“Tryin to make a dolla outa fifteen cent”: Teaching composition with the Internet at an HBCU

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Abstract

Drawing upon nearly a decade of experience, I describe the challenges and advantages of teaching composition with the Internet at Howard University; I also explore the implications for other historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). First, I discuss the digital divide that has made it so difficult for many HBCU faculty members and students to access the Internet for composition courses. Next, I describe how students and I succeeded in harnessing the Internet not only to practice high-level writing skills but to “do cultural work”: to establish online “safe houses” for African American English, to collaborate with White North Americans and Black South Africans, and to publish Afrocentric material on the Web. In closing, I identify the pedagogical strategies that turned the Internet into a productive tool for the students in my writing courses.

Keywords: African American English; African American students; African American teachers; College composition; Computer access; Online collaboration; HBCU; Safe houses; Web sites

1. Introduction

Twenty years ago when Computers and Composition first went to press, there were no computers for composition at Howard University.¹ The fact that the journal preceded the computers is telling—it is just one sign of how far behind Howard was in the race to harness information technology. The same can be said of the more than 100 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in this country. These institutions enroll 14% of Black college students and produce 23% of Black college graduates (Fletcher, 2002). Yet because of their small endowments and limited number of rich alumni, HBCUs as a whole have lacked funds to invest heavily in technology. As the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) reported in 2000,
the “average endowments at UNCF colleges are less than one third the average for private four-year colleges nationally” (n.p.). Meanwhile, the UNCF noted, “alumni giving accounts for 33 percent of total voluntary support at private colleges nationally, and it accounts for only 6 percent at private HBCUs—despite the fact that the proportion of alumni who give is almost the same” (n.p.). Hence, in the 1980s, most HBCUs were stuck at the bottom of the digital divide, that yawning chasm between the technology haves and have-nots. Later, as the Internet expanded and majority White institutions began to speed along the information superhighway, most HBCUs still lay on the side of the road.

At Howard, few programs have lagged farther behind than Freshman English. I know all too well—I am an associate professor in Howard’s English department, where I have taught first-year English along with other writing and linguistics courses for 20 years. Although I began experimenting with computers in the early 1980s and with the Internet a decade later, for many years my colleagues and I could not teach with computers, much less with the Internet. Not until the fall of 1990 did a composition class gain access to computers, a class I marched once a week to a computer classroom. As for the Internet, it did not play a significant role in our composition curriculum until the fall of 1994, when my Freshman English for Engineers class started using email for class assignments. Although nowadays several of us engage on-campus students in Internet activities, the Freshman English Program did not launch its first distance-learning courses until January 2003. Yes, we’ve come a long way, but, as I write in March of 2003, I see that we’ve still got a long way to go, especially if we’re going to exploit the full teaching potential of the Internet.

Consequently, I focus this article on the challenges and advantages of teaching composition with the Internet at Howard University; at the same time, I consider the implications for other HBCUs. First, I explain how the racial and socioeconomic digital divide has made it so difficult for many HBCU faculty members and students to access the Internet for composition courses. Then, I describe how my students and I succeeded in harnessing the Internet not only to practice high-level writing skills but to “do cultural work” for our African American community. Finally, after assessing our accomplishments, I identify the pedagogical strategies that transformed the Internet into a productive tool for my classes. In other words, I demonstrate how students and I turned a little bit of Internet access into something big—how we managed to “make a dolla outa fifteen cent.”

2. Accessing the net

Like other HBCUs, Howard spent the early 1990s trying to climb out of the digital divide. I will never forget the days when I had to beg the Engineering School’s Computer Learning and Design Center for Internet accounts for the students in my classes. In those days, the university did not even provide faculty members with Internet accounts. With funds from the National Science Foundation, engineering professors brought a T-1 line to the campus in the 1980s, but few departments invested the time or money to connect their facilities to it.

Today, all Howard faculty members and students automatically receive Internet accounts. Thanks to Howard’s $10 million ResNet2 program, students enjoy high-speed Internet access in the dormitories—at their bedside or beneath a “wireless umbrella” that keeps them online if
they wish to tote a laptop through a dorm (Madigan, 2002). They can read and send email from eStops, the walk-up computer stations scattered throughout the campus. They can tap into the high-speed network in campus libraries, including the new state-of-the-art digital libraries for the health sciences and law school. They can sit in smart classrooms, viewing web sites, slides, or video on a smartboard, while listening to speakers pipe out music or other sounds. If they have a laptop, they can even plug into the Internet jack on the classroom seat so that they can follow along. Inside or outside of classrooms, students can also access the e-learning platform Blackboard via a campus server. And, of course, they can log into the campus network from the all-purpose iLab, which one reporter described as “a vast expanse of ergonomically correct work stations outfitted with everything from the rather pedestrian Dells and iMacs to $25,000, Hollywood-quality animation machines from Silicon Graphics” (Madigan, 2002, p. 24).

To finance this high level of technology, Howard has assumed a higher level of debt. But by investing in technology, we have leapt ahead of practically every HBCU, most of which depend upon relatively slow T-1 lines (NAFEO, 2000) instead of high-speed T-3 connections like ours. In fact, the Washington Business Journal recently called Howard “one of the country’s most advanced tech campuses” (Madigan, 2002, p. 23). Yet, in the composition program, the digital divide persists. Even in 2003, our program continues to suffer from a shortage of teaching technology, inadequate technical support, and a low level of computer literacy among students and faculty members.

2.1. Faculty access

Howard’s composition faculty members can rarely access the technology they need to bring their courses into the 21st century. Consider, for instance, access to computer classrooms. According to English faculty members at Georgetown and American Universities, two comparable institutions in our area, composition teachers can easily find a computer classroom for their courses. At Howard, on the other hand, composition teachers quickly discover that most computer classrooms are off limits. For instance, the computer classroom I shared from 1990 to 1991 now belongs to the Comprehensive Sciences Program. Since then, I have succeeded in occupying a computer classroom every year only because the Engineering School invited me to teach Freshman English for Engineers in its facility. Other Howard composition teachers are not as fortunate; most of the time, they can’t even borrow a computer lab for a few lessons. If they are lucky, they can squeeze a class into the English Department’s Writing Center (when the tutorials and graduate classes are not in session), or they can reserve a classroom in the iLab. However, none of the iLab classrooms holds more than 12 computers—hardly enough for composition classes, which normally consist of 20 students. As for Howard’s smart classrooms, they don’t have any computers for students, only Internet jacks where students can plug in the laptops that virtually none of the students in first-year composition courses possess (more about that later).

Of course, teachers do not need computer classrooms to bring the Internet to their classes. But there is no “wireless umbrella” in our composition classrooms. The smart rooms (along with classrooms in some of the professional schools) are virtually the only classrooms that boast any sort of Internet connections, and they are almost impossible to obtain because they are in short supply and in high demand by faculty members in other departments. The shortage of wired
classrooms is typical at HBCUs. The HBCU Technology Assessment Study, conducted by the National Association for Equal Opportunity (NAFEO), revealed that HBCUs were more likely to update wiring in their administration, lab, and library buildings than in classrooms (NAFEO, 2000). Two years ago, when I asked a campus information technology (IT) administrator why wiring dormitories took priority over wiring classrooms at Howard, he replied, “We have to get students before you can teach them.” As our president has explained, to compete for outstanding students, we need to offer students “the best equipment and the best resources” (Madigan, 2002, p. 23). Statistics support his argument: Four years ago, in its national survey, the Campus Computing Project (1999) reported that 62% of dormitory rooms already had Internet connections; last year, it reported that 10% of the surveyed campuses were completely wireless, so the competition is stiff. There are plans to provide wireless access throughout our campus, but, according to our campus newspaper, that project is still “in the works” (Sims, 2002, p. A8). However, even if more classrooms were wired, what good would they be to composition faculty, most of whom lack laptops? Theoretically, the Audio Visual Unit in the College of Arts & Sciences could lend them a laptop for classroom use, but the AV unit owns only two laptops to lend to the more than 350 faculty members in the College.

To make matters worse, composition instructors lack office computers—a situation virtually unheard of at Georgetown and American, according to English faculty members at those institutions. Because most of Howard University’s composition instructors (currently 14 of 22) survive on temporary one-year contracts, they have been at the bottom of the list for the Facnet program that installs computers in faculty offices. Moreover, last year many of these instructors were moved to a large suite that lacked Internet connections. At first, when I inquired, IT administrators explained that there was no budget for wiring additional faculty offices—the college, department, or professor must bear the cost. However, recently, thanks to the intervention of the dean, the university’s chief engineer, and another sympathetic IT administrator, the university dispatched a contractor to complete the job at no charge. Hopefully, one-year instructors will also receive Facnet computers during the next round of deliveries. In the meantime, a resourceful chemistry professor has come to our rescue; he has been picking up recently owned surplus computers from a government agency and installing them in the suite.

In previous years, some instructors did not even own computers at home, and they were not alone. The UNCF’s (2000) survey of its 39 member colleges disclosed that as recently as 1999, less than 50% of UNCF faculty owned computers, compared to 71% nationwide. As a result of such inconvenience, at home or on campus, few of our composition instructors have taken advantage of online programs to post course information, hold class discussions, or facilitate collaborative writing or peer review of essays. For the most part, they merely refer students to the Internet to conduct research outside of class or, possibly, to email papers.

Along with limited computer access, inadequate technical support and lack of training have deterred composition faculty members from teaching with the Internet. Bit by bit, Howard has attempted to address this problem. In the past two years, our IT administration and library system have offered workshops on BLACKBOARD, Microsoft FRONTPAGE, and other Internet tools, and the university has beefed up its help desk. The university plans to sponsor many more faculty workshops through the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, as soon as a director is hired.
Such workshops are desperately needed at Howard and other HBCUs. In 1998 and 2001, informal surveys of faculty members in Howard’s College of Arts & Sciences revealed that few faculty members did little more with the Internet than access email and surf the Web and that many wanted to be trained to use such basic programs as Microsoft PowerPoint. And they were not alone. In 1999, while conducting technology workshops at three HBCUs in the Southeast, I was stunned to discover that some faculty members had not even used email. No wonder most HBCUs reported in 2000 that the faculty members were only “somewhat effective” at using the Internet for instruction and that faculty members in the humanities were among the “least effective” (NAFEO, 2000, p. 27). The lack of technical expertise on the part of the faculty members presents a daunting hurdle.

Seeing their plight, I realized how blessed I was. Although I had signed up for some university-sponsored workshops (including a web-authoring workshop in Silicon Valley), I had learned the most from students and from science colleagues at Howard—an English graduate student who worked for a web-hosting company, professors in the Physics Department and School of Engineering, as well as engineering students.

2.2. Student access

Many HBCU faculty members possess limited computer skills because, as Elaine Richardson (1997) has reminded us, “many academics of color were once students of color from the working or underworking classes” (p. 279) and thus had little or no access to computers. Even today many students of color lack sufficient exposure to computers because they come from low-income neighborhoods with underfunded schools. However, it is in the homes of students that we can see the greatest effects of the digital divide. Although Blacks have steadily gained Internet access over the past few years, in 2001, Blacks still trailed in terms of Internet access in their homes—only 40% were so fortunate, compared to 60% of Whites (Cha, 2002; NTIA, 2002). College students from homes without Internet access rarely have had time to learn what other students with on-demand access have learned from unrestricted exploration. They are still novice users, and it is precisely here—in the gap between novice and experienced users—that the digital divide is widest. According to Jeffrey Cole, head of UCLA’s 2001 study of the digital divide, “there are still significant differences between those who have been online five years and more and those who just went online” (cited in Cha, 2002, p. E2).

The same differences emerge among college students who own computers on campus and those who do not, and, unfortunately, most HBCU students fall in the latter category. According to the UNCF (2000), in 1999, 55% of American college students owned computers, but only 15% of UNCF students did. NAFEO (2000) also released similar statistics for the following year: “Fewer than 25 percent, or only one out of every four HBCU students, personally own computers” (p. 21) compared to nearly 50% of college students nationwide. The families of HBCU students are less likely to buy them computers because most can barely afford tuition: Nearly 90% of HBCU students need financial assistance of some kind (UNCF, 2000).

Therefore, most of these students must rely upon university libraries and labs for access. Because they rely upon the university’s computers, they remain at the mercy of “institutional funds, schedules, staffing, and availability” (NAFEO, 2000, p. 23), and that is a problem, as the following statistics suggest: In 1999, the typical U.S. college owned “one computer
for every 2.6 students” whereas the typical UNCF college owned “one computer for every 6 students” (UNCF, 2000). As NAFEO pointed out in 2000, “this means that in spite of the best efforts of HBCUs, students must often wait hours at labs to use computers to gain access to the Internet and the World Wide Web” (p. v). Waiting exacerbates problems for students who must work, as many HBCU students do; they find it even more difficult to squeeze lab time into their tight schedules. To make matters worse, the prospect of walking to and from labs late at night may deter students from using the labs and accessing the Internet as often as they should. As a result of these lab-related problems, many HBCU students struggle to keep up with Internet assignments, and their complaints can easily deter faculty members from giving frequent Internet assignments. Fortunately, Howard has responded to students’ security concerns by setting up labs in dorms and by providing a late-night shuttle and escort service to and from the iLab. Nevertheless, so many students have complained about the inconvenience that I warn students about my Internet assignments on the first day of class so that the lab-weary can switch sections if they wish.

Although a few HBCUs have sought to avoid these problems by requiring incoming first-year students to purchase laptops (UNCF, 2000), Howard currently requires only students in certain professional schools to bring their own hardware. Because, historically, we have served a disadvantaged population, we hesitate to add to the financial burden of low-income students. After all, UNCF reported in 2000 that “the average household income for African American families is only 59 percent of the average household income for White families” (n.p.). Indeed, the American Council on Education confirmed in 1999 that

more than 36 percent of African American students have income and assets that are so limited that the government does not expect them to make any contribution to their college education. Another 25 percent of African American students are expected to contribute only $2,500 annually. And among HBCU students paying their own way through college, almost 64 percent have annual incomes of less than $20,000, and 39% have incomes less than $10,000. (cited in NAFEO, 2000, p. 19)

Because the economic picture for African Americans has hardly improved since then, on-demand access for most HBCU students remains on hold.

3. Harnessing the net

Because of the difficulty of accessing the Internet, I felt—and still feel—compelled to make Internet assignments worth the trouble; I do not ask students to use the Internet merely to take interactive grammar drills or to surf the Web. Yet studies suggest that when disadvantaged students have gained access to computers, teachers have often done just that: They have engaged their classes in lower-level cognitive activities (DeFord, 2003; Gomez, 1991).

I also vowed that I would not require students to access the Internet without validating their culture online, for the Internet is a powerful purveyor of culture. As Steven Johnson (1997) has observed, when we access the Internet through Microsoft WINDOWS’ desktop interface, we accept a cultural metaphor that can dominate not only how we view the computer’s dataspace but how we view the real world. Likewise, when we click on hyperlinks, we follow culturally asso-
ciated trails, which may determine not only what route we take in cyberspace but what relationships we perceive in life. Considering whose culture reigns in the high-tech world, it is hardly surprising that the culture of both cyberspace and the interface is overwhelmingly middle-class, Western, and White—from the Standard English grammar checker to the Windows desktop icons to Microsoft Internet Explorer’s little white hand (Selfe & Selfe, 1994).

The challenge that loomed before me was to harness the Internet in such a way that students in my classes could practice high-level writing skills and make the Internet culturally their own. Like the three African American English instructors Richardson (1997) interviewed at majority White institutions, I sought to employ technology to uplift the African American community, to “help culturally different learners broaden their communication skills without suppressing their cultural identities” (p. 284). I attempted to meet this goal in three ways: (a) by establishing online “safe houses” for African American English, (b) by collaborating with White North Americans and Black South Africans via email, and (c) by publishing Afrocentric material on the Web.

3.1. Safe houses

One vehicle I used in my classes for creating “safe houses” was the dialogic electronic journal. Whether they were using Connect.Net, Daedalus Online, Blackboard, a Microsoft FrontPage discussion web, or email, students could share ideas about readings, brainstorm about topics, or solicit feedback about their theses via the Internet. And they could write any way they pleased. In other words, I invited them to address one another in Standard English, African American English (AAE), or a mixture of both—whatever felt comfortable. Like A. Suresh Canagarajah (1997), I attempted to build an online “safe house” where African American students could “keep alive, practice, and develop their own vernacular discourse” (p. 190) without fear of condemnation, assimilation, or appropriation by the dominant culture.

I sought to establish a safe house for students in my courses because HBCUs are “contact zones” where African American traditions sometimes collide with academic traditions. As Mary Louise Pratt (2002) has noted, members of oppressed groups can rarely feel safe in “contact zones... social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (p. 4). That is why they need “safe houses”, “places for healing and mutual recognition... in which to construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can bring into the contact zone” (p. 17).

Given this opportunity, some students invoked the earthy imagery of AAE rhetoric in their email entries:

On White police officers: “... you just need to be ‘like a midget on a urinal, and be on your toes,’ when dealing with them.”

On African technology: “African technological advancement may be slower than a turtle walking uphill on a slip ‘n ‘slide, but EVERYONE is headed in the same direction.”

On the omnipresence of racists: “If @$holes could fly the world would be covered with airports.” (Redd & Massey, 1997, p. 251)

However, some students had the most fun with AAE in our Blackboard chatroom. Savor the AAE flava of the following dialogue from Freshman English for Engineers, where a team
of students (identified by pseudonyms) used the chatroom to assign duties for their English and Introduction to Engineering design project:

CB: whaddup player
JB: the god is here
AD: the you, Chuck, will have to price these at a hardware tomorrow and do up the table. Hullo there John.
JB: what crackin
AD: hmmm
JI: johnnie boy
AD: O.K. just one person missing, Jamal
JB: what yall been conversatin bout?
CB: so all I got to do is find the price of the project and type that up
AD: yes
CB: a’ight
AD: So if we’re using foil and duct tape and cardboard etc. you have to get the price of these and do up the table
CB: what table
AD: Can anyone get the format to him by tomorrow? Maybe in intro class? It must be done in a table.
JB: Did yall rank the criteria yet?
AD: O.K. I think we should start.

Yet in spite of these and other examples, I have found that relatively few students take advantage of this opportunity to use their home language for academic purposes. Although Canagarajah (1997) reported that his African American students “moved to vernacular-based, person-centered and topic-associated modes” (p. 191) in their online safe house, over the years most of the students in my classes have maintained Standard English in their “safe houses”, even though the vast majority speak AAE as well. Perhaps the specter of their teacher lurking in the background deterred them. Perhaps they did not associate AAE with the written word—a medium most of them still associated with email, in spite of email’s orality (Redd & Massey, 1997). Or perhaps they were simply convinced that AAE did not belong in the classroom. Indeed, later in the online chat excerpted above, JI typed with apparent exasperation, “Stop with the dialect lets speak english Johnnie.” Clearly, for some students, classroom spaces, whether virtual or not, are not linguistically safe.
3.2. Intercultural collaboration

Ironically, while I grasped the Internet to lead students to a linguistic safe house, I also seized upon it to thrust them outside the cultural security of their peer group. Time and time again, when students had written about racism, our peer review session had sounded like an Amen Corner. Because they shared a language and history, they rarely challenged what was said and often understood what was left unsaid. Thus, even after peer review, their essays failed to support generalizations about race relations or to examine assumptions about Whites and Blacks. To write well, students needed to address an audience’s need for explanation and evidence. So in 1994, when Stephanie Newman-James of Montana State University (MSU) suggested that her White art students collaborate with my Black composition students, I jumped at the chance to give students, via email, a potentially uninformed and critical audience. Thus, I developed a second strategy for teaching with the Internet: intercultural collaboration via email.

Together, Newman-James and I organized an elaborate series of email exchanges, even though Howard did not yet offer Internet access to all students and faculty members. Fortunately, because the first-year students in my class were engineering majors, I managed to secure text-based email accounts for them from the Engineering School’s Computer and Learning Design Center. And because some of my former students worked in the center, I could rely upon their expertise to teach my class how to use a UNIX system to send essays and receive graphics. With their help, the Howard students emailed the first drafts of their essays about the causes and effects of a racist incident in their lives. Next, the MSU students emailed their feedback, and the Howard students replied. Taking into account the online discussion, the students in my class revised their essays and emailed the revisions for the MSU students to illustrate. The MSU students, in turn, transmitted their graphics, using a file-transfer program, for the Howard students’ response. Finally, having received feedback, the MSU students revised their layouts.

The collaboration led to the publication of On the Color Line: Networking to End Racism (1995), a 32-page booklet that featured not only the students’ essays and illustrations but excerpts from their email messages, such as the following:

MSU Artist: I think this was a touching example of how racism was directed toward your mother. However... it seems as if something needs to be elaborated on. You could add something about her reaction at the time of the incident and how she felt. I feel this story has a lot of potential to touch someone and maybe promote a more open mind.

HU Author: I want my essay to be well explained so that your drawings will reflect every detail. (Redd, 1998, p. 11)

As these excerpts suggest, the collaboration motivated most of the students in my class to accommodate an audience. At the same time, it motivated most of the MSU artists to accommodate a client. Moreover, as Heidi McKee (2002) concluded after studying interracial electronic postings within an affirmative action/diversity forum, the faceless but personal online exchanges provided “a space for students to discuss issues that are not often discussed in society, particularly among individuals of different races” (p. 428). Because of the archival nature of the Internet, students could even review and analyze the online conversation.

In the mid-1990s, such Internet collaborations were so rare that ours was featured in The Chronicle of Higher Education and on WHMM’s TV talk show Evening Exchange
Encouraged by our success, our classes continued to collaborate, tackling not only the topic of racism but African American English as well. Eventually, our classes even co-produced the web site *Howard Legends: Legendary Literary Figures at Howard University*, with the students in my class generating the text and some of the picture research, and the MSU students designing the graphics (<http://www.english.howard.edu/legends>).

Since then, however, numerous classes have crossed racial and ethnic lines via the Internet (e.g., *Bennett & Walsh, 1997*; “Bread Loaf,” 1991; *McKee, 2002*; *Riel, 1992*). For example, in 1996, via email, White students from Central Oregon Community College discussed an African American novel with African American students from Long Island University. Like the Howard and MSU students, they gained a keener sense of audience because “racial difference forced them to think about their readers in new ways” (*Bennett & Walsh, 1997*, p. 222). Their experience and ours confirmed Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman’s (2000) observation that “race matters in cyberspace precisely because all of us who spend time online are already shaped by the ways in which race matters off-line” (pp. 4–5). Yet, as Todd Taylor (1997) has noted, “too little of our work in computers and writing... has considered the persistence of racial difference in electronic environments” (p. 170).

In addition to racial barriers, students have also crossed international borders via the Internet, participating in discussions and projects with classes in countries as far-flung as Korea, Finland, and India (e.g., *Ma, 1996*; *Meagher & Castaños, 1996*; *Shamoon, 1998*; *Winner & Shields, 2002*). In 1997, I too harnessed the Internet to globalize the curriculum. With the aid of an engineering professor who had just visited South Africa, I arranged for composition students in my class to collaborate with four South African students at the University of Cape Town. This time I did not have to beg for email accounts for students: The first-year engineers had received accounts upon enrolling at Howard. However, it was difficult for the engineering professor to find South African students with reliable email access.

The focus of the students’ email discussion was a 1971 speech, “Some African Cultural Concepts,” in which South African activist Steve Biko contrasted traditional African culture and Western culture (*Biko, 2002*). After I had faxed the South Africans a copy, students at Howard emailed questions about the speech to help them plan their upcoming essay about Africa. They bombarded the South Africans with questions such as the following:

- What does Biko mean when he says that Africa can give the world “a more human face?”
- What evidence led Biko to form his opinions about Westerners and Africans?
- What do Africans think of African Americans?
- Have family values changed in Africa?
- How would you describe the African attitude toward life?
- Are Africans deeply religious?

Some of the South Africans’ responses confirmed Biko’s claims about Africans’ sense of music, religion, unity, and humanity. For instance, one South African wrote:

> What I really enjoy about my culture is the whole question of the respect for the elder. It does not mean that they should be your close relatives. The other thing is the human aspect to everything we are doing. We believe that “a person is a person because of other people.”
On the other hand, a few responses caught my class by surprise, among them the following statement:

All in all, most Black people in South Africa and in Africa in particular have got serious problems with Blacks from out of the continent. We will always accuse them of not knowing their roots and of suffering from a serious identity crisis. These accusations will only be outlived when Black people in the world do not always measure their successes by White people.

In the eyes of some students, this statement undermined Biko’s claims about Africans’ deep sense of humanity. However, hardly anyone in my class denied that many African Americans suffered from “a serious identity crisis”—not knowing how African or American they wanted to be.

Thus, along with other research material, the South African email exchange enabled students to test Biko’s claims against the reality of modern-day Africa and to explore their relationship to it. As I had hoped, this process prepared them to write more intellectually rigorous essays.

3.3. Afrocentric web sites

The Howard Legends web site mentioned previously represents the third focus of my Internet pedagogy: building web sites about Blacks. Such web sites are important for a number of reasons: (a) they inform viewers—both Black and White—about significant aspects of African American studies; (b) they provide a ready source of research material for classes, year after year; (c) they furnish a publishing outlet for Black students, often motivating them to accommodate a wider audience and to proofread more diligently; and (d) their Afrocentric content prevents the information highway from becoming another Great White Way. In fact, Stephen Knadler (2001) found that requiring students at his HBCU (Spelman College) to develop web-based portfolios for his composition class led most students to appropriate the web sites “as a place to express more freely their racial and gender identities” (p. 238). Contrary to what current theories would have predicted, both the Spelman and Howard students were not interested in “freeing” themselves from race within the colorless space of the Internet but in situating “their cyborg selves within an African American discursive tradition” and making “their racial identity visible to a networked diasporic community” (p. 236).

The Howard Legends site is one of three Afrocentric web sites produced by or for my classes. It took nearly two years to place it online because I had not yet learned to build web sites and I could not gain convenient access to a server. Finally, with the assistance of an English work-study student and the university’s webmaster, the Howard Legends site made its debut on my office computer, which I ran around the clock as a Microsoft server. Through students’ writing and the MSU students’ drawings, Howard Legends presents—in text and graphics—famous African American literary figures who studied or taught at Howard (e.g., Amiri Baraka, Sterling Brown, Ossie Davis, Zora Neale Hurston, Haki Madhubuti, Toni Morrison). As a result of our collaboration with the MSU students, both the MSU and Howard students expanded their knowledge of African American literature.

Meanwhile, students in my Freshman English for Engineers classes have increased their knowledge of the role of African Americans in science via the Blacks in Science, web site, which was constructed by an engineering student from other students’ writing (<http://www.english.>
howard.edu/science). With just a click, the online menu introduces readers to the remarkable contributions of Benjamin Banneker, George Washington Carver, Charles Drew, Louis Latimer, Garret Morgan, Madame C. J. Walker, and Granville Woods, among others. Originally compiled as a hard copy newsletter for other first-year engineers, the articles on the Web were written by my 1995 class. Since then, I have featured the online version in the composition curriculum for subsequent classes. Students have incorporated the research in their writing or studied the classification and division structure of the articles.

Finally, students can also consult the companion web site to our first-year composition anthology, Revelation: An Anthology of Expository Essays by and about Blacks (<http://www.english.howard.edu/revelation>). Although I started the site, it was completed by a graduate assistant I had trained to use FrontPage. Like the textbook, the web site features authors such as Chinua Achebe, James Baldwin, Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Cornel West discussing topics such as Africa, racism, AAE, and Black liberation. Students can click on an essayist’s name to access web pages with biographical information and primary texts. Or they can click historical terms from an essay to link to web pages providing background about everything from Dred Scott to Jim Crow to Public Enemy.

Because these sites come from our web authors, present our experience, and run on our server, they help us make the Internet our own. They turn the Internet into a place where we are producers, not just consumers. Considering how poverty and prejudice have historically limited the number of Black publications, the World Wide Web offers us the opportunity to maintain our independence and expand our reach.

4. Assessing the net

In the final analysis, what students have accomplished in their “safe houses”, their collaborations, and their web sites justifies the difficulty of accessing the Net. My classroom experience proves that teachers at HBCUs can overcome technological shortcomings, and we can do this without lowering our academic standards or sacrificing cultural enrichment. The secret lies in devising low-tech solutions to achieve high-level goals. For instance, HBCU faculty members who lack access to expensive programs like Blackboard can harness email, something virtually every HBCU guarantees its faculty members and Howard students (NAFEO, 2000). After all, my students’ Montana- and South African-based collaborations proceeded via email, and, although we now enjoy access to Blackboard, my students’ dialogic journals were once a series of email messages. Nowadays, there are more options: For a nominal student fee, some publishers offer textbook adopters access to web-based composition programs such as Daedalus Online and Connect.Net. Some publishers, such as Longman, even offer complementary access to discussion boards on some textbooks’ companion web sites. As for the lack of training, HBCU faculty members can recruit savvy students to help out, just as I did. Moreover, in a computer classroom, faculty members can draft experienced students to assist the inexperienced ones.

Yes, with some ingenuity, we can “make a dolla outa fifteen cent.” However, HBCU faculty members must continue to lobby their universities, governments, and others for greater, faster, and more reliable Internet access as well as more training and technical support. Thanks
to its persistent lobbying, UNCF has raised more than $70 million to upgrade HBCU technology (Olsen, 2001), and NAFEO is offering discounted or free computers through federal and private programs (NAFEO, 1999). Meanwhile, through the Executive Leadership Foundation, African American executives of Fortune 500 companies have been sponsoring summer technology camps for the HBCU faculty members participating in their Technology Transfer Project (Roach, 2000).

But the struggle is not over. Morris Brown College, on the verge of becoming one of the few Black laptop campuses, recently lost its accreditation because of financial problems. According to the Washington Post, the financial problems became so daunting that Morris Brown “reneged on promises to give students laptop computers for which they had paid” (Fletcher, 2002, p. A13). Fisk, Wilberforce, Central State, and Grambling State have also been besieged by financial problems.

Even Howard, which has supposedly “caught up to some of the country’s leading wired campuses,” finds itself “once again behind in the wired-campus race” (Madigan, 2002, p. 24). Consider Howard’s neighbor American University: It is connecting laptops, PDAs, and telephones to a wireless network throughout its 84-acre campus (Schwartz, 2003); at Howard and other HBCUs, such campus-wide access is still a dream.

The struggle continues. HBCUs are still at risk. As the authors of the HBCU Technology Assessment Study concluded, “during this era of continuous innovation and change, continual upgrading of networking and connectivity systems is critical if HBCUs are to continue to cross the digital divide and not fall victim to it. Failure to do this may result in what is a manageable digital divide today evolving into an unmanageable digital gulf tomorrow” (NAFEO, 2000, p. 2).

Notes

1. Among HBCUs, Howard University is the largest, with an enrollment of approximately 10,000 and an operating budget totaling roughly $600 million. It is also one of the best-funded HBCUs, boasting an endowment of nearly $300 million and a federal appropriation of over $200 million (“Congress Approves,” 2003; Madigan, 2002). Thus, for most other HBCUs, technology poses an even heavier financial burden.

2. The iLab is the main student computer lab. In addition to the standard office productivity software, students can access software for statistical analysis, animation, CAD/CAM, and other specialized tasks.

3. The HBCUs had asked me to teach workshops on incorporating technology in writing across the curriculum. Although the participants represented a range of departments, several faculty members were English teachers.

4. Cole reported that novices know how to surf the Internet to find entertainment, but experienced users know how to put the Internet to work, for example, to assist them with online banking and other professional tasks (Cha, 2002). At Howard, I have also observed that experienced users are more adept at finding and exploiting online resources, downloading and installing programs, and navigating and participating in virtual classrooms.
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