Clicking on the Icon: How Technology Helped Amplify Some “Micro-Voices”

by Jabari Mahiri

A few years ago, while I was doing research in a community sports setting, I began thinking about computer-mediated instruction as a way of aiding the writing development of underprepared college students. As I studied players of computer games, I documented the considerable competence and lack of anxiety these young players demonstrated as they manipulated these complex programs. The most successful of these games created a high degree of challenge and a sense of empowerment for the players. I wanted to find out if underprepared student writers would benefit in similar ways if they had the chance to use computer technology.

I set out to investigate this question as a teacher researcher. I configured two college writing classes so that they were composed primarily of student athletes who had severe problems with the demands of college writing. Many of these athletes were extremely successful in their sports. Several were national-class competitors and had been recruited by Division One schools all over the country. In a six-minute video I made about my work in this class, I documented the contrasting worlds in which these athletes live. In one sequence we see a student hunched over a keyboard — the key spacing way too small for hands that effortlessly palm a basketball. Then there is a cut to the same student slamming down a spectacular dunk on national TV. “He lights up a team,” the announcer screams. “You won’t find a better freshman player in the country.” In the heady prowess of their microsecond reflexes captured in slow motion replays on national TV, in the delirious adula-
tion of fans, these were the “lucky” few that the young players in my community sports study had “Hoop Dreams” of becoming.

However, over the course of this study, this term also come to stand for the initial “tiny” voices that some of these students brought to college. I learned that many feared writing, but many also lacked the motivation to write. For most of these students, writing had never been a valued or functional part of their social practices. Consequently, a significant part of the challenge was to help them locate, experiment with, learn to trust, and eventually amplify their voices.

A more specific word now about the setting in which I taught these students and conducted my research. In the fall of 1993 and again in the fall of 1994, I volunteered to teach a section of College Writing at U.C. Berkeley. Both of the sections were taught entirely within one of the new micro-computer labs. My classes were made up primarily of students who had failed to pass College Writing when it was offered during the University’s Summerbridge Program, a summer program intended to equip entering students for university work. Most of the 14 students in each section were scholarship athletes. Only three were female, two of them also scholarship athletes. About half the students in both classes were African American, while the other half was made up of about equal numbers of Latino, Asian and white students.

In many ways the micro-computer lab was an ideal setting to carry on my work as a participant observer. I constructed a teacher-as-coach persona (in this case a writing coach) in developing classroom activities. Yet I found that the most important part of my work needed to take place out of class where it was crucial to design a good balance of activities: individual work on computers, group computer activities, whole group discussions on our readings, and one-on-one dialogues between my students and me, as well as dialogues between student pairs.

The three-hour class sessions would often take on an office-like atmosphere as students worked at different levels and often on different assigned projects, controlling the order and pace of their tasks. To facilitate this structure, I provided each student with a detailed assignment sheet at the beginning of the first class of each week. These assignment sheets alerted students to their writing priorities for the week and provided them with material to help them prepare for our oral
discussions. Students would take a break or two during the period and even leave the building to get refreshments.

Although I dictated the time restraints on the breaks, students individually determined when and how they would break up their work. This structure allowed for extended periods during class when I could either observe or interact with students. I would usually keep a field note page active on my computer where I would often type in observations as class transpired.

But while the computer lab provided a superior environment for a teacher researcher, I understood that my principal job here was to prepare my students for success in the university. The gaps in the preparedness of these athletes are especially glaring at a major academic university where they sometimes have to endure opposing fans heckling "Prop 48" or "SAT" to call attention to special conditions through which athletes are sometimes admitted. Their high school teachers in some cases contributed to their underpreparation either by being somewhat in awe of these athletes themselves on the one hand, or by not having any real expectations for them on the other. One of my students told me that he really had liked English all through high school, but his teachers never required anything of him in class because they excessively admired his talent on the field.

Stereotypical attitudes about athletes can be devastating for these students in other ways, as revealed in the following excerpt from a November 1994 article in the Daily Californian, U.C.B.'s campus newspaper:

A woman called the Daily Cal... livid about a photo we ran in our second Game Day special issue. It shows [two of the students in my writing class] ... sitting in a line on the bleachers at Memorial Stadium ... holding up four fingers.

Our caller, a school teacher, was certain the two frosh football players were flashing gang signs, and was concerned her students would get the wrong message about gangs.

No [they] ... are not Crips, or Bloods, or anything close. The four fingers stood for 1994, their recruiting class, and if they're members of any gang, it's the one that tames the field at Memorial every day for practice.

It was because so many of my students saw themselves as athletes first that I tried the fuzzy logic of a sports metaphor to push them beyond their micro-voices. In my students' early essays, it seemed that no matter what the topic or mode of writing, they were only able to generate about a page and a half of text. So, I did something that I thought I would never do in a writing class. I set a two-page minimum on all essay assignments. And here's where the metaphor came in. There were students in the class who could run a 40-yard dash in a blazing 4.4 seconds. I challenged them to break the two-page barrier. Of course, this barrier was not a problem for a number of students, but for those who were truly underprepared, it represented a rather formidable obstacle.

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I started getting papers that began more than a third of the way down the first page. Margins got wider and wider. Type faces began to change from Palatino to New York, a slightly larger style of type. I even received a couple of essays where the type size had been pumped up from 12 to 14 points. I commended these students on their "creativity," but I became more adamant about the requirement that they break the two-page barrier. But I will admit to sometimes being a little baffled as I looked for ways to aid those students who were having real problems generating text.

Jerod is a case in point. Jerod and I were working with problems in an essay he had written about a terrible car accident he had been in while home on break. Another car had run a red light and plowed into the car he was driving. His injuries were so serious that it was not clear if he would ever be able to play sports again.

Jerod's essay on this topic had lightly probed a provocative aspect of an identity theme. He wrote about how this whole episode was forcing him to come to terms with who he really was as a person beyond the bright lights and cameras and the roar of the crowds.
But in his treatment of this theme, with all its possibilities for details and connections, Jerod was still having trouble fleshing out what could become an extremely powerful and illuminating essay. Ironically, several lengthy articles had appeared about this episode in the sports pages of major newspapers that Jerod had read. Yet he was having trouble breaking the two-page barrier and finding the voice to tell his own dramatic story in writing.

While working with Jerod on this piece, I hit on an image that seemed to help students move past the micro-voices that were restricting their writing. It was a heuristic made possible by the way the computers themselves operated. I was explaining how Jerod could look at the slightly developed images or episodes in his paper like they were icons on the screen of his computer. Though each icon had limited, surface meaning, when he clicked on that icon it would launch a program that was rich and dense with additional meanings and details. Each icon on the screen was a window into a larger, more complicated, more detailed world. I gave him examples of the way he could “click” on a particular image or episode in his paper and launch more of the detail, explore more connections, or establish more of the context that rested just below the surface of the existing text. This computer metaphor became a useful way for me to talk to students about specific areas of their papers that needed to be fleshed out and pumped up in order to avoid a state of “arrested development” — a term I appropriated for use in the class because it was also the name of a popular rap group that some of the students in the class liked. I would like now to look at how this concept of “clicking on the icon” played out with one student, Ray, in his essay “Stentorian Man.”

“Stentorian Man” was written in response to an early assignment that asked students to describe an oddball character. They were to consider a colorful character from their past or present life and to write about that person’s behavior in a particular activity or event that gave insight into why or how the person was such an oddball. When Ray handed in the first draft of his essay, excerpted below, it was barely a page and a half, a micro-voice example of “arrested development”:

Stentorian Man
After using up all my perennial excuses, I finally decided to end my procrastination and read Lives on the Boundary, so on Sunday afternoon, after waking up I tried to read in my dorm room. However, in a college dorm there are too many distractions and within ten minutes I singing to the new “Boyz to Men” CD:

So I sit away lonely
And I get away only in my mind...

However after listening to this music I became very sober, and I thought for my own sake, I had to turn it off. While searching for something else to entertain myself, I remembered that I had to read. So with a dollar and a Fat Slice coupon in my pocket and Lives on the Boundary in my hand I left my dorm room searching for a place to read.

Heading to Fat Slice to get a slice of their delicious pizza pie I noticed that the weather was nice. For it was mild, not too hot or too cold as it has been for the past three weeks and I thought that maybe Sproul Plaza would be a perfect place to read. And although during the week Sproul Plaza is usually noisy and chaotic, on the weekend there is a certain peace that prevails around the area. That was until I saw one of the strangest people I have ever seen.
Trying to read my book so that I could do the assignment that was due the next day, I was startled when I heard piercing sounds that disturbed the calm. I looked up to see a short bald man with a cup in his hand from whom the sound was resonating. Obviously a beggar he would ask people for change and if they refused to give money he would wail to the top of his lungs usually scaring the people off in a hurried gallop. I think when describing this character I should clarify this scream.

At first it sounded like a nonsense song with no coherent words that was sung off key and too loud. However after being forced to listen to this man his scream sounded like a warrior call and it could have been beautiful if he didn’t assault everyone with his stentorian way. He stopped for a while and I thought maybe I could continue to get some reading in but he continued to blow.

I was frustrated now beyond belief and I thought if he approached me I would react in a negative way and thus I left. His oddness fascinated me though and the way he used his mystic to frighten people showed me fears that overwhelm the human soul.

I want to discuss the “icons” that Ray found and “clicked on” as he worked through seven more drafts of this paper, but first I want to describe certain aspects of the class that helped Ray flesh out his writing once he had “clicked on.”

We had read and discussed several writings that described oddball characters — some models I provided, some students provided — anchoring a discussion on the piece they had selected. This was one method of getting students to contribute to the content of the class. I brought in an article from an alternative newspaper which described Kaufman, an oddball comic who “more than anyone else pushed the dada edge of the comedy envelope.” We had read about Dag in Douglass Coupland’s Generation X, a self-described “lesbian trapped inside a man’s body.” In class discussions students made connections with other oddball characters that they knew or had read about, like Jack MacFarland in Mike Rose’s Lives on the Boundary, whose “teeth were stained, he tucked his sorry tie in between the third and fourth buttons of his shirt, and his pants were chronically wrinkled,” but he could “teach his heart out.”

Another contributing factor to Ray’s essay may have been the discussion we had had about the plight of the homeless. Most of these students were not from the Bay Area, and they were shocked by the number and condition of the homeless people they encountered daily. In response to an article about a homeless man named Theoomigabo who challenged many naive perceptions about homeless people, a student brought in an article from a local newspaper which reviewed Howard Schatz’s book, Homeless: Portraits of Americans in Hard Times. The class took a trip to the University Art Museum where we viewed an exhibit of Schatz’s photographs.

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Another experience that quite likely influenced Ray as he was working thought his drafts of “Stentorian Man” was a piece by Oakland writer Emily Gurnon entitled “Staking Claim.” Indeed, this article had an impact on the writing of most every writer in the class.

“Staking Claim” was brought to class by Leticia, who also anchored our discussion on it. Leticia was a single mother who initially used family relationships with her son and her estranged relationship with her father as a catalyst for her early narrative writing. It was easy to see why the article was significant for her. It was about Gurnon’s relationship with her father whose influence on her life was consciously negated or resisted until she understood that those reactions had more to do with her than with him. She wrote, “My dad was the person who pulled up to the curb each Saturday … and took us out to lunch at McDonald’s. … I started looking for my father in other people … in high school teachers, in church pastors, and later in lovers. I would remake him and remake myself.” It was about her coming to value and thereby claim her
roots. It was this theme that made a definite impres-
sion on my students. New college students are at an
age and in a situation that forces them to consider
complex issues of identity and family and community
connectedness, especially since they have often been
distanced from their familiar support systems, and
they must consequently determine how they will
represent themselves in and to a larger, stranger world.

Ray and I went over and identified
the "menu" of points in his paper
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As Leticia used family ties, Ray, like some of the other
African American students, regularly used issues
from African American culture to focus his writing.
These concerns emerged as the drafts of "Stentorian
Man" progressed.

Another aspect of the class that may have influ-
enced Ray's subsequent drafts was my decision to
courage those students who chose to do so to try
out some imagery. Imagery, often overly intensive,
was a feature of all of Ray's writing. Even when
comparing with individual students of a class
in a local high school, Ray's letter incorporated lots
of imagery. A couple of lines from the beginning of
one letter illustrates this:

Dear Betty: As I look out the window two clouds hang
in the gray sky, creating a pervasive gloomy and
somber mood. The rain comes intermittently, re-
minding me of good old days when I used to sleep
beneath the fire place, warm and protected from the
cruel forces of the outside world. However, as I grow
older, shelter and my comfort seem to fade.

In the first conference with Ray, I reminded him of the
icon metaphor I had come up with while working with
Jerrold. Ray and I went over and identified the "menu"
of points in his paper that could be imaginatively
"clicked on." We found ways to open windows
through which he could see more details and summon
feelings and perceptions to give depth to what so far
had been a surface treatment of potentially provoca-
tive themes. In our discussion we agreed that the essay
as originally written had a menu of three basic items:
Ray's mood and objective to read on a Sunday morning,
a change in mood posed by an obstacle to his objective
— the Stentorian Man — and Ray's realization that
beyond his frustration he was also fascinated by this
man. Disclosing the elemental structure of the essay
helped Ray see the fundamental decision points —
those places where he could "click on" for more
development — and it also revealed that essentially
this essay was more about Ray himself than it was
about the Stentorian Man. This perception was an
important consideration for refocusing the piece.

At the first of these three broad decision points,
Ray used imagery. "I used the sun to forecast the
mood," he later reflected in his portfolio. Ray lived
in one of the high-rise dorms just off campus, and
after substantial revisions, he incorporated his dorm
room view of the San Francisco Bay in the opening
scene, giving tone and texture to his psychological
state as he wrestled with his procrastination to do
his homework. After briefly acknowledging his
struggle not to jump back in bed and go to sleep, he
showed how the beauty of the day itself and his
recognition of the grandeur of the world outside
his window helped make him want to go outside
and find a place to do his reading:

I threw back the curtains ... [and] the grandeur of the
bay area morning emerged as if my window framed a
canvas of the picturesque landscape. Like an art critic,
I peered deeply into this painting and was impressed
by the amazing detail. The bay bridge was like a huge
prehistoric beast with tiny speckled insects buzzing
along its curved back. To the left, the loading cranes
on the edge of the east bay looked like giant horses,
motionless and hypnotized. To the right the trans-
America Building rose out of downtown San Fran-
cisco demanding respect for its magnitude and aes-
thetics. In the middle of the bay, Alcatraz stood or
rather slumped like an old man, warped and decayed
by the passage of time, dead and dark on the inside.
Rising behind this remnant of another era, the old
lady A.K.A. the Golden Gate Bridge in all of her
prestige and glory stood guard over the bay, beckon-
ing in hope and pride, and everything bowed to her
beauty. As I look even closer, I could see the birds in
Ray operated on the next decision point in his essay — his encounter with the Stentorian Man — in a similar way. It had come out in class discussions that he was really conflicted by the situation of homeless people in the Bay Area. He had written another essay on that topic entitled "Them" which chronicled his shock at seeing a fairly young man and his three children sitting on Telegraph Avenue begging for change and food. The Stentorian Man was also a beggar "dressed in red sweater shirt, corduroy pants and sneakers with an empty cup in his outstretched hand." But as his skeletal description became clothed with more detail through successive revisions, the force of the Stentorian Man’s presence also took on added significance as the axis on which the key theme as well as the structure of the essay turned. Unlike draft one, which stepped lightly around Ray’s frustration — suggesting its source was the Stentorian Man’s vociferous screams which prevented Ray from reading Lives on the Boundary — the final draft honestly and painfully probes the intense feelings of disdain that Ray was experiencing in attempting to read a real life on the boundary.

I began to see him as the devil. ... Wailing at the top of his lungs, he used his voice as a threatening weapon, scaring many people away. ... Although I was unsure on whether he was upset that no one proceeded to give him money, or he was demented, I hated him. This morning’s serene painting was being slashed forever by this demon.

Yet Ray’s revised essay went on to reveal how he was simultaneously fascinated as well as repelled by this eerie presence:

Something deep and latent in me was attracted to his cacophony. His self-asserting commanding tone entranced me like the painting did.

Reading these words about “self-asserting and commanding tone,” I was reminded of another incident with Ray in class. Ray, like several other students, often chose issues in African American culture on which to focus his writing. For example, one of his contributions to the class curriculum on which he anchored a discussion was a selection from The Autobiography of Malcolm X. He was passionate about these issues. In one class discussion on The Color Purple, Ray strongly disagreed when I suggested that the book revealed ways that the oppression of black women
was every bit as intense as it was for black men, and black men did at times engage in destructive behavior that was not always the consequence of racism and white supremacy. Ray expressed his view that black men were the special targets of racism and white supremacy. It was a view that I had heard many times before. I didn’t relent in my position; Ray relentlessly pursued his. He couldn’t contain himself in his seat. He stood up in our “talking circle” and paced back and forth as he made his points. For a moment he was the man — the Stentorian Man.

At the third decision point, working through successive drafts and in contrast to the open ending of the initial draft, Ray reveals an epiphany. Influenced by the “staking claims” essay, Ray connects the Stentorian Man to his own identity quest. Something essential about the Stentorian Man represented something essential about Ray. When he was able to embrace this essential quality of himself that was represented in the other, he wrote, “...my mind was able to break through his wall of sound and on the other side a landscape appeared. It was Africa.” In breaking through this wall of sound, Ray was able to stake claim to this other landscape which counterbalanced his earlier description of the San Francisco Bay. When he came down from the lofty panorama of his room-with-a-view, he was able to see something of equal grandeur “reflecting black” in a single life on the streets. He wrote:

*I could see her majestic mountains that rose out of the rich soil, touching God. I could see her powerful waterfalls and life giving rivers, that surged like arteries, with a cargo as precious as blood. I could see her ancient ruins, calculated and precise that told arcane tales of great civilizations. I could see the great animals on the plains of the savanna moving with agility, dignified and proud. Beyond his wall of sound, I could feel the sun cradling my body like I was his child, taste the rich snow on the mountains, had the varied languages springing forth from diverse communities, smell the smorgasbord of delicious food, and intuitively I felt I belonged.*

In the elegance of its structure, in the vividness of its images, in the light it sheds on life and learning, “Stentorian Man” speaks, indeed, in a loud yet lucid voice. Operating on an initially limited theme, Ray was to use a computer heuristic — clicking on the icon — for invention. This technique, along with the models of writing that were being continually critiqued in class, helped motivate and facilitate the intense introspection, interrogation and invention that led to this final piece.

**Conclusion**

How was it that the “arrested development” of Ray’s first draft became the eloquent statement of his final draft? First, the co-created curriculum to which both the students and I contributed writing models motivated students to write by incorporating and building on their voices and choices. I believe that students also benefited from my collaborative teaching style that included a willingness to make use of computer technology. Real computers — as well as metaphorical ones — facilitated text generation. Remember, Ray went through seven drafts of this paper. Using the computer lab allowed students to work at different projects and at their own pace. They were, however, all expected to “write like crazy.”

In the process, these students actually changed themselves. In various ways and in varying degrees, they broke through their fears of writing and began to see themselves as writers; they broke through some of the boundaries of difference and stretched their perceptions to see similarities on the other side. They broke through the walls of stentorian sound that surrounded them to find and affirm unique writing voices. Ray ended the last version of his essay with a description of how he had re-visioned the Stentorian Man and which, I think, partially reflects these claims:

*Seeing the man again, he was dressed in a brown leather dingo. His feet were tethered with sandals and in his outstretched hand he carried a spear. His taut body glistened in the sun, and his cacophony transformed into a powerful warrior call. In his woeful song, I heard the voice of mother Africa, calling me home.*

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