I remember the first time I participated in an online computer chat. Watching typewritten responses instantly appear on my screen — writing that had originated on my brother-in-law’s keyboard only milliseconds earlier in Tokyo, Japan — had an almost eerie, Ouija-board feeling to it. I recall thinking just how different this experience was — not quite writing, not quite speaking — and how in some ways even better than the long-distance telephone conversations it was replacing. It was certainly more fun than talking on the phone, and as an English teacher always on the prowl for new ways to engage my students, I was excited about the playfulness that such an environment invited.

In *Link/Age: Composing in the Online Classroom*, Joan Turnow captures the playful possibilities of this real-time, online medium as she reports on her semester-long study of one college writing classroom using networked computers. However, what she finds as a participant-observer in this predominantly online composition classroom concerns more than just the “playful possibilities” of employing networked computers. While addressing the potential of this medium to engage students in the enjoyment of word play, this book also speaks powerfully to all composition teachers who are interested in thinking about ways and reasons to harness these relatively new technologies in a response-based writing classroom.

*Link/Age* revolves around the story of Hugh Burns’ English 309 course, “Writing, Thinking, and Learning,” with eighteen seniors and one sophomore enrolled, the course itself met twice a week in the English Department Computer Lab at the University of Texas. Students and the instructor spent part of the time communicating with each other through a real-time networked computer system called LINC (Live Interactive Network Conversations). Comparable to the now-ubiquitous chatroom or MUD (Multi-User Domain) available to every denizen of cyberspace. The rest of the time, class members met face-to-face in the center of the computer room around a more “traditional” cluster of tables and chairs.

Burns designed the course to include two or three LINC sessions per each of the class texts (*Writing to Learn* by William Zinsser, *Time and the Art of Living* by Robert Grudin, and *Best American Essays, 1989*, edited by Geoffrey Wolff and Robert Atwan). These online discussions focused on various aspects of the texts, such as style or specific content, but, as the reader discovers, they also took many interesting and multi-purposed detours along the way. In addition to participating in these LINC sessions, students were expected to write a paper on each of these texts, various versions of which were to be posted by e-mail to all class members.

Turnow begins *Link/Age* with an interesting discussion about the rel-
evance of an ever-emerging postmodern world view to traditional composition curricula, followed by a brief history of networked computers in education. This context is helpful in understanding her argument that these new communication tools are embedded in a larger shift affecting the way we perceive and organize reality. In the field of composition, this is generally referred to as the shift from modernism to postmodernism — a new foregrounding of fragmentation along with a collapsing of coherence and of the autonomous individual.... While humanities disciplines tend to frame this shift as one from modernism to postmodernism, science disciplines frame it as one from a mechanistic and predictable Newtonian world view to a dynamic and unpredictable quantum world view. (p. 3)

This "paradigm shift" is consistent with these new forms of electronic communication; the "fragmentation" of networked communication tends to decentralize authority and invite multiple perspectives. In such an environment, knowledge is seen as "dynamic" and socially constructed, not "prepackaged" and transmittable. Furthermore, this environment challenges boundaries — including the slippery boundary between speaking and writing.

But what really makes this book come alive for the teacher of writing is what these students in English 309 say and do with this electronic classroom space and how, with the guidance of an exceptionally capable instructor, they appropriate this networked writing environment for themselves while developing into a community of writers.

The first of several students we meet in this book is Lora. She admits to being self-conscious about her ability to write, and she readily shares her trepidation about venturing into this online arena when sending her first "obligatory" e-mail message to her instructor:

"Wow, am I confused. Should I continue this adventure in computer chaos? This class was recommended to me by Kate Frost [a former instructor]. She felt like I had a lot to say, but didn't know how to say it. That's why I'm here. God help me! The people next to me are going so quickly. AHHHHHHHHHH!

Anyway, I'll continue now. I found out in my freshman year of college that I didn't know how to write a correct essay. What a disconcerting thing to realize about yourself.... Especially when your desire is to be an English major. Eventually I would like to teach high school English. Are you scared for me or what? I'm hoping to better my writing with practice and help from you and the others in the class. Also, I'm a dummy with computers, so I'm wanting to be enlightened by the computer world. (p. 28)

In this and similar comments readily offered by students via e-mail and the LINC system, we're reminded of how so many young writers come to our classrooms consumed with a fair amount of writing angst. But now, in a nontreating way, this uneasiness is made public.

Burns faces another problem familiar enough to teachers who want to share authority in their classrooms. He worked to create a classroom environment where students could assume responsibility for their own learning. But (perhaps this should be no surprise) they were unaccustomed to this role. Burns' first assignment asked students to write e-mail to him about their initial experiences in class and their own goals in composition studies. Turnow notes that

"Most of the students in the class ... admitted they were not accustomed to defining or articulating their goals in composition studies ... that they were uncomfortable with too many choices." (p. 27)

What's fascinating to watch, though, is just how well these students respond to the challenge of collaborating in this "virtual" classroom and in choosing the direction and content of these online conversations. Even during the first online discussion, students had little problem contributing to the dialogue, as Burns himself notes midway through the initial online discussion. "Listen to all these keystrokes today. Pretty weird for a 'writing' class to actually be writing. Amazazzzing!" (p. 42)

Amazing, too, that all nineteen class members voluntarily participated in their very first online conference, resulting in a prodigious (if rather chaotic!) transcript in which students pursued various themes and purposes. Here William Zinsser's Writing to Learn touched a nerve, as students identified with Zinsser's consternation over the "pompous bureaucratic language of our times." This notion resonated with students "who, in their online talk, frequently expressed disdain for obscure aca-
Writing to Learn gave me new hope! As a math major, the thought of having to write terrifies me. I always hated analyzing stories in English. I never knew what to write. Zinsser's approach to writing in one's own field makes a lot of sense. As Zinsser says, "Students will write far more willingly if they write about subjects that interest them and that they have an aptitude for." (p. 39)

That writing should be a personally meaningful and thoughtful activity is a pervasive theme in Link/Age. Here, of course, the instructor's stance was critical. Turnow points out that Burns was aware, even before the class started, that "Old and rigid roles of 'student' and 'teacher' simply don't hold up in the networked environment," pointing out a line in his syllabus that read, "At the beginning, I'll seem like the teacher and you, the student. By the end, you should be a teacher too" (p. 81). Turnow notes that while Burns was the chief authority in the classroom, his "nonauthoritarian persona did seem to foster an informal atmosphere in which students, too, could experiment with various personae" (p. 81).

One of the students who clearly benefited from this atmosphere was David, an African American senior majoring in psychology, who admitted during an interview that in most of his college classes he had chosen to keep "a low profile — reading, listening, thinking, but not choosing to talk too much" (p. 108). During one LINC session regarding Zinsser's Writing to Learn, he wrote, "I think that the most important point that Zinsser makes is that writing [sic] can be an enjoyable and valuable learning experience" (p. 108). Up to this point, David had exercised his prerogative to re-read and edit his comments carefully before posting them on the LINC. Turnow notes the virtue of this new medium for a reluctant classroom participant like David, who at first was overly conscious of writing "mechanics" but whose priorities were clearly on meaning now, and not on spelling; furthermore, he had noticed that many students made errors and that in synchronous online discussion, the cosmetics of writing were given short shrift ... He later said that once he realized that online writing was more like talking, it was easier to participate. (p. 108)

The power of these LINC sessions to invite participation is especially
noteworthy, for it foregrounds the potential of this medium to break down barriers to classroom participation, while reminding us of the difficulty many students have entering a group discussion, afraid as they often are of having to “sound intellectual.” Irene, an English major who “admitted that she found the relative anonymity of the LINC more comfortable than traditional class discussions,” confesses that she rarely if ever spoke in her English classes:

I was terrified to speak. I guess I felt like I had nothing intelligent to say. Sometimes I thought maybe I would speak, but most of the things I say I’m emotionally attached to, so I’ll lay low because I might have to defend what I say and there’s a chance I might start crying in class. (p. 59)

One reason students weren’t made to feel defensive is that this online discussion environment also promotes tentativeness in both ideas and language. For example, students can play with writing conventions, often to interesting effects, relieving the pressure they often feel to compose perfect academic prose. This was true when sending e-mail to one another as well — even to their instructor. Turnow observes that, “If the students wrote in slang, Burns often responded in kind. If they experimented with writing conventions, such as dispensing with capitalization, he gave it a try, too” (p. 88). For example, Lora sent the following e-mail to Burns, eliciting his response to her proposed topic for the second class paper:

yo lora. Pain and the art of living. What do you think? very broad, huh? ...

To this Burns responded:

yo lora depends on what happened on your [LINC] cover the positive side of pain too don’t be just heavy hearted why am i not punctuating or capitalizing why why why … (pp. 88-89)

As the semester progressed, the fruits of such linguistic tentativeness, including the participation it fostered, turned this classroom into a community. Burns felt that establishing such community was crucial, modeling what Turnow calls “kind attention” in his thoughtful reading of student messages. She notes that

(h)is responses were always supportive, even when critical. Thus, he did not bluntly challenge, insult, or in any way model a confrontational style of relationship. His very style of support suggested a type of community that might be achieved online. (p. 146)

Students in turn seemed to respond to this kind of modeling in their support of one another, expressions of which Turnow believes are much more frequent and public than in traditional classes she has observed. Not only did students call each other by name more frequently, they also made supportive comments such as “Tagree” and “good point” regularly when responding to one another.

During one LINC session students helped each other brainstorm topics for their second paper on *Time and the Art of Living* by Robert Grudin. Partly as an exercise in imitating Grudin’s somewhat random and “hypertextual” (or non-linear) style, students were asked to pick a substitute for the word/concept “Time” in *Time and the Art of Living*. Each paper would ultimately consist of a series of paragraphs exploring aspects of their chosen topics. Following is a short sequence of three LINC comments by Holly, David, and Angela. Early in the LINC, Holly wrote:

My topic is Knowledge and the Art of Living, and I encourage and welcome any insight into this topic.

David responded:

Have you ever heard the saying that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing? Also I think that it is interesting how certain leaders in other countries, and probably in our own too, control people by keeping certain information out of their hands. just a thought.

Angela then picked up on this message and carried it further:

Holly: This is kind of an aside to David’s message about leaders of other countries. That brought to my mind George Orwell’s 1984 where they had all knowledge of everyone. Nothing was privacy. There are some things that people shouldn’t know. We debated in a gov. class one time about knowledge. Is it always good? For example, would we be better off without the knowledge of the H-bomb? HMMMMM. (pp. 112-113)

In this climate, students were interested in helping one another by bringing to bear their own intertextual “tapestry” of background knowledge culled from pre-
vious readings, discussions, and experiences.

And while not all of these experiences may have been immediately relevant to the formal curriculum, they were certainly vital to the broader purposes of this writing course. One of the great virtues of this new medium is the way in which it fosters subconversations, examples of what Irving Goffman calls “underlife,” those behaviors that help individuals carve out unique identities for themselves and express their desire to expand beyond circumscribed roles— in this case, their traditional school roles as “students.” Here, for example, is some of the “off-task” discussion woven throughout a LINC discussion on Zinsser’s Writing to Learn (numbers refer to when they occurred during the discussion):

(19) **Todd:** all we are is dust in the wind...

(21) **Tammy:** Todd: Like sands through the hourglass so are the days of our lives

(29) **Tim:** Todd: you type therefore you are...

(50) **Todd:** to tim and tammy: “We’re just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year, running over the same old ground, what have we found, the same old fears...”

(51) **Josh:** Tammy: Are you a DAYS fan?

(56) **Tammy:** Josh: Of course!!! Todd: What drugs are you on? Where do you come up with this stuff?

(64) **Todd:** tammy: don’t you listen to p. floyd? You know, “we don’t need no educatin, we don’t need no thought control” that kind of stuff

(67) **Josh:** In defense of Todd, you can’t beat Pink Floyd

(72) **Tammy:** O.K. guys. Whatever you say. I’m not really into p. floyd but I’ll take your word for it.

(79) **Sharon:** Todd: You seem to have many philosophical ideas. Have you by any chance seen “Bill and Ted’s excellent adventure” and are you an adament follower of Days Of Our Lives?”

(p.98)

Turnow reminds us that, these comments were interspersed among nearly eighty messages, noting that students can participate in “underlife discourse without losing a single word of the mainstream discussion. She observes how the dynamics of classroom dialogue shift when underlife conversations are allowed to become public:

Students change the scope of what is being shared, thought about, and written about. Some teachers report that they find the openness and self-revelation refreshing. It helps them see their students as complex individuals, not simply students. Further, it provides a window into the students’ true feelings about the curriculum. Burns appreciated these underlife features of student dialogue. (p. 100)

In the end, Turnow leaves us with the kind of irony any English teacher can appreciate. In an age where many fear the dehumanizing potential of machines to alienate and isolate, here they function to do just the opposite. Furthermore, the “Ouija-board” magic my brother-in-law and I enjoyed during our first overseas online exchange was really no magic at all; on some level, we each probably knew this was simply a new place where the language arts were very much alive. While reminding us of this, Link/Age affirms what we already know about good teaching, and how these modern electronic tools can be harnessed to achieve many important pedagogical ends: inviting student ownership of the curriculum, fostering community and dialogue, providing real audiences, and inspiring continuous revision.

And while such computer resources remain far from the norm in most schools, they are becoming standard classroom tools. Turnow’s book helps us think about the ways the new communication “spaces” they create can be used to achieve multiple purposes in the writing classroom. Link/Age also reminds us that what it means to be “literate” is a slippery and ever-evolving construct, always defined by our own “ways with words”— and the means we use for sharing them.