



# The Electronic Forum: Linking Students to their Future

Cyndi Greening

Many see education as the path for change. Without higher education, people are often limited to following in the footsteps of their family members or their peer group. Yet, as networking pundits and college recruiters will attest, the magic is not in the education alone. It is the social connections along with the education which offer most students the vehicle for life transformation.

Residential universities, with their four-year programs, sororities, fraternities, dormitories, and dining halls, naturally provide both of those components to their students. A challenge faced by community colleges is in offering similar experiences to their students, who often are not as immersed in their education and face a more delayed payoff for their efforts.

Community colleges have been very successful in providing occupational re-



training, developmental education, flexible scheduling, and alternative delivery systems to meet the unique needs of their student population. Yet their students continually grapple with several major challenges to transformation, including:

1. the more "transient population" and limited professional contacts created by commuter campuses;
2. the competing responsibilities of family and employment;
3. the inaccessibility or unavailability of social organizations and activities; and
4. the wide range of ages, experiences, interests, and outlooks of the students in each class.

Because the community college student may spend ten years or more working toward his or her goal, strategies for overcoming these obstacles to completion

concern instructors and administrators everywhere.

Now, from a project developed at Glendale Community College to improve student writing skills, has come a link that has impact on these obstacles and helps to connect students to their future. It is the "Electronic Forum." The Electronic Forum, or "EF" as it is often called by its users, grew out of the "Electronic Journal," a communication experiment initiated by English instructor Karen Schwalm.

Like hundreds of other English instructors across the nation, Schwalm waged an ongoing battle with declining skill levels in verbal and written communication. Like other instructors, she wanted to offer students a means for improving those skills as a component of their course work. Facing a week that was already consumed with preparing and presenting

course lectures, correcting assignments, evaluating writing projects, fulfilling departmental responsibilities, and serving on committees, she knew that the project would have to be easy to implement and simple to maintain. Then, she struck upon an innovative idea -- the union of an old concept with a new technology.

She contacted Christopher Zagar, then the director of GCC's High Tech Center, and proposed her plan. She wanted students to keep a community "learning journal" on the computer. She reasoned that students, using pen names to ensure anonymity, could make candid entries on virtually any topic of concern in this "electronic journal." Entries could then be read

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and commented on by members of the class. This would improve their writing skills along with their reading, reasoning, and computer skills. Since the purpose of the journal was to encourage students to write, she needed to document only how many words each student had written and how often he or she wrote in the class journal.

Zagar assured her that it could be done. He created the programming to integrate the student records with the electronic journal, thereby limiting participation to a specific class. He set up reporting capabilities to document such items as the number of words per entry, journal subject areas, and writing activity by student identification number. At Schwalm's request, he also set up the journal to use the language of writing, not computing. Finally, he established the means for students to change their pen names at will.

They implemented the project that semester. For their efforts, they were selected for the *Innovator of the Year* award at Glendale Community College in the spring of 1990.

Now, three semesters later, several instructors on several campuses are using electronic journals as a component of their courses. Instructors across the dis

ciplines are overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the benefits of the electronic journal. The benefits for the students -- from the simple improvement of computer and communication skills to the difficult-to-assess effects on networking and social transformation -- are surprising nearly everyone involved.

"The original purpose of the journal was to improve writing skills. It was to be writing for learning rather than writing for evaluation," said Schwalm. "What we discovered was that the journal gave a voice to *silenced* or *marginalized* students. For instance, a student who never spoke in class was very active on the journal, contributing over twenty thousand words in one semester." Citing recent research on classroom dynamics, Schwalm says findings indicate that minority, handicapped, and female students are most likely to remain *unvoiced* in the classroom. Because of social, cultural, physical, or instructor bias, these students often do not communicate, or communicate in a very limited way in the classroom. The electronic journal, she discovered, put everyone on equal footing.

Former Glendale Chief of Police Jack Rose, now a GCC administration of justice instructor, had the same findings when he implemented the electronic journal in his Current Issues in Criminal Justice course. Finding students to be reticent during discussions on local enforcement issues, Rose required students to use pen names and express their opinions on the electronic journal. Like Schwalm, he found the electronic journal to be the great equalizer. Sensitive issues such as the use of force, police misconduct, police and minority relations, and ethics of reporting were all discussed in the journal.

"The journal was very useful because it stimulated enthusiasm and honest discussion among the students, especially minority students, on a variety of issues. It also introduced students to the use of computers for communication. That's a skill they must have to work in this field," said Rose. Students were able to communicate sensitive information and legal issues in a fairly public forum, a practice common in nearly all criminal justice careers. Rose was able to give that experience to his students specifically through the use of the electronic journal, an experience he feels is vital to their future success.

Both Schwalm and Rose use the elec

tronic journal as a learning tool. Both instructors require that students use the journal but do not grade on the content of the entries. Unlike Schwalm, however, Rose corresponds directly with students in the journal. He feels students are eager to have his response. Under the pen name of "Chief," he debates issues with his students in the journal. He challenges their assumptions and asks them to consider other aspects or points of view on a particular topic. Other students may then join the discussion.

"This stimulates their critical thinking skills and helps them to confront their personal biases and prejudices before they're in a professional position. It helps them to see that something can be legally correct even though, ethically, it's not the right thing to do," he said. Because of how easy it was to implement (Chris Zagar installed it during a telephone conversation) and the many benefits for the students, Rose says he will continue to use the electronic journal in his course.

"You have to see it happen to appreciate it," he said. That first semester, during a lecture by a guest speaker from the NAACP, the subject of the Philadelphia police action against the "MOVE" group was mentioned. In an effort to remove the black activist organization, the Philadelphia police inadvertently burned down an entire block of the city. Rose asked the students if they thought the Philadelphia police would have proceeded in the same fashion had the organization been a white activist group. There was SILENCE in the classroom. Immediately following that class, however, the electronic journal went wild.

Lee Kirkpatrick, a biology instructor at GCC, also found the electronic journal to be a "safety valve" for some students. "I decided to have my non-major students use the electronic journal for several reasons," said Kirkpatrick. "I wanted them to have the opportunity to use the vocabulary of biology outside the classroom, to have a chance to discuss quiz questions prior to exams, and to have a way for them to develop bonds with their classmates." She found that students were also using the journal to arrange study groups, to clarify difficult or confusing course material, and to vent frustrations following examinations.

"As a group, the class got friendlier, faster," Kirkpatrick said. "The journal seemed to take the place of the 'student

union' when I went to college. It was a place where everyone could come together and talk about what was happening for them."

As the administrator of the "Public Forum" and her own course journals, Schwalm also sees this electronic communication as an equivalent to the student unions at many universities. Like their counterparts, the GCC students use the electronic forum when the going gets tough. They share their frustrations and draw support from others. From her vantage point, the electronic journals and the open forums provide "the glue that binds some students more securely to their education."

"What we're seeing is a lot of 'tapping on the microphone' to see if the lines are open," said Schwalm. "The content of the message often is not as important as simply finding out if someone will listen if they have something to say." Sometimes, students have a lot to say and need a safe place to say it.

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Stephen Cooper had that experience. He had a classroom crisis. Students in his introductory psychology course at GCC would not interact in the classroom. Cooper thought their reluctance might be a result of feeling judged or a fear of expressing their feelings in a room full of strangers. To get his students to "say anything," he had them use the electronic forum to communicate on different subjects, including the subject of death and dying. He also had them write under a pen name. "I was quite amazed at the level of sharing," said Cooper. "It was the most intimate sharing I've ever had in a 101 class. The students were able to safely share their feelings and their experiences, and other people were then able to comment and share their experiences as well. I don't think we could have done the same thing in a conventional 101 classroom." At



the end of the course, he surveyed students on the use of the electronic forum in the course. Cooper said the response was totally positive: there wasn't one negative comment.

In addition to the classroom journals, Chris Zagar and Karen Schwalm established two open electronic forums at GCC. The "Public Forum," which is administered by Schwalm, is open to everyone on campus and in the community for the discussion of anything. "The Dialogue Forum - The Forum for the Thoughtful Discussion of Anything at All," is also open to everyone but is limited to the discussion of serious subjects. Kirkpatrick administers the dialogue forum. She reveals that religion, ethics, morality, domestic violence, family abuse, the Smitty's situation (involving the death of a black man at the hands of employees at a local grocery store), and the conflict in the Middle East have all been discussed on the dialogue forum.

As semesters pass and student populations change, there are recurring subjects which appear on the dialogue forum. The most common recurrence is the controversy between religion and science. Religious beliefs (which are generally connected to the student's home life and path from the past) often come into conflict with scientific theory (on the education path which leads to the future). On the dialogue forum, other students and faculty members help these students to chart a path between their two worlds, to find agreement between their old belief sys-

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tems and current learning. Tight course schedules rarely permit this type of discussion in class. On the dialogue forum, however, students discuss these deeply personal issues and get the response they need from others.

Several instructors have said the response is most important. This is also true on the two open forums. "On the surface,

much of the discussion on the public forum may appear trivial," said Schwalm, "but what we're seeing is the delicate negotiations which signal the formation of new friendships. Through writing, students are learning that language has the power to change their lives. They are learning that the world responds to what they communicate." Schwalm shared a story that revealed the power of the electronic forum to affect student lives.

On the public forum, "Tom" revealed a history of family abuse and problems that he was having because of it. Several students shared their experiences and empathized with Tom. Another student, "Mary," suggested counseling services available at the campus. She said that she had seen a counselor and it had helped her tremendously. Tom was leery about going for counseling and asked Mary to take him to the counselor. Since they were communicating on an open forum, Mary was concerned for Tom's privacy. Instead of arranging a public meeting place where they could be observed by anyone who happened to be following the open forum, Mary told Tom where she worked on campus and what she was wearing that day. Mary suggested that Tom come to her whenever he was ready. He did.

Through the public forum, both Tom's and Mary's lives were changed. Tom took responsibility for his emotional health and Mary reached out to another human being. A connection was made. This is a significant benefit of the public forum. It allows and encourages students to take responsibility for their education, their lives, and their futures. It also helps them to form new bonds which open them to new paths.

Clearly, the path to the future leads from the path of the past. Schwalm sees the forum as a way to smooth those paths. The public forum allows students to bring their family members to the campus to communicate with their classmates. "Someone will write, 'my mom's here tonight so be nice.' And mom may make a journal entry on some subject," said Schwalm, "but what she really has done by writing on the forum is to help smooth the paths between generations, allowing for social mobility and change." Another student brought his high-school-age sister to correspond on the forum, helping to smooth her transition from high school student to college student.

The open forums differ from the class journals in that they are not course specif-

ic. Combining that fact with the appearance of triviality has brought the open forums under administrative concern. In the future, there may be a fee for use of the public forums or the inclusion of an electronic journal in a course.

Some feel that this might discourage instructors from using the electronic journal as a teaching tool and discourage

students from taking those courses. Students would then lose a valuable opportunity for improving writing, reasoning, reading, and computer skills. They suggest the electronic forum might be better viewed as a resource similar to the library with fees for operation built into tuition. Of course, the issue of a fee for use has been

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## Electronic Communication In Action

The electronic forum is transforming more than the lives of the students who use it. It is also transforming the lives of the instructors who incorporate it in their teaching strategies. The benefits of the electronic forum are as diverse as the curriculum itself.

- **Biology** — Lee Kirkpatrick (GCC) uses the electronic forum to encourage students to use the language of biology, discuss course material, and practice exam questions with their classmates. She discovered they use the forum to coordinate study sessions and vent frustrations as well.
- **Child and Family Studies** — Since there isn't enough class time to allow students to recount their many personal experiences, Child and Family Studies instructor Eileen Shiff (GCC) uses the electronic forum as a means for her classes to disclose and discuss pertinent issues. This allows Shiff to spend the entire class period on CFS concepts and theories and still allows students to share their course-related experiences.
- **Criminal Justice** — Jack Rose (GCC) requires students to use the electronic forum for two reasons. First, because virtually all criminal justice professions require the electronic communication of sensitive information, he uses the electronic forum to acquaint students with that process. Second, he challenges them to discuss pertinent ethical, social, and legal issues in order to confront their personal biases, develop critical thinking skills, and develop career ethics.
- **English and Literature** — Marti Combel, Patrick Haas, and Karen Schwalm (GCC) use the electronic forum in their courses to improve writing and reasoning skills, elicit discussion on both course and non-course related topics, and stimulate student computer skills.
- **Humanities** — Lynn Ann Wojciechowicz (SMCC) uses the electronic forum in her Ideas and Values class to persuade students to practice course material and participate in dialogues on essay questions during the semester. Students must respond to each of the five course units at least twice. They can also earn extra credit for additional writings. With the use of the electronic forum, overall comprehension and grades have improved in her courses.
- **Psychology** — Stephen Cooper (GCC) uses the electronic forum to get students communicating on personal psychological issues under a pen name. He feels this also gets them into GCC's High Tech Center and working on a computer.
- **National Education Forum** — Billie Hughes (PC) is exploring the implementation and use of a national electronic forum to facilitate the exchange of teaching strategies, information, and methods among educators.
- **Reading** — Roberta Delaney (GCC) is having her students read a short story with an ambiguous ending. Each student will then write a new ending for the story. They will then read all of the endings and comment on them in the forum. She hopes this will develop reading and writing skills.

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## Why Affects How

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lege is the question of adaptation. Do instructors conform to the students' expectations or do they work to change their motivational orientations? One instructor who allowed a participant observer in her class was respected by both students and colleagues as an excellent teacher.

The class was composed mainly of nursing students who were, by and large, Requirement Meeters. The first exam consisted mostly of multiple choice questions with one essay question and a few short answer questions. When the instructor returned the test and was going over the answers, students accepted the grading of the multiple choice questions without argument. However, they fought bitterly with the instructor for fractions of points for their short answers and essay. The hostility of the exchange caused the instructor never to include short answer and essay questions again. She adapted to the Requirement Meeters by requiring only biting of information; the Requirement Meeters were not forced to adapt.

The challenge in recognizing the different motivations of students is to meet students where they are, to know what they expect, and to work with them to change those expectations. Thus, students leaving the Maricopa Community Colleges will have assimilated literacy and critical thinking skills essential for the rest of their lives.

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## Electronic Forum

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a topic of much debate on the forums. Although numerous students have complained, most acknowledge that resources are finite and a fee would be justified.

As "Pixie Dust" (entry #35867 from August 30, 1990) says, "When I first came to GCC, I was completely computer illiterate. Now, I can use both the Mac and the IBM compatible for writing papers and graphing. That may not seem like a big deal to some, but it has helped me a lot in many of my classes. I have also made friends through the forum, friends I would hate to lose. Yet, if they discontinue the forum, lose them I would because this is the only link I have with them.... We all use the same font on this computer but our feelings and personalities come out in what we write and how we write it. Some forumers are not very talkative in person but bloom on the computer.... most of the forumers wouldn't mind paying a [user] fee as long as it's reasonable."

When the dust settles over the fee issue, one truth will remain regarding electronic journals and public forums. Community colleges have encountered a resource that improves a number of student skills and may help them stay in school, linking them to a brighter future.

Cyndi Greening is a staff writer for Vision. As a freelance writer, she has published numerous articles on writing, electronic communication, desktop publishing, and electronic design. She completed her undergraduate work at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire in Telecommunications and Writing. She teaches courses in writing, desktop publishing, and advertising arts.