of support is established to promote the use of these technologies and to maintain them
- established partnerships with the community including parents, universities, colleges, and other organizations
- teachers being able to collaborate with other teachers to provide project-based, cross-disciplinary learning opportunities for students
- students being able to collaborate with one another, with teachers, and mentors, both communally and globally (Puopolo, 2001).

Looking back over the first year of the school’s growth, many of these initiatives have been implemented as Mary Puopolo continues to support technology in our school.

She has also done a tremendous amount of networking to gain community support in terms of businesses. Aside from our partnership with IBM Canada, many organizations in the community donate money toward the bursary program at the school. She was also the one who applied for and received the grant from SchoolNet – Canada’s Network of Innovative Schools. She has worked tirelessly to ensure that the program is
well promoted and supported. Her attendance at conferences and workshops brings an added element of professional development back to the staff; when I see my principal as enthusiastic as she is, it only furthers my interest. She has also been fully supportive of my own professional development by allowing me to leave school to attend conferences such as The Learning Partnership and the Educational Computing Organization of Ontario (ECOO), where I have presented my activities to audiences of teachers and administrators. Without her support, I would not have been able to enhance my own learning experiences.

One month into the second year of the program, I e-mailed Mary Puopolo to ask her about some of her thoughts on the program and its success thus far. While it was the Senior Administration and the Trustees of the York Catholic District School Board who spearheaded a technology-focused school, Mary is still in support of its inception and development. Markham is considered Canada’s High-Tech Capital so the “potential to create partnerships and mentoring programs with a high tech high school could only enhance and benefit student learners” (M. Puopolo, e-mail, September 21, 2002). Mary also still believes

*that integrating technology and providing students with this very important skill can only work to their advantage in terms of preparing them as they face numerous challenges when entering post secondary institutions or the workplace. Technology is a skill that is required and in demand in all positions of employment. What we are doing (at St. Augustine CHS) is providing our students with an additional skill that can only work to their advantage and hopefully open*
more doors to them as they graduate from our school (M. Puopolo, e-mail, September 21, 2002).

Despite Mary’s enthusiasm for the program, it has created a number of concerns within the school among the staff—both laptop and nonlaptop alike. In any school there are numerous problems that arise with students, parents, teachers, and so on. From my perspective, certain areas that needed addressing were not tended to as quickly as they should have been because of time spent focusing on the technology programs. Because Mary attended numerous conferences and meetings in support of laptop learning, it meant she was absent from the school a great deal. This was often frustrating for staff who needed to consult with her regarding numerous issues. Starting a new school is a time-consuming job, and I do not think proper balance was provided between technology and other areas. Money spent on resources for the technology programs in the school meant less money for other areas, such as Physical and Health Education, Arts, school newspaper, and so on. While I fully believe in the importance of technology, I do not want to see a loss of balance for students. I think they must develop in all aspects of their lives, not just technology, and St. Augustine Catholic High School must provide the opportunity for this to happen.

The laptop program also created a number of discipline issues that were time consuming for the administrative team. One student in particular took up countless hours through meetings with parents, technicians, board personnel, and the school psychologist as the administrative team tried to have him removed from the e-learning program based on a number of hacking-related incidents that were disrupting the learning of the other students. Valuable hours that could have been spent being visible in the school and
helping develop the school culture were taken up because of this program and student. It is one large learning curve, and I suspect the team will be better prepared to deal with the next hacking incident, as many safeguards have been put into place because of this incident. I think the staff, myself included, and administrators were naïve in our estimations of what students were capable of in terms of computer hacking issues.

One final point worth mentioning is in regard to administrative support from the Board level. While the creation of a technology-focused school was their idea, it has been difficult to advocate support for the program at times. During my e-mail interview with Mary Puopolo, she noted that she

*had to strongly advocate on behalf of the program especially since Senior Administration was considering cuts to programs due to a lack of additional funding. Senior Administration had to review some decisions that they were planning to make regarding program cuts due to the fact that our school had excess of 350 students participating in the laptop program. There were also two other schools in the board with smaller laptop programs in progress*” (September 21, 2002).

After reading this, I was amazed that a group of individuals who initiated the program were going to cut it after only one year. The lack of foresight and planning was quite astounding to me.

Regardless of this lack of vision from the Senior Administration, Mary Puopolo definitely has continued vision for the success of the program at St. Augustine Catholic High School. She
would love to see the majority of incoming grade 9 students enrolled in laptop learning. [She] believes that it will be such a tremendous help for them when applying to post-secondary institutions. The collaboration, teamwork, independence, and initiative learning that they will acquire can only increase their success in school. [She] would also love to see this program extended to students in the applied stream. Laptop learning would work so well with courses that focus on a 'practical, hands-on' approach to learning. Some courses in the applied stream that would blend really well with the technology integration are Math, Science, Geography, and Learning Strategies (M. Puopolo, e-mail, September 21, 2002).

One thing is clear to me in terms of administrative support—the laptop program at St. Augustine Catholic High School is in good hands under the direction and vision of its principal, Mary Puopolo.

**Teacher Training**

Perhaps one of the largest issues the research seems to focus on is the need for strong teacher training if a technology program is going to be successful. I can certainly share my own experiences with this issue, but I will also focus on what the research has found to date. Valenti (2000) points out that “teachers’ preparation is a key predictor of whether classroom use of technology will improve student achievement” (p. 79). How will this preparation be met? It is clear that there is a strong need for workshops and training and time to meet with colleagues to dialogue about activities and curriculum. Most people recognize how little time is given to this important issue, especially with the increase in teacher timetable loads. “Teachers currently receive little technical, pedagogic
or administrative support for these activities, and few colleges of education adequately prepare their graduates to use information technologies in their teaching” (Pea, 2000, p. 7).

After I was hired as a department head, I found setting up the basic necessities for my department quite a straightforward task, and I glided smoothly into my new role during the spring before I formally started my new position. As a laptop teacher, however, it was quite a different matter. The bomb dropped when I was required to attend a 3 day training session offered by our board. While I was enthusiastic about the possibilities of working with the laptop as a tool, I was not prepared for the overwhelming sense of frustration and anxiety I experienced. The training session was held during the first week of July 2001. At the same time, I had just started teaching an on-line Additional Qualification Course for Queen’s University and was taking a course for my Master of Education studies. I had just finished a stressful school year and was not ready to tackle all that was about to be thrown in my direction by the computer consultant, Jim LePlante.

*This was the last place I wanted to be today. I spent most of the long weekend trying to organize and contact the students in my on-line course—so many details; so many things I’m not sure about. Undertaking this right now is not what I need. I feel like I’m never going to get a holiday!*” (Personal Journal, July 3, 2001).

Even though I did not want to be at the training session at that specific time, I do understand that one of the reasons the support and training is so important is because teachers progress through a number of stages when it comes to technology implementation. Kleiman (2000) lists these stages as: entry (teachers experience
trepidation and excitement as they learn to master new tools and begin planning for the classroom), adoption (teachers begin to blend technology into practices but there is no significant change), adaptation (new technology becomes thoroughly integrated into traditional classroom practice), appropriation (teachers understand technology and use it effortlessly in their own work and in the classroom), and invention (teachers are ready to experiment with new instructional patterns and ways of relating to students and other teachers; p. 12). It is not enough to provide support and training at the entry level; it must be an ongoing process if a technology program is going to provide students with challenging activities and meet the objectives of the curriculum. Means et al. (2001) state:

Teachers need exposure to new ideas and resources for using technology in their specific subject areas and supported time to assimilate these ideas into their own plans and practices. They need the opportunity to observe expert technology-using teachers in their subject area and the opportunity to try out new approaches and receive feedback on their initial efforts” (p. 228).

The problem lies in the fact that teachers must accomplish this in conjunction with their ongoing teaching, and there is little time for collaboration among colleagues. Unless this changes, a technology program may never be completely successful.

In early June of 2001, I had met with a colleague who had some familiarity with the application I would be using at St. Augustine Catholic High School. I can now look back at that meeting and see that I was in the “entry” stage of my learning. I picked up some of the rudimentary skills needed to set up my own web page and went home and practiced. Though I had some of these initial skills, entering into the 3-day training
session, I was still filled with trepidation. I was with 11 other colleagues and the Vice Principal–none of whom I knew as we were all coming from different schools. I had no idea what their level of technology was. "There are 12 of us present and I wonder how many people are experiencing the stress level that I am? How many of them are already skilled in these areas and find this boring?" (Personal Journal, July 3, 2001). One person, who was to be part of my English Department, touted himself as a technology guru, and so I felt quite intimidated as I also learned he had applied for the headship as well. (I later discovered that he knew very little and he ended up leaving our board, much to my relief.) Nevertheless, it was the first time in a long time that I had felt inadequate as a teacher. Besides this anxiety, there was more stress for me once we received our computers:

After lunch we got our laptops—it was mayhem—we were like kids at Christmas with a new toy, but I felt like I needed my father to assemble it! I looked around and saw everyone busily hooking up wires and cables, but I didn't know what plug went where! I didn't want to appear solicitous and ask, so I tried to sneak a look here and there and finally managed to get it set up. (Personal Journal, July 3, 2001)

All of a sudden, it was like a light clicked on! "My thoughts turned to my future students—what will their stress levels be like the first day we embark on our laptop journey in my classroom? What trepidation will they be feeling?" (Personal Journal, July 3, 2001).

That day in July, I decided that e-learning was ostensibly a place for me to hang my researcher's hat. I knew I was a good classroom teacher, but would I be a good facilitator for my laptop students, and what would they gain or lose by being members of this
pioneer program with me as their teacher at a brand new high school? The importance of the constructivist teacher comes into play here. Sprague and Dede (1999) describe this view of teaching as follows:

Constructivist teachers allow student responses to drive lessons, shift instructional strategies and alter content... they encourage student inquiry by asking thoughtful, open-ended questions and encouraging students to ask questions of each other ... constructivism translates into effective classroom practice at least as demanding of teacher excellence as presentational instruction... the teacher no longer has to be in charge every minute, but can give some of the control over to the students and the technology. (pp. 7-8)

I think that my classroom has always been a welcoming and inviting place, and I believe that I have become a good constructivist teacher, but the implementation of the laptop program in my class helped give voice to my story.

Within those 3 days of training, I think I quickly moved to the adoption stage that Kleiman (2000) writes about, though not without a lot of frustration and anxiety. “The inservice was completely disorganized. We received nothing on paper and our instructor moved so quickly that I had great difficulty following his instruction” (Personal Journal, July 3, 2001). By the third day, I was overwhelmed:

About an hour before lunch, I lost it! I felt like throwing my laptop at someone. Jim (consultant) whipped through so many things this morning that my head was spinning. I couldn’t keep up with the speed at which he was moving through the various programs. If I stopped to pause, I’d lose him. Was my mounting frustration unique? I finally said “STOP.” I can’t take this. You’re throwing so
much at me—nothing is written down—there is no support. You're trying to teach me more than I am capable of. (Personal Journal, July 5, 2001)

My colleagues were very supportive, and I discovered that about eight other people were feeling the same thing. Bernie Smith, the head of science, said to me, “We were not hired to teach computers. So, do your best and that will be good enough” (Personal Journal, July 5, 2001). Jim, the consultant, vowed to put together a manual for us in September. I wondered why this had not been done already. And September came and went, and it is now 2 years later and there is no sign of a manual. Perhaps the greatest insight I gained from this training session had nothing to do with the actual laptop computer. For the first time in a long time, I felt I walked in my students’ shoes. I remind myself of this experience over and over again as I try to teach my students skills and use the computer as a tool in the classroom.

I spent the rest of the summer of 2001 training myself. I moved quickly into the “appropriation and invention” phase. I did not experience the “adoption or adaptation” phase—there was simply no time to move slowly into this realm. When September arrived, I had numerous laptop activities and problem based-learning tasks in place. Students would be creating their own WebPages around an e-folio assignment; tackling problems using Webquests; having on-line journal discussions; and more.

Beyond the 3-day training session in July, I was released from my regular teaching duties for 5 days between September and November of 2001. Though this was enough to get me started, in no way was it enough training to allow me to be as successful a teacher using technology as I wanted to be. On one of those days, I was able to collaborate with my colleague who is the other laptop English teacher at my school.
However, she is a first-year teacher, drowning in a sea of tasks that every first-year teacher must learn and deal with. English is her second teaching subject, and so I have found that I have really put the whole grade 9 laptop English program together by myself. One other day was set aside for me to meet with three other teachers from our Board who also use laptops in the classroom. Their programs are not as extensive as ours, and while it was pleasant to dialogue, I found they could offer me nothing in the way of expertise, yet they had been involved in the program for 2 years already.

The board consultant, Jim LePlante, has been extremely helpful in showing me how to implement the ideas I have, but there has been little other opportunity to dialogue with other teachers in my subject area—I am very much alone as I learn to put the program into place. Once I come up with an idea, Jim is willing and enthusiastic to help me put it in place. He has helped create chat forums and WebPages. He has been extremely helpful in troubleshooting and is intrigued by the code my grade 9s use on a regular basis in their WebPages. Even the IBM technicians are curious about what goes on in my classroom, and they log into the student WebPages on a regular basis. But even though Jim is helpful, I still find the resources sorely lacking.

Though my training has been limited, I met a group of teachers in the spring of 2002 from another school board in Ontario who have been released from teaching for an entire semester to prepare for the opening of their technology-based school. I can only dream of how wonderful that would be—to have the time to plan, dialogue, and learn about the technology without all the other responsibilities that go with teaching would be ideal. I can’t even account for the number of hours during the summer and on weekends
that I have spent planning and experimenting as I try to bring the curriculum alive through the laptop computer.

Another area the research focuses on is the need to keep teachers in these programs.

Research reviewed by a panel suggests that the typical teacher will require between three and six years to fully integrate technology into his or her teaching; in the presence of continued technological innovation, a teacher’s learning curve is thus unlikely to ever level off entirely. (Pea, 2000, p. 8)

Teachers no longer stay at one school for their careers, and often the amount of work involved in a technology program leads to burnout and frequent movement. “Technology by itself was not the silver bullet. In fact, it added yet another layer of complexity, a whole new set of things for already overworked and stressed teachers to learn and manage” (Pea, pp. 256-257). Already at Saint Augustine, laptop teachers are being removed as the school grows and they are needed in other subject areas. The other laptop English teacher who started out in the program with me will be teaching Art full time in the second year of the program. Two new teachers have been hired to cover the growth of the program, but what that means is that I will be required to provide training for these two new teachers, and while they are learning the ropes, I will again be on my own in creating activities for the grade 10 program. There needs to be better long-term planning when hiring teachers for these programs or else I think it will just be continually reinventing itself instead of progressing. The other issue that comes into play here is the loss of teachers to other positions and schools. I know that I am hoping to move into administration as the next stop on my journey. I am not sure when that will happen, but
that will create a gap in the e-learning program as well. Learning to combat these staffing problems will be one of the keys to a successful technology program.

Finally, the importance of teacher training in technology can be seen as vital in the political climate of today. More and more, teachers are being held accountable for student achievement in a results-based curriculum. The parents at our school whose children are in the laptop program are spending a great deal of money. They want results. As I noted earlier, the course medians were not drastically different between the laptop and nonlaptop English courses. Can results such as this still justify running a program that costs a great deal of money? Would these students achieve any better results without computers? The Grade 10 Literacy Test is another highly visible issue. Many students have difficulty writing, as they have become so dependent on the tools of the computer, such as spell check and grammar check. How does a teacher ensure these skills are still being learned while successfully integrating the use of the computer in the classroom? With this in mind, it becomes clear that the need for well-trained teachers is as important as ever. This is reinforced by Feldman (2000), who states:

Students’ need for support and guidance in their learning has not changed.

Today’s students may be surrounded by computers, digital information, and instant access to distant resources, but their need for interaction with adults who support their learning is as great as ever – and arguably even greater. (p. 90)

To implement successful teacher training, schools must “provide educators with quality learning experiences based on our knowledge about how adults learn, and provide continuing support that promotes opportunities for reflection, coaching, modeling, and self-assessment” (Bobowick, 2001, p. 77). I know that choosing to do my research in this
field has allowed me to gain valuable insight and information on the computer as a learning tool, but that has been my choice; there was no opportunity for me to learn about this educational tool through my board.

**Lack of Resources**

A factor that did not get much coverage in the research that I have read is the importance of good, sound resources for teachers and students. Many software companies and publishers seem to be gearing their materials toward curriculum expectations, but unless this becomes the norm, teachers will have difficulty adapting the curriculum to technology. “Children have access to computers and the Net, but they also need appropriate software and services. They need motivation to learn” (Tapscott, 2000, p. 134). The applications I work with at my school are very good, but there are also limitations that prevent me from exploring other possibilities in the classroom, such as interactive chat lines, on-line connections with authors, and other web-based programs. If these issues are not addressed, the systems become too frustrating for teacher or student use and the program falls to the wayside. When I attended the Educational Computing Conference in the spring of 2001, I noticed that most of the software developed was for elementary-age students. There were lots of programs on math and writing, but they were not suited for high school learners.

A final area of note is having a vision within a program of understanding the benchmarks of student achievement. Teachers and students must know what skills are expected, and then programs can be designed accordingly. These benchmarks were developed by a number of parties where I teach, including School Board personnel,
teachers, administrators, technicians, and corporate partners. It is my belief that all parties need to work to develop activities and software to meet these criteria.

While having these benchmarks within our program is helpful, I still find that most of what I create in the classroom is original. And while that can be quite rewarding, it is also time consuming and tiring. There are a select number of educational websites that have good resources, such as Education World. I have found one or two good Webquests on this site to integrate into my teaching. The area of resource support is one which I think needs to be addressed by software companies and educators. Our board has provided very little in terms of resources; teachers are the ones who have created them or have gone in search of them. Our staff had the opportunity to visit the IBM Software Development Lab in June of 2002. I was quite excited as I thought it would afford me the opportunity to see what was being created and how I might integrate this software into my classroom. What I discovered was that it was simply a public relations event—we were given a tour of the facility that included the personal gym, lounge areas, and games room. One positive thing did arise out of the visit:

The head of the K-12 (kindergarten to grade 12) Curriculum Division, Ann Patterson, asked me to e-mail her with my concerns and things that I am looking for. I find that I have developed everything for the laptop course with little or no support in terms of ideas from IBM, even though it is their software we are using. How can I know what types of activities I might be able to implement when I have no idea what kinds of programs are out there? They seem to think that I should come up with the ideas and they will tell me how to work them. While I understand that to a degree, I would really appreciate some
input from IBM as to what is available, and then perhaps my ideas can arise from there. (Personal Journal, June 26, 2002)

One other point of discussion came out of this tour as well. There was continued concern about the lack of females in technology-based jobs. While I will not be focusing my research around gender, I do think it will be interesting to look at the differences in how my male and female participants react and address their learning on their laptops.

**The Role of the Teacher in the Technology Classroom**

The last area I would like to focus on is that of the role of the teacher in the classroom with respect to using technology. One thing that repeats itself in the literature is the notion that the teacher becomes a facilitator in a constructivist classroom. I believe a teacher who is not comfortable with this approach will have a difficult time implementing technology successfully in the classroom, regardless of the subject area or the resources available.

Sometimes the difficulty in accepting this constructivist approach is that it is quite different from the traditional classroom. It differs from traditional pedagogy in the sense that the classroom is not a quiet place and skills are not always taught ahead of time. For example, during a novel study of *The Alchemist* by Paolo Coelho, the teacher would not simply tell the students what role certain characters play in the novel. Students would research and formulate their own thoughts and opinions on the roles of characters. They would share this with other students and come to an agreement about the role a specific character plays. The teacher is there as a guide to help students move in the direction of independent learners and critical thinkers. Their own experience has to come into play as readers in this situation as well. Tasks often do not have specific answers, and the
teacher is the facilitator of dialogue around issues and concepts and is not only the explainer. Projects often take a week or more to complete, and students often play a role in determining outcomes and evaluation (Becker, 2000, p. 98).

The beauty of using technology to reach this constructivist edge is that students are empowered to discover answers about the subject area as well as about themselves. They have latitude in designing their own products, and they have opportunity for collaboration with peers and outside experts as part of their learning process (Means et al. 2001, p. 5). This is also reinforced in the text *Technology and Learning* where Becker (2000) points out that a constructivist theory of learning suggests that subject matter becomes meaningful, and therefore understandable, only when it is used in context rich activities. Teachers whose instructional plan follows from constructivist learning theory will not only use group projects more than other teachers; they will emphasize the students’ own responsibility for designing their own tasks, for figuring out their own methods of solving problems, and for assessing their own work – all as a means of making learning tasks more meaningful to students. (p. 97)

The technology provides the teacher with a tool to fit individual learning styles and needs. It can “broaden curriculum objectives, adding more problem-solving, inquiry, project-based learning, and collaborative work” (Gordon, 2000, p. 10). One other element Gordon points out is that the computer is a tool that invites students to exercise several of their intelligences and this has to be good for learning because students can excel in areas of personal strength, whereas the traditional classroom does not always
allow for this to happen. Overall, the role of the teacher is essential in the technology-rich classroom; without an enthusiastic, motivated, constructivist teacher, the technology may well not enhance student learning.

**A Sense of Direction**

As I examined research on the subject of e-learning, a number of issues were in the forefront. I have attempted here to address most of them and have enlightened myself about the pitfalls and benefits of e-learning in the classroom. It is clear that computers are a powerful tool that can enhance and empower students and their learning. They are **interactive**, which puts them ahead of other media-based objects like television and radio. Individual school visions and plans vary, but implementing technology successfully is an onerous and complex task that needs the support of many stakeholders.
CHAPTER THREE: FINDING MY BEARINGS

Introduction

When I first started my Master of Education studies, I had no real understanding of methodologies in research. I had always assumed that every study entailed data collection through numbers, statistics, and charts. It was not until I took a Research Methods course that I realized there was a whole realm devoted to qualitative research. This was simply another step in my teaching journey as I came to realize that so much of what my students and I were doing in the classroom was really a form of research—journal writing, discussion, and viewing films (observation). Together, we were learning to interpret and understand literature, and our own experiences and voices had an impact on these interpretations and understandings. As I sorted and sifted through the array of qualitative methodologies available, I came to the conclusion that an interpretive ethnographic study using four key methods—observation, interview, thick description, and journaling—would serve me best as I embarked on my research study. This methodology has allowed me to make connections that are personally meaningful while studying a culture that is unique and different—my grade 9 Laptop Learning English class. This discovery came with a great sense of relief, as I knew I had a concrete direction to move in and knew that my thesis would be an interesting, rewarding, and challenging experience.
Interpretive Ethnography

Historically, ethnography seems to be one of the main veins of qualitative research over time, and though each methodology has its benefits and merits depending on the nature of the research being conducted, some methodologies and methods suit projects better than others. In Denzin’s book, *Interpretive Ethnography* (1997), one sentence leaped off the page and connected so wonderfully with my notion of the journey I was taking that I knew that I had found the right methodology to use in my study. He states, “to read ethnographically is to travel, to dream and to be elsewhere” (p. 237). If I can create this world of e-learning for myself and readers of my work, then I feel we can both learn from this experience. I also had to remember that “research has a temporal dimension. The research text has boundaries and is defined by the time over which the research took place” (Packwood & Sikes, 1996, p. 338). I believe that interpretive ethnography (Denzin, 1994) best suits my topic and needs because it “comes from the anthropological tradition of illuminating patterns of culture through long-term immersion in the field, collecting data primarily by participant-observation and interviewing” (Glesne, 1999, p. 9). In other words,

ethnography is more than the record of human experience. The ethnographer writes tiny moral tales – tales that do more than celebrate cultural difference or bring another culture alive...the tale is a means of experience for the reader. It is a vehicle for readers to discover moral truths about themselves (Denzin, 1997, p. xiv).
Just as important, though, I also learned about myself as I observed my grade 9 English class for 5 months and collected data through the methods mentioned, which I describe in greater detail further on in this section.

Ethnographers “write and speak about culture not only for the purpose of analysis but also for critique, intervention, and inspiration” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 17). As teacher and as learner, I feel I have been able to put myself in the shoes of the e-learner, and I hope that others can benefit from my sharing my experience as well. Ethnography also appeals to me as an English teacher because it is similar to literature in so many ways. “Ethnography should broaden our horizons, awaken our capacity to care about people different from us, help us know how to converse with them, feel connected – similar to what good literature may do” (Ellis & Bochner, p. 26). As Ellis and Bochner also note, “ethnography tries to deepen and enlarge our sense of human community” (p. 18). What I learned from my study and my experiences within the culture of e-learning has inspired me to reflect on my own teaching practices.

Because ethnography allowed me as researcher to immerse myself in this e-learning culture, I was able to paint a picture of my classroom, my students, and the 4 particular student participants in my study, using thick description (Glesne, 1999). And I was reminded by Denzin (1997) that “although I was adding my own self-reflections to this project, my aim was always to keep my text anchored in the worlds of lived experience” (p. xv)—meaning that of my student participants as well as my own. Ethnography also places a “strong emphasis on exploring the nature of a particular social phenomenon, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 248). I was more interested in discovering how effective e-
learning is in my grade 9 English program than producing a formal theory for others to measure their own research against. I was investigating this topic not just to produce change for myself as teacher, but to examine this new learning tool to discover something about it—those discoveries emerged as I undertook this study and took it to completion.

Ethnography also means writing about people and is “usually interested in describing the culture of a group of people and learning what it is like to be a member of the group from the perspective of the members of the group” (Johnson & Christensen, 2000, p. 29). It is trying to “find out the typical ways of thinking and feeling, corresponding to the institutions and culture of a given community and formulating the results in a most convincing way” (Denzin, 1997, p. xvi). I examined the culture within St. Augustine in Chapter One, and I believe that the picture of St. Augustine Catholic High School that I have created has helped me to understand the culture of a technology-based school. Further, upon meeting my student participants in Chapter Four, I believe readers will visualize more clearly the place where my students learn and where I teach and learn.

It took me a long time to recognize that interpretive ethnography was a legitimate methodology and that writing from personal experience and being the authoritative voice in my study was the only journey I could take. Ellis and Bochner (1996) comment that as ethnographic writers “we collect ourselves by carrying back stories and artifacts, finding and losing and finding ourselves through the objects and images we gather around us—this process augments the dialectical and self-reflexive qualities of ethnographic inquiry” (p. 34). I had to believe that without the boundaries of quantitative research I could create a piece of writing that I would be proud of and that would honor my experience and that
of my students. By doing this, what I hoped to achieve is best summed up by Denzin (1997). He says that in using interpretive ethnography, “the desire is not to put words or interpretations in people’s mouths but to create the spaces so their voices can be heard, to write and read with them, for them, and not just about them” (p. 239). I believe my voice and the voices of my students have been heard in my study and that by listening, much can be learned about the culture of e-learning and what it means to journey into cyberspace.

Thick Description

According to Glesne (1999), thick description is defined as “description that goes beyond the mere or bare reporting of an act (thin description), but describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations, and circumstances of action” (p. 22). This, coupled with Schwandt’s definition (2000) of thick description as “not simply a matter of amassing relevant detail. Rather, to thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode” (p. 255).

Using thick description and photographs, I was afforded the task of doing what I often ask my students to do—write descriptively. For the first time in a long time, I was walking in their shoes, and it was not as easy as I imagined it would be. Not only did it give me a greater appreciation for the skills of the writers I read, it reminded me that my students are not experts and that often they are trying their best. I have tried to capture the attitudes, values, norms, practices, patterns of interaction, perspectives, and multiple interpretations of St. Augustine Catholic High School and my own e-learning classroom. I have tried to paint as a vivid a picture as possible of my 4 student participants so that
their personalities come alive for the reader. I want the reader to try to know my students as well as I did—to feel as though they were in the classroom with us, experiencing the trials and tribulations of e-learning.

The use of thick description as a method in my study “gives the context of an experience, states the intentions and meanings that organized the experience, and reveals the experience as a process. Out of this process arises a text’s claim for truth, or its verisimilitude” (Denzin, 1994, p. 505). Thick description helped me to set the context for my own perspectives to emerge. “Contextualization helps make the ethnographer more aware of the relationship between the context and the observed behavior and it helps readers of the research report to know where and to whom they can apply research results” (Johnson & Christensen, 2000, p. 326). I hope to make a contribution to disciplinary knowledge, and I think this initial thick description helped get me started (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, p. 253).

Selection of Participants

My 4 student participants were selected semirandomly. Each student in my class filled in an initial survey on their comfort level and knowledge of computer use during the first week of the semester (See Appendix A). From those surveys, I grouped the students into three categories: little or no experience with computers, some experience, and expert user. I wanted my participants to cover a broad range of abilities from the first-time computer user to the expert user. Ideally, I wanted 2 males and 2 females in my study, but because the selection was random, this was not guaranteed. From the first category, I drew one name—a female whom I will refer to as Vanessa Christenses. From the second category, I drew two names, one male and one female—Lucy Reider and
Martin Alexander Young. I felt this category housed the largest number of my students, so selecting 2 participants from here was fair. And from the final category, I drew one name—Steve Wagner. I felt it important to have a cross section of computer knowledge and experience from my participants to try to better understand how the computer as a learning tool impacted their daily classroom learning and their learning from home. I wanted representation from both genders as well to help me come to see some of the differences in learning styles males and females might experience. Though they had their unique qualities and character traits, they were similar to many of the e-learners in my grade 9 English classroom.

Once I invited my 4 participants to join me in my study and they accepted, I thought it was important that their voices be heard, and so I invited them to submit a biography that would give the reader a sense of who they were. Though I also contributed my thoughts, I wanted to know their views of themselves as learners and people and found it interesting to discover that sometimes my perceptions and theirs were quite different. I think this personal contribution from the student participants gives a better sense of the students themselves because they are not simply relying on my interpretations. Denzin (1997) comments on this very issue: "The writer can no longer presume to be able to present an objective, non-contested account of the other’s experiences. Those we study have their own understandings of how they want to be represented" (p. xii). I also wanted to learn as much as possible about who the students were, both outside and inside my classroom. I think that what a student brings into the classroom in terms of background, home life, extracurricular involvement, life experiences, and attitudes is just as important as the persona they present inside the walls.
of the classroom. Perhaps they, too, will see the experience of being a participant as a journey. I was truly excited to have them as traveling companions for the 5 months of my journey.

Aside from their student biographies, the participants chose their own pseudonyms for the study. These, too, seemed to me to be quite reflective of their personalities! Participants were also responsible for some journal writing and interviewing, which I will detail further on in this chapter. Right from the start, I found my rapport with my participants easy and relaxed. I think this was because the class in its entirety was so easy to work with that my participants were just a microcosm of this environment. I wanted to give my study a personal perspective and have the culture of the school and the students shine through. I think the data collected and the inclusion of the thoughts of my participants allowed this to happen.

**Data Collection**

Once the participants were on board and the necessary consent forms were filled out, I was ready to proceed with data collection. I decided to use three other methods aside from thick description within my interpretive ethnographic study. They were observation, journal writing, and interview. As an English teacher, I have always encouraged journal writing and have kept a personal journal since I was 7 years old. It is also part of my normal routine to observe the students in my classroom as I look for changes in behaviour or difficulties they might encounter while learning. And, quite frankly, I enjoy a good discussion now and then, so these three methods seemed to fit nicely with my personality. I did not feel overwhelmed or intimidated by any of these methods, and I think they provided me with a variety of data. If a student were less
comfortable in an oral situation, then perhaps the journal writing would allow that student to express their voice without anxiety. If a student was not that strong orally or with written skills, then my observations might produce some valuable information and insights into that student's e-learning. There was also strong support from my research that led me to believe these three methods would serve me well in my study.

Observation

The first method I used was observation. "Observation consists of gathering impressions of the surrounding world through all relevant human faculties" (Adler & Adler, 1994, p. 378). Adler and Adler also note that "the naturalness of the observer role coupled with its nondirection makes it the least noticeably intrusive of all research techniques" (p. 380). I could not think of a better method of data collection than simply observing my participants as they work in the natural setting of the classroom with their laptop computers. Historically, observation is also a key method in ethnographic work. Observation of the participants took place on an ongoing basis during the class and was dictated by the various activities that were taking place during the lesson. I kept field notes of my observations that I used as data. Notes were taken via paper and pen and via the laptop computer. In particular, I focused my observations on my students' use of laptops, their ability to stay focused and on task, group interaction, problem solving initiatives and approaches (i.e., during a Webquest), and research skills. I believe I gained so much from watching students' interactions during these periods of learning. I was "an active, participating voyeur -
a detective who hears and sees the sounds and consequences of the other's voices and actions” (Denzin, 1997, p. 41).

The method of observation did not end there though; I included myself as "participant observer" in order to gain a full perspective of my topic. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) have pointed out the importance of this method. They state that both the “observer and observed are inhabitants of a shared social and cultural field, their respective cultures different but equal, and capable of mutual recognition by virtue of a shared humanity” (p. 256). It was definitely advantageous for me to place myself in the same position as my students and for them to witness their teacher as a learner as well. In this way, we were able to work towards enhanced understanding and learning in our classroom. This allowed my written text to become a “mise-en-scene – a meeting place where original voices, their inscriptions (as transcribed texts), and the writer’s interpretations to come together” (Denzin, 1997, p. 41). This role also allowed me to obtain full descriptions and a deeper understanding while immersing myself in experiences similar to those of my participants. According to Glesne (1999),

participant observers are not merely visiting with the hope to see the sights, have a good time, and in the passing, learn a little about how the natives live. Researchers have ends-in-view, purposes-however incipient- that underlie their presence in particular settings and direct their behavior while there. (p. 64)

I felt I would not be doing my study justice if I had not put myself into the mix. Denzin (1994) notes that “the postmodern sensibility encourages writers to put themselves into their texts, to engage writing as a creative act of discovery and inquiry” (p. 504). I also
have kept a journal of my experiences and observations since I started teaching at St. Augustine Catholic High School, and I drew on those data as part of my study.

One thing I needed to remember with observation was that I could not rely on this method alone. Adler and Adler (1994) point this out when they note:

Where the future of observation shines more brightly is in the use of this technique as an integrated rather than primary method. When employed as part of a methodological spectrum that includes member articulated data gathering strategies such as in-depth interviewing or participant observation, it is the most powerful source of validation. (p. 389)

Clearly, then, my ethnographic study would be incomplete without the method of observation, as

the validity or authority of a given observation is determined by the nature of the critical understandings it produces. These understandings are based on glimpses and slices of the culture in action. Any given practice that is observed is significant because it is an instance of a cultural practice that happened in a particular time and place. This practice cannot be generalized to other practices; its importance lies in the fact that it instantiates a cultural practice, a cultural performance, and a set of shifting, conflicting cultural meanings. (Denzin, 1997, p. 8)

The use of observation allowed me to present a picture of the culture of e-learning at St. Augustine Catholic High School without being overly intrusive. In hindsight, I believe it was a good choice as a method for this journey into cyberspace.
Journal Writing

Journal writing also provided my participants and me with an avenue of expression that held a higher level of comfort. As I noted earlier, I have kept a journal since I was 7 years old, though not as regularly as I used to. It is a cathartic experience and one that lends itself to an ethnographic study. I started keeping a journal of my own learning experiences as a new “e-learner” when I first started teaching at St. Augustine Catholic High School. I did this primarily to have a place to voice my frustrations as I tried to master the laptop computer. It turned out to be the perfect avenue for my own observations and interpretations of my own learning journey.

I hoped to discover whether many of the same frustrations, anxieties, and triumphs that I was experiencing in the first years as an e-learning teacher were similar to the experiences of my participants as first-time e-learners. This notion tied in with a point that Johnson and Christensen (2000) made when they noted: “When ethnographers conduct research, they are usually interested in describing the culture of a group of people and learning what it is like to be a member of the group from the perspective of the members of the group” (p. 29). As Johnson and Christensen also pointed out, “culture is a system of shared beliefs, values, and practices that members of a group use in understanding their world and relating to others” (p. 321).

All students in the class were asked to write a journal response to a variety of issues concerning laptop learning or the activities they were working on. I collected these journals, and those belonging to the 4 participants were photocopied and kept for data collection purposes. I felt that inviting my students to express their thoughts through a journal three to four times during the course of the study helped me learn
about the culture as my participants viewed it. I asked them something specific to respond to for their first journal entry. I asked them to comment on their feelings about being an e-learner after a short period in the program. I asked them to comment on their comfort level with the computer, any frustrations or elations they felt while doing some of the activities, and what might have helped them feel more successful. I thought an open-ended journal response would help them feel comfortable with this method of communication. I hoped the freedom of written expression would allow them to be open, honest, and reflective with their thoughts on e-learning in my classroom. Certainly, the circumstances surrounding our learning experience did dictate some direction in their writing, but I did not want to limit their thoughts. I believed that as students were invited to share their journals, more discussion would arise as their comfort level increased. Sharing their journals and mine also allowed me to fit into that culture without being intrusive.

**Interview**

As I continued to encourage and observe my participants, I used interview, another method of qualitative inquiry that fit under the umbrella of ethnography. The interviews took place in the Library Resource Center. The teacher-librarian was present in the library but not privy to the actual interviews. I taped all the interviews and then had the tapes transcribed to use as data. I questioned my participants at the beginning of the semester to gauge their comfort level with computers and to note any anxieties or fears they might have. An interview in the middle of the program gave me a glimpse into their thoughts on the program and the activities. This interview gave me a good base of data to formulate some thoughts on the usefulness of the program and the progress made by my
participants. The questions for this interview can be found in Appendix B. "The very virtue of qualitative interviews is their openness. No standard techniques or rules exist for an interview" (Kvale, 1996). "Ethnography is an emergent, fluid, and responsive approach to qualitative research because the original research questions frequently change" (Johnson & Christensen, 2000, p. 324). The idea of starting with some set questions but having the freedom to veer from those questions to learn more about my participants and their perspectives on e-learning appealed to me. As Kvale notes, "the purpose of the qualitative research interview...is to obtain descriptions of the lived world of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena"—in this case, e-learning (p. 30). Kvale also details seven stages of an Interview Investigation in her book, Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research. I think this method of interview provided me with some important data throughout the course of the semester. Schwandt (1994) comments on the interpretive undertaking as the practice of "actively debating and exchanging points of view with our informants. It means placing our ideas on a par with theirs, testing them not against predetermined standards of rationality but against the immediate exigencies of life" (p. 132). I also think that the interviews led to a change in my teaching methods as I discovered that student perceptions of e-learning were different from mine, and this was helpful for me as a teacher as an outcome of my research.

I also chose to interview my principal, Mary Puopolo, as part of the study. Gaining an administrative opinion provided me with another voice to add to my research. And, because I am interested in becoming an administrator myself in the future, I found it a helpful exercise in learning about e-learning from a perspective found outside the
classroom. The interview with her shed some much-needed light on areas such as funding, teacher training, and administrative support within a program.

Clearly, interview was just as important a method as observation and journal writing, and I think it took all three methods to help me fully understand the journey I was on. The questions for Mary Puopolo’s interview can be found in Appendix C.

Assumptions and Insights

As I set out to collect data from my grade 9 e-learning class in September 2002, I was entering the classroom with some assumptions and expectations. I had taught the same course twice the previous year, so this time I was more familiar with the course content and the use of the laptop computer. While the experience was new for my students, it was no longer brand new for me. Though I was still learning, I certainly felt less anxious than I had a year earlier, so I think I was better able to handle problems and questions that arose within the class. Because of this, I think I did not transfer the same amount of anxiety and frustration onto these students as I did when I first taught the course. I think this may have resulted in a better atmosphere in general in the classroom, as I was better prepared for some of the curves e-learning threw my way.

As well, having taught the course twice, I had a better sense of the general learning styles of e-learning students, so my instructions were clearer and I was better able to field questions from my students. Again, I think this created a stronger learning environment for everyone involved.

As with any study, there were also insights gained into my research, my students, and myself. In my selection of participants, I had no control over whether I was selecting a student who was strong verbally or with written skills. This certainly made a difference
in terms of the information I could glean from a journal or an interview. I was not able to select students according to their academic ability, so difficulties with curriculum or curriculum that was too easy had the potential to create a whole other set of issues within the research. Finally, because I was operating within some curriculum guidelines, student expertise might never be fully recognized if an assignment or task did not allow for a student to demonstrate their full capability within the e-learning environment. I hoped this wouldn’t happen, and I think a number of assignments certainly allowed students to move beyond the confines of the assignment toward a greater demonstration of their skill level and thought processes.

One final insight into any study involving students is that a teacher is never guaranteed the type of student he/she will have in the class. Some years I have had classes that are phenomenal in terms of self-directed learning; other years, it has been a battle every step of the way to have students learn and produce. As a teacher, and in this case a researcher, I did not know at the start what type of classroom environment or students I would be teaching and studying. Luckily, as teacher and researcher, I ended up with a terrific group of students to conduct this study with.

**Ethical Considerations**

Finally, the impact of e-learning was the primary focus of this study, and I did not anticipate any risks to the students participating. Students reflected on the use of the computer as well as issues that arose out of the curriculum in class. Some topics from the curriculum, such as foster parenting, abuse, and teenage love, might have been upsetting or disturbing to some of the students. I approached these topics with care and compassion for all students, not just the 4 student participants. I expected that students’ emotional
responses to these issues would be included in their journals or spoken about during interviews. Their responses were examined, but most of the students were not asked to address these questions beyond the normal curriculum requirements. Any concerns that arose within the context of the study or within the regular teaching of the class were handled according to proper policy and procedure as outlined by the St. Augustine Catholic High School and the York Catholic District School Board.

There were minimal anticipated risks for either physical or psychological/emotional harm to any of the participants from the research aspects of this project. All precautions were taken to ensure that student participation in the research process was carefully thought out. During the student and researcher interview process, the interviews took place in the school’s Library Resource Center. The teacher-librarian was present in the library but not privy to the content of the interview.

I found that the study progressed smoothly throughout the semester. It was a pleasure to work with my student participants, and I consider myself lucky to have encountered such bright young teenagers during the course of my research. The Ethics Application to the Brock University Research Ethics Board is appended. (See Appendix D.)
CHAPTER 4: MY TRAVELING COMPANIONS

"I am not a teacher: only a fellow-traveler of whom you asked the way. I pointed ahead—ahead of myself as well as you."

(George Bernard Shaw-Playwright)

Introduction

Throughout this chapter, participant responses, journal entries, and my personal journal entries are in italics.

Teenagers

I am a teenager, fourteen to be exact; too old to be considered a child, but too young to be an adult. Maybe that is why I feel like I don't fit into any particular mould. If I said that I was not the stereotypical teen, what would that mean? Whose stereotype am I looking at? Am I looking at the type of teen set before me by television and my somewhat brainwashed peers who believe in this mould? If I was, I would be a person who is often said to be vastly different from other people of my age group for various reasons and would be, and often am, classified as a nerd!

But how can my fellow teens say that when most of them only see me in an academic environment? Most of them do not know me; they do not know my problems, concerns, or consider how I feel when I am put into some group that only describes one aspect of my personality. It seems that they are eating away at my qualities as if they are wrong or undesirable. They may think that they are 'helping' me by pushing forward into what they say is reality, and how I'm supposed to be. Here's an interesting thought though...
Maybe I do not want to live in a reality where people are judged by how 'cool' they are. I don't want to live their dreams; I want to live my own. I don't want to be used as a puppet on a string, the way the media has infected the minds of some of my peers. I do not want to be constricted to only one way of thinking. I do not...wait, for once again I come to the major issue set before me. I am only an 'in-betweener' looked at from the outside. How does my voice have any chance to be heard? Maybe as my fellow teens say, I should be quiet, go with the flow, and just try to be cool. The only problem is: DO I WANT TO? (Steve Wagner, Journal Entry, September, 2002)

When I first decided to go on this journey, I never imagined that I would end up with such wonderful traveling companions. I have been teaching for almost 14 years, and each time a new semester rolls around, I always wonder what each class has in store for me. I have had my share of phenomenal students and those that tried my patience day after day after day. And so, when I decided that my grade 9 e-learning English class would be a part of my research, I was really taking a risk, as I did not know what type of class I would get or what type of learners would be involved.

During the summer of 2002, when I started to formulate my thesis and the approach I would be taking, I kept thinking about the grade 9 class I had just finished teaching in June of 2002. They were an unruly bunch—many lovely students—but their efforts were often in vain as six particular students changed the dynamics of the class daily. And as much as I tried to like them, I just did not. I did not enjoy coming to class, and I did not find them rising to the challenges of laptop learning. So when September of 2002 rolled around, I was very nervous and anxious to meet my future participants. I wondered if they would travel well with me or whether they would be equipped enough
to start the journey and ready to get off at the next station in January of 2003. And now, as I look back over the course of the semester, I realize that someone was looking out for me... I was blessed with a wonderful group of students—hands down the best grade 9 class I have had in 14 years of teaching.

The students at our school are an interesting group. The grade 9s come from five different Catholic elementary feeder schools in the area, but this year we have had a number of students arrive from outside the area. They have heard of the technology focus of our school, have come for an interview with administration, and then have been accepted into our community. The grade 10s seem to have settled in nicely and are finding their place in the social hierarchy. The grade 11s have lost the edge and attitude they arrived with in their first year having been forced to leave their other high school due to boundary shifts. They seem pleased to be back this year, and though they are young, they are quickly developing a sense of leadership and responsibility towards their personal education. There is an attitude of respect and academic focus permeating the air and a strong sense of school spirit developing as students get involved in a multitude of activities. Because St. Augustine is so new, the sense of tradition that is normally found in schools is not present, but I believe it will develop over time as students and staff feel their way through the first few years.

Throughout the first few days of the semester, my grade 9 English class was quiet as mice—respectful, attentive, and shy. It wasn't until we did an "ice-breaker" activity that I began to see some of their personalities shine through. I have 29 students in the class: 18 females and 11 males. Collectively, they represent eight different cultures; Greek, Italian, Chinese, Portuguese, Philippine, African-American, Polish, and English.
Curiously, within those first few days, there was no indication that I would have a
dominant student who would control the dynamics of the class—what a relief! What I have
since discovered is that these 29 students have a wonderful rapport with each other and
with me. Our classes function smoothly, and they are the most focused group of 14-year-
olds I have ever had the privilege of working with. Knowing this, I breathed a sigh of
relief, as I knew whoever was selected to be my participants would be a good choice—
there was not one student who I did not think I would want to work with.

And so, the selection process began—my surveys were conducted and the 4
students were randomly chosen as outlined in Chapter Three. I took the opportunity of
writing down my initial thoughts about my 4 travelers the moment their names were
chosen. I wanted my first impressions to be recorded so I could determine how much
growth and change these students underwent through the course of the semester.

Now Boarding

In order to get to know the passengers on this journey, I have combined my own
thoughts with their own autobiographies. I told them over Christmas I’d be asking them
to write an autobiography for me to help paint a picture of themselves in the study. I told
them they would need a pseudonym as they are under 18 years of age, and they chuckled
as they started to think of some of the names they might create or the personas they might
embrace! I will give them some specifics that need to be shared, like family make-up and
where they live, but I will also give them free rein to describe themselves with humor,
emotion, or creativity (Personal Journal, November 5, 2002). The guidelines for their
autobiography can be found in Appendix K and, overall, I think they’ve described
themselves fairly well.
Passenger #1–Lucy Reider

Lucy is a quiet, polite individual who seems quite focused in her approach to class so far. She is a pretty girl with blonde hair, stylish, and likes to add some neat jewellery to her appearance. She is Canadian from Irish, Scottish, and English descent. She has one ear that is double pierced and wears a silver link chain that is funky and presents a bit of a different side to her overall appearance. Her uniform is worn neatly and with pride. She is generally quiet in class, but eager to put her hand up and volunteer. Her permission form was signed right away; I think she is quite shy. I would like to see her interact outside of the classroom. I think perhaps once she is in a group doing some group work, she may be a little more forthcoming. In one of her early pieces of writing where she responded to an assignment on identity, she wrote, *But when you have an opinion on something that affects our day-to-day life, you should really let people know where you stand. For rules and laws are only changed when someone shares an opinion and others around them begin to see another side to the story (The Breakfast Club Assignment, September 13, 2002).* I am impressed with her ability to look beyond the walls of our school and to the greater good of society. I did not expect a student to have such a global sense of the world at age 14.

Lucy’s initial response to the survey I sent out indicated: *I’m really excited about being in the laptop program. I really think that it will help me in the future when I need a job. I think I will do quite well in the program, seeing as I’ve had a computer at home for all my life. I’m looking forward to using all of the programs and making presentations*
and slide shows, etc. (Lucy's survey, September 4, 2002). I met Lucy's mother at Curriculum night, and she told me that Lucy arrived at St. Augustine knowing no one, and I think that in itself shows courage and confidence. It added another dimension to her character for me, and I look at her with a new sense of awe—to be 14 and confident enough to make such a decision is wonderful—I'll definitely have to ask about that in our first interview (Personal Journal, October 5, 2002). I am looking forward to finding out how Lucy has managed socially and if she is pleased she made the decision to come here. I discovered during our interview that Lucy really wanted a change of environment. She commented, First of all, I had a lot of problems with the kids from my old school who would be going to Brother Andre, where I was supposed to go. The girls wear their kilts up to their chins and their tops are so tight they can barely breathe, and I just didn't want to go somewhere where it would be like that, and if I wasn't like that, would I be considered different? So I wanted a change of environment and the chance to meet new people" (Interview—Lucy Reider, November 12, 2002).

And finally, Lucy views herself in this way:

My name is Lucy and I am 14 years old. I was born on December 20, 1988. I have dark blonde hair with red and blonde streaks, brown eyes, and I am 5'3. My friends would describe me as being funny, someone who always listens to their problems, someone who is always there for them. I have an awesome sense of humour, someone who can always get a person to smile. I consider myself trustworthy, honest, someone who loves to talk and engage in conversation. However, most of all, I consider myself a great friend.

My favourite sports are skiing and swimming. In my spare time, I read, hang out with my friends, watch T.V., talk on MSN, and listen to music. I like listening to Shania
Twain, Oasis, and, more recently, the Harry Potter soundtrack. My favourite movies are Legally Blonde and the Harry Potter movies. My favourite books are anything by Kit Pearson, anything by S.E. Hinton, the Harry Potter books, and the Chicken Soup for the Soul books. If I could change anything about myself, I would want to have gone through my school years without having any enemies or problems with any of the other students. The things that I like best about myself are that I can make anyone smile and that people can trust me with anything.

My family consists of four people including myself. I have my Mom and Dad and a younger brother who’s 11. My Mom and I have a very close relationship. We spend a lot of time talking and I go to her with most of my problems. We do a lot of things together, like shopping, and I can always trust her. My Dad and I are also very close. We spend a lot of time together watching T.V. and he takes my brother and I to a lot of things, like baseball games and skiing. My brother and I have not had a very close relationship, though more recently we have started spending a lot more time together. My brother and I fight a lot, but the fighting seems to have calmed down a lot. Since my brother is younger, it is one of my responsibilities to help look after him, so I help him with his homework and play games with him. My family has a lot of relatives, but none of them live very close. I have relatives in Nova Scotia, Montreal, St. Mary’s, London, and Ottawa. My Mom was born in Ottawa and my Dad was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia. My brother and I were also born in Halifax. A year after my brother was born, we moved to Thousand Oaks, California, where we lived for about two years. We then moved to Toronto, and then to Markham, where I am currently living. This is the 6th house that I have lived in! My ancestors are from England, Scotland, and Ireland, but my family is
many generations Canadian. We do not follow any specific cultural traditions other than the usual ones; Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving.

My Dad works for The Business Development Bank of Canada, BDC. His work involves financing companies. My Mom is a full time Mom, and she is also a fitness instructor at Goodlife Fitness. My family and I have taken a lot of vacations. I have been to Florida, California, Cuba, and Quebec. This March Break, we are going to Cuba with another family. We have a fish, a bird named Sunny, and a dog named Cooper.

I have lots of really good friends that I like to hang around with. My best friend and I have been friends for 9 years. She's a lot of fun to hang out with, she always has me laughing, she's really kind to others, she's honest, and I can always go to her with my problems and trust her to help me out. My new friends at school are all really nice too. They were all so welcoming and they are a lot of fun to hang out with. Some of the things that bother me about my best friend are that since we go to different schools, she seems to be different around her school friends more than she is around me. One of my other friends bothers me just because she is so easily distracted and so it's hard to keep her attention focused on one thing. When my friends and I are together we laugh a lot, talk, listen to music, and watch movies. (Lucy's Autobiography, January 1, 2003)

As the semester winds to a close, Lucy has definitely become a class favourite. The crush she has on a grade 11 student in our school who reads the morning announcements has brought us all many laughs as she pleads to take the attendance down to catch a glimpse of "him." The girls help her out by scouting out who he is talking to in the halls, and the boys, well, they just shake their heads in awe of this female behaviour
which they can’t quite grasp! She has turned out to be a delightful student who has definitely flourished in the school, and I think she is quite happy to have made the decision to come here.

**Passenger #2—Martin Alexander Young**

Martin sits beside Lucy, which is total coincidence. He is also extremely quiet and of ethnic descent—Portugese. He is very polite, but I do notice he cracks a smile quite easily, and I enjoy watching him chuckle over a silly joke. He is neat and organized and quite focused on his school work. He seems to talk quite easily with the girls who sit in his area of the classroom, but doesn’t display any immature behaviour that is often part of the package with a 14-year-old boy (though I see him looking at Lucy in awe when she talks about the grade 11 heart throb!). While he is generally prepared, he did not have his permission form signed for me right away. He is dark haired, with rich brown eyes. His uniform is tucked in, and he seems pleased to be here.

After examining Martin’s response to the identity assignment, I have discovered that he is quite forthright in his opinion; this surprised me a little, as he is so quiet in class that I did not expect him to be so outspoken in his writing. He wrote, *By speaking up, you are helping rather than hurting. As well, people respect those who speak their minds. Even though I try to tell my opinions, it is difficult to defy the pressure from other teenagers, so I don’t always do it (The Breakfast Club Assignment, September 13, 2002).* I have noticed that Martin has continued to remain fairly quiet in class throughout the semester, but his writing continues to reflect his thoughts and observations (Personal Journal, December 16, 2002).
Martin’s initial response to the survey: I am looking forward to the possibility of doing assignments in school while accessing the Internet or other programs that I need to help me. Also, I am excited about learning courses like science and math on the computer. I never would have imagined doing this until I heard about the laptop program. Even though I am looking forward to it, I do have some concerns. How can we learn things on the computers? What programs would help learning the different courses more than just textbooks?” (Martin’s survey, September 4, 2002) And now, it is time to share Martin’s thoughts about himself, so climb aboard:

I want my pseudonym to be Martin Alexander Young. It is after my two favourite hockey players (Martin Brodeur and Alexander Mogilny) and my favourite football player (Steve Young). My height is between 5 feet 5 inches to about 5 feet 7 inches (I haven’t checked in a long time). My hair colour is black, and my eye colour is hazel green. I have really short hair. My friends say that I am loyal, funny, helpful, kind, smart, and friendly. I play soccer for a competitive team, and I love to play all kinds of other sports with my friends such as hockey, basketball, and football.

I like to listen to rap, hip-hop, R&B, and some classical music. I enjoy playing sports a lot, I play video games and I like to watch movies with my friends and brothers. In school, I am trying to do my best in high school and go to a good university. I want to be a doctor, a lawyer, or a police officer. I haven’t decided yet what I wanted to be. I also want to recover from my knee injury so I can rejoin my team as soon as possible. My favourite books are any mystery books and Lord of the Rings. I also liked the first two Lord of the Rings movies. I enjoy watching a lot of comedy movies and also some horror, mystery and action. I probably would not change anything about me because I am pretty
happy with who I am but if I had to change something about me, I would not be as shy as I am. I like the fact that I am athletic and smart.

In my family, I have a mother, a father, and two brothers. My brothers do try to annoy me at every chance possible but they are still really nice to me. They help me with stuff and they take me to movies or to go play sports with their friends. My parents are strict but they are really loving. They buy me stuff and they help me with homework. They do a lot for me. I have a lot of relatives. I have 5 aunts on my mom’s side and 8 first cousins. On my dad’s side, I have 1 uncle, 1 aunt and 7 first cousins. I also have a lot of second cousins and other relatives. My relatives live in all sorts of places like Ottawa, San Francisco, Boston, Brazil, India, Australia, England, Portugal, Macao and a lot of other places. My parents come from a Portuguese colony in India. This place is called Goa (on the coast. 1 hour flight from Bombay). My dad was born in Goa and my mom was born in Mozambique; she and the rest of her family went back to Goa. Their ancestors came from Portugal. I don’t really think we have any traditions that are special to our family. There probably are a lot of customs in my heritage but I cannot think of any of them. My dad is an electrical engineer and he is the Senior Vice President. My mom was a teacher for 20 years in India and taught elementary school here. After that, she started a day care and it went on for 14 years. This summer she retired. My family travels a lot. About every two summers we go somewhere. Since 1996, we have gone to India, Portugal, Cuba, Australia and this summer we are going to Brazil. I have a few pets. In the summer, I got a tank of fish. A few of them have died but I have gotten more over these last few months. Also, for Christmas, I finally got another hamster. (my mother accidentally killed the first one when she thought it was dead and put it outside!)
My closest friends are DC, CG, and JO. They have a lot of friends from all sorts of places and they are really fun to be around. They are easy to get along with and they are always friendly to me. They also play a lot of sports like hockey and baseball. They are very popular. I like that they are funny, fun to be around, very friendly and they are also smart and athletic. They are really good people. Nothing really bugs me about them except that they can be annoying sometimes and they can get mad easily. We like to watch movies and play sports together. I don’t think there is anything else that is important about me that I missed (Martin’s Autobiography, December 31, 2002).

Martin has remained soft spoken and unobtrusive throughout the semester. Even after 5 months, I still have to remind myself that he is in the classroom. He is one of those students who does not stand out, for he seems to move through the course effortlessly, yet I wonder if anything has ignited a passion in him. I am reminded of his interest in science and math, and it may just be that English is not the area he chooses to get excited about.

Passenger #3—Vanessa Christenses

I noticed Vanessa in the halls even before I realized she was part of my grade 9 English class. She is tall—about 5’9”, and so she stands out as a grade 9 because of this height. She has long, brown hair and a pale complexion—she is also an attractive young lady who carries herself with a quiet confidence. She is my beginner and has already experienced some frustrations with the laptop—problems before the school year even started. She has become “best friends” with our teacher-librarian as she has had to see him numerous times about technology problems. Yet, through it all, she handles it with grace—never belying her true frustration. She seemed surprised that she was asked to partake in the study, and I hope to learn more from her in terms of the anxiety and
frustrations that come with not being very familiar with the computer. I think I will recognize a number of things in her that I went through last year.

Vanessa’s response to the initial survey: *I strongly feel, that I as a beginner in computers, will learn a lot more about different programs and how they can be used. This will definitely help me in the future, maybe for a job application or for assignments. Later on, in University, I believe that this is a new challenge that will re-enforce my learning. It is also a new experience that I can learn from. I am concerned that I might lose important files and documents or that my computer might freeze when I need it* (Vanessa’s survey, September 4, 2002). Vanessa was not quite as prolific with her writing in her initial assignments, and her writing is not as polished as my other participants. She did note that *students should feel comfortable expressing their own ideas and even disagreeing with someone else’s* (The Breakfast Club Assignment, September 13, 2002), and I’ve noticed that Vanessa generally seems comfortable in her own skin. When I met her mother at Curriculum night, it was clear they were cut from the same cloth. *She was quiet and soft spoken and just wanted to say hello—I can definitely see some of Vanessa in her in terms of mannerisms and posture—she also told me how much Vanessa is enjoying class* (Personal Journal, October 5, 2002). As tiring as Curriculum night can be, I enjoy the spotlight of showcasing our department and all the activities that are involved in the laptop program. *It’s nice to get positive feedback and hear that the students are enjoying it so that my perceptions of them in class are similar to their parents’ perceptions* (Personal Journal, October 5, 2002).

Vanessa’s autobiography sheds some light on her and her views of herself:
I am a pretty tall and thin girl. I have brown hair and hazel eyes. I also have a fair skin tone. My friends would probably describe me as clumsy, and gullible. I am a pretty crazy person myself, that is out of school. I am a competitive swimmer. I love to swim and so I spend almost all of my time doing it. I swim 10 times a week and travel to compete. Basketball and volleyball are other hobbies of mine. I also love going shopping and watching movies with friends. I have many goals, some realistic and others not as much so. I want to be in the honor role in school, travel the world when I am older and for the present, achieve a national swim time. One of my all time favorite movies is Legally Blonde, and so many others which I cannot name. I also love to listen to music by Ashanti, Mandy Moore, Destiny's child and so many other similar artists. If I could I would change my forgetfulness. Things I like about myself are that I am athletic and easy to talk to.

There are 4 people in my family. My mother and I are very close. She is always there for me and I can always depend on her. My dad is usually out of town on business but we have great communication over the phone. I can always reach him and he always makes time for me in his busy schedule. My sister and I tend to fight a lot. Although we do talk to each other about everything they usually lead to fights. I have a very large family. I have 15 first cousins. We are all very close and visit each other regularly. I am also very close with my aunts and uncles. I am Greek although I was born in Canada. Both my parents immigrated to Canada in their early teens. My family has very large gatherings for Christmas, New Years, Easter, Thanksgivings and birthdays to name a few. We also celebrate a Greek thing called "Name Days" Names are very important to Greeks so we have a special day to celebrate every name. My "NAME DAY" for example
is on Christmas. These days aren't just chosen randomly but have a special meaning to them. My mom is a stay at home mom and my dad sells anti-virus's for computers. His business is called, Network Associates. I have been to many places for family vacations. I have been to Greece and Florida a couple times, Mexico, Cuba and Dominican Republic. I have one budgie named Sunshine.

My closest friends are funny, and pretty crazy. I love that they are always there for me and I always have so much fun with them. I do not like when they brag about things or when some of them do not admit to things they know are true. My friends and I do tons of things from going to the movies to shopping to going to Wonderland and just hanging out at each other's homes. We also like sleeping over (Vanessa's Autobiography, December 28, 2002).

Passenger #4—Steve Wagner

From day one, I liked Steve's easy demeanor—he seemed excited to be starting high school, but quite quiet. He was very eager to put up his hand, and his answers to date have been filled with wonderful vocabulary and rich insights—he clearly likes to learn and is not embarrassed about being a good student or writer. I expected him to have a strong voice and, true to form, he did (Personal Journal, September 17, 2002). In response to the identity assignment, he wrote, I, being a person who speaks my mind, and is vocally opposed to issues, am sometimes taken as someone who is in constant opposition to all that teenagers consider to be cool. I see people constantly trying to fit in by saying what everyone else says and am taken aback by their willingness to lie to themselves. How could they possibly know what their futures have in store for them, or the difficulties they will face in life? Maybe at a crucial point in their lives, they will be
confronted with one of the many issues that today, when put on the spot in front of their peers, they simply ignore. What will they do then? Shrug like they did in the past? I won’t ever follow someone’s lead if I don’t want to (The Breakfast Club Assignment, September 13, 2002).

It is refreshing to see a student who is confident of himself. I wanted to know more about Steve’s background to discover why he is the way he is. I did end up meeting Steve’s parents at a curriculum night in October. I met Steve’s parents—older than I expected which may explain his quiet nature and definite maturity. His mother was gushing over how much he was enjoying English, especially the fast pace we go at; I think he is definitely a true academic student. I could not say enough wonderful things about him either—they are clearly parents who are really proud. He was the top student in grade 8, which would explain his confidence. He is also playing volleyball, which I just found out, so I am glad he is well rounded and not entirely focused on school work (Personal Journal, October 5, 2002).

He has blond-brown hair and a sprinkle of freckles. He is tidy in his appearance and reminds me of a young Richie Cunningham as Opie—only a little more mature. I think talking to Steve is going to reveal a number of issues around the laptop program; he has a quiet confidence, and I believe he will be honest and forthright about his experiences in this program. When I read Steve’s initial survey, I was more impressed. He is not living within the boundaries of our school and so wrote a special letter of consideration to our board to get into St. Augustine just because of the laptop program. In his survey, he writes, I have been using computers since a very young age and am excited about their use in class. Although I’m not concerned in any way, I have wondered what this program
will consist of. I am anxious to begin the program so it can further my knowledge in the computer field. I believe I will pursue opportunities in this field after high school and think that the laptop program will be a good step in that direction (Steve’s Survey, September 4, 2002). I later found out that he had a difficult time with the students at his previous school. He was often made fun of for being so studious so did not want to attend his local high school. His mother told me he is enjoying every minute of St. Augustine CHS so far.

Steve’s autobiography truly helps paint a picture of this young man as he writes,

"Hello, my name is Steve Wagner and I am currently in grade 9. I am a five foot five with blue eyes, and brownish-blond hair. I do well academically, enjoy playing sports competitively, and like to work with the computer to accomplish various tasks. Some of my friends would say that I am outgoing, with a good sense of humour. I especially like to play sports such as basketball, baseball, tennis and volleyball. This year I made the varsity volleyball team at my high school, even though I am only in grade 9. I enjoy listening to rock or rap music, but do not often listen to music.

I hope to become a lawyer when I get older, and attend a top law school, possibly in the United States. I also am considering computer engineering or video game design, as both would incorporate my love for computers and new technologies. At the moment my favourite books include the Artemis Fowl series, and Prey, a new novel written by the creator of Jurassic Park. I am also an avid Star Wars fan, and own many of the Star Wars video games along with the movies.

The only thing that I would change about myself is my height. Compared to many of my friends I am short, although I am told that I will soon begin my growth spurt."
Hopefully this will come soon, to help me beat them at basketball once again. Other than this minor detail, I feel that I like everything about myself, especially the fact that I do well in school. I continue to work hard to achieve my goals, and so that I can have the most possibilities open when it is time to choose a career path. I hope to continue the hard work all throughout my high school career as well as my life.

My family consists of four people, including myself. I have one sibling, a younger sister, who I feel very close to. She is always there to listen or comfort me, depending on how I am feeling. I also have a strong relationship with my parents, who I feel care for me very much and support me not only in academic pursuits, but with my social activities as well.

As for my extended family, I am happy to say that both sets of my grandparents are alive and are consistent role models for me to look up to. My mother has two siblings, a brother and a sister who both live in the vicinity of where we live, making it easy for me to visit them. All of my cousins on this side are older than me, with my mother's brother's children away at university studying medicine. My father on the other hand has three siblings: two sisters and a brother. My father's youngest sister lives in North Carolina, preventing us from visiting her often. She has two of her own children, both younger than myself, and some more stepchildren from her new marriage. My father's older sister has one child who is in his first year of university, and plans to study law. She lives close to us as well, about an hour and half from where I live. My father's brother lives near them too, making it easy for that side of the family to see each other.

All of my grandparents were born in Canada and have lived here for some time. As far as I know, my grandmother on my mother's side is Irish with my grandfather's
mother being French. My grandmother on my father’s side has a German background, whose parents moved from a Germanic part of Russia right before the Russian Revolution. My grandfather’s mother was born in England, with his father born in Wales. My grandfather was born in Winnipeg and moved with my grandmother around the 1950’s.

My mother and father both work, with my mother working part-time and my father working full time. My mother works as a physiotherapist at a private clinic that is mainly involved in sports-related injuries. My father, on the other hand, works as an accountant for a large Canadian computer-related company. His company originally started making video cards for computers (what enables a computer to produce crisp graphics), and is now involved in making products for gaming systems, handheld computer devices and televisions. He is directly involved in the consumer electronics division, which is in charge of making graphics chips for High Definition Televisions, and so on.

Although my family does like to visit all sorts of different places, we rarely venture out of Ontario. Our lone excursions out of the province have been to Florida, and to New York. In the summer we usually go north to Haliburton or the areas around Muskoka where we like to swim in the lakes, or take part in water-related activities. Last summer was especially nice as we went to one of my best friends cottages and stayed there for a few days.

I really have two best friends who contrast each other in every imaginable way. One of my friends is very organized, does well in school, and likes to play video games at his house. He also takes part in baseball and hockey but does not let the sport envelope
his life. He is very understanding of all my problems, and works hard to get any job done. I couldn’t have asked for a better partner in school projects, as he is always willing to work harder to achieve a higher mark. My other friend is completely the opposite: messy, average academically, and loves to play basketball. He is such an avid fan of the sport that it is not unlikely to find him playing five to six hours straight. The temperature is never too cold for him, and the ground is never too slippery as long as he can shoot the ball. This can sometimes be a problem when my hands are frozen and numb, and he still feels like playing another game of one-on-one. I am proud of how well he has gotten though, as he only picked up the sport two years ago, and now is an all-star of my basketball league. His enthusiasm for the sport continues into school as well, as he is often told by his teachers to use proper English in his writing, rather than basketball slang. Unfortunately, both of my best friends do not go to the same high school as I do because of my decision to attend school out of district (Steve’s Autobiography, December 30, 2002).

Steve has truly been a wonderful student and mature presence in my classroom this year. If I could bottle him up and sell him as the exemplar for a grade 9 student, I would, but then perhaps his uniqueness would go unnoticed. I fully expect to hear about Steve sometime in the future. His passion for learning is so fierce that I hope he finds his niche and explores all that the world and his intellect can offer. It is his voice that opens this chapter and truly shares the idea of being a teenager in 2002. I think he will come to realize that he “does not want to” follow the lead of his classmates, and I hope that he will become a leader for others as he makes his way in this world.
The passengers have been introduced, the train is leaving the station, and the journey into the world of cyberspace in my grade 9 English classroom is about to begin—buckle up and enjoy the ride!
CHAPTER FIVE: THE TRIP ITSELF

Introduction

The trip through grade 9 Academic English is a busy one—there is not a lot of time to get off the train and just sit and enjoy the scenery. I wish there was, but there is so much curriculum to cover that often I feel like we are racing to the next stop without even pausing to reflect on what we have learned at the last stop. Though we seem to spend longer on certain tasks that are laptop based, I still feel like I am under the gun to reach a certain destination before the trip ends in January.

My students are guided on this trip by a number of things: They have a monthly calendar which outlines assignments, events, and class activities; they have my Webpage which contains a homework calendar and all the different activities and assignments we cover; they have my e-mail which they access on a regular basis—sometimes with pertinent questions and other times just to find out if the next day is a "civies" day where they can get rid of their uniform for a day. Finally, they have each other—to call, e-mail, or even beam with the wireless capability on their computers. One would think that all of these directions would help them on their journey into cyberspace, but sometimes things still fall apart. A computer might break, the Internet might be down, hockey gets in the way, the Board firewall may block a student's name, and my perfect plan to the next destination goes awry.

But this year, I have learned to handle all these interruptions with much more patience and grace than last year, though there are still frustrating times even this early in the semester. I have spoken too soon! Yesterday, I was feeling very frustrated. The printers in our workrooms aren't functioning, the laptop labs aren't ready, and the cross-
curricular lab is unfinished. All of this set-up has been left to the teacher-librarian and the head of our religion department, who happen to know a bit about wiring. My bigger question is, why isn't the board covering this? Well, the answer is because it would take about 4 months to get it done by the time the work order was processed. I just don't understand how the school and board did not know this would have to be done based on our enrolment. It seems as though there is a real lack of communication, and the way things are done is for the quick fix with little thought given to the situation down the road.

The way some of the labs are configured is horrendous. Kids are sitting around the entire room, so the teacher can't even get to the blackboards without climbing over kids. Now the principal is talking about going wireless; that causes me to react the way you do when someone drags their nails across the chalkboard! I'm finally starting to get comfortable with the technology we have now and am not ready to face more change so quickly (Personal Journal, September 17, 2002).

My lab didn't require that much reconfiguring, so on September 23, 2002, we had the first day in the laptop lab and, compared to last year, things went really well. The students were organized and interested in logging on and following instructions—a refreshing change from the group I had last year, though the day was not without challenges. One student's laptop screen was cracked, and he was trying hard not to cry in front of everyone else. I escorted him to Guidance, where he broke down and started to wheeze and sob. He had fallen off the bus and landed on his backpack. Once he relaxed, we phoned home, got him a loaner computer, and he regrouped and returned to class. I forget that they are only 14 years old and are still just kids even though they try hard to be adults. Sometimes I think we expect too much of them at this age. I was thinking the
same thing with my grade 11s as they are tackling tasks that I used to teach to my OACs – they’ve had to move so quickly under the new curriculum that I’m surprised so many of them are still so enthusiastic about learning (Personal Journal, September 23, 2002).

Once I got the problem with the cracked screen sorted out, the period flew by that first day in the lab. I showed them my page and gave instructions of what to print for tomorrow—we worked through some introductory material on mythology, and there was lots of good research going on. They are a quiet and focused group, rarely straying from their task; they seem pleased to be in such a unique program and to be trusted to work away without a teacher guiding their every move. Steve is so on the ball and finished his work quite quickly; he had no trouble creating his chart and researching the Greek Gods, and so helped the student beside him, which further demonstrates some of the positive aspects of this program. Lucy followed my every word and was very meticulous in her typing and organization. She seems more concerned with doing things properly than actually focusing on what the topic is—I hardly notice Martin sometimes and have to make a conscious effort to look his way. He blends into the classroom, and even though he was sitting beside someone, it was almost like he was sitting alone. He is definitely introverted, but not strangely so—just very quiet and focused. Vanessa did not have a laptop—it continually gives her problems. She is frustrated—has had it in for the technician to look at three times already. I quickly set her up on my laptop and then her Internet wouldn’t work—so we logged her off, I logged in, and off she went—I was amazed at how calmly she handled it. Other kids I’ve taught would have been in tears or angry by that point—she just seemed to handle it with the same grace and poise that she carries herself with. I had no qualms about letting her use my computer. She took her notes in
her notebook so that she would have them and not have to worry about printing off my laptop.

Not one kid is using a mouse, and that amazes me as I hate that little red button—I feel like I’m playing a sport that I’m not good at when I try to maneuver it. My coordination seems all off, and I want to scream out, “But I can dribble a basketball!” This little button seems like second nature to them, and not one of them seems at all intimidated by it. Their typing is definitely awkward though. They aren’t taught the rudimentary typing skills as thoroughly as they used to be.

The class ran so smoothly I couldn’t believe it. It was never like that in all of last year, and I wonder if that is because I am just more used to the glitches that can occur. I hope this bodes well for a good year. They packed up carefully and quietly. I think the grey cords being locked down to the ports instead of each student having a cord to hook up is a terrific idea—definitely an improvement in the log-in process—I’m still quite excited about teaching these kids—they are a teacher’s dream! (Personal Journal, September 23, 2002).

Stops Along the Way: The Activities of e-Learning

The laptop English courses contain a number of different activities that students work through during the semester. Between observations written in my journals and interviews, I was able to gather many impressions from my participants about laptop learning. I met with my 4 participants for the first time on November 4, 2002. We had a brief meeting in the library. I gave them a series of questions to prepare for our first interview. I arrived in the library first—Martin came in second—in a bit of panic as he had a science quiz—I sent him back and said I would meet with him tomorrow—then he
returned to say his teacher said he could write it later! He and I sat at the table in an awkward silence for a few minutes. I asked him about his family to break the ice a bit—he is the youngest but has two older brothers, and the age difference is 8 and 12 years—quite a span—he smiled and admitted to being spoiled!

Vanessa arrived next—quite comfortable to plop herself down beside me as only a lanky 14-year-old can do. She has one younger sister, whom she can’t stand! Her sister drives her crazy and steals her clothes all the time.... This reminded me of my own sibling rivalry—my sister and I couldn’t stand each other until she went away to university, and even then I’d miss her but when she returned home, I’d want her to go back again! Both Vanessa and I agreed that anything less than 3 years apart was too close!

Lucy arrived next—a little breathless but seemingly excited to sit down and chat with us—she has a younger sibling too. Steve was the last to arrive, and as we all looked out the glass wall of the library, we saw him peeling around the corner and racing into the library! We talked briefly about a student who had died over the weekend—it was a former grade 8 classmate of Steve’s and Lucy’s—hit by a speeding driver. They were certainly touched by it, and I was impressed to see that they took some time to reflect on their own mortality.

I tried to make them feel at ease by just chatting a bit about what I am doing and how I would like the interviews to proceed. I told them I’d address some, but not all, of the questions and I wanted it to be more of a dialogue rather than a formal interview. We walked through the questions together, and they all seemed at ease with them—no one
asked any questions, and I reminded them I needed them to be honest about things—if they didn’t like something that was fine—they did need to express that.

The meeting lasted about 20 minutes. Lucy was disappointed as she didn’t want to go back to class...she had hoped she would get to go straight to lunch! I reassured her that next week would be longer when we do the actual interviews. I also told them the interviews would be taped so that they would feel comfortable with that. Overall, I feel confident that I will learn some significant things from talking to my participants—I think they will be honest and forthright and, I hope, will shine some light on what it’s like to be on this journey into Cyberspace with me (Personal Journal, November 5, 2002).

Through my observations and interviews over the course of the semester, I think the best way to determine how my participants felt about these activities is to examine one activity at a time and gather their thoughts and impressions, along with my own, about e-learning.

**First Stop: Journal Discussions**

One of the primary expectations in English is to have students write reflectively. If you tell students this, they immediately cringe and groan. The beauty of the laptop program is there is a “fun” way to have students reflect through writing and they do not even realize that they are working hard to develop insights and skills. I have a forum that the students access two to three times a month. They will log onto my Webpage, find out what discussion group they are in, and then click on the link to their respective group. The topic for discussion is posted on the Webpage as well.

I had noted this opening activity in my journal. *Today, I introduced the on-line journal application. Well, I introduced it yesterday, but Jim, the board consultant, hadn’t*
inputted the student ids, which he promised to do 3 weeks ago, so after all my careful planning, the class lesson had to be shelved.... A year ago I would have had a fit over this, but instead I just sighed and moved on. I phoned Jim—he totally apologized and got things ready for today.

The students experienced some trepidation at first, but got moving. Once we got everyone logged on they set to work writing about something they felt strongly about. Interesting to look at their topics—from rap music, to homework, to parents, to the war in Iraq; all the way to not being able to wear their kilts! They have some wonderful things to say. As I wandered around the room, some had difficulty deciding what to write about—it wasn’t that they didn’t feel passionate about something—it was just that they were worried because everyone would be able to read their remarks and they were nervous about that. They then had to respond to someone within their group. They found that a lot easier because the person had already opened themselves up for debate. All in all, their responses were fairly mature—definite problems with spelling and grammar—they write as if they are at home on ICQ, so that will be a bit of a battle to correct. Or maybe I do not have to correct that, as that is their reality today when it comes to communicating with the computer (Personal Journal, October 11, 2002).

Lucy wrote about loving to read—and two kids responded positively to her. Her enjoyment shines through in her response. One of my favourite things to do is to read. I have read a lot of books, and I have quite a collection of them on my bookshelf. Reading is enjoyable because if a story is really good, then you become involved in it. The characters become real, and you can relate to them in certain ways.

If a book is really good, it can become very hard to put down. It also helps to pass time,
and is very relaxing. I love to read because it's so interesting, and all books are different. My favourite authors are Kit Pearson and Lurlene McDaniel. They write about issues that teens really do have to face. It's interesting to read about them, and their different problems. These authors write books that are very hard to put down.

So, the next time you need something to do, I recommend that you pick up a good book, and read (Journal Discussion – Lucy, October 14, 2002).

Steve wrote about the ease of wearing uniforms and how it equalizes everyone—clearly a student who thinks beyond the fashion world. In elementary school, I couldn't see myself ever wearing a uniform. I liked my clothes and it didn't ever seem like a huge problem about deciding what to wear in the morning. In grade 7, I was even considering going to a public high school, just so that I wouldn't have to wear what I thought was uncomfortable and boring. I dreaded the thought of having to wear the same thing over and over again, never having the free will to wear what I wanted to wear. But now that I am in high school, I see why uniforms are necessary at this time in our life.

At Muskoka Woods, I was astonished by the number of people who wore such baggy clothing that they could barely move, or do any of the activities. There was a lot of competition between each person to wear the most expensive clothing that they had. I'm sure that in many people's minds they felt that they were being judged on mainly just their appearance, by others who didn't think they were cool. Who do these people who were just laughing and pointing at others think they are? Some of the clothes that they were wearing must have cost hundreds of dollars. Maybe other people who are not as interested in their appearance would rather spend that money on something else, rather than their clothing. All in all, I see that uniforms in schools can help keep the pressure off
those who may not fit in. I no longer dread wearing the same thing everyday, as I can see that it has a good purpose (Journal Discussion – Steve, October 14, 2002).

I think Steve took a risk when he selected this topic. Most students would not admit to actually being supportive of wearing a uniform—it is the one thing that they use to test teachers by wearing it incorrectly as often as possible. I believe that this is just another indication of Steve’s maturity level and confidence in his opinions; he is not willing to bow to peer pressure and continues to demonstrate that quite often.

Martin wrote about homework and hating it—he may yet surprise me. I did not expect him to admit to this; he seems so focused in class that I did not think homework was something he was particularly affected by. I really think homework sucks. It is kind of stupid because we already learn things at school so why do we have to do it home. It wastes time. I could be out watching a movie, playing video games, watching tv, or even reading a book but because of homework, there is absolutely no time. It is ridiculous. It is also stupid because it can deprive us of sleep. Sometimes we are up at the early hours of the morning, like 3:00am doing homework, projects and studying for big tests. The day after we can barely stay awake during school. By the end of the week, if that continues, we won’t even have the energy to walk (Journal Discussion – Martin, October 14, 2002)

Vanessa wrote about media and its image of females—interesting as she herself is so thin that I wonder if she has an eating disorder... it was easy to see through this exercise the students who have developed an ability to think a little more critically from the topics they’ve chosen or the carefully worded responses they present to their classmates. Vanessa wrote, I strongly believe that the media has a very big effect on
teens! Girls for example are always trying to lose weight, and buy the latest fashion. This has both a good and bad affect to it. Sometimes losing a bit of weight is healthy and can boost up your self-esteem although losing too much weight is very dangerous. Teens tend to start off losing a bit of weight for health purposes but then become obsessed with being thin until they either become anorexic or bulimic. Guys, on the other hand, are pressured into taking drugs, and smoking. Because we all see famous movie stars doing it teens follow their example and think that it is the cool thing to do. Many teens also change their appearance and wear baggy or tight clothes and extensive make-up just to be like Brittany Spears or Nelly. All of this gets in the way of finding out who you really are and not who you are trying to be (Journal Discussion – Vanessa, October 14, 2002).

The journals took longer than I anticipated—I had slotted about 20 minutes, but we spent 45 minutes on them. It was quality work the whole time, and I’m curious to see if they tackle it a little faster now that they have the process down pat. One thing I found was that they questioned quickly instead of clicking back to my laptop page to read the instructions of the task at hand. It all connected back to editor letters and finding a voice—we will be moving into letter to the editor writing next week, so I think it was a successful way to watch them find their voices, but also to realize that opinion alone is not enough—you need support for your opinion to be convincing.

The second time we approached the journal discussion forum, the students logged in with ease. Though some of them had forgotten their passwords, the whole process went much more smoothly. We have been reading a novel by Paolo Coelho called The Alchemist, and the story centers around a Spanish shepherd boy who travels parts of the world to discover his personal legend—his connection and place in the world. At age 14, I
find, my students do not have a sense of place in the world. So much is new to them as they enter high school, and it is a time of change. They are discovering their identities through peer groups, academics, family relationships, and extracurricular activities. I posed a question to them to respond to in the journal forum. I asked them to comment on what they thought their personal legend was at this point in their lives. Their responses were varied—some seemed to know what direction they would head in and others were at a loss. I do not remember having to think about such a thing when I was 14, but they are moving through high school more quickly now and have to make life-altering decisions earlier. They are living in a time of change and technology, and it is interesting to read their perspectives. I think this small journal entry will later act as a springboard for further writing for them.

Martin responded, *I feel that I am supposed to help people in every way I can. This is because the two careers I am thinking about save people's lives or protect them. Those careers are a doctor/surgeon or a police officer. I haven't yet decided but I think that either one would probably be good. The people who have influenced me and my decision are my parents and some of my friends. My parents have always taught me to help people in every way I can like sharing things or looking after someone. That was one of the reasons that I chose those two possible careers. My brother is a doctor and he has shown me some of the things that they do and I always thought it was really interesting. This made me want to be a doctor even more. My brother's friend is an officer and he said that it was fun and rewarding, even though it is really dangerous. I think all these people helped me to discover my personal legend and have put me on a*
good path to achieving it (Journal Discussion—Martin, October 30, 2002). Martin seems focused and has role models to help on his journey.

Lucy did not seem to have a final goal in mind, but recognizes what she needs to do to achieve whatever that goal might be. *I think that my personal legend in grade nine is getting good grades, and to focus on my education. In order to get accepted into a good university and to get a good job, you need to have an education. If I focus on making good grades in grade nine, I will be able to maintain those grades during the rest of my high school years. Grade nine will be a time for me to develop good study habits. This will help me to succeed in high school, and continue on with my post-secondary education (Journal Discussion—Lucy, October 30, 2002).*

Akin to Lucy, Steve and Vanessa both seem unsure of what direction life will be taking them in. Vanessa seems unsure of where she is headed; she has some goals in mind, but how realistic they are is yet to be determined. *At the moment I do not know exactly what my personal legend is. I have not yet found something that I would like to do for my career. Although I have not decided on my personal legend, I do have a possibility in mind. I might want to pursue a career in journalism. This is because I enjoy writing, especially on issues that I feel strongly about. To pursue this legend I will have to become a better writer. I do think that friends have a major impact on what my personal legend is. Since I do not know exactly what it is they will help me find it. Because I spend a lot of my time with my friends I could say that they know me almost better than I know my self. Another possible personal legend is to compete in the Olympics! I have been swimming for 2 years and I have discovered my passion in the sport. I think that my passion to swim will bring me to that point. The two legends are directed towards two very different*
paths. One is towards sports and the other in business. Whatever I do end up pursuing I am sure it will be the right choice (Journal Discussion – Vanessa, October 30, 2002).

Steve writes, Right now, sitting here in grade 9, I do not know what my Personal Legend is. I do not know what I want to become in the future, or how I will eventually get there. I do not know where my life will lead, who I will meet along the way, or what experiences I will go through. At this moment though, I think that it would be best to concentrate on the present, and try to make the most out of what I do now. I must try to be kind to others, for I do not know where we will meet in the future. I am not a fortune-teller, nor do I have a detailed plan of what I will do each morning as I wake. For this reason, it is important for me to be open to new opportunities, and be able to realize when something is what I want to continue doing for the rest of my life. Although I do not really know what my Personal Legend is, I believe that if you are considerate to others, and keep their wishes in mind when you act, you are on your way to discovering your Personal Legend. When you can see what it is though, you must take it and follow it through to the end so that you, like Santiago, can find true happiness (Journal Discussion – Steve, October 30, 2002). As I continue to read Steve’s work, I am reminded of his mature level of thinking—his ability to make personal connections to the literature we are studying to his own life is so refreshing.

Another opportunity to use the forum arrived during the study of Romeo and Juliet. My grade 9 class went incredibly well today–some days feel like they just flow more smoothly than others, and today was one of them. We opened using the Journal Discussion forum—I chose to do this because when I interviewed Vanessa and Lucy this week they both commented on how much they liked that forum and really wished we did
it more often (Personal Journal, November 15, 2002). When I asked Vanessa about this activity during an interview, she responded, *I think it's a good way to interact and I like writing...if we could write about current issues in the media or something like that, that would be cool* (Interview, Vanessa, November 13, 2002). Lucy responded, *I like it because it's simple, like you just read all the rules and you know what to do. It doesn't take that long, I like that part...but sometimes you're afraid of what people might think but I think basically everyone has the same interests so it's not so hard to write...I loved responding the best* (Interview, Lucy, November 12, 2002). Lucy also noted that she would love to do journal discussion once a week. With that in mind, I decided to try to make more use of the forum during our study of Shakespeare. *Yesterday, I sat down and wrote out five very free questions about issues within the play from who you should date and whether your parents should have any say, to when you should reveal something even if you've been sworn to secrecy* (Personal Journal, November 15, 2002).

We began with the dating question—and they typed away for about 20 minutes, posting their own thoughts and then responding to someone within their group (Personal Journal, November 15, 2002). Lucy was quite sensible in her response: *Since the beginning of time, parents have always tried to decide whom their children date. And no matter how hard they try, they seem to fail miserably because teenagers can be extremely unreasonable. Although I think that parents cannot decide whom their children date, I do think that they have the right to have a say. For example, if a girl comes home with her new "boyfriend" and he's some motorcycle punk, then they can talk to their daughter. This way, the parents can express their feelings about the guy and maybe learn to understand him better. But I think that their right to decide upon their children's dating*
life does have to end somewhere. I think that they are allowed to have an opinion about a
date, but they cannot decide every time. Personally, I would allow my parents to have an
opinion, but I would not allow them to decide who I date (Journal Discussion – Lucy,
November 15, 2002).

Vanessa also felt that parents had a definite right to know about whom she was
dating. I think that parents do have a little right to express their opinion on who their kids
date. Although everyone has personal preference, parents could help you get out of an
abusive and disrespectful relationship. They are usually able to see through the guy and
tell if he is trustworthy and loyal, this can prevent you from getting hurt. I also think that
it is mainly your decision who you choose to date. Your parents will not always be
correct with their judgment. For example your date might get nervous when meeting your
parents and will act strangely. This situation is normal and often occurs. Parents can
express their opinion on your date but they cannot force you to stop seeing them. The
ultimate decision is yours! (Journal Discussion – Vanessa, November 15, 2002).

Steve’s response was a little shorter and not quite as passionate as the girl’s. I
think your parents should have some say in who you date because they can give advice to
you if you need it. In the same way, I do not think that they have the right to force you to
date or to not date someone, but can only provide guidance in your decision. Although it
is not their place to fully judge someone, I do think that an outside view on your situation
can help, not hinder. Therefore, because our parents have all probably gone through
these types of situations and have already had these discussions with their parents when
they were teenagers, their wisdom can be a good thing. Sometimes we just have to put up
with their criticism as they are only trying to do what’s best for us (Journal Discussion,
Steve, November 15, 2002). (Martin was absent during this posting time and he chose to reflect twice on another topic rather than add to this discussion at a later date.)

After they posted we discussed some of the issues. Most felt that their parents wanted to know who they were dating just out of concern for their well being and because they cared. A couple of girls still felt they fell under very “old school” European thinking on the part of their father’s – and most felt that it didn’t matter what culture someone was from – I found this particularly refreshing. Most also felt that religion wasn’t an important determining factor either - yet I tend to think that going to a Catholic school prevents them from really knowing too many other people their age who aren’t Catholic – or if they do, it may be people from sports teams and would generally be the same gender – so would not play as large a role for them (Personal Journal, November 15, 2002).

Beginning Romeo and Juliet with this type of discussion seemed to open the class up, and they definitely seemed more excited about starting a play that dealt with issues that they face in their lives. Then we began Romeo and Juliet, and though I’ve taught it a million times, we had fun today. I vowed not to rush them through it, forgetting that it is their first time with Shakespeare and the language has not become second nature like it tends to by the time they hit grade 11. Though they are familiar with the story, they don’t know the details. I began by separating the girls and boys, and I had them repeat a few lines after me—at the top of their lungs!! I didn’t want them to be embarrassed by the words or how funny it sounded when they read—strength in numbers.... By the time we started reading, my readers bravely tackled the Elizabethan English like it was nothing more than a primer!! We made it through the first scene and they have slowly gained
some appreciation for Shakespeare’s bawdy humor—with maidenheads and biting of thumbs! The feud has started, and hopefully the richness of the story and its poetic language will grab their hearts over the next few weeks (Personal Journal, November 15, 2002).

As we continued to wade through the play, I used the journal discussion forum twice more. During many scenes in the play, the characters resort to violence to solve their problems and act irrationally. This was another good opportunity to open the floor for discussion that started with the journal. My participants readily responded, and the classroom is so quiet as they are intent on flooding the forum with their thoughts. Martin’s response allowed me to recognize the importance of religion in his life. It is not often that I find a teenager in our school who openly writes or talks about God, and the fact that he did so here indicates that it is a safe and comfortable forum for him. He wrote: I think that resorting to violence is just stupid and useless. It goes against everything that we believe in as Christians. Jesus never said to go around and fight people or kill others. He always told us to love one another. It is also stupid because it is a complete waste of time. Why would we go out to kill someone for revenge or another purpose when it is easier to forgive someone? You are not putting your own life at risk, and you are doing what God wants us to do. I think that violence is the dumbest answer to solving your problems (Journal Discussion – Martin, December 2, 2002).

Lucy’s response surprised me. Over the course of the last couple of months, she has not seemed as aware of the world around her as I thought she would be. Yet, in this particular forum, her sense of world events came to light, and so I was pleased to see this. Part of this may stem from our Literature Circles and webpages, but I will comment on
this a little later in this chapter. In response to whether or not violence is the answer to solving problems, she wrote: *There are many people in the world who feel that violence is a way to solve a problem. Obviously, fighting does not get us anywhere. It may prove who is stronger, but it does not prove who is morally right. In order to solve a problem, people should learn to do it in a calm and rational way. By sitting down and talking about their problems, they are going to get a lot farther than by fighting. Right now, there is a war going on in the Middle East against the U.S. Apparently, they are solving the problem of terrorism by terrorizing another country and other innocent people. Once again, I question what they are solving, and what they hope to achieve by partaking in these actions. I think that the United States should take a stand, and promote a different way of solving a problem - using words* (Journal Discussion – Lucy, December 2, 2002).

The other interesting thing I noted is that a simple question which connects to an age-old play allows students to make connections to other issues. While Lucy connected to the ongoing war against terrorism, Steve chose to examine the issue in relation to the media's response to violence. He wrote: *No, I do not think that violence is ever a way of solving problems because it will only lead to further problems. By acting violently, the issues that we have with that person will continue as they will want revenge. Sometimes whether to act violently towards someone is a hard decision, especially if they physically hurt you. Also, the media can cloud our judgment where we see very violent movies, with our heroes wielding guns, and planning to blow up everything around them. Even in real life, the armies of the world travel to far countries to act in revenge against a previous occurrence. With all this influence from people that we look up to, it may be hard to make*
the right decision. In these situations we should use our best judgment and try to think of the consequences of our actions (Journal Discussion – Steve, December 2, 2002).

Vanessa chose to connect on a slightly different level. While it was clear she felt the same way in response to the question, her thoughts do not move out towards a global view until the end of her journal response. Violence should never be justified as a means for solving a problem However, people are still doing it! To most people revenge is a good way to feel better about the situation and become even with their enemy. This act tends to be an act of anger although it should not be allowed! It may become hard to control and manage but we must learn to prevent the rage from starting for it only gets worse. What we need to realize is that anger and rage cannot solve anything! We need to think about the problem and find a solution that is in favor of both people. This way the solution will be clear and most of all fair! It is very clear that violence is used a lot in everyday situations. We see it on the streets, in the news, at school, and even in sports and careers. I think that it is very important that we learn to find other ways of dealing with our problems (Journal Discussion – Vanessa, December 2, 2002).

I used the journal discussion forum a total of eight times during the course of the semester. It has come to be a wonderful way of focusing students on interesting topics for the start of class. Clearly, the journal forum allows students to express themselves, and piloting this component of the laptop course has given me some ideas of how I would like to see it used in the future.

Second Stop: Webquests–Problem Based Learning

When I first started adapting technology to the grade 9 Academic English course, I had never heard of Webquests. I have since discovered that they are a form of problem-
Based learning that requires students to use the internet to research a problem and attempt to come up with a viable solution for the problem based on their research. According to Dodge (1997), in D'Souza’s (2002) article on Webquests, “a Webquest is an inquiry-oriented activity where some or all of the information comes from the Internet” (p. 9).

The Webquest allows a teacher to bring together a number of instructional practices into one student-integrated activity (D’Souza). A Webquest can last for a short period of time or an extended period of time. The beauty of using it within a laptop class is that students can work on the activity in class or at home, and it can be scheduled over a week or more of class time.

D’Souza (2002) also identifies Dodge’s (1997) six main attributes as critical for the successful implementation and completion of a Webquest. They are the “Introduction,” which provides background information; the “Task,” that describes what the students will be completing during their Webquest such as a brochure or Powerpoint slide presentation. This component is essentially the final product. The third step is the “Process,” which walks the students through the steps needed to reach the final product stage. The fourth stage is the “Topics and Resources” section. The section provides links to the Internet sites that the students will access for information during the Webquest. Finally, there is the conclusion that provides the method of assessment or evaluation and points out the skills the students gained during the process of completing the Webquest.

The additional beauty of the Webquest, to me, is that it provides a forum for constructivist teaching and learning at its best. A good Webquest will take a teacher up to 15 hours to complete. Once appropriate and applicable sites are located, the actual development of the assignment is fairly straightforward.
In constructivism, knowledge is created through the use of many examples and opinions. The nature of the Internet makes this process much easier than in a classroom. By following hyperlink web pages, educators can connect to many different resources, giving students the opportunity to effectively construct knowledge (D’Souza, 2002).

While students are given some sites to begin their research with, they are expected to search the Internet for additional sites and resources to help them in their problem solving.

While there are a number of decent Webquest sites available, I find that I do all the developing of these Webquests myself, because the novels I teach are contemporary and there is little resource support available on the Internet or anywhere else. I decided to develop a Webquest for Paolo Coelho’s novel The Alchemist—it has the potential for some exciting research. The main character in the novel is Santiago, a shepherd in search of his personal legend. He travels to Spain and to parts of Africa, including Egypt and Morocco, attempting to find a treasure. What he discovers is that his personal legend is right where he started from—he needed to learn to listen to his heart and connect with the Soul of the World, but it is only through the journey that he is able to do this. He reminds me of Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz, who learns that everything she ever wanted was right in her own backyard; she just needed to journey to Oz to realize it. With this story in mind, I decided to send my students on their own travels to some of the countries that Santiago visited. The Webquest is outlined in Appendix E. The students were placed in groups and asked to produce brochures for different countries. They needed to look at such issues as cost, travel arrangements, attractions, festivals, historical sights, education,
and cuisine. This real-life problem allows them to learn about travel and all that is involved in planning a trip. They had to work together and were given a budget. They also had to use Microsoft Publisher so they were using an application that they had been taught in their introductory Business Technology course.

I put my 4 participants in the same group for this activity. I thought this would allow me to observe them more easily and to gather their opinions more readily. I wanted to learn more about group dynamics and how they approached the problem and took it to its solution. The day the Webquest was introduced got off to a good start. The class seems to be interested and intrigued by the possibilities of what they have to do, and not one student had heard of this type of problem-based learning before. It will be interesting to observe them through this week to see how they work with the task and how they develop their research skills. I know from my perspective I am much more comfortable presenting the problem and activity to them—I feel like I actually know what I’m talking about this year. Early in the Webquest today, one student informed me that a link on my quest to Morocco was not working. Last year I would have been stressed and overwhelmed by this, but this morning, I simply said, ok—give me a second. I went onto the Internet, located a new link, replaced the old one, and we were up and running—it was easy! What a difference a year makes, and I assume that when they tackle their next Webquest in grade 10, they may feel more at ease as well (Personal Journal, October 28, 2002).

I noted some initial observations about my participants on the first day of the Webquest. My participants are working well together. They have set up on one side of the classroom with two of their laptops going. Steve and Martin are manning their
computers, and Vanessa and Lucy are observing and talking. Martin seems to be a little on the periphery here—he has been away for 3 days in Boston, so I’m not sure if that is having an impact. They have decided on traveling to Spain and assigned their respective roles. Steve seems to be taking on a quiet leadership role, looking at flights immediately to see what is reasonable in terms of costs. They seem to be discussing the overall trip rather than dispersing immediately to cover their individual areas. I will be interested to see how they went about setting up their tasks. Many of the other groups do not seem quite as focused, and one group is arguing over which country they should visit (Personal Journal, October 28, 2002).

The duration of the Webquest was five class periods, and while the first two classes seemed to move in a rather focused direction, I noticed on day three of the activity that the concentration level of my participants was waning. Lucy is worried today, she forgot to hand in her literature circle journal and seems quite panicked by that. She will hand it in tomorrow, but in the meantime I will have to make a phone call home and deduct her 10%. Steve looks extremely tired, though his schoolwork is still exceptional and his insights still continue to surprise me, with a maturity level I have never seen in a grade 9 student before. Martin seems all over the place today—he hasn’t quite caught up from his absence, and nothing has been posted on his webpage even though he had 5 weeks to post prior to leaving on his trip. Vanessa also didn’t bring her journal...strange that all 4 of my participants are not themselves today (Personal Journal, October 30, 2002).

By the end of the five periods, my participants had completed the Webquest and handed in some wonderful finished products. A sample of a brochure by Steve can be
found in Appendix G. During the interview with my participants, I was able to better understand the process of decision making and group dynamics. Vanessa found that everyone in the group worked really well together. She said, *We talked about what we would do together and what we would work on individually. Then we decided how we would place everything... everyone was pretty easy going... you needed to talk to each other because you needed to know what places you were going to book hotels for and how much money you would need, but then you could go back and work on your own section of the problem* (Interview, Vanessa, November 13, 2002). Lucy found the process of making the brochure the most difficult part of the problem. She had other things on her mind that week, which came through in the interview. *I found it hard to make the brochure... it was due on the Monday after the weekend that J. died (a former school mate). I was really distracted and I was at church in the morning and at their house in the afternoon... and the wake. I kind of wasn’t in the mood and I wasn’t interested in what I was doing, so I just threw some stuff together... I thought everyone was pretty easy to work with though and one Webquest is enough. It was fun but I just think if you were going to do it again you wouldn’t want to do another brochure*” (Interview – Lucy, November 12, 2002). The interesting thing to me is that Lucy never came and asked for an extension based on what she was coping with at the time. She still managed to work through the problem and subsequently did not let her group down.

I noticed that Steve played a leadership role here once the positions of responsibility were assigned. The second day of the Webquest, he brought in a map of Spain and a research text from home. More and more I am able to see why he is such a strong student if he has material like this at home. He noted that he enjoyed the group he
worked with. The brochure activity was fine and my group was good so it worked out, but I heard that some other groups didn't work so well together so that can be a problem and I'm glad I didn't experience that (Interview – Steve, November 18, 2002). Though Steve also made the same Imk as Vanessa that the activity did not seem that connected to the novel, he didn't think it mattered as much because he really enjoyed working on the brochure and researching about Spain. Martin seemed somewhat indifferent throughout the whole process. He did his work and participated, but I never get the sense that he is that passionate about what he is doing. He did comment that he liked the Webquest overall because with a brochure, I got to research stuff and learn more about Publisher (Interview – Martin, November 20, 2002).

While the process seemed successful over the course of the week and my participants worked well together, it was only through the interview stage of my research that I discovered that my assignment was quite flawed. While interviewing Vanessa, she pointed out something that I had never thought of. When I inquired as to what she thought about the whole Webquest assignment, she replied, I really liked the idea that we got to make a brochure and my group really worked well together, but [pause] I don't really see the connection to the novel. I mean, other than the countries Santiago went to, the activity really seemed to have nothing to do with The Alchemist" (Interview, Vanessa, November 13, 2002). I paused for moment and replied, You know Vanessa, you are absolutely right—what a brutal assignment I've created! (Interview--Vanessa, November 13, 2002). I could see a look of relief flood her face; I think she was worried about telling me and was pleased to see that I took what she had to say seriously and that she was correct.
When I got home that evening, after the interview, I read over the Webquest and thought she was right. I had created it quite quickly last year as I was trying to integrate the technology into my course at the speed of light. I was always so pressed for time that completing something was paramount. I was so pleased to finish it that I did not really give much thought to the credibility of the problem I was asking my students to solve. And based on the fact that it was my first introduction to Webquests, I’m not surprised. It is only now, a year later, that I am able to look at my work with a more critical eye and realize that change is needed. I sat down with the other grade 9 English teachers and we set a date to revamp this assignment. I have some ideas—instead of a brochure, perhaps a Literature Guide that looks at the people and symbols that affect Santiago, not just the countries he travels to. As with anything in teaching, one doesn’t get a second chance to try things out with a class, so the new and improved Webquest will have to wait until second semester to be unveiled, but I have Vanessa to thank for pointing out that teachers are not always the best judges for the value of an assignment.

Third Stop: On-Line Media Unit

During the spring of 2002, I had the opportunity to work with two former colleagues from Saint Joan of Arc to develop an on-line media unit at the Board level. The hope was that this unit would be used by all grade 9 Academic English classes in the board regardless of whether or not they were e-learn classes. While I knew it would be easy for me to pilot this project, much to my dismay, my two colleagues left the Board this year, and so I am piloting it on my own within my school. I have decided to have all the grade 9 Academic English classes try the unit to see if it is accessible and viable.
The unit is divided into four separate activities. The first activity has students examine different newspapers online and look for evidence of bias. They looked at aesthetics, content, advertising, and articles. The final task of the first activity was to submit a journal response to the following question: How has this activity helped you to understand bias in the news, and what difference will it make for you in the future? This first activity can be found in Appendix G. The second activity has students learn about differentiating between fact and opinion and writing their own piece of nonfiction writing on one of the following topics: Eating Disorders—their impact on teens; Violence in Youth Hockey; Legalization of Marijuana; and the influence of Video Games on Children. The activity provides the students with two initial sites to access on each topic, and they are then required to find additional information to support their opinion. The third activity examines the rules and regulations of the Canadian Radio and Television Communication’s laws. The final activity has students create a product and produce a short script for a radio commercial. On screen, I thought the entire unit was quite fair, but through the course of the semester, and after talking with my participants, many problems with the unit came to light.

My participants had some difficulty with the initial activity. Vanessa did not finish the whole exercise, and her journal reflected very little thought. She wrote, *I have learned that bias is not always clear and recognizable although it can be seen if looked for. If an article had bias in it, it can change your whole perspective on the situation...although ultimately, opinion does not amount over fact, it still has a major impact (Media Activity #1 Response, Vanessa, October 31, 2002).* I think that Vanessa knew most of this prior to the activity, and I did not see any real progress in her thought
process because of the activity. Lucy’s response was similar in that it lacked substance. She notes, *I have now learned that almost every newspaper article is biased. I think the most popular form of bias will be when the writer does not express an opinion.... Newspapers that are usually praised for having good quality articles probably have smaller chances of having any form of bias in them...I think that bias is a very hard thing to control, seeing as there are many forms and it is easy to add to an article* (Media Activity #1 Response, Lucy, October 31, 2002).

I found Martin’s response to be more reflective of what I hoped the assignment would help students come to understand. He writes in his journal, *In this activity, I have learned a lot about bias in print media. First of all, newspapers do everything possible to get readers to read their newspapers. They try to get an unreasonable amount of partnerships for advertisements and other features involved with other companies to get more people on their website. This is a scam, in my opinion. Also, they advertise their own newspaper with some slogans making their newspaper seem like it is the greatest thing to happen to the world like for the Globe and Mail, it had an ad about the newspaper with its slogan.*

*Also, there was a lot of bias in a lot of the articles that I read. I think that they are trying to get us to look at their opinions and accept them. By accepting the opinions, we would have the same opinions and look at the world their way. That, also, could make us want to read their newspaper even more. Some writers, depending on the newspaper, uses way too much bias. They are much too opinionated with their articles and it is extremely foolish and stupid.*
I think this really is going to change my way of reading newspapers from now on because I can see that they have a lot of bias in the newspapers now and it is out of control. I am completely aware that sometimes I may not agree with their opinions and their opinions may not be valid. I can also study their opinions and see what they think about society, the problems happening, and what they think about the certain story that they are covering (Media Activity #1 Response – Martin, October 31, 2002).

Steve continues to demonstrate his ability to think critically about the topic, and I plan on using his final journal as an exemplar in all my classes. He writes, From this newspaper activity, I have discovered that bias is present in most of the newspaper articles that we read. Sometimes the opinion is stated clearly, while it can also be suggested, but not verbally expressed. The writer or newspaper may show bias by filling the article with quotes from only one of the debating sides, showing preference towards that side. For example, an American newspaper article may contain many quotes from President Bush or American citizens expressing their concerns on the extreme possibility that Iraq, a terrorist-supporting nation, is developing nuclear armaments. This use of bias may be used as a platform to present the newspaper’s view, and can be considered as an opinion from the writer. It is also very unlikely that an American writer would publish a piece that inferred that he supported Saddam Hussein and his regime, or that the Americans should back off on Iraq. This clearly shows that bias is evident in most newspaper articles. For this reason we must carefully look at what we are reading, to see if it is entirely correct, and not just an underlying opinion based on inferred ideas.
I think that this activity will affect how I read newspapers, because through the various investigations, I have found that not all of what newspaper articles say is based on fact. Sometimes, you don't even have to look at an editorial or opinion writing piece, to find a preference to one side. For example, much of the Toronto Sun's articles are biased, at times ridiculously confusing readers who want to know what exactly happened. On the other hand, the Globe and Mail has very factual articles, although sometimes they can, as stated above, tend to lean towards one side, through the publishing of many of that side's quotes.

I believe that this activity was integral in understanding print media, especially because young adults can be easily persuaded into thinking one way or another. If we do not ask questions, but only believe what others tell us because they are older, and supposedly more knowledgeable, then we will never understand why things aren't exactly how we were told they were. If we are not inquisitive and do not ask objective questions when trying to decide what side to stand up for, then we will become lost in the many issues encircling our rapidly changing and diverse culture. For this reason, understanding what bias is, and when it is often used, can help us to make educated decisions at this crucial time in our lives (Media Activity #1 Response, Steve, October 31, 2002).

While the length and depth of my participants' responses varied, it was through the interview process in November 2002 that I discovered some other pertinent information about this first media activity. All 4 participants thought the first activity was extremely lengthy. While each student found the instructions clear and easy to follow, they all felt overwhelmed by the amount of work that needed to be done to complete the
first activity. Lucy recommended that examining the ads in four different newspapers should be removed. The advertisement part, I don’t know, it was a little confusing because the newspaper site I was on rarely had ads on it and I found it hard to find what I was supposed to be looking for...I had enough time but I left things til the last minute so I didn’t get through it all. (Interview – Lucy, November 12, 2002). Vanessa and Steve both recommended that the number of papers that needed to be examined should be reduced from four to two. “Four was way too much...it would have been better just looking at two papers (Interview – Vanessa, November 13, 2002). Steve also recommended that two papers already be paired up so that when students examine them there will definitely be bias for them to see and reflect upon. Steve commented, I purposely picked the Globe and Mail and The Toronto Sun because I wanted to compare them because I already knew they were so much different from each other so that’s why I picked them. Then I picked the Telegram because there was a new founder and I wanted to see what issues they were talking about. I also chose the Ottawa Citizen (Interview – Steve, November 18, 2002).

A final recommendation from Martin was to pair students up for the media activity—it would reduce the workload and allow them to dialogue with each other about what they found. I thought that while I was doing it, it would be a lot easier if it was something to do with a partner and you could get and give opinions from the webpages [of the papers] and what you thought of them (Interview – Martin, November 20, 2002).

The second activity requires students to examine the difference between fact and opinion. They will ultimately select a topic from four choices: legalization of marijuana, anorexia—a societal problem, violence in hockey, and the impact of video games on
children. The on-line unit provides them with some initial websites to gain research information from, and then they are to write a nonfiction piece to persuade their reader, me, of their opinion on the topic. I found that this activity ran more smoothly than the first, but I think that may have been because we had done some nonfiction writing in an earlier unit in the semester. As well, the topic choices seemed to work well; all students found one that they were interested in, and I think that made their writing flow more smoothly. I did discover that I had not included information about referencing their facts, so that change needs to be implemented for second semester. Sometimes I feel like I’ve never taught before when I forget simple things like that. I think this technology program can be overwhelming, and so it is a little easier for me to see how my students can forget to do something as well. The assignments for this activity were fairly lengthy, and my participants all wrote well, definitely understanding the difference between fact and opinion. I do not ever remember having to voice my opinion in my writing as a student in high school, so I am pleased that they are learning this skill early—it will help them as they move through their schooling.

The third activity has them examine the Canadian Radio and Television Communications (CRTC) industry. They look briefly at rules and regulations governing television and are then required to fill in a worksheet. However, as the due date for this activity approached, I realized that the posting on the website was incorrect. The original material was nowhere to be found, and by the time the teacher who had developed this portion sent me the activity, the time frame became too tight. The grade 9 teachers ended up canceling this activity, much to the relief of all our students. It is now something I will
have to revamp and include for second semester. The benefit to this was that it gave students a little more time for the final activity.

The final activity of the unit had them writing a script for a radio commercial. They invent a product and produce the script. This portion of the unit seemed to be the one they were most enthusiastic about. Just before Christmas, I introduced the final task to them and walked them through the instructions. Some changes were needed, as part of the activity built on the third component of the unit. Since the third activity had been cancelled, we did some quick adjustments to make the fourth activity still viable. I could almost see Steve’s brain buzzing away as he looked over the list of potential products to develop. I foresee Lucy’s sense of humor coming through in this one, and I’m not sure what Vanessa and Martin will choose to create. Their scripts turned out to be quite clever and fun, but I do not think the activity was as useful to them since they were not able to complete the third activity. As well, I have come across a media-based company that will do workshops on advertising, so I think this will eventually be a nice compliment to this unit—again. I’ll have to wait until the new semester to pilot it.

**Fourth Stop: Internet Research-Based Activities**

One of the other merits of the e-learning program at St. Augustine Catholic High School is having the Internet at one’s fingertips. As a teacher, it is so helpful to have students who can access resources immediately and not have to worry about booking my class into the computer lab or the library. Of course, with this comes the notion that students have to be taught how to find good resources on the Internet and that not every website will provide them with valuable or accurate information. All grade 9 students receive orientation on accessing resources from the teacher-librarian. It
is here they learn about finding informative and accurate websites and how to reference other forms of print material. Once they have this knowledge, it makes their ability to utilize the Internet in my classroom much more successful. It is at this point that I can implement many of my research-based activities in class.

For example, during our study of *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, students were required to research a number of the characters and symbols found in the novel. “Coelho’s Conundrum” is an assignment that requires them to discover the truth behind many of the characters and symbols in the novel and to discover their impact on Santiago, the main character. The assignment takes them through a series of research steps until they produce a box-like structure that is decorated with quotes and filled with artifacts that represent the characters or symbols they choose. They are also required to e-mail me a paragraph response explaining what they have discovered and the connections they have made. Once all of this is complete, students present their findings to small groups in the class.

Their ability to make connections to the literature and synthesize the information is one step towards improving their critical thinking skills. Their ability to “think outside the box” as they produce visual products that reflect their creativity and hard work is amazing. This type of assignment also allows those with different intelligences, such as kinesthetic or visual, to shine through.

My participants produced some interesting and analytical products that they shared willingly. Vanessa presented a jewel-encrusted case which focused around the symbol of the Soul of the World. Her focus centered on the importance of pursuing our dreams, and her response reflected her voice. *The Soul of the World is nourished by*
people's happiness, unhappiness, envy and even jealousy. Everything is written in the Soul of the World and there it will stay forever. To become part of the Soul of the World, you must understand that all things are one. Love never keeps a person from pursuing his personal legend; if he abandons that pursuit it is because it wasn't true love...the love that speaks of the language of the world...My box symbolizes the world and inside it are some of the true meanings of the world. I placed a second box which represents the desert inside the first box and in it are many small marbles and one large marble. The small marbles represent the omens and symbols that you must learn to be able to become part of the Soul of the World. The bigger red marble symbolizes a heart... (Coelho's Conundrum Response, Vanessa).

Lucy's sense of humour shines through in this assignment. She decided to use chocolate chips as sheep dung within her box, among other more important symbols. She noted that you don't always need words to communicate, as Santiago was able to communicate with his sheep without the use of words. Martin's continued interest in religion was present in his box. He focused on the need for Santiago and us to trust in God, and if we do, then our personal legend will be achieved. Steve's assignment was very reflective of research. He appeared content and proud of his final product and willingly shared all that he had learned from his research. Steve is smiling and is so well spoken during his small presentation of his box. I can see the enjoyment that he gets from learning; it shines through in his answers and in the care he puts into his work. Sometimes though, I think the other students are intimidated by him. I truly enjoy having him in class because he enables the other students to see what can be done (Personal Journal, November 3, 2002).
Another example of a research-based activity where e-learning is implemented is in the form of a debate. Students read a second novel called *Ellen Foster* by Kaye Gibbons. It is the story of a young girl who lives with an alcoholic, abusive father. Through the course of the novel, she attempts to escape her father and live with a foster family. She is a young girl who is wise beyond her years. The girl is forced to live with her grandmother instead of a kind and loving teacher. Students are asked to examine whether living with family is always the best solution for abused children. They are required to research child abuse, case studies, and use the novel as a source of information. They synthesize their findings and prepare a side for debate. The research leading up to the debate allows them to understand that solutions are not always black and white and that, more often than not, the world we live in presents them with many gray areas.

A second research-based activity that connects to *Ellen Foster* occurs near the end of the semester. Students are required to prepare a seminar to be shared with the class on a societal issue that is addressed in the novel. These issues include racism, child abuse, alcoholism, and survival. While they are making numerous connections to the novel, they are required to put together a fact sheet about the issue that is based on research. Perhaps one of the most compelling parts of this activity is that the students' eyes are opened to issues that they may not be fully aware of within the context of their own lives. The students I teach generally come from affluent families where both parents are educated and successful. They may have never experienced abuse, alcoholism, or racism. For others, it is a reaffirmation that things they are dealing with in their lives do not have to
be handled on their own—that there is help and solutions for the problems they may be encountering.

Whatever the activity may be, the value of learning research, presentation, and communication skills shines through in my class. I think students are much more active in their learning than I ever was or than some of their other classes allow them to be.

**Fifth Stop: e-Folio**

During my teaching of an additional qualification course during the summer of 2001, I had the opportunity to read extensively about portfolios and decided to implement the use of a portfolio in my grade 9 laptop English class. A copy of the portfolio is attached in Appendix I. However, I wanted to create this portfolio so it would be unique to laptop learning, and so I decided that students could create a Webpage as their final product that would reflect their reading over the course of the semester. At this point, I did not have the slightest idea how I would implement this as I had little training and knowledge about html coding. I met with Jim LePlante, our Board consultant, and together we determined how to develop an application for student use. It is curious that I need not have worried about my lack of knowledge as my students are so well versed in code that they took the assignment and ran with it!

I did discover that this year that I am much more comfortable in my delivery of this project than I was in my first year. There were so many unknowns when I first started and so many kinks that had to be ironed out. Jim, the consultant, and I created a set of rules to follow so that student pages would not crash. So many of them were using extensive java and flash coding that the application we were using was not capable of handling it. The technicians at IBM were involved almost daily during the first year of
implementation, as they were continually amazed by what my students were producing during the first year of the program. When I implemented it this year, all of these problems and technical glitches had been addressed, so the activity ran more smoothly and only minor technical problems had to be dealt with on occasion. I spoke extensively with my participants and observed them as they created their pages.

The students had much to say about this project, and I am certainly able to draw some wonderful conclusions about the e-folio because of their responses. I began my introduction to this ongoing assignment on September 24, 2002, and my journal from that day reflects life in the e-learn classroom. I introduced the e-folio web page to my grade 9s today. What a treat—for once the technology on my end was all up and running. There were problems with four kids in terms of passwords, Internet connections, and one boy didn’t have a home page icon to begin the process. I certainly have learned from last year that there is no point in getting all flustered about it—I think that part of the reason is that I myself am more comfortable with the process, so I don’t get stressed as easily. I walked them through the process using the projector and then had them spend the class practicing and fooling around with different links, etc. I left to search for the technicians who were apparently in the building, but no one knew where—so what do I do with the kid who doesn’t have the icon—he looked on with someone else.

Two girls whose computers were in for imaging used my computer when I was done—one was Vanessa. I can’t believe the problems that occur, and I’m sure that eventually it will get better for her and she will be less frustrated.

The techs showed up and were able to fix three problems but not the icon one. It’s a job for someone at the board which means poor TT, a student in the class, couldn’t do
anything all class. I will be away tomorrow, so if it's not fixed, he can't even do
tomorrow's work—the perils and downfalls of laptop technology! He has a contingency
plan in place to bring other work, but hopefully when he logs on tomorrow it will be up
and running.

Steve was able to troubleshoot his way around a couple of problems and spent
some time helping the boy next to him. Lucy had a smile the size of New York on her face
when her first link worked.... Martin—I made a point of going over to see if he was ok
today as I forgot about him yesterday. I cracked a joke, got a smile out of him, and he
seemed to have a handle on things. He has a hurt arm and is unable to write or type with
it. He fell off the trampoline at Muskoka. I was surprised that he asked for an extension
on his poetry artwork. I knew he needed one but I didn't think he was "forward" enough
to come and address it—so I'm glad to see that. I hope that is an indication that he feels
comfortable in the room and will lead to openness in his journals and interviews.

The students worked away the whole period, experimenting with backgrounds,
pictures, links, etc. I was so impressed with their focus, and a number of times, small
cheers of relief went up around the room as a process worked for them. I admit the same
feeling came from me when twice I was asked how to put a background in. I learned it in
the summer but didn't write it down so was afraid I wouldn't remember. We walked
through it and it worked. One girl even waited before shutting down because she wanted
me to see her experimental page with clouds and bubbles on it! For the first time in a
while, teaching felt truly rewarding today with my laptop kids. They were motivated,
enthusiastic, and excited about what they were doing... three cheers for technology
today! (Personal Journal, September 24, 2002).
And yet, even when things run smoothly, I am never out of the woods or completely on the right track! Three days later, as they set to work on their webpages: Yesterday, I was in early and had the lab all set up. I decided to spend the first 20 minutes explaining the e-folio to the students in terms of the specific content and then give them the period to work on their actual page. They had been experimenting with the technology for 2 days, so I figured it was time they actually address the assignment. And so, the frustration begins!

Within the first 5 minutes of class, three students could not access their home page that they had created the day before, two students still couldn’t access theirs, and one student couldn’t log on. Two others had forgotten their passwords and two others needed to go to the library to get loaner laptops as their computers were in for servicing. And so, what I thought would be a smoother start than last year just doesn’t seem to be. We’re still dealing with the same technical issues that we did last year. Thankfully, the technicians happened to be in today so they were able to get things fixed within about 30 minutes (but class is half over by then, and those students weren’t able to use that time). I also had one student who had broken his CD drive and it was in pieces on his desk—he is the same one that seems to have constant technical problems and keeps telling me about them, and yet what can I do? I am not a technician, and I find I’m getting frustrated with him. I need to remind myself that he is only 14 and an immature student and he doesn’t know what to do either. It doesn’t seem to me that some of these students really take good care of their computers (Personal Journal, September 27, 2002).

With all of these problems just growing, I finally decided to switch tracks and introduce them to our modern mythology unit through urban legends. Students viewed a
clip, ate Poprocks, and drank coca cola (a popular urban legend), and then set about researching a variety of legends to see if they were true or false. While it was a break away from our e-folio work, it did allow me to watch my participants in action. 

Lucy—for the first time I’m starting to see some energy and expression out of Lucy. She was giggling and animated over some of her discoveries of her legends. Steve has continued to be focused and quiet, but every so often I notice him quietly smiling as if he is agreeing or enjoying something that I’ve said in the class. Vanessa was wonderful today—her computer is actually working and she seems focused. Yesterday, she even helped another student save something to the common drive, and so even though she claims she has little computer experience, she is clearly picking up techniques and sharing her knowledge freely with her classmates. Martin also jumped in to help, but only when asked—he did not volunteer to help, but once there, he was more than happy to assist. He is still so quiet—I am looking forward to seeing his dynamics in a group situation to see if he speaks up a bit more. I think Steve will be a natural leader in there, and Vanessa will be vocal. Lucy and Martin will be my quiet ones, but I still know the work will get done (Personal Journal, September 27, 2002).

When the technology is running smoothly, the e-folio becomes a wonderful way to spend class time. Once students have finished posting their magazine, newspaper, poetry, movie, and book review responses, they are ready to meet in their Literature Circles for the month. I randomly choose groups and they spend the period, usually the last Friday of the month, sharing what they have read about and responded to. They also take great pride in showing off all the flashy things on their webpages. Their personalities are definitely reflected in these pages. The Literature Circle allows them to voice
opinions and learn about interests of their classmates. The laptop just seems to give them a more viable mode of communicating all of this. The first Literature Circle went well in October, but not as well as the subsequent ones. As soon as students have a better understanding of the circle, they feel more comfortable with it and with their peers.

*Last Friday was our second Literature Circle day with my grade 9s and their efolios. We ended up having to conduct our circle in the lab instead of the library as I had not booked in, even though I thought I had. The lab worked well enough—just a little crowded in spots as kids were trying to group themselves and log in so they could all see each other's computer screens.*

*Right from the start of today there was a different atmosphere from the first one. I'm not sure if it is because they knew what to expect this time around or if it was because I let them coordinate their own groups. The sizes of groups ranged from three to five people and, curiously, there were no mixed groups—the girls were all with girls and the boys were all with their pals too. One thing it did give me was a better sense of some of my participants' peer groups. Lucy, who I had wondered if she was finding the adjustment easy, was in the group of five and very verbal and excited to be there—clearly not turning out to be the quiet one! Vanessa was matched up with three other girls, a little quieter in nature. Martin and Steve ended up in the same group—that didn't surprise me because they sit near each other in class, so it seemed a natural progression.*

*I made a point of circulating through the lab today and listened in on some of the discussion. Harry Potter was a hot topic for most groups—I'm glad to see the bespectacled wizard is still a favourite, even in high school. I wondered if they would be trying to be too cool to admit that they really like him. About a dozen students had seen*
the film on the opening weekend—rave reviews, and they struggled to keep parts secret from their classmates who had yet to see it. More and more I have to remind myself that they are only 14, and though they are trying to be adults and are treated as adults, they are still children in a lot of respects. I'm glad there is still that sense of excitement and enchantment within them.

The buzz of conversation was much stronger than last time. Many students commented in their journals that they felt more at ease being in a group with their friends and not as timid about expressing their opinions even if they differed from the other students. They felt more confident disagreeing or asking questions of their peers—so perhaps in the future, I should make the first literature circle one where they are grouped with peers so that they are eased into it and feel more comfortable for the second and consecutive ones (Personal Journal, November 1, 2002).

As with many of their assignments, I found the topics chosen really reflected the maturity and insight of my participants. For example, one of Lucy's responses was to a magazine article about a gay teen killed in Colorado. She writes:

To Whom It May Concern,

I recently read the article entitled "A Killing In Colorado". I found this story to be very empowering, yet it also made me very angry.

The article features a young, gay boy who was murdered for no apparent reason. It makes me sick how people are discriminated against just because of the life that they chose for themselves, a life that makes them happy. People have no right in saying how someone should live their lives. I'm sure that they would not want someone else interfering because of the way that they chose to live their life.
I think that you should continue to publish these stories because I think that it helps others to realize that being gay or bisexual isn’t wrong. Your magazine has a big influence on its readers, and so I think that by promoting gay rights, you will teach young people that just because someone chooses to live their life differently, they should not be discriminated against.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter, and I hope that it helps to make young people realize that it is not wrong to be different (Letter to Author, November e-folio, Lucy).

Vanessa’s poetry responses also reflect some interesting insights. After examining the poem, “this is a photograph of me” by Margaret Atwood, she notes, I found this poem very thought provoking. It talks about a young girl who drowned in a lake. I think that nobody knew what actually happened to her and that is why she was explaining the picture of her dead in the lake. While listening to it I thought of the movie, What Lies Beneath. I thought of this because it is about a girl who is purposely drowned in a lake by her boyfriend and she later comes back as a ghost. The girl in the poem must be talking about the picture because she wants people to know how she died. The poem makes me feel sad in a way because she seemed so young and innocent. A question that I would want to ask the author would be how she drowned and what people thought of her disappearance (November e-folio, Vanessa).

She also responded to another poem about racism, entitled “Theme for English B” with the following words: The meaning of this poem was very significant for it is about the meaning of being white or coloured. I thought that his poem was truly written from the heart; it asked and showed that he saw something that many others didn’t see. He
said that although he was coloured and the instructor was white nobody noticed that they were the same and a part of each other in a way. That was that they were both American!

When reading this poem I thought of the movie Finding Forester. This movie came to mind because it was about a coloured teenager who had a great talent in writing. In the end, one of his teachers doesn't think that he is actually writing his essays and that he is using plagiarism. He thinks this because of his colour. If I could propose a question to the author it would be, what do you mean when you stated, “hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page.” I didn't understand this verse and wonder what the meaning is (November e-folio, Vanessa). I was so pleased to see Vanessa make a connection to another work that we studied in class; that shows some maturity and critical thinking skills.

Martin's response to the same poem was also well thought out. I really liked this poem. The author was a twenty-two year old African-American living in Harlem. He goes to school to this college on a hill above Harlem. At first, he tells us about what his paper was about, a little bit about himself and a paragraph of the way to his house. He then describes what he thinks being an African-American in the American society of his time. He is the only coloured person in his class and most likely was treated unfairly by a lot of people. However, he describes that he is treated like a lesser person although; he is just like the instructor, the other people in his class and everyone else, despite the skin colour. For instance, he says, “I like to eat, sleep, drink and be in love. I like to work, read, learn and understand life. I like a pipe for a Christmas present, or records- Bessie, bop, or Bach.” I think his message of that part of the poem was basically saying, “I like these things. I'm sure that you do to. How does that make me any different from you? Just
because I have a different skin colour, I am still a human being." He then says that because they are both Americans, they are one people. They are one nation of united people yet they still discriminate against him. I liked this poem because he is showing the pain and suffering of being an African-American in the American society during the 1950's and how he overcame the treatment (November e-folio, Martin).

Once again, Steve's interest and intelligence are reflected through his e-folio. He read an article entitled "The Real Face of Jesus" by Mike Fillion. His letter to the author reflects his enthusiasm for science and technology, both subjects I have noticed he has commented on previously. He writes,

Mr. Fillion,

Thank you for the article on "The Real Face of Jesus," and forensic anthropology. I was very interested about how computer software is able to create an image representing a person's face, just by inputting data from their time period. It was also interesting to compare Mr. Neave's picture to seven others from different centuries. I would like to learn more on how forensic anthropology helps to create images of the faces of criminals wanted by the police. I would also like to know if the software that Mr. Neave used to create the face of Jesus is available to the public, or for download on the Internet.

Although the picture of Jesus' face was shocking at first I hope that people do not take Mr. Neave's work wrongly. Before they criticize his work, they should understand how the archaeological data was utilized to create the picture. I have always believed that the pictures or paintings of Jesus that we often see in North America look too westernized. I have also wondered how it was the Jesus was so much taller than the
people of his time. By looking at the different pictures of Jesus through the centuries though, and by different races of people, I decided that most races see him how they wish to see him. For example the Byzantine mosaic from the 13th century has Jesus looking as if he was Eastern European. In the picture from the MGM film “King of Kings,” Jesus looks as if he were American. Finally in the painting called “Black Jesus Blesses the Children,” Jesus looks African.

I also believe that as long as we follow what Jesus said, it does not matter what he looks like. It doesn’t matter if he was short and stocky, or if he had the body and appearance of a fashion model. As long we know what he taught his looks are meaningless. Still some clarification of a frequently asked question is nice, and Neave has done just that. Just like any other piece of art, his work is subjective to his data, and can be true or untrue (November e-folio, Steve).

A short section of Steve’s November Literature Circle Response gives a sense of what they are discussing—certainly not what I ever would have discussed at age 14:

When Martin presented his magazine response I was immediately interested in the topic he chose; what Russia is doing about the Chechen rebels who held hundreds of people hostage in a theatre earlier this year. I did not really know the details of what had happened during the time that the people were held hostage in Russia, and was planning to find out more on the scene anyways. With Martin’s response though, I instantly knew who had committed the terrorist act, and what the elite forces of Russia were planning in retaliation. Although I am interested in seeing a response to the act of terrorism against innocent people, I am angered by not only how they rebels acted, but how the Russian government is acting too. I think that as long as we continue to raid the countries where
the terrorists originated, we are just feeding the fire they have sparked. I agree that control of these misled people is necessary for the safety of others, but think that by responding to this act, we are just provoking a bully. As long as the Russian elite forces continue to blow up buildings in Chechnya, an increasing level of violence will rise in the Chechen forces who not only are acting in response of previous conflicts, but to be martyrs to their people (Literature Circle Journal, Steve, November 23, 2002).

While these responses give only a snapshot of what my participants are doing, they do reflect the time and thought that the students are putting into their assignments, not to mention the further time they spend posting all of these responses and personalizing their webpages. While it has turned out to be an exemplary portfolio assignment, as a teacher, it is quite difficult to evaluate in the sense that constantly reading off the computer screen and moving back and forth between their pages and their links is very time consuming and exhausting.

The journal responses for December and January continued to reflect my students’ voices and their unique perspectives on topics that they found truly interesting. During my interview with Vanessa, when asked if she thought the e-folio would get boring month after month, she responded, No, because there’s different articles and movies to talk about; it’s different and plus I add new little funky things on the page...Plus, I really like it because I’d never made a webpage before and now I’m just learning all this new stuff, I was totally clueless before (Interview, Vanessa, November 13, 2002). Steve enjoyed the e-folio. I get to show my interests to other people and talk about issues and I like that and, sometimes it just gives you an excuse to watch a movie! Sometimes it (the coding) didn’t work and I had to find a book on how to do it and that
helped a bit or sometimes I asked a classmate and was able to fix and change my page that way (Interview, Steve, November 18, 2002). I wish it was possible to save their pages, but once the repository of their files is deleted when the semester is done, there is no access to their responses. My initial hope was that they would leave high school with a portfolio of their reading. The nonlaptop classes create a hardcopy scrapbook so they will have a memento of this assignment, but the laptop classes will not. They could feasibly save their page without the links and keep their responses as word documents, but it certainly won’t give the same sense of creativity that the original assignment calls for.

The End of the Semester

As I look back over the course of the last 5 months, I am continually amazed at how quickly time flies in the classroom and in life. I see my classroom as a place of comfort and learning. I’ve watched the students grow and change. That is the beauty of teaching grade 9 in the first semester—the changes in 5 months that the students undergo are often remarkable. I think I was unusually lucky that this group was so cohesive. I witnessed healthy competition and mutual respect in my students as they strived to achieve their best.

My goal as an e-learning teacher was to create activities that would emulate a true constructivist classroom, and I think I have done that. The journal discussions allowed me to learn about my students in a way that was less intrusive. I entered their world with all its difficulties in terms of parental relationships and struggles to fit in. Through the Webquest activity with The Alchemist, I have learned that my ideas are not always the most successful and that my students can help me become a better teacher. I am pleased that I am able to react to their suggestions with confidence and that I have created an
environment where I think they feel self-assured. The on-line media unit enabled me to view my students as independent learners, but I also realize that they still need direction and guidance in their learning, and sometimes I was not able to give them enough of this as I dealt with technology troubles. The e-folio activity is still my favourite component of the grade 9 English course. I think students exude creativity and thoughtfulness every time they post a response, and I truly enjoyed reading their responses. It was also during this activity that I realized that quite often their technology skills were superior to mine, and I enjoyed learning from them.

As usual, the end of the semester arrives quickly, and preparing for exams provides a whole new set of worries for my students, but I think they are adequately prepared to tackle their exam and move forward. I think I have managed to present a broad view of life in my laptop classroom and all the glitches and moments of euphoria that go with it. I have learned to face change and challenge with grace and patience. I have also learned that the need for students to be self-directed, motivated, and enthusiastic presents itself again and again in all of the activities. I have discovered how critical my commitment and passion for e-learning are, and I hope that my voice and the voices of my participants have adequately described our experiences and thoughts about e-learning.

So, as I close the page on this chapter, I am going to need some time to digest all that has happened as I prepare to draw some conclusions and interpret what I’ve come to understand about e-learning. And so, it is on to the final stop of this journey into cyberspace.
CHAPTER SIX: LAST STOP (FOR NOW)

"Life offers us tickets to places which we have not knowingly asked for.

Then it makes us pay the fare." (Maya Angelou—poet and author)

Introduction

It seems strange to be arriving at the final stop on this part of my journey. It has been an interesting one—one which I have thoroughly enjoyed taking. As I disembark from the train, I look around me with a very different attitude than I had when I first began my study. So much of who I am has been defined within the walls of a classroom (both as a student and as a teacher), and yet my experiences over the past 2 years at St. Augustine CHS have allowed me to move beyond those walls into a world that is not defined by a structure. Instead, it is defined by a whole new framework, one that is not limited by walls, but instead allows me to explore the world through technology. The whole notion of e-learning—to "integrate the use of information technologies in an anywhere, anytime learning environment" (Puopolo, 2001) has become something I truly support.

As I look back through my writing, I believe the methods I chose provided detailed and tangible evidence of the e-learning culture of St. Augustine Catholic High School and the student participants within my study. Glesne (1999) states:

The use of multiple data-collection methods contributes to the trustworthiness of the data. This practice of relying on multiple methods is commonly called triangulation...the purpose for methods triangulation is not the simple combination of different kinds of data, but the attempt to relate them so as to counteract the threats to validity identified in each. (p. 31)
Denzin (1997) agrees. He says:

A text is valid (legitimate) if it is sufficiently grounded, triangulated, based on naturalistic indicators, respondent validation, carefully fitted to a theory, comprehensive in scope, credible in terms of member checks, and so on. The text’s author then announces these validity claims to the reader. Such claims now become the text’s warrant to its own authoritative representation of the experience and social world under investigation. (p. 7)

I believe that using observation, thick description, journal writing, and interview have allowed me to examine the impact of e-learning from a number of perspectives, thus creating a stronger foundation for the multiple interpretations I have drawn about the activities used in e-learning, the role of the teacher, and the type of student best suited for my laptop classroom.

Glesne (1999) cites a number of other ways of creating a valid study. One such approach is through prolonged engagement and persistent observation. She defines this as “extended time in the field so that you are able to develop trust, learn the culture, and check out your hunches” (p. 32). By the time my data collection was completed, I had spent a year and a half immersed in the culture of e-learning at St. Augustine Catholic High School. I spent another 6 months there while writing the final chapters of my thesis. I spent 5 months with my grade 9 English class and my 4 student participants, enough time, I believe, for me to get to know them and gain some of the valuable insights they provided me with that I have described in this study.

Another pathway that Glesne (1999) details is the clarification of researcher bias, which she defines as “reflection upon your own subjectivity and how you will use and
monitor it in your research” (p. 32). I think that I was able to remain fairly objective through my study because I had a similar experience to that of my participants when I first started to teach in my laptop classroom. I was once a novice e-learner, and I feel that my own journal writing allowed me to remain relatively impartial as I interpreted the experiences of my participants, who were also new to this craft. There is also the idea of member checking—“sharing interview transcripts, analytical thoughts, and/or drafts of the final report with research participants to make sure you are representing them and their ideas accurately” (Glesne, p. 32). Even though I was not teaching my participants when I sat down to write the final chapters of my thesis, they were easily accessible, for clarification if needed, through the school or e-mail. Finally, sharing my work with my supervisor on a regular basis allowed me to reflect on the data I was collecting. I think all of these avenues helped me to remain focused and credible during my research.

As I conclude this study, I feel that my interpretations and my reconstruction of events and of the perceptions of my student participants reflect an accurate portrait of my time in the field gathering my data and considering aspects of e-learning in my classroom and in my school. With this in mind, I decided to divide my final chapter into three sections for a final view of e-learning in my classroom. First, I reflect on the e-learn program at St. Augustine in terms of the factors described in Chapter Two. As I looked back over the factors that I examined in Chapter Two, I discovered a number of important things about the implementation of an e-learning program at this high school. Second, I decided to share my perception of the English program through the findings of my research participants. Finally, I reflected on my “Journey into Cyberspace” as a whole.
St. Augustine's e-Learn Program

Cost Factors

The program is clearly successful in terms of the number of students who are interested, parent support, and teacher support, but without more funding from the school board, I am not sure that this program is sustainable. As the program heads toward the end of the second year, there are still a number of concerns and problems that I feel may lead to the downfall of the program. Teacher training, technical support, and the infrastructure are only a few concerns raised in this study. Our labs are not configured properly, and every day there are ports not working. Staff has worked to try to make ends meet, but I feel it should actually be school board personnel who take care of these needs. Just the other day, two technicians from the school board came in and could not believe the configuration of our labs. There has been some discussion around the use of wireless technology, which might solve many of these problems but would mean further costs to upgrade some computers and may lead to a different set of concerns with student use. The amount of time, energy, and money that has already been put into this program to ensure its success is not enough. The problems only magnify the real need for further support from our school board.

Lack of Technical Support

Tied to the issue of cost is the need for ongoing technical support. Though this area has improved in the second year of the program, I still believe that our school requires full-time technical support to help maintain the e-learn program. Currently, there are two technicians 4 days a week, but they are still unable to handle the plethora of problems the students experience with their laptops, not to mention all of the
complications that arise in the e-learn labs and with the desktop computers. Without enhancing this aspect, I believe teachers will become too frustrated and will eventually move back to older, less technical methods of teaching. I know there have been days when I wished I did not have to deal with technology issues, but they have been fewer and fewer over the course of the past year. One thing I feel might help is that the number of students allowed entry into the program be limited based on the availability of technical support. I think it is better to run an efficient and workable program than one that is fraught with problems and is difficult to manage.

Administrative Support

This has been one area of the e-learn program at St. Augustine CHS that has been consistently strong. The vision of a technology-based school is so important to the principal, Mary Puopolo, that her support for the program, its staff, and students has been unwavering. I do not think the program would have garnered as much success without her commitment. I think that any administrator who becomes part of this community will need to be just as supportive as she has been in order to maintain the program. In that regard, the importance of hiring staff who are also committed to this vision seems to me to be a necessity. I think there will also have to be continued connection to the community as well to foster the growth and development of this program. In conjunction with administrative support, there still has to be support from the school board. There is a need for board personnel to visit the school and witness the success and strength of the program as well as the frustrations. Their awareness of the level of technology being employed at the school might increase the spending or the presence of support from consultants and technicians.
Teacher Training

This is the area that I am most passionate about as I think about the potential of the e-learn program at St. Augustine CHS. As I noted earlier, I received about 8 days of training in my first year, certainly not enough to allow for the immediate and successful implementation of an e-learn program. I had so many questions and frustrations over the course of the first year of the program and, had I been more adequately prepared, I think my experience would have been more positive.

I see a need for workshops on application use and on ways to successfully implement curriculum. I found that I was a pioneer in this area; there was very little out there to model or to use in the classroom. I was inventing ideas and activities daily, with no mentors to turn to. Ideally, a semester of training would enable a teacher to immerse her/himself fully into the program and feel confident walking into the classroom. Though I know this kind of time commitment is not financially possible, the one area I would like to see given more attention is for teachers to have the opportunity to meet and dialogue with colleagues to develop curriculum. During exams in January of 2003, three colleagues and I sat down to examine the grade 9 Academic English course. Two of us were laptop teachers and two were nonlaptop teachers. Given that hour to dialogue, we managed to change the Webquest which Vanessa, my student participant, had drawn my attention to. We decided to create a “Guide to your Personal Legend” instead of a travel brochure. This guide would incorporate some elements of the original Webquest. Students could still research a country that Santiago traveled to and create a brochure, but they would also examine some of the people and symbols that were significant to the novel. This would bring students closer to the literature and, it is hoped, give them a
better understanding of the importance of following their own personal legends. Without Vanessa's input, I do not think this change would have occurred, and so, for me, she has reinforced the importance of discourse among students and teachers.

During that meeting, we were also able to design a new approach to a novel study and revamp the on-line media unit so that changes could be made for second semester. So, it is my conclusion that, more than anything, teachers need time to spend working through curriculum issues together. Administrative teams need to come up with creative ways of allowing teachers time during the day to meet and plan. This can only benefit the e-learn program as well as the curriculum in general.

The training for the e-learn program did not continue in my second year. I could meet the consultant on my own time to get assistance, but any formal training in new applications or programs did not continue. Teachers new to the department and program became dependent on me to provide them with the technological expertise I had supposedly developed. While I see this mentoring as an opportunity to improve professionally and to create a positive climate in my department, I was not given any extra time to do this. Such increased work load may eventually lead to teacher burn out in this program. It is painful to think of the number of teachers who may leave the program because they are overworked, because then the training and development will have to start all over again. I have come to believe that the type of teacher that is successful in this program is one who is self-directed and motivated to learn and grow professionally. I think they must also be confident enough to dialogue with their students, admit their mistakes, and be willing to make changes to best suit the needs of their learners. Ironically, this is also what makes a student successful in the program. However, if
teachers are not afforded the proper training and time, I think they will choose to leave the program and it will not be able to sustain itself. Therefore, it is critical to provide teachers with support and training so that they will continue to teach in the e-learn environment. I know that I will stay with the program for at least another year as I have put so much energy and work into it. Also, I still enjoy the challenges it affords me as a professional and the environment it creates in my classroom. I hope to become involved in administration in the next few years, and I know that this part of my teaching experience has only helped prepare me for what I may encounter.

*Lack of Resources*

It is obvious to me that one of the reasons for the minimal amount of teacher training I received is the cost involved. But I think the lack of resources available that are designed specifically for e-learn programs may also play a role. As I have said earlier, I have been the pioneer in curriculum development. Even though I have attended a number of conferences and workshops and spoken with other teachers of e-learn programs, I found very little usable material for the English classroom. While the base application our board uses affords me the freedom to create a number of my own activities, there is very little "ready-made" material for me to use or adapt to my specific classroom needs. I found this to be the biggest shortfall in the development of this program. As a teacher in a nonlaptop environment, I usually had access to a number of resources that needed minor adaptations to fit my classroom and student needs. As an e-learning teacher, this supply of resources has dwindled dramatically. As I noted earlier, I think our corporate partners should take a greater role in developing software in their education field that is designed to suit the needs of laptop teachers and learners.
The Role of the Teacher in the Technology Classroom

The key discovery I made through my research and through my study was that the role of the teacher becomes that of facilitator. As I stated in Chapter Two, a teacher who is not comfortable with this role will have a difficult time adapting to the e-learn classroom. The constructivist teacher becomes a key part of the classroom—not the sole leader of the class. I have enjoyed adapting to this role. There are still days when I am leading students through an activity or lecturing, but they are few and far between. In my e-learn classroom, I get students started at the beginning of class, but then they are the ones posing questions, researching answers, and leading discussion. I step in to guide them if they are heading off track, but it is truly rewarding to watch them become critical thinkers and participants in their own learning rather than waiting for me to tell them all the answers.

My role enables students to collaborate with one another, but only if the design of the activities allows them to do so. Therefore, I think it is critical for an administrator to select teachers who are willing to work in this environment. If I were not open to the possibility of change through using technology in my classroom, my e-learn program would be a disaster. While there are still curriculum areas that do not connect with technology, I now see it as a valuable tool that invites students to exercise their own perspectives. The program can be successful with a constructivist teacher who is challenged and excited by the use of the computer as a tool, but it is also important to have a motivated, self-directed student who is willing to demonstrate these characteristics on a daily basis.
The English Program and My Fellow Travelers

When I first designed the e-learning activities for the grade 9 English curriculum, I was not sure what to expect in terms of student interest and response. While I found everything new, challenging, and exciting, I had to remember that the students I would be teaching had grown up in an environment surrounded by technology, so their connections and understanding of computers were vastly different from my own. As the semester started, I posed a question for students to reflect on and e-mail their responses: we have just finished our first week in the e-learn lab. What were your feelings and comment on your experience in the following areas:

- computer use—difficulties and frustrations
- ease of use of the e-folio page and clarity of instructions
- ease of set-up of activities and the classroom
- research activities on Urban Legends

I received a number of interesting responses from my participants and other students and highlighted areas which I thought would have some impact on my study (Personal Journal, September 28, 2002).

Lucy responded, I liked experimenting with the e-folio webpage, but I didn’t love it. I found some aspects frustrating...I found the research for the Urban Legends easy...So far, I really like the laptop program. It offers more freedom than I had when I used computers in elementary school. I think that we should use our laptops as much as possible because it’s fun to use the Internet as a research tool. I’m glad I’m in the laptop program because it opens up a whole new way of learning (Lucy’s e-mail response, September 29, 2002).
Vanessa also had some interesting things to report. I applied for the laptop program to learn more...I have already learned a lot about how my personal computer operates and although there are many great features, I have been experiencing many problems with my laptop. In the four weeks that I have had my computer it has broken down three times. I find this very frustrating because I have paid a lot of money for it and have lost many important files when it has to be re-imaged... I find that we are completing work in a different way that allows us to develop and use new skills. I found the e-folio assignment very creative and interesting. I had no knowledge of html coding but in the past week I have learned a lot about code and links...This course is putting a different slant to assignments and it is providing me with more experience with computers (Vanessa’s e-mail response, September 29, 2002).

Martin’s response also has similar themes to Lucy’s and Vanessa’s. He says, the laptop program makes learning easier and a lot more fun than just reading out of a textbook every day and doing questions. I think that it opens a whole new world of learning to the students...this past week at the lab was really cool. I enjoyed going on the Internet and searching for different Greek Gods and their powers. Also, so far, I thought the CPT e-folio was remarkable. I never knew how to make a webpage before. This program makes it easy and fun. I finished the newspaper article part of it and found it easy...this part of the curriculum is the best... I cannot wait to start with Romeo and Juliet, I hope the rest of the course is just as incredible as this first month (Martin’s e-mail response, September 29, 2002).

Finally, Steve’s response adds more support for the program. Each time we go on the laptop, I learn something new and utilize different programs to help with my learning.
In English we are designing a web site and this has been a great experience as I get to write HTML code to design the site. Within the webpage we have to write newspaper responses, magazines responses, and movie reviews. I think this is interesting as we are exploring different types of media and then using it to produce a website...so far I’m glad that I chose to take part in Laptop Learning and believe I will learn more from this program then I would from the ordinary Academic stream (Steve’s e-mail response, September 29, 2002).

These early e-mail journals show my participants’ initial response to their perceptions of e-learning. They were initially enthusiastic and interested in all the program had to offer, and as I looked back over the course of the semester, I did not see their passion wane at all. By examining some of the common themes that I discovered through my interviews and observations, such as the type of activity and the role of the student and teacher in my e-learning classroom, I have developed a perception of e-learning through my fellow travelers on the journey. I think the various activities that were part of the e-learn English course hold the key to understanding whether a laptop program can be successful.

The journal discussions were a hit in terms of student response. All 4 of my participants enjoyed this activity and clearly wanted more of this in class. This forum allowed them to express their views and opinions on a variety of subjects without the risk of talking in front of people. Initially, I think it is important to give them freedom in their topic choice so they can write about something they feel passionate about. Once they were comfortable with the forum, it was easier to have them focus on topics and issues directly connected to the curriculum. I believe this is a successful way to encourage
students to respond reflectively to an issue or to a classmate’s thoughts. It also allows them to develop their own voices in a less threatening environment. I only have to look back at Lucy and Vanessa’s responses during the interviews to realize that this is a successful component in the e-learn program and one that should continue. The journal discussion forum is a wonderful venue for students to experiment with their own voices and to learn to be reflective and responsive to each other and to issues in society. It gives them the opportunity to express themselves and to be critiqued by someone other than their teacher. I would like to see it used more frequently in the future and perhaps even shared between laptop classes or other schools to broaden the experience even further.

The second activity that I want to comment on is the Webquest for *The Alchemist*. This form of problem-based learning has become a staple in my English laptop classes, but it was not until my interview with Vanessa that I truly understood the purpose and impact that this type of activity could have. Initially, I saw it as a unique way to use the laptops over a 5-day stretch. It would allow students to research and produce a product connected to the novel. I do believe that if a Webquest is constructed effectively, it allows students to work cooperatively in groups, with each student having a particular role and responsibility to the group. My participants worked well together, and all felt comfortable with the task. During the interview, they all indicated that they found the notion of a Webquest to be interesting but would not want to do more than one in a semester. But the one thing that became clear in my interview with Vanessa was that the Webquest I had designed was really quite flawed. Steve had commented that it didn’t seem that connected to the novel, but I was surprised that Vanessa picked up on this as well. Once she pointed its faults out, I realized she was right and wondered why Martin
or Lucy did not notice this too. The problem they were solving really had no relevant connection to the novel. At the least, I would have expected Steve to point this out and I was truly surprised that it was Vanessa who was able to see this. Even though the activity had little connection to the novel, all my participants seemed to enjoy the process involved. I am pleased that Vanessa felt comfortable enough to share her thoughts with me, and because of this I have redesigned the Webquest for second semester. It is more comprehensive and captures stronger connections to the novel by researching symbols and people that Santiago encounters, not just the places he travels to. I will be curious to see if it is more successful under its new design. Probably the biggest insight I have had from this part of the process is the importance of ongoing dialogue with students regarding activities. I think that I am able to accept their criticism because I am confident in my teaching style and I look at their comments as valuable resources for creating a stronger program.

The on-line media unit was perhaps the least successful of the laptop activities according to my participants' responses. In hindsight, I wonder if this is because there were three people designing it, two of whom were not at all familiar with e-learning and one, being me, who was so overwhelmed with trying to create a program that I was just happy to see the unit completed. I did not want to be the leader at this point as I was tired of creating everything, and I found it a little difficult to give direction to my colleagues who were not as immersed in this new style of learning as I was.

After interviewing my student participants, a number of themes became clear. All 4 found the first activity overwhelming in its length. They indicated that their understanding of bias could be gained through two papers and that the activity became
repetitive. In light of this, I have cut the activity in half and students will examine only
two newspapers instead of four. Again, the success or failure of this change is yet to be
determined, as second semester has just started. I think the second activity—
differentiating fact from opinion—was generally successful. The participants enjoyed the
topics and found them fairly easy to research. I did have to make some changes here as
well though. I realized that I had given no concrete instructions about citing sources, and
so they needed direction in this. As well, I think I will look to change the topics from
semester to semester, as it will prevent the possibility of plagiarism and keep the unit
current for students and teachers alike. I have come to understand that e-learning requires
ongoing adjustments. Traditionally, I could leave a course fairly intact over a 2- or 3-
year period, but this activity indicates to me that this is no longer possible, so I must be
prepared to update activities and topics quite regularly to preserve the integrity of the
program.

The students were unable to comment on the third activity, as they never
completed it due to lost information. I will be piloting it during second semester. They
enjoyed the last activity the most. It was the advertising script, and it allowed them to be
creative. Because this seemed to be the highlight of the on-line unit, I have decided to
build on it through a guest workshop on advertising. The grade 9 classes in second
semester will have the added benefit of a half-day workshop on deconstructing all forms
of advertising. It will be interesting to see if their ads in the final activity are stronger
because of this. For me, that is the one drawback to teaching; I frequently discover better
ways to teach or facilitate something, but it is never the original class who benefits from
the changes—it is always the next group.
The e-folio is the bread and butter of the grade 9 laptop program. It is the activity that seems to integrate all the necessary skills under the umbrella of e-learning. I think this activity is successful for a number of reasons. It promotes the reading of many different genres that encourages students to become actively involved in the world around them. The variety of reading they engage in translates into developing different writing skills, such as summarizing, reflecting, responding, and analyzing. The literature circle component encourages communication and discussion, and because the student responses are being shared, I think the students take more care in presenting their responses. Finally, the medium through which they present it all reflects one of the many uses of technology. I think it is a wonderful activity, and I was encouraged by the responses of my participants to it.

The e-folio activity gives students the ability to assist each other in the development of their code and webpage design. It allows students to shine in different areas, for the stronger writer may not necessarily be the most adept at technology. Their enthusiasm for the activity shines through in the production of their webpages. I am continually amazed at the backgrounds, graphics, and fonts they use to “jazz” up their writing. They seem to realize that the writing is still the paramount activity, but being able to be creative with more than just words is a benefit. They are teaching me a whole new language as we share ideas for webpage design.

I have learned a number of things from my experiences with my participants in light of the e-folio over the semester. Students need guidance initially and one or two classes of experimenting, but after that, they can work and create independently. I found the literature circles to be more successful when students were grouped with their peers,
and so I will make a point of recommending this for the first literature circle at least. I still think it is important to have them sharing with classmates who are not in their peer group because they can learn from them and, ultimately, no student feels excluded. The e-folio is a wonderful activity because it allows students to explore so many different societal issues as well as many different forms of media, including movies and songs. The variety also helps prepare them for the Grade 10 Literacy Test, and while this has never been the purpose of the activity, it certainly helps. The one area that I am still at odds over is the evaluating of this assignment. I evaluate monthly, as I have found this to be manageable. The first time I waited until the end of the semester and it was too onerous a task, with little time for students to digest feedback. So within my study, it became clear that a monthly evaluation was effective, as was the rubric I used. But it is the difficulty of constantly reading off the computer screen and checking to see if links are working that still presents frustrations for me. Yet, to have students hand in hard copies of their writing would defeat the purpose of the creation of the webpage. This is one area that I hope to further examine and dialogue with colleagues about to see if there is a more efficient way of evaluating.

The final block of activities that make up the e-learn program revolve around Internet research. I can’t stress enough how wonderful it is to have the Internet as a resource at my students’ fingertips. Just from a planning perspective, this tool enhances classroom productivity. No time is wasted traveling to and from the library to use computers and, as long as the students are taught sound research skills, this is an invaluable tool. The difficulty lies in monitoring plagiarism and encouraging students to use other means of research besides their computers. I think if the design of the activities
takes these two factors into account, the constructivist classroom can still run smoothly. The use of the computer as a research tool enables students to share resources and synthesize information quickly. They become more adept at finding relevant information and, as I noted earlier in Chapter Five, the value of research skills, presentation skills, and communication skills is strengthened with the presence of this learning tool.

**Overall Thoughts**

The journey through cyberspace has been a truly unique one for me. When I set out in September of 2001, I was so excited to be a part of the vision at St. Augustine CHS, and now that 2 years have passed, I know I have embraced the challenge to the best of my ability. I have come to believe that e-learning is a valuable program and one that challenges students and teachers alike, but that these challenges are not always easy to adapt to. There has to be ongoing communication with all parties involved in the program to ensure its success and sustainability. As a teacher facilitator involved in e-learning, I have learned that my students have valuable input and that I can learn much from them. I have also learned that using technology is never static—as quickly as the technology changes, so too must the lessons and methods of teaching when using this tool. My interpretations, therefore, are just that; they are not carved in stone and will certainly change over time. Most important, the students themselves who are involved in this program must be willing to take control of their own learning. They must be willing to expect a heavier workload, share their work with more people and not just their teacher, and they must be passionate and motivated; the passive learner will not shine.
I understand and realize that using interpretive ethnography allowed me to reflect on my own interpretations and to record human experience. Glesne (1999) sums this research methodology up when she says,

much of what we seek to find out in ethnography is knowledge that others already have. Our ability to learn ethnographically is an extension of what every human being must do, that is, learn the meanings, norms, and patterns of a way of life. (p. 45)

I have come away from this study with a better understanding of how my students adapted to the use of technology and how I can better serve them in my role as an e-learning teacher, and I feel that I have accomplished something worthwhile in my research. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) note that “in the past, and probably still today, most ethnography has been directed toward contributing to disciplinary knowledge rather than toward solving practical problems” (p. 253). I do hope that my research will lead to better pedagogical practice for me in the e-learning classroom and that others who read my work will enjoy and learn from the journey I have taken as well. I also hope that what I have learned might aid new teachers as they come into the e-learning environment. As Denzin (1994) puts it in describing interpretive ethnography, “the challenge lies in what each of us chooses to do when we represent our experiences” (p. 503).

Kleiman (2000) asked, “will all this technology improve education for large numbers of students? Will it make our educational systems more effective and efficient? Will it help schools better prepare students for their lives in the 21st Century?” (p. 7). I do not know the answers to these questions, as my journey is not yet over. I have not reached “that station.” I do know that I have become a better teacher, as the computer
helps me create a constructivist classroom and has given me opportunity to grow professionally. I do know that I have willingly undergone a great deal of change and if teachers are not willing to change then they will remain anchored in a traditional pedagogy that may not have a place in our technologically advanced society. I also think that many of my students have developed into motivated, curious learners and critical thinkers because of their integration with technology in my classroom. The students in my e-learn classroom have improved their communication skills, their leadership skills, and have learned to formulate conclusions. Using the computer as a tool provides students with choice and the ability to interact with a wide range of material. Students learn to work in groups and to interact beyond the walls of my classroom. I think they have gained valuable skills that will serve them well in the workplace or in their postsecondary studies. I also believe that interpretive ethnography provided a strong research methodology for me as I embarked on this experience of researching e-learning in a grade 9 Academic English classroom.

I do not know when I will board the next train or where it will take me, but I do know that the places I’ve seen, the people I’ve met, and the things I’ve learned along the way will be packed in my suitcase and carried with me.

*Each of us has the right and responsibility to assess the roads which lie ahead and those over which we have traveled, and if the future road looms ominous or unpromising and the roads back uninviting, then we need to gather our resolve and, carrying only the necessary baggage, step off that road [or train] into another direction.* (Maya Angelou – Poet and Author)
References


Selected Bibliography


Hastings, R. J. (n.d.). *That Station*. 


Appendix A

Initial Student Survey

Name __________________________

Write the number that best describes your knowledge for each item:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4(Expert)</th>
<th>3(Proficient)</th>
<th>2(Learning)</th>
<th>1(No Knowledge)</th>
</tr>
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1. I know the basics of the computer: how to turn on the computer; save information to a disk; troubleshoot problems with the computer; print my documents.

2. I am good at keyboarding/typing on the computer. I can type using proper fingering on the keyboard.

3. I know how to use Microsoft Word 2000. I can open the program, type my information, change fonts, space my document, and use spell check.

4. I know how to use Microsoft PowerPoint. I can open the program, create slides with text and pictures, create a background, and present the information to others.

5. I know how to use Microsoft Excel; I can enter data, create a graph, and write formulas in the cells.

6. I know how to create a web page/use HTML.

7. I know how to use e-mail.

8. I know how to search the World Wide Web and find information I need on the Internet.

ANSWER YES/NO

9. Do you have a computer at home? If yes, what kind? __________________________

10. Do you have Internet connection at home?
SHORT ANSWER – In one paragraph, describe why you wish to participate in the Laptop Learning Program and within your answer, you can describe different ways that you have used a computer.
Appendix B

Research Participants – Interview Questions

1. What influenced your decision to take the Laptop Academic English over the nonlaptop course offered at St. Augustine?

2. To the best of your ability, describe your general comfort level with computers.

3. From your understanding of the program so far, do you think the computer is a valuable tool to help you with your learning? Why or why not?

4. What do you hope to gain or learn from this program?

5. To date, how have you found the following:
   a. The set up and use of your computer
   b. Following various instructions and using different applications
   c. Completing tasks assigned.

6. Do you ever feel overwhelmed because you are in the laptop program?

7. Do you feel that you are more or less socially interactive because you are in the laptop program? In class or out of class?

8. How often are you on your computer? In school? Outside of school?

9. Journal Discussion Forum:
   a. How do you feel about the topics you’ve had to write about so far?
   b. What types of topics would you like to write about?
   c. Have any of the postings been awkward or threatening for you? Why or why not?

10. Webquests:
    a. Do you like the philosophy or idea of a webquest as a form of learning?
    b. Why or why not?
    c. How did your group decide what country you would cover and who would be in charge of what areas?
    d. Did you have any difficulty working within your group?

11. On – Line Media Unit:
    a. Did you find the instructions effective?
    b. Did you feel intimidated or isolated by the activity and unit?
    c. Was the work load unreasonable?
12. What are your overall impressions of coming to St. Augustine and being in this program? Have you found it easy or difficult to make friends and meet people?

13. What role does the computer play in your life outside of school? Friends? Family?

14. Do you face any challenges or would you like to ask any questions?
Appendix C

Interview Questions – Mrs. Mary Puopolo

1. Why did you decide to have technology as the focus of Saint Augustine CHS?

2. Do you think the integration of technology will better prepare our students? Why?

3. There are a number of obstacles or roadblocks when implementing technology in a high school. Would you please comment on the problems that have arisen in regards to the following:
   - funding
   - teacher training
   - technical support
   - administrative support at the Board level
   - availability of resources

4. The school is in its second year of operation now. Why has this year been easier or harder than last year in terms of technology implementation?

5. What is your future vision for Saint Augustine CHS?
Appendix D

Ethics Approval

Senate Research Ethics Board

DATE: July 11, 2002

FROM: David Butz, Chair
    Senate Research Ethics Board (REB)

TO: Carmen Shields, Education
    Dana Sheahan

FILE: 01-293, Sheahan

TITLE: A Qualitative Journey into Cyberspace

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

DECISION: Accepted as clarified.

This project has been approved for the period of July 11, 2002 to August 31, 2003, subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The approval may be extended upon request. The study may now proceed.

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB. The Board must approve any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to www.BrockU.CA/researchservices/forms.html to complete the appropriate form REB-03 (2001) Request for Clearance of a Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council. Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects, with the exception of undergraduate projects, upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form REB-02 (2001) Continuing Review/Final Report is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

Deborah Van Oosten
Research Ethics Officer
Brock University  http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/
phone: (905)688-5550, ext. 3035 fax: (905)688-0748
Appendix E

The Alchemist Webquest

Activity Plan

- Title: The Alchemist Grade 9 English Webquest
- Subject(s): English
- Activity Type: Independent Research Assignment

Student Procedures:

THE ALCHEMIST - TRAVEL GUIDE - GR 9
LAPTOP ENGLISH

"A Wise and inspiring fable about the pilgrimage that life should be"

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the world of Paolo Coelho. Your group is about to embark on a Webquest - you will use the internet to solve a problem.

TASK

The class will be divided into groups of 4-5. It is your job to create a travel guide for either Spain, Morroco or Egypt. Your group of travellers consist of:
- an artist
- a historian
- an outdoor adventurer
- a theologian
- a vegetarian

Your guide should be based on a budget traveller on a two week vacation.
PROCESS

1) The teacher will assign you one of the following countries: Spain, Morocco or Egypt.

Spain Link
Morocco Link
Egypt Link

2) Each person must select one of the following areas to research:
- Cost of Your Trip
- The Country
- Sights and Attractions
- History
- Educational Opportunities (this is for groups with 5 members)

(See heading for details)

3) Research your area thoroughly. Sample sites have been provided, but you are also required to include 2-3 additional sites in your brochure that you found helpful in your research.

4) Once you have compiled the necessary information for your area, create a brochure using Web Publisher.

5) As a group, design a cover package to hold your brochure.

6) Hand in hard copy of your travel guide. Be sure to come up with a creative name for your travel company.

TOPICS AND RESOURCES

- route travelled
- currency
- transportation - return airfare and within trip
- accommodation - hostels? pensions? hotels?
- passports/Visas/medical insurance

Air Canada Link
European Rail Systems Link
Federal Canadian Government Passport Office Link
Hostelling International Link

- climate
- time of year to travel
- physical geography/political geography (bordering countries, cities etc.)
- cuisine

World Climate Link:

- cultural festivals
- major tourist sights (be sure to appeal to all the different travellers in your group)
  ie: museums, churches, historical landmarks, etc.
CONCLUSION

Through completing this assignment, the student will become aware of the planning, cost, and organization of a trip. They will also understand more about Santiago's travels while working cooperatively in a group. Research skills and desktop publishing skills will be used and enhanced.

EVALUATION

Products / Performances:
Rubric Evaluation - Link below
Additional Editors: Vera Tong (St. Augustine CHS), Andrea Ledvinka (OISE-UofT)

Duration/length of the activity:
5 Day(s)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Below Level One (0-49)</th>
<th>Level One (50-59)</th>
<th>Level Two (60-69)</th>
<th>Level Three (70-79)</th>
<th>Level Four (80-100)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge/Understanding</td>
<td>The Student:</td>
<td>Very limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Some knowledge</td>
<td>Considerable Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge of conventions of internet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thorough Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understanding of relationships, facts, ideas, concepts and themes</td>
<td>Very limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Some knowledge</td>
<td>Considerable Understanding</td>
<td>Thorough Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking and Inquiry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draw Conclusions about material for use in final Product</td>
<td>Limited Effectiveness</td>
<td>Limited use of other sites Includes 1 internet site.</td>
<td>Some use of other sites Includes 1-2 internet sites.</td>
<td>Considerable use of other sites Includes 2 useful internet sites.</td>
<td>Thorough Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore other sites for additional information</td>
<td>Very limited Use of other sites No additional internet sites included.</td>
<td>Limited use of other sites Includes 1 internet site.</td>
<td>Some use of other sites Includes 1-2 internet sites.</td>
<td>Considerable use of other sites Includes 2 useful internet sites.</td>
<td>Thorough Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Information for final product in an organized manner</td>
<td>Very limited organization</td>
<td>Limited organization</td>
<td>Some organization</td>
<td>Considerable organization</td>
<td>Thorough organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect and Respond to research</td>
<td>Very limited Reflection &amp; research</td>
<td>Limited reflection and research</td>
<td>Some reflection and research</td>
<td>Considerable reflection and research</td>
<td>Thorough reflection research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce a brochure which reflects your knowledge and research</td>
<td>Very limited brochure - missing lots of information</td>
<td>Limited brochure - missing information</td>
<td>Fair Brochure - components are there, but lacking in organization</td>
<td>Considerable effort on brochure - organized and complete</td>
<td>Thorough production - creative and organized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis of information into Travel Guide</td>
<td>Very Limited Travel Guide incomplete</td>
<td>Limited - most components of travel guide completed</td>
<td>Fair Travel Guide - all components present but lacking in aesthetics</td>
<td>Good Travel Guide - organized and aesthetic</td>
<td>Excellent Travel Guide - organized and aesthetic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EVALUATION

- **Products / Performances:**
  Rubric Evaluation - Link below
  Additional Editors: Vera Tong (St. Augustine CHS), Andrea Ledvinka (OISE-UofT)

- **Duration/length of the activity:**
  5 Day(s)

- **Additional Editors:**
  Dana Sheahan
Appendix

Sample Travel Brochure
(reduced in size)

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Early Spanish History

Christian several centuries Spanish rule over the land and islands

The Spaniards

Their authority

Christian several centuries
Spanish rule over the land and islands

The Spanish

By the 1520's, Isabella and Ferdinand had

The Spanish Empire

Charles inherited not only Spain and the

Civil War

compounded provided a market for goods and

economic development from trade with Spain.

The skills of the Spanish navy, such as

in the Christian faith, due to the

in the Moors, the Visigoths' defeat of the Visigoths.

Ferdinand and Isabella

Spain captured in 1492.

with the help of the Genoese,

Arabian and Islamic countries friction with the

influenced the later Spanish

Spanish

Early Spanish History

Christian several centuries Spanish rule over the land and islands

The Spaniards

Their authority

Christian several centuries
Spanish rule over the land and islands

The Spanish

By the 1520's, Isabella and Ferdinand had

The Spanish Empire

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Civil War

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The skills of the Spanish navy, such as

in the Christian faith, due to the

in the Moors, the Visigoths' defeat of the Visigoths.

Ferdinand and Isabella

Spain captured in 1492.

with the help of the Genoese,
Modern Spanish Culture

Old Spain: These languages are also very similar. Standard Spanish, Basque, and Catalan alike. Most of the countries where they are spoken have a strong Latin American influence. They are spoken in Spain, Portugal, and Argentina. There is also a mix of people living in Spain today who are descendants of those who left Spain.

Spanish Language

Spain is also a member of the European Union, a group of European countries that have formed a partnership with other countries. This partnership helps them to work together on important decisions.

Curtain Spanish King

Juan Carlos I de Borja

The official flag of the European Union

Current Spanish Prime Minister

Jose Maria Aznar

Aznar are named by the Prime Minister. Jose Maria Aznar, as most of the important decisions are made by the Prime Minister. Jose Maria Aznar is the current prime minister of Spain.

Another famous Spanish explorer was

Hernan Cortes

Mexico, and conquered the Aztecs.

Hernan Cortes, who landed in what is now Mexico, and conquered the Aztecs.

Columbus's Ships: The Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria

Columbus's Ships: The Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria

Columbus's Ships: The Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria

where it was sold.

An Italian by birth, he was hired by Isabella

and Spanish Indians

Columbus Landing in the New World

Columbus Landing in the New World

one of the Spanish Islands

The first known Spanish-sponsored explorer was

Christopher Columbus, who landed on

The first known Spanish-sponsored explorer was

Christopher Columbus, who landed on

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Appendix G

Media On-Line Unit – Sample Activity

Discovering Bias In Canadian Newspapers

Purpose: During this lesson, you will learn a variety of newspaper terms and become aware of strategies newspapers employ to sell papers, stories and ideas. You will also learn to recognize false advertising in on-line ads and become critical of on both advertisements and newspapers because of your knowledge of target audiences, bias etc.

Strand: Media

Step 1: Click on the list of Newspaper Terms. It would be helpful for you to have a copy of a newspaper in front of you when you are learning these terms so that you can read each definition, then look at your newspaper to locate each item in the paper.

Step 2: Now that you are comfortable with newspaper terminology, click on the Newspaper Activity to begin your assignment. Next, you must complete the Student Activity Worksheet. Print out a copy of the Journal Response Rubric and hand it in with your finished product.

Step 3: After you have completed Steps 1 and 2, complete the Advertising Activity if you teacher assigns this component.

All work is to be printed and placed in the media section of your notebook.
Newspaper Terminology

**Advertisement** – a message printed in the newspaper paid for by the advertiser

**Article** - a fact-based summary of a recent event; usually answers *Who*, *What*, *Where*, *When*, *Why* and *How*; should not give the author’s opinion

**Banner** – a headline in large type running across the entire width of the page

**Bias** – *an opinion or tendency to be strongly for or against an issue*. Bias can be revealed in many ways. For example, if a newspaper only reports one side of the story, *that reveals the paper’s bias*. Similarly, if a newspaper article directly or indirectly reveals the opinion of the writer, *that also demonstrates bias*.

**Box** – a small article or headline enclosed by lines to give it visual emphasis

**Byline** – the name of the writer of the article, usually appearing above the news item or feature story

**Caption** – title or explanatory note above a picture

**Columnist** – a writer who regularly has a column appearing in a newspaper or distributed by a newspaper syndicate

**Credit Line** – acknowledging the source of a picture

**Cutline** – information below a picture that describes it

**Dateline** – line that tells where the story originated (New York, Toronto, Paris etc.)

**Ears** – space at the top of the front page on each side of the newspaper’s nameplate. Usually boxed in with weather news, index, or an announcement of special features.

**Edition** – one of several issues of a newspaper for a single day

**Editorial** – an article stating the opinion of the newspaper editorial board, usually written in essay style; it usually relates to a current topic/issue
**Editorial Cartoon/Political Cartoon** – cartoon which expresses opinions; usually on the editorial/comment page

**Feature** – a story in which the interest lies in some other factor other than news value

**Filler** – a copy with little news value; used to fill space

**Headline** – display type placed over a story summarizing the story for the reader/title of article

**Index** – table of contents of each paper, usually placed on page one

**Journalism** – process of collecting, writing, editing, and publishing news

**Jump** – the continuation of an article from one page to another

**Kicker** – a short catchy word or phrase over a major headline

**Lead** – the first few sentences or opening paragraphs of a news story containing the answers to **Who**, **What**, **Where**, **When**, **Why**, and **How**

**Mass Media** – any various methods of transmitting news to a large number of people (e.g. radio, television, newspaper, internet)

**Masthead**- the matter printed in every issue of a newspaper stating the title, ownership, management, rates, etc.

**Nameplate (flag)** – a stylized signature of a newspaper which appears at the top of page one

**News Services** – news gathering agencies such as the Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), and Canadian Press (CP). They gather and distribute news to subscribing newspapers

**Obit** – an obituary; a story of a person’s death

**Review** – an account of an artistic event such as a concert or play which offers critical evaluation; opinion of the writer

**Side Bar** – a short story related to a major story and run nearby

**Tabloid** – a newspaper with five-column pages. It is one half the size of the traditional paper

**Target Audience** – the group of people for whom each newspaper is primarily written/designed; usually includes gender, age, socio-economic class
Newspaper Activity

Now that you are familiar with newspaper terminology, you will be able to successfully complete this newspaper activity.

Explore 2 of the following online newspapers on the same day. (It is important that you complete this activity in one day because the questions pertain to comparing news items in different papers on the same day.)

- The Globe and Mail [www.globeandmail.com]
- The Toronto Star [www.thestar.com]
- The Telegram [www.thetelegram.com]
- The Ottawa Citizen [www.canada.com/ottawa/ottawacitizen/]
- The National Post [www.nationalpost.com]
- The Toronto Sun [www.yivitoronto.com/torsun.shtml]
- The Vancouver Sun [www.canada.com/vancouver/vancouversun/]
- The Montreal Gazette [www.canada.com/montreal/montrealgazette/]

You will need to answer questions based on the information from these web pages when you get to the student activity worksheet.
Student Activity Worksheet

Answer the following questions in complete sentences, using your on-line newspapers as your source.

1. For each of the two newspapers you have selected, answer the following questions:
   a) What is the first thing you noticed about each paper’s webpage? (This could be a headline, a photograph, a flash of colour...anything that caught your eye when you first looked at it)
   b) What does your response to the above question reveal about the newspapers? (Ex. The newspapers use flashy colours to attract readers)

2. Describe each of the two paper’s home pages. Include all headlines, photographs, etc.

3. Based on the home page of each of the papers, what is the target audience of each paper? Explain your answer in detail by giving examples from the papers. (E.g. The Toronto Star has a link to a local high school sports page, therefore teenagers are a part of the Star’s target audience.) To answer this question, look for images used, style of headlines (including font, size and colour), issues covered, advertisements, indexes/links, layout, etc.

4. Compare and contrast the coverage of the same news item in your two different papers. How does each paper’s coverage of the news item reveal its bias?

5. Find an article from one of the papers where you detect bias. Briefly summarize the article. Explain how the bias of the author is revealed. (*Make sure you read an article, not an editorial)

6. On any given news day there is a “top story”, a.k.a. the “biggest ticket news item”. Using the two newspapers, select one top story for each of the following categories from the news day you have selected:
   a) international news
   b) national news
   c) sports news
   d) entertainment news

7. Journal Response: What have you learned about bias in print media? Will this affect how you read the news from now on? Why or why not? (Length: Approximately 1 page typed double spaced)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Level 1 50-59%</th>
<th>Level 2 60-69%</th>
<th>Level 3 70-79%</th>
<th>Level 4 80-100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge/Understanding</td>
<td>- demonstrates limited knowledge</td>
<td>- demonstrates some knowledge</td>
<td>- demonstrates considerable knowledge</td>
<td>- demonstrates thorough knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- knowledge of the form required for response journal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- understanding of information, ideas, concepts related to each subtask journal entry</td>
<td>- demonstrates limited understanding</td>
<td>- demonstrates some understanding</td>
<td>- demonstrates considerable understanding</td>
<td>- demonstrates thorough understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking/Inquiry</td>
<td>- uses critical thinking skills with limited effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses critical thinking skills with moderate effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses critical thinking skills with considerable effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses critical thinking skills with a high degree of effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- critical thinking skills shown in responses to questions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- inquiry skills in analyzing, and interpreting information, and forming conclusions to questions</td>
<td>- uses inquiry skills with limited effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses inquiry skills with moderate effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses inquiry skills with considerable effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses inquiry skills with a high degree of effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>- communicates information and ideas with limited clarity</td>
<td>- communicates information and ideas with some clarity</td>
<td>- communicates information and ideas with considerable clarity</td>
<td>- communicates information and ideas with a high degree of clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- communication of information and ideas in journal writing pieces</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- use of various forms of communication for different purposes</td>
<td>- demonstrates limited command of various forms</td>
<td>- demonstrates moderate command of various forms</td>
<td>- demonstrates considerable command of various forms</td>
<td>- demonstrates extensive command of various forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>- uses language conventions with limited accuracy and effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses language conventions with some accuracy and effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses language conventions with considerable accuracy and effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses language conventions with a high degree of accuracy and effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- application of language conventions in response journals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- connection of personal ideas, feelings, and experiences in response journals</td>
<td>- connection of personal ideas to writing is limited</td>
<td>- connection of personal ideas to writing is moderately effective</td>
<td>- connection of personal ideas to writing is considerably effective</td>
<td>- connection of personal ideas to writing is highly effective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** A student whose achievement is below level 1 (50%) has not met the expectations for this assignment or activity.
Appendix H

Reading Portfolio

READING PORTFOLIO...(Dana Sheahan)

A Reading Portfolio is a compilation of your reading for your grade 9 year and can extend throughout high school. It is our goal that you leave St. Augustine in four years with a portfolio that documents your reading and thoughts while you were here. The portfolio is an ongoing work that is constantly changing and growing just as you grow and change. There are specific guidelines that need to be followed and there is also a lot of room for your own creativity and uniqueness. We hope you enjoy this assignment and turn it into a reflection of who you are and what matters to you.

STEP ONE: Select a suitable format for your reading portfolio. It will be a web based application as outlined in class for the laptop English classes. For non-laptop classes, you may select an alternate format such as a scrapbook, album, or binder with appropriate dividers.

STEP TWO: Divide your portfolio into the following sections- each section should have a title page of some sort.

- Novel Study
- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Book Reviews
- Poetry/Song
- Movie Review
- Literature Circle Response

**EACH TIME YOU POST SOMETHING, IT SHOULD BE DATED: MONTH AND SECTION (ie) Movie Review – October or Book Review - November

STEP THREE: Specific Instructions for Each Section

Section One – Novel Study
You and your classmates will be reading a novel called Ellen Foster by Kaye Gibbons. Throughout the course of the semester, you will meet with your Literature Circle Group to discuss portions of the novel you have read. Each person in your group has an assigned role for each Literature Circle meeting date.

Literature Circle will meet four times during the semester, so each member of your group will have the opportunity to play each role. If your group has more than four members, the role of Literary Luminary will be assigned to two people.

Role #1 – The Summarizer
- your job is to prepare a brief summary of the reading. Your job sheet outlines this role in detail. Read it carefully so you are prepared for Literature Circle Day.

Role #2 – Literary Luminary
- your job is to focus on special sections of the reading that you think your classmates should remember. Your job sheet outlines this role in detail. Read it carefully so you are prepared for Literature Circle Day.

Role #2 – Discussion Director
- your job is to develop a list of questions that your group might want to discuss. Your job sheet outlines this role in detail. Read it carefully so you are prepared for Literature Circle Day.

Role #4 – Creative Connector
- your job is to find connections between the book and the world outside. Your job sheet outlines this role in detail. Read it carefully so you are prepared for Literature Circle Day.

At the end of the Literature Circle, your group should hand in their role sheets for assessment under the learning skills component of your marks. Since you are handing in these sheets, you should take some notes during discussion to refer to for your paragraph response.

Upon completion of the Literature Circle, you must write a two paragraph response which comments on the discussion your group had. Your response should be put in the novel section of your portfolio and should be clearly dated. It should be ready for the day your CPT is due each month.

Section Two: Newspapers
a) Throughout the course of the semester, you should read 4 newspaper articles.
b) When you read an article, choose something that is of interest to you.
c) Cut the article out and paste it in your portfolio.
d) Your articles should be at least 2 weeks apart in date.
e) Each article should fall under one of the following headings:
   - Sports
   - Entertainment/Life
   - National News
   - International News
f) For each article, respond to the following:
   - a brief 3-5 sentence summary of the content of the article. (Refer to your EQAO red book to help you write your summary) Be sure to focus on the issue and not your opinion here.
   - In a paragraph response, if you had the opportunity, what would you do to change or enhance the issue that you’ve read about.

Section Three: Magazines
a) Throughout the semester, you should read 4 articles from any popular magazines that you like (articles must come from different magazines. That means you can’t use the same magazine twice)
b) When you read an article, choose something that interests you. (e) sports, fashion, computers, running, etc.
c) Cut the article out and include it in your portfolio or post it on your webpage. If you can’t post it, be sure to give the hard copy to your teacher on the day your CPT is due.
d) For each article, respond to the following:
   - a brief summary of the article – a paragraph in length (Refer to your EQAO book for helpful hints)
   - Write a short letter – 2-3 paragraphs to the author commenting on why you liked and/or disliked the article.
   - Find a website that has information on the topic that the article focuses on and include it in your portfolio.
Section Four: Book Reviews

a) Check your weekend newspaper or the internet for book reviews.
b) Print or cut out four reviews over the course of the semester. (dates must be at least 2 weeks apart)
c) Choose reviews that appeal to you – think about whether you’d like to read the book after reading the review.
d) Include the review in your portfolio

e) In a brief 3-5 sentence response, comment on why you chose this particular book as one of your reviews.

Section Five: Poetry/Song

Poetry:

a) Every other month you will receive three poems to read.
b) In your portfolio, write a paragraph response to each poem- you can include your thoughts on some or all of the following:
   - what did you understand, feel, think after your first reading?
   - What questions did you have?
   - What words/phrases did you find confusing?
   - What words/phrases seemed to have particular importance?
   - After a second reading, what insights did you have?

Songs:

a) Every other month, you will be allowed to choose two songs from your favourites.
b) Include the lyrics in this section. Lyrics must be appropriate – would you read them out loud in class?!
c) Your songs must come from two different headings. You may choose from:
   a. Pop
   b. Rock
   c. Rap
   d. Hip Hop
   e. Folk
   f. Blues
   g. Jazz
   h. Country
   i. Classical
   j. Spiritual/Christian

d) For each song you choose, comment on what you think the main message of the song is. Also, comment on why you chose this particular song and what relevance it has in your life. You may also comment on rhetorical devices used by the artist and entertainment value of the song.

e) Your response should be approximately 200 words in length.

Section Six: Movie Reviews

a) Each month you should view a movie – either at home or at the theatre
b) After viewing, write a short review – 2 paragraphs in length. You should include the following:
   - Title and key actors and their acting
   - Brief plot line
   - Entertainment value - did you like it or not?
   - Comments on the music and sets

Section Seven: Literature Circle Response

a) Once a month we will have a reading portfolio day. You will gather in small groups and share something from your portfolio. It can be from any of the sections.
b) The purpose is for you to share and discuss some of what has been read.
c) There are no specific questions to be asked or answered. You will take turns and talk about whatever you wish as long as it is connected to something in your portfolio.

d) At the end of each Portfolio Day, you will write a one page journal response which reflects on what was discussed in your small groups. You must also hand a hard copy in to your teacher for marking.

e) Include your response in your portfolio.

WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THIS ASSIGNMENT. IT WILL BE YOUR CULMINATING PERFORMANCE TASK FOR GRADE 9. IT IS WORTH 15% OF YOUR FINAL GRADE SO TAKE PRIDE IN THIS ASSIGNMENT.

YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN GUIDELINES, BUT YOU ARE MORE THAN WELCOME TO READ MORE THAN WHAT IS REQUIRED!!

CPT DATES:

CPT Dates will be set by your teacher but usually occur on the last Friday of the month. Your journal response is due on the Monday following the circle.

On each Literature Circle Day you are required to have the following completed:
- One newspaper article
- One magazine article
- One book review
- One movie review
- One set of poem/song responses
- Novel Response from Literature Circle

EVALUATION

1) Complete the Master Checklist to ensure you finish all the tasks required (see attached)

2) Journal Responses – The Monday following each Literature Circle Date, you are required to hand in a journal response (see attached rubric)
   4 x 25 = 100 marks

3) Handing in your completed Reading Portfolio (see attached rubric)
   100 marks. Your portfolio will be collected or viewed after each Literature Circle Day for assessment. The final collection will be evaluated.

TOTAL MARKS= 200
PERCENTAGE OF COURSE = 15%
PARENT COMMENT SHEET

To Grade 9 Parents and Guardians:

Please take a few moments to answer the following questions about the Reading Portfolio Assignment your son/daughter has been working on this semester.

Did this assignment lead to any discussion in your home surrounding the issues that your son/daughter read about?

Did this assignment encourage your son/daughter to read more independently?

Do you think this is a worthwhile assignment to do in Grade 9? Why or why not?

Would you like to see this assignment extended to Grade 10? Why or Why not?

Thank you so much for your cooperation. Please contact your son/daughter’s English Teacher if you have any further questions or comments.
# READING PORTFOLIO RUBRIC

## RESPONSE TO READING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Level 0 (0-49%)</th>
<th>Level 1 (50-59%)</th>
<th>Level 2 (60-69%)</th>
<th>Level 3 (70-79%)</th>
<th>Level 4 (80-100%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge &amp; Understanding</td>
<td>0 1 2</td>
<td>2.5 2.8</td>
<td>3 3.2</td>
<td>3.5 3.8</td>
<td>4 4.5 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the content and form of a text</td>
<td>Shows very limited knowledge</td>
<td>Shows limited knowledge</td>
<td>Shows some knowledge</td>
<td>Shows considerable knowledge</td>
<td>Shows thorough knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of the meaning of the text</td>
<td>Shows very limited understanding</td>
<td>Shows limited understanding</td>
<td>Shows some understanding</td>
<td>Shows considerable understanding</td>
<td>Shows thorough understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding elements and effects of style</td>
<td>Shows very limited understanding</td>
<td>Shows limited understanding</td>
<td>Shows some understanding</td>
<td>Shows considerable understanding</td>
<td>Shows thorough understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking and Inquiry</td>
<td>0 1 2 3 4</td>
<td>5 5.5</td>
<td>6 6.5</td>
<td>7 7.5</td>
<td>8 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking Skills</td>
<td>Shows Very limited inference skills</td>
<td>Shows limited inference skills</td>
<td>Shows some inference skills</td>
<td>Shows considerable inference skills</td>
<td>Shows thorough inference skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examines personal ideas and values with those in text</td>
<td>Shows very limited understanding</td>
<td>Shows limited understanding</td>
<td>Shows some understanding</td>
<td>Shows considerable understanding</td>
<td>Shows thorough understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>0 1 2</td>
<td>2.5 2.8</td>
<td>3 3.2</td>
<td>3.5 3.8</td>
<td>4 4.5 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication of response to information and ideas</td>
<td>Very limited clarity in communicating response</td>
<td>Limited clarity in communicating response</td>
<td>Some clarity in communicating response</td>
<td>Considerable clarity in communicating response</td>
<td>Thorough clarity in communicating response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>0 1 2</td>
<td>2.5 2.8</td>
<td>3 3.2</td>
<td>3.5 3.8</td>
<td>4 4.5 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of reading strategies</td>
<td>Very limited effectiveness in using reading strategies</td>
<td>Limited effectiveness in using reading strategies</td>
<td>Some effectiveness in using reading strategies</td>
<td>Considerable effectiveness in using reading strategies</td>
<td>Thorough effectiveness in using reading strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application of the writing process</td>
<td>Very limited effectiveness in using writing process</td>
<td>Limited effectiveness in using writing process</td>
<td>Some effectiveness in using writing process</td>
<td>Considerable effectiveness in using writing process</td>
<td>Thorough effectiveness in using writing process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of creativity/webpage Creation/portfolio</td>
<td>Very limited creativity</td>
<td>Limited creativity</td>
<td>Some creativity</td>
<td>Considerable creativity</td>
<td>Thorough creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of reading</td>
<td>Very limited content/organization</td>
<td>Limited content/Organization</td>
<td>Some content/Organization</td>
<td>Considerable content/org.</td>
<td>Thorough content/org.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 1

Instructions for e-Folio

SETTING UP YOUR E-FOLIO

1) Click on the icon that says “Grade 9 CPT E-Folio” on the learning village home page
2) Click on Create New Page
3) Click on Modify Home Page
4) A template will come up that you will set up as your e-folio

-Section One - Newspapers
- Section Two - Magazines
- Section Three – Book Review
- Section Four - Poetry
- Section Five - Novels
- Section Six – Administration

5) Your info for sections One-Three must come from e-library

To Get to E-Library –

- Click on the icon from the main page that says Student Resources
- Click on e-library
- Click the resource you want and type in a search topic
- When you find the article you like, click “View” on the tool bar at the top of the page
- Click on “Source” – all the html coding for the article will come up
- Highlight the areas you want and then Click on Edit and copy

6) Go back to your homepage template (modify home page)
7) In the box for newspapers – click Paste – all the html text should show up
8) Scroll down to the bottom of the page and click on “Save”
9) Click on Preview at the top of the page – your home page with the actual article should be there

TO INSERT PICTURES INTO YOUR E-FOLIO
- find a picture you like and save it to somewhere in your computer ie) my pictures!
- Go back to your E-Folio Page – click on File Repository ( at the top)
- Scroll down to Browse – click on that until “My Pictures” comes up – double click on the picture you want – it should then show up in the file box
- Go back to your Webpage – Modify webpage
- Scroll to newspaper section (or other section) – look for the little area that says “My Files”
- Click on that and the picture should be listed there – click on it so it shows up in the little box beside My Files
- Click on Save at the bottom of the page
- Go to Preview – and your page should be there with the picture somewhere near your article

**This process will work for all your sections - but only if you are taking your info from e-library and your pictures are saved to your “My Pictures” area

**To put in your written responses to each section, you need to go to “Modify Home Page” and then scroll down to the section you want to enter in – remember to follow the basic HTML codes for your written responses.
BASIC html CODES

**Bold**  
<bold>  </bold>

**Italic**  
<i>  </i>

**New Paragraph**  
<p>  </p>

**Hard Return**  
<br>

**Center**  
<center>  </center>

**Blinking**  
<blink>  </blink>

**Font Colors**  
<font color=ffffff>  </font>

**Font Size**  
<font size=+1>  </font>  Different Font Sizes, +1,+2,+3 etc. (use – for smaller)

Red=FF0000  
White= FFFFFF  
Light Blue = 00FFFF  
Gray= CC9999  
Purple = CC33FF  
Green = 00FF00  
Blue=0000FF  
Black = 000000  
Yellow= FFF66

MAKING LINKS TO OTHER PAGES

<A HREF= "http://www.put the website in here"> The name of your link</a>

**Making Links to your Articles**

1) Go to your page and click on the notebook so you can edit  
2) Click on “file repository” at the top  
3) Scroll down to the blank bars with “Browse”  
4) Click on the first Browse  
5) Select the area where you have saved your file ie) CD, floppy, My documents  
6) Double click on your file – it should appear in the first blank bar beside browse  
7) Click save ( at the bottom)  
8) You will be back at your home page  
9) Click on File Repository again  
10) Scroll to the bottom – your file should be there  
11) Right click on your file  
12) Click Copy Shortcut  
13) Click “back” on the top tool bar to get you back to your editing screen  
14) Click “Modify my home page”  
15) Scroll to the area you want to put the file  
16) Type in the following code:  
<a href= "hit Control V( this will paste your file in this space)">Title of your link goes here</a>  
17) Scroll down and hit submit – then preview to see if your link worked.
Appendix J

Student Autobiography

Name: __________________________

Age: ___________ Birthday: ______________

1. Me: - In this section please describe the following - no point form please!
   - Physical Features - height, hair color, eye color, anything else
   - Personality Traits - How would your friends describe you?
   - Your Interests - sports, music, hobbies, arts, etc.
   - Your goals - school, extra-curricular, others
   - Favourite movies, books, music
   - What would you change about yourself if you could?
   - What do you like best about yourself?

2. Family - In this section describe the following - no point form please!
   - Number of people in your family
   - Your relationship with each family member
   - Extended family - do you have relatives - where
   - Family heritage - where are you from or where are your ancestors from
   - Traditions or customs that you think are unique to your family
   - What do your parents do - work wise
   - Family Vacations - have you traveled anywhere
   - Any pets?

3. Friends - In this section describe the following - no point form please!
   - How would you describe your closest friends?
   - What is it about them that you really like?
   - What bugs you about them? (You don’t need to name them if you don’t want to - or give them a fake name!)
   - What types of things do you and your friends like to do?

4. Your Pseudonym - Because this is a formal study and you are under the age of 18, you cannot be identified by your real name. Therefore, you need to make up a name for yourself - have some fun - but don’t be too crazy!!

   My Fake Name: __________________________

5. Anything else you think I might have missed that is important about you - then let me know in this section!