

**The Virtual Student and Distance Learning Toward the Ph.D.:
A Case Study**

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Abstract

This paper reviews experiences with distance learning while working toward completing the Ph.D. in English. Problems such as limited contact time with faculty, with peers and with a graduate student cohort, as well as limited contact with specific university resources such as librarians and support staff are discussed. Digital solutions to contact and resource problems such as Web-based seminar papers, E-mail student-student and student-teacher contact, and Web-based research are reviewed. Unresolved problems such as interrupted mentor relationships and geographic isolation are presented, as well as positive attributes of distance learning such as digitally extended support networks and freedom of scholarly direction.

The Virtual Student and Distance Learning toward the Ph.D.:

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“I saw a student moving through the library stacks with a hand-held scanner and a laptop computer, ‘reading’ in text and citations like a grocery clerk at the checkout counter.”

-Anonymous Duluth Public Library Staff

“Whoa.”

Jean Jacobson

Introduction: The Case Profile and Definitions

Case Profile

This paper reviews my experience with distance learning while working toward completing the Ph.D. in English. My profile as a student includes a three-year undergraduate degree from Luther College, Iowa; two Masters degrees from Stanford University, one in English, one in Education; teaching experience at the high school level (briefly); current working experience as Editor at the Bureau of Business and Economic Research, University of Minnesota Duluth; and current Ph.D. graduate student at the University of Minnesota, expected completion in 2001. I am a non-traditional, older than average, full-time employed, part-time student. I have a portfolio of published works dating to before I undertook the Ph.D.¹ I started my Ph.D. program in 1990, although I was accepted into the program earlier. I work in a university office where technology is heavily involved and my job description includes editing of documents in many digitized forms. Staff development policy at my

¹Jean A. Jacobson, Poetry <<http://SBE.D.UMN.EDU/ced/BBER/jaj/www/poetry.html>>

workplace has included technical support for my student activities and given me (off hours) access to an ISDN/T1 connected, device-laden, software-rich environment. By my own reckoning, I fit many of the descriptions of a typical distance learner in that I am self-motivated, I depend on electronic networking, and receive learner support from tutors and mentors via E-mail, more than a hundred miles away.²

In short, my study problem: I am studying my partially virtual experience as a student working toward the Ph.D. because I want to understand and describe what that has meant to me, how it compares with other kinds of student experiences, in order to understand how virtual education is different from real, whether I want to change my process to include more or less technology in the final stages of completing the Ph.D., and will I write a specifically digital version of my dissertation?

Definition of This Virtual Student

Distance learning, in my case, is a term I will use in this paper for any part of my student activity which happens away from my degree-granting campus and/or in a digitized medium. For the purpose of this discussion, I use the term “virtual” to include distance learning situations such as online research, computer-mediated communication, and researching and delivery of scholarly output. I will discuss specifically the Web-based seminar papers I have filed. I include in the definition of my virtual experience any long distance connection to any library resources and support staff, and my student-student and student-teacher contact which has been conducted through E-mail.

The non-virtual parts of my student experience include actual classroom time (not more than

²L. Sherry, "Issues in Distance Learning," *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications* 1 (4), 337-365 (1996) <<http://www.cudenver.edu/~lsherry/pubs/issues.html> #p.3>

once a week during any semester), time spent in the university libraries while not online, and time spent on the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota in conversation with faculty and staff. The most basic description of what I use as my definition of the non-virtual is dependent on and determined by the empirical fact of physical location.

Qualitative differences between virtual and non-virtual student activities are more subtle. How, and in what sense, has my experience been “virtual”? According to Sven Birkerts, famous curmudgeon of the popular critique of technology *The Gutenberg Elegies*,³ some definitions of “virtuality (are) . . . that which can perfectly seem without in fact being,”⁴ and “ . . . that frictionless secondary environment.”⁵ A skeptic like Birkerts proposes that electronic enthusiasts proceed with caution into the experience which replaces a true human experience with its simulacrum. It would follow perhaps that students would prefer, in very case, the “real thing.” However, rather than finding that students are dissuaded from the experience of virtual education, I note that a growing proportion of students at the graduate level at my university are choosing digital (virtual) experiences over non-virtual, and that the distance learner and the non-distance learner’s experiences are resembling each other more closely with every passing year. I also note that most contemporary students are often choosing to use digital resources rather than walk into a building, for example; they are asking for course material online rather than in hard copy, and that for certain kinds of messages they connect more frequently with each other

³Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies : The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994).

⁴Sven Birkerts, “Sense and Semblance: The Implications of Virtuality,” *Readings*. (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1999) 48.

⁵Birkerts, *Readings*, 52.

through E-mail than in person.

The kinds of “distance” implied in the term distance education may also vary and be variously present across the student population. Daniel Granger, Director of the Office of Distance Education at the University of Minnesota, is quoted in the daily student newspaper as saying “I use distance as a metaphor for all of the different (barriers) to learning, which also include sociocultural and economic distances.”⁶

Description of My Virtual (Distance Learning) Activities;

The Question of Intellectual Property Rights

A review of the online components of my program shows that over the last five years (1995-2000), most class syllabi have been offered online, as well as some background pages and Web links, reading schedules, and bibliographies. Web library resources sources, HTML data pages, were augmented in one case by bibliographic annotations from other seminar students. Search engines discovered digitally available relevant seminar papers from students at other universities. Specific questions addressed to and by professors were shared electronically. I also found useful more standard Web-data resources, such as the William Blake Archive (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/blake/main.html>), the Rossetti Archive (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/rossetti/>), the Voice of the Shuttle (<http://vos.ucsb.edu/shuttle/english.html>), and the Perseus Project (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>), as well as general references such as on-line foreign

⁶Joe Carlson, “Distance Learning is Education Innovation.” *Minnesota Daily Online Resources* 7 Mar. 1997. <<http://www.daily.umn.edu/daily/1997/03/07/news/dist2/>>.

language dictionaries, CD archives such as the Full-text English Poetry Database, and even frivolous inventory excursions into percentage findings of non-standard word usage preferences and unusual spellings. As compiled for its guidelines for documenting sources on the World Wide Web, the Modern Language Association's 1998 style guide includes ". . . scholarly projects, reference databases, the texts of books, articles in periodicals, and professional and personal sites."⁷ The expediency of moving among these sites, especially with my preliminary background research questions, impressed me and motivated me to join the effort.

One of the first and most pressing problems graduate students encounter is probably the question of intellectual property rights. This is less of an issue for a student such as myself whose career moves are not tenure-track, and whose intellectual life and economic life are linked to dependence on publication of research; and I believe my profile as a fully-employed, place-committed adult obtains. But in advocating for virtual study and research publication, more compelling I find is the defense of scholarly ethics as such, for instance as put forth by Wayne Booth, et al. in their discussion of research and ethics, saying if it is not ethically bound, what's the point? These authors start their chapter with the following manifesto: "Everything we've said about research begins with our conviction that it is a thoroughly social activity, one that links us to those whose research we use and in turn to those who will use ours. . . . More than most social activities, research challenges us to define our ethical principles and then to make choices that violate or honor them. Starting even with your first project, you face ethical choices . . ." Booth, et al. give their list of "thou shall nots," which includes no stealing by

⁷*MLA Style*, "Documenting Sources from the World Wide Web." MLA 1998
<<http://www.mla.org>>.

plagiarizing or claiming the results of others, no lying by misreporting sources or by inventing results, no destroying of sources and data for those who follow. Less obviously, they go on to declare: Do not submit data whose accuracy you have reason to question, do not conceal objections that you cannot rebut, do not falsely caricature opposing views, do not deliberately make your research difficult to understand, and do not oversimplify the legitimately complex.⁸ [I am reminded of the idealism of early Internet users and the sense of nostalgia I have heard voiced for the first years of this new anarchic medium; there is a perception that fair-play and a kind of good behavior were hallmarks of that experience.]

History of my web-based scholarly efforts

<http://www.d.umn.edu/~jjacobs1/8710.html>

In my first attempt at a Web page seminar paper, “Some Considerations for the Use of Lists as Hypertextual Devices on HTML WWW Pages,”⁹ I began climbing the learning curve of how to do hypertext markup language coding (as in the old days of text editing the code). I also was interested to address some of the theoretical “gestures” implicit in an HTML project; I found it meaningful to quote Richard Lanham discussing, in terms of rhetoric, a transference from the tropes of oral tradition, to gestures of print, to the extended gesture of electronic text:

“Clearly the human memory is weakened still further from the radical weakening

⁸Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams, “Research and Ethics,” *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) 255-58.

⁹ Jean A. Jacobson, “Some Considerations for the Use of Lists as Hypertextual Devices on HTML WWW Pages” 1995 < <http://www.d.umn.edu/~jjacobs1/8710.html>> .

inflicted by writing and then by print. Equally clearly, it is immensely enhanced by the awesome search and retrieval powers of digital memory. . . . And, through the iconic powers of electronic text, gesture has returned even more strongly than memory. . . . the digitized word is renegotiating the icon/alphabet ratio which we have since the invention of printing taken almost as holy writ. The oscillation between verbal and visual appeal which *ecphrasis* used to build into speech and writing now finds itself extraordinarily enhanced.”¹⁰

Electronic text is the enhancement of a known rhetorical move; however, writers/coders (?) can now launch this gesture with a new bounce: something like text-as- image/image-as-text. I was excited to try to think about how to demonstrate Lanham’s image/text gesture through this new kind of document: HTML with embedded objects.

<http://www.d.umn.edu/~jjacobs1/ut.htm> (in progress)

In my second Web-based seminar paper, the gesture of Lanham’s ecphrastic text had led me to a further consideration of text and image. I tried to develop multimedia demonstrations of some of the arguments of John Hollander and Murray Krieger in a paper titled “Ut Pictura Poesis? Answers from John Hollander’s *The Gazer’s Spirit* and Murray Krieger’s *Ekphrasis, The Illusion of the Natural Sign*.”¹¹

One of Hollander’s discussions makes the point that in extended fictions, the notional ecphrasis may be a described image that is imaginary. Hollander brings to mind Browning’s “The Statue and the

¹⁰ Richard A. Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts*. (U of Chicago P, 1993. 76.

¹¹ Jacobson, Jean A. “Ut Pictura Poesis? Answers from John Hollander’s *The Gazer’s Spirit* and Murray Krieger’s *Ekphrasis, The Illusion of the Natural Sign*.” 1997
<<http://www.d.umn.edu/~jjacobs1/ut.htm>>

Bust," where a portrait in relief is commissioned to perpetuate the face of a fictional lady. In the poem the fictional lady has an actual lover (Ferdinand de Medici) who commissions his actual statue to stand in Florence. Hollander says "The actual statue and the poem's own supplement, the notional bust, watch each other eternally, but of course fictively."¹²

The ecphrastic gesture develops through Krieger's explanation somewhat differently: "Once the shift from natural-sign picture to picture-as-code has occurred, it is a short step to a configuration of words that would turn themselves into a form that is the self-enclosed equivalent of an emblem, in effect a verbal emblem. . . . It seeks to defy the mediating properties and the temporality of language by finding in language a plasticity that, as in the plastic arts, turns its medium into the unmediated thing itself, as if it were the word (Word?) of God."¹³

Unsolved problems from this inquiry remain: Is ekphrasis possible? It seems to me that the best examples of poetry written about images are (in Hollander's phrase)"notional" ekphrases, (Homer's shield of Achilles, Keats' Ode on a Grecian Urn, Bishop's Large Bad Painting, etc.). Why? One possible definition of Art is that it must be "greater than the sum of its parts." If a great painting is being put into poetry, are we hazarding something less than the sum of its parts? Do poets write about an actual image in the same way they write about an imagined image? Would someone ever write a poem if they had never seen a poem to imitate? Why, when you see the movie before you read the book, do the movie images (as movie critic Pauline Kael says) "saturate" the book? .

¹²John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1995) 22.

¹³Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992) 22..

I tried to evoke the worst case for research in my opening epigram which pictures the “student” indiscriminately manipulating data through technology. And although I continue to make somewhat unwarranted claims that the virtual experience, through World Wide Web pages, is for a student enabling through technology, the personal claim I warrant as true for me has been that through this technology I have virtually experienced graduate-level education while at the same time maintaining commitments to other parts of my adult situation: commitment to the importance of place,¹⁴ in my case the place I choose to call home (northern Minnesota and more remote northern Wisconsin), and an enhanced sense of control of choices about trade-offs regarding higher education goals; the indulgence, or perk if you will, of acquiring more education than is manifest in my career plans or expediencies of the job market. The direction I would like to move next is toward the opening up of new ways to do things that enable new knowledge, for instance in the way that Robert Horn, among others, has asserted that computer technology, and specifically the object-oriented integration of text and image launches additional ways of problem solving and delivering complex topics.¹⁵ (See Appendix C for an example of Horn’s thesis.)

For Further Study

Both of these papers also attempted to address potentialities of the medium: Would they help solve the problem of being at some distance from my professors and classmates? And in that attempt,

¹⁴ Wallace E. Stegner, *A Sense of Place (audio recording)*, NorthWord Press 3550-4, 1989.

¹⁵Horn, Robert E. *Visual language: Global Communication for the 21st Century*. Bainbridge Island, WA : MacroVU, Inc., 1998.

would they contribute to the complete the aforementioned “thoroughly social” component of the ethical communication component of research? Would they help solve any of the problems of Time? I like to think that the difficulty in concluding those project which the reader has by now marked as “in progress” may have something to do with the difficulty of closure for virtual documents. Birkerts makes an interesting assertion that a Bergsonian description of time as having duration is absent from virtual documents. Hence on the WWW the only time sense is a kind of NOW.¹⁶ Or I would add, there is a data-seeking experience of digital documents that reduces them to the search for a particular fact or statement, exclusive of context.

Given limited contact with faculty, peers, graduate student cohort, specific university resources, limited contact with librarians and support staff, would Web-based papers, documents, and digital modus operandi in general increase my contact effect?

Would these kinds of papers solve a vague and probably new-scholar situated problem I felt as a need for more creative ways to do scholarship, or ways that include images? I was very receptive to the intent of an image relayed by Matt Kirschenbaum in an online paper which questions the value of graduate student work shelved and languishing in the black covers of figurative “body bags” in the basement of libraries.¹⁷

And on the other hand, would these pages create new problems: a problem has been identified in the discussion of the fact that although dissemination is ideal over the Web one of the costs is a lack

¹⁶Birkerts, Gutenberg Elegies, 31.

¹⁷ Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, “Electronic Publishing and Doctoral Dissertations in the Humanities.” <<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/ETD/about/etd-mla.html>>

of peer reviewing apparatus¹⁸ And although I have had the good fortune to find technical support for my interest, how severe is the problem created by the additional learning curve implicit in acquiring familiarity with more and more software and editing applications, the challenge of becoming competent in solving design layout problems, and managing the structure of networked information? (See Conceptual Map, Appendix D for a review of my experience with these questions and claims I put forward from that experience.) I have used a long list of software applications in pursuing my interest in applying new media to scholarship, but from a short survey of my fellow students I know that I am not typical in the depth of technology available to me. (See Appendix E for a list of software and hardware I have found useful.) And how do we deal with the problem of equitable or even usefully broad access to technology for everyone who wants and needs a voice in the online community of scholars? Finally, how do I see my life-long learning experiences unfolding; how virtual can I get in the larger experiences of myself as student, teacher, researcher?

¹⁸ Jeffrey R. Young, "Requiring Theses in Digital Form: the First Year at Virginia Tech." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 Feb 1998, Section: Information Technology; Pg. A29.

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Appendices: <http://sbe.d.umn.edu/ced/BBER/jaj/www/appendices.htm>

Appendix A: More Definitions of Virtuality and Questions about My Experience

Appendix B: A FAQ Taxonomy of Questions

Appendix C: Example of Horn's Conceptual Mapping

Appendix D: Conceptual Map

Appendix E: Software and Hardware

Appendix F: For More Information