Tackling Technology
Participating in an Online Conference

BY DEANA LEW

Imagine checking your email after a typical day filled with curriculum mandates, challenging students, and contentious contract negotiations. After shifting aside the pile of student papers on your desk and scrolling aimlessly through jokes from colleagues and listserv digests, you come across an invitation to an Authors and Issues Online Conference sponsored by the National Writing Project.

You picture the professional release day from school: lunch with friends at a real restaurant, a new totebag weighted down with free samples from vendors. By 4:30 p.m., pumped up on rich ideas and adrenaline, happily exhausted from the frantic scramble between workshops, enthusiasm replacing current apathy, you would leave with your teacher-self renewed.

But wait. A closer look at your email reveals that this is a two-week online forum. Immediately, you are skeptical of the idea. Can the noise and color, inspiration, resources, and heady ideas of an "actual" conference possibly transfer to an online venue? Won't the presenters' personalities come across as flat and devoid of humanity?

Your eyes begin to glaze over at the thought of taking in so many words on a monitor, without even the prospect of overheads, jokes, or activities to break up the flow of information. Rereading the email one last time before throwing it away, you notice that the featured presenter is author Ralph Fletcher, whose poetry and professional development books, such as Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing K-8, have inspired so many colleagues.

Then, you notice that the conference is free. A national conference with a well-known author would normally cost hundreds of dollars, not to mention the time, energy, and money spent on travel arrangements and babysitters. The online forum is easily accessible from a home or school computer with no packing, child care, or airport shuttle to consider. You register, click submit, and hope for the best.

Conference in Cyberspace
An obedient conference-goer, you follow directions to locate the "Welcome and Introductions" page and write up a short introductory biography. One hundred and thirty-five assorted English teachers and literacy specialists from across the nation have done the same. Reading their biographies has none of the collegial feel of pulling up a chair next to a stranger, squinting at a magic-markered name tag and striking up a conversation about teaching. A few familiar names from other conferences and listservs begin to make you more comfortable. And there, respond thoughtfully to comments; time to buy or borrow the tantalizing Ralph Fletcher books from the "Book Talks" section. You visit the site on your terms, take breaks when you need them, allow yourself time to digest material, and return when you choose. Even four months later, you can revisit the website to, say, search for quotations and menu items to paste into an article about online conferences. The intensity of interaction and participation is another pleasant surprise. In a real-time, face-to-face conference, there'd be a lot of sitting, listening, and note taking. Brave participants might venture a question at the end. Most conversations would happen during breaks and lunch, and many people would never interact directly with the presenter.

In this virtual conference, the roles of participants, presenters, and organizers are altered dramatically. Interaction becomes essential. Ideas and information flow freely via posting and email. There are no presentations per se, rather a series of ongoing conversations. If many participants focus on one theme, it morphs into a new agenda item.

By the end of the two weeks, the menu has ballooned to 15 items, filled with chat, questions, and helpful advice. The best part is discussing the craft of writing and revising with Ralph Fletcher himself. In "Review and Revision with Fletcher and Friends," participants are invited to respond to an early draft of an article written for the Boston Globe. After a couple of days of comments, Fletcher details the article's evolution from anecdote to draft to publication. He shares his revision process with feedback from his mentor, Globe columnist Donald Murray.

A Down-to-Earth Experience
This interaction is invaluable. Fletcher is an outstanding online presenter. The breezy, conversational tone that inhabits his books travels beautifully through cyberspace. He has a gift for metaphor, using images to convey big ideas. He tackles difficult topics in language so clear and straightforward it leaves you unconscious of the great skill it must have taken to write.

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As in his books, he reflects on writing and teaching in the context of life, family, and baseball. He illustrates ideas with many examples of personal and student writing and gently bestows the wisdom wrought by years of writing, teaching, and working with teachers. He comments, "Teachers need to bring skills as literate readers into writing conferences with students. We need to be present first as a reader—sharing interest, delight, and occasional confusion—before we move toward the role as teacher. I would even go so far as to say that in a conference we earn the right to teach by first dwelling as a reader in the student's writing."

 Dwelling in Ralph Fletcher's writing and thinking for the duration of this online conference has been practical and enriching for both teacher and writer selves. With a little imagination, you think, communicating with hundreds of people across miles of cold cable might almost have been a lazy chat with the author over a cup of steaming coffee.

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This article originally appeared in the Boston Writing Project Newsletter 18 (3) Spring 2001. It is reprinted with permission.