Holzwege and Feldwege in Cyberwald: Using Computers in Teaching the Humanities

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I will be speaking here about the use of computers in teaching the humanities. I will be telling stories not so much because the stories themselves deserve preservation but rather because the stories serve, as do the many lines of a drawing or the notes of a musical composition, to open before us much that is already present — and at the same time usually almost wholly unnoticed. The things that immediately do strike us — the lines, sounds and the employment of technological tools — these conspicuous things open before us the emptiness of the space within which the drawing unfolds, the stillness in the midst of which the notes resonate, and the letting students learn which some understand to be what takes place in authentic teaching. These stories may best be approached not so much as accounts of successful formulas to be repeated elsewhere but rather as if they were simply paths I have followed — ones that might be explored by others in their own quite different ways. If, of course, such paths only were so simple.

My metaphor of thinking as following a path comes from Martin Heidegger. Heidegger discusses two kinds of paths in his writings. One of these, called a Feldweg, is as its name tells us a "path to the field". The traditional field for teaching is the classroom and I will begin speaking about each of the paths I have pursued in the past several years of using technology in my teaching as "paths to the field". Feldweg in this sense also means those obvious ways of getting to the field or to the classroom. Heidegger found another kind of path, a Holzweg, far more compelling. Holzweg is used most commonly today not to refer to any physical path but rather to the metaphoric "being lost on a Holzweg" which is something like "being on a wild goose chase". The word does however have literal connotations. A Holzweg is a path in the woods made by foresters. It may refer to the space cleared to allow a large tree to fall unrestrictedly to the ground: it may also be the path created as the cutting of trees proceeds ever more deeply into the woods. In both of these forms, a Holzweg is a "path that leads nowhere". Heidegger discovered that one can learn much about one’s work in the field not only by studying the path to it but also by finding oneself in the unexpected places one encounters on a Holzweg. Ending up in one of these places is like finding oneself in the middle of the woods seeing several paths to choose from but not knowing whether any will actually lead to a
familiar place. What I will be speaking about, then, turns out to be intertwined *Holzwege* and *Feldwege* as they are found in the fabric of teaching with technology.

II

The longest of these new paths of teaching I have been following started in 1991 when I began using computer-based multimedia in the classroom. I had begun using a Macintosh SE in 1987 simply for word processing; by 1991 had progressed to be proficient enough with a sophisticated page layout program (PageMaker™) to be able to prepare for printing the camera-ready copy of a journal (*Mad River*) I founded and edited for my university. As a thusly “advanced” computer user I decided in the spring of 1991 to participate in an on-campus two-day training session on multimedia. The training was based upon Podium™ and was taught by the creator of Podium™, Fred Hostetter of the University of Delaware. At that time IBM still expected that OS/2 would succeed and had supported the development of Podium™ on OS/2. Thus in participating in the training sessions I embarked upon what I am here calling a *Feldweg* — learning multimedia on a second operating system, a new path to the classroom/field. At the end of the second day several of the workshop participants (including me) made short multimedia demonstrations to the entire group and to others who were “interested” (= administrators). Podium™ appeared, some thought, easy enough to learn that it would enable faculty having only the most basic computer skills to use multimedia presentations in many classes in the near future.

In the term immediately following the workshop I did in fact use a computer in the classroom on several occasions. The particular course was on 19th and 20th century aesthetics. I used the computer in that course in three contexts. The first was while studying Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. In trying to help students contextualize what Nietzsche is thinking in his discussion of the Dionysian I decided to spend some class time looking at Van Gogh’s *The Red Vineyard*. This particular lecture actually originated several years before I began using a computer in the classroom. Its first form entailed my bringing a slide of *The Red Vineyard* to class, turning off the lights and lecturing in the darkened classroom for 50 minutes (without notes). My lecture that day drew upon Walter Pater’s “A Study of Dionysus” from *Greek Studies* and numerous other sources. I remember that class well. One reason, perhaps, is that I had never lectured without notes before. But neither had I ever had students look so intensely at any image. In that lecture the painting was an essential (indeed, the exclusive visual) feature of an entire class. I also remember that I sensed an intensity of
involvement on the part of the students. We were there in that classroom together in a way we had not been previously. A student in the class wrote a poem afterwards that subsequently won the annual poetry contest on campus. The poem, reflecting the intensity of the class, spoke about what one sees in Van Gogh’s painting.

And so it is not surprising that when I first began to try to imagine how I might use computer-based multimedia in the classroom I took a path to the field that I had already taken. My first multimedia lecture was about the Dionysian in Nietzsche and it was centered on The Red Vineyard (now digitized). The class was, however, again different. On the computer display in the classroom I presented a few key phrases from Pater interwoven with images. I used several Van Gogh images (of various plants) to work our way through plant worship to the greater significance of two plants, corn (grain) and the vine. And then I used other Van Gogh vineyard paintings before turning to the detailed discussion of the Dionysian and The Red Vineyard. It can of course be noted that the previously-used low-tech slide projector also allowed the display of multiple images. While this is factually correct, it does not account for my never having developed the flashlight-in-a-darkened-classroom dexterity my art historian friends all possess. One must also note here that the dimmed lighting of a multimedia classroom allows students to take notes and it allows the visual contact attentive lecturers and listeners work with.

One of the essential features of a walk in the woods is that one does not necessarily have a defined agenda that must be completed in a fixed time. Likewise this discussion of teaching need not in haste pass by several points in what has just been said. One of the elements of a Feldweg that seems to apply so well to teaching with technology is that one makes repetitive trips to both field and classroom. Further, it is very likely the case that many of the first things one imagines doing with a computer in the classroom are going to be repetitions of what one did in the classroom with earlier technologies. The farmer may take a newly-designed hoe to the field and proceed to “weed the potatoes” just as had been done with the old hoe. This path of familiarity actually turns many ways. The initial push at my university to use multimedia in the classroom came from the administration’s idea that teaching in the recently introduced large (400-student) general education sections would be enhanced by the impact that multimedia presentations can produce. Those here who teach such sections have subsequently confirmed the value of multimedia in the large classroom. The operating assumption seems to have been that new innovative teaching methods are desirable (and financially justifiable) because teachers cannot
keep doing the same “old things” in those large classes that they were used to doing in smaller ones.

I, on the other hand, use multimedia in classes ranging in size from 15 – 40 students. Here we encounter the first possibility of a Holzweg. Within the past year, (and 4 years after the multimedia project began at my university) an administrator said in a faculty meeting that while multimedia is justified in a large classroom it was nothing more than a “glorified overhead” when used in small classes. This “glorified overhead” perspective once again opens numerous paths. We might start with the perhaps surprising fact (to some) that while I use multimedia more extensively than any other colleague on this campus (in every class, every day), I did not get to this position by progressing from the use of the overhead projector, slide projector, or the VCR to the use of multimedia. I was never even tempted to experiment with using the overhead in the classroom, I rarely showed slides and more rarely showed movies. In my case the path to the classroom changed radically with the appearance of multimedia-capable computers: my path was not at all one of upward mobility from simpler technology. It is also clear that the most extensive users of pre-computer classroom technologies are not generally the quickest to revise their teaching by incorporating newer technology.

The phrase “glorified overhead” has enough richness for this inquiry to warrant our lingering with it a while more. There is a widely reproduced photograph from the Ford Motor Company archives of a Model T which has had its rear tires removed, a wider rear axle installed and large-diameter metal wheels attached. The car has a plow attached. And so one sees a horseless carriage pulling a horseless plow.

It is quite likely that both plow and carriage were also called “glorified” although the glory of the automobile’s self-mobility was far more quickly
understood than was that of the horseless plow. Horse-drawn plows remained standard on many U.S. farms until after World War II; the horse-drawn carriage had long since disappeared by then. It was clear from the context of the comment about multimedia as a “glorified overhead” that it was judged to be a worthless expense, unjustifiable via cost-benefit analysis.

One has to ask at this point why it is that the same multimedia materials are justifiable in the large classroom but not in the small classroom. There is a simple answer. If the same multimedia material is used in both kinds of classes and they presumably cost the same to develop then that cost is distributed over more students. If only things were so simple. The complexity here begins to appear when we return to the arguments for multimedia in general. Multimedia has always been presented as fundamental innovation in education. But what is the nature of this innovation? Before the Podium™ workshop was held at my university there was a “demonstration” for possibly interested faculty. I clearly remember leaving that demonstration saying to myself, “But I don’t sell ideas!” What I had seen in the demonstration was the kind of effective persuasion one finds in TV advertising. If one wishes to draw upon the business world to understand teaching it appears that perhaps it is more the methods of advertising than it is the reasoning of accounting that holds sway.

There appears to be a new Feldweg here for teaching in the persuasiveness of multimedia presentations. The language of the names of software packages that are typically used in multimedia presentations is suggestive. Podium™ of course recalls the lecture hall. But even its goal was much more expressed in the newer names of similar packages. We have now replaced Podium™ with Astound™ while others may be using Persuasion™, Compel™ or Power Point™. I have always found it slightly amusing that I am “astounding” my students — rendering them speechless with thunder (as the origins of “astound” suggest). The context here might be the unexpected loud boom of thunder which opens a sudden summer downpour — or grabs the attention of a classroom of 400 first-year students. In the current campus climate of political correctness, “compel” seems even more at home. A far more important fact here is that all of these packages allow the integration of text, still image, video, animation and sound. What distinguishes them is essentially little more than the initial learning curve, the speed of development, and the ease of use. When I say “little more” I do not mean to say these differences are insignificant. Very few of the faculty who participated in the initial Podium™ workshop ever used it even once in a classroom. A simple explanation is that it was very difficult to learn, astonishingly slow for development and very confusing to use in the classroom. On just this latter point, Podium™ uses a hierarchical
arrangement plan — quite like we now see everywhere on Web pages. On a Web page this arrangement is quite functional; in a class, which is necessarily linear temporally, the arrangement of successive slides (as if from a slide projector) employed in the newer multimedia programs is clearly far easier to use. The point here about variations between programs is that the developers have done an excellent job in making these programs “user-friendly”. The Feldweg of multimedia teaching is today a much easier path than it was in 1991. The recognition of diminished difficulty will clearly invite more faculty to experiment with multimedia; but this change does not get us to what is still more essential here.

We need to return to the phrase: “the integration of text, still image, video, animation and sound”. Basically there are two responses to this account of multimedia. While everyone understands the description as such, the vast majority of my colleagues also seem to say, mostly to themselves, “... but how am I going to ‘...integrate text, still image, video, animation and sound...’ into my classes?” As a professor of philosophy I get this response constantly. The associate dean of my college once said to me, “You are the last person anyone around here would have expected to become the campus leader in using multimedia!” After participating on a panel discussion on technology and higher education with the president of the local community college, I was approached by him and strongly encouraged to continue my efforts in using technology in teaching. “Especially you!” he said, and I knew he meant “...especially a philosopher”. When asked to explain my own involvement with multimedia I usually point to my use of multimedia in aesthetics classes. It makes sense to others that since I am talking in class about works of art I would also want students to see the same works. It also reinforces the already-mentioned familiar Feldweg of using the computer to do those things you have already been doing. The fact is, however, I very seldom showed slides in aesthetics classes prior to my use of computers in the classroom. Instead, I talked about paintings I assumed were very familiar to students’ visual memory – Van Gogh’s Sunflowers, Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, etc. It is far more rare that I mention multimedia lectures on Heidegger or the Pre-Socratics or Descartes in responding to inquiries about “just what do you do?” I give the latter kind of multimedia lecture far more frequently than I give multimedia aesthetics lectures.

The second response to the phrase: “the integration of text, still image, video, animation and sound...” is to see multimedia as neither mere familiar Feldweg nor as mysterious Holzweg but rather as the creation of an entirely new kind of path. At an IBM conference on computers and teaching in 1991 the standard phrase was, “If you’re not part of the steam-roller, you’ll be part of the pavement”. I doubt if there were any paved roads in the Black
Forest where Heidegger loved to walk. At that conference and in everything I have encountered since that time it is clear to me that while the basic elements — text, still image, video, animation, sound — are named virtually always as the defining elements of multimedia, it is also true that some of the elements are, as Mr. Orwell said, “...more equal than others”. I recall a cliché from the time of the earliest discussions of multimedia in the classroom that praised multimedia because it allows one to escape being merely a “talking head”. Text, accordingly, occupies the lowest level on the multimedia hierarchy. At the top is obviously full-motion video with integrated sound. Full-motion video accompanied by sound is the “thunder” that astounds in multimedia. Animation with sound seems to be a very close, but still second-level multimedia element. Still images by themselves are of course better than mere text but pictures are even better if they have sound added. This hierarchy can hardly be surprising; it is simply an expression of the media of the culture in which we live. On this thread, multimedia may well be a new path to the field, but it is primarily the path for those who would otherwise be directors of movies or creators of MTV videos.

We cross here a path already begun earlier. I described my first multimedia class (the first at my university) as the display of a few paintings of Van Gogh interwoven with a few lines of text. If asked to describe a multimedia lecture given this past term in a course on Heidegger I would say simply, “a few still images interwoven with many screens of text.” I would quickly add that on two occasions I played sound files (unaccompanied by any images) of Seamus Heaney reciting one of his poems. Obviously I have, on the basis of the hierarchy just outlined, failed to realize the potential of multimedia in my teaching. I am not really doing multi-media, using one media at a time. It is obvious that many would consider my use of multimedia to be following a Holzweg. I think the sense one might have had of what I was doing originally was, “Well, that’s not real multimedia — but he’ll get there slowly.” I have never created a QuickTime™ movie or an animation. The closest I have come to video is to show a video sequence from Voyager’s Michelangelino laser disk in which a camera moves around the David or pans the de Medici Chapel. Thus one may ask, “Where has he strayed to?”

An attentive listener may have noticed that I have spoken of multimedia lectures only in reference to my own multimedia teaching whereas I refer to others’ uses of multimedia as “presentations”. There is no accident here. On the contrary I also for a while stopped using “lecture” as a pedagogically incorrect term because it seems to refer to the also pedagogically incorrect “talking head”; but I now see the differing terms as referring to fundamentally different teaching activities — only one of which I have ever
been inclined to explore. I have, thus, reached the point on this journey to turn more carefully to the experience of what I know as a multimedia lecture. It is, first of all, clearly a lecture in the sense that it is my speaking that provides the explicit unity of what takes place. When I started, as I’ve indicated, my sense of what I wanted to do was to show some pictures and some accompanying words. The pictures were to be looked at more seriously than students had perhaps been accustomed to looking at pictures. I say pictures, but as already indicated I mean digitized reproductions of paintings. The first paintings shown were by Van Gogh. Since then works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Dürer, and Cezanne are also regular choices. In the first æsthetics class I mentioned doing three different multimedia lectures. In the second lecture, on Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art”, I showed Van Gogh’s *Old Boots with Laces* which Heidegger discusses in the text. In that same lecture I also used a digitized picture of the shoes I was wearing during the class. I asked my students to look at the picture of my shoes and at Van Gogh’s painting in the context of Heidegger’s discussion of tools (which both pairs of shoes are) and in the context of gaining access to our essential relation to the tools we use. This included their relation to their own shoes and our relation to the tool (the computer) we were using at that moment in the class. The real question there was to see if we could make sense of Heidegger’s proposal that we get closest to thinking the essence of tools not while wearing our own shoes, nor while talking about them but rather, we get closest when we stand in front of Van Gogh’s painting of shoes (tools).

My “pictures accompanied by a few words” version of multimedia lecturing continued to be employed on an occasional “as-needed” basis until I was provided with a computer in my office which enabled me to develop multimedia materials. I asked for this computer with the proposal that it would allow me to be doing more multimedia lecturing than I had been able to do using a multimedia lab for development. Going across campus to the lab made me less available for students. The computer arrived in the middle of a summer term (in 1992) while I was lecturing on Kant’s æsthetics. I decided to abandon Podium™ due to the slow development and confusing structure for the classroom. I started teaching myself ToolBook™ for Windows (originally a Macintosh user, I was never amused with either OS/2 or Windows). ToolBook™ allows one to create sequential pages and in spite of requiring one to learn a very simple scripting language was immensely easier to use both for development and in the classroom. Having taught myself some basics of ToolBook™ I decided to try it one day in the classroom that summer. The unexpected result was that I was so taken with what I was able to do in that one class that I finished that course with “just-in-time” daily multimedia lectures.
Those who have read Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (or any of Kant for that matter) may recall that Kant’s style is to write abnormally long sentences which have words one might casually give a variety of meanings but which in fact have for Kant quite precise meanings. I was immediately confronted in that first experiment with ToolBook™ with a quite different perspective on a multimedia lecture. Kant demanded many words on screen interwoven with a few images (of paintings). I have to be quite careful here to explain exactly what is meant by “many words on screen”. Let’s start with something I do not mean. One of the most common mistakes beginning users of multimedia make in the use of text on screen is to put too many words on each screen. This practice quite likely derives from previous usage of an overhead projector and its accompanying transparencies filled with words. Being visually impaired I must also add here how rare it is to see one of these overhead presentations which imagines that the print one can read on a normal sized page at normal reading distance might not be readable on the overhead by readers out in the room. More on this later. Then, to prevent readers (who can) from reading the whole page and not listening to the presenter, a blank piece of paper is placed over the lower part of the transparency to control the reading audience which, contrary to its name will not otherwise listen. This procedure can be mimicked now by presentation software -- with sequential display of “bullets” (text) replacing the sequential sliding down of the covering sheet. Far more important in all of this is how the entire process is understood by presenter and viewer-listener. Most presentations I have attended are understood as the dispensing of information. Teachers who think of teaching as dispensing information are extremely vulnerable to the desire to be as efficient as possible in that task. This gets translated into the “more words (information) per page is better” syndrome. My teaching has always been something quite different from dispensing information and so our path must turn once again.

Let’s go back to those convoluted Kantian-Germanic sentences that I said required “many words on screen”. A better phrase here might be “many screens (slides) with few words on each”. A typical multimedia lecture for me then has many slides of words interwoven with fewer slides of images. Although having mentioned aesthetics classes primarily thus far — classes in which images seem perfectly at home, most of my courses are not in aesthetics and I use the same mixture there as well of more slides of words than slides of images.

The few words that appear on each screen I create almost always show phrases and never complete sentences. So a single screen will have a
phrase, possibly two which by themselves are meaningless. Usually, they are also meaningless even if the student recognizes them from prior reading. Here my practice with a phrase shown on screen actually resembles my practice with the showing of a representation of a painting. I will not merely display the words as fully intelligible in themselves; rather I will talk about the phrase as I might about the picture, exploring the meaning of the words. Depending on the context, I might talk for 10 minutes about a single phrase. These words in Kant may well be reasonably interpreted by students using familiar meanings. These familiar usages are often extremely misleading and it is these misreadings as well as Kant’s meanings that must be explored. The words on the screen, by themselves, are perhaps like a single line from a Rembrandt drawing which has been reproduced by itself isolated from the whole on a blank piece of paper. If one had seen the drawing prior to seeing one of its lines thusly reproduced, one would have obviously “seen” that line, and could just as likely not have noticed it at all. Or even having noticed such a line, one may still not have noticed how that one line defines the whole drawing. Perhaps, after seeing the line in isolation and then returned to its real context, one may be able to see its “weight” in the whole. Much the same happens with philosopher’s words.

There is more to be noted in this resemblance of the showing a phrase on screen to the showing of a painting. One thing that both showings share is color. If there is profound “thunder” in multimedia I think it is to be found in how one uses color far more than it is to be heard in the volume or unexpectedness of sound production. By “use of color” I am now thinking of using different colors in showing particular words. In a usual multimedia display of text, there is a default background color for all screens and a complimentary color used to display the text (light blue text on a dark blue background for example). Within this framework one can then give emphasis to selected words by giving them a third, contrasting color. I do this in two ways. On the one hand I will use a different color for the single word on a single screen that I want to discuss in detail. This method of emphasis is analogous to using italic or bold or underlining in print documents. Here once again Mr. Orwell might tell us that while there are many ways of adding emphasis to displayed text, some methods of emphasis are “more equal” than others. My experience is that color is far more effective in maintaining attention than are the more classical print methods of altering font shape. The issue here is not simply that there are more colors to choose from than there are alternate font shapes. Showing with color invites still more careful thinking.

Earlier multimedia was described as the use of still images, text, sounds, animation and video. To put this slightly otherwise, multimedia addresses us
through our senses of sight and hearing. That learning would take place through the senses of sight and hearing comes as no surprise to anyone. These are the senses we rely upon the most and the ones we would least like to lose. And yet in this complete familiarity with sight and hearing there may still be lurking some astounding things we do not understand. I remember saying to myself, when I finally began to grasp what multimedia “authoring” meant, that I would have to “learn what color was” — either again or “for the first time”. What I am trying to bring forward here is a significance of color and sound which goes far beneath the comprehensiveness of our everyday relations to color and sound. We may approach this unusual significance of color and sound by turning to a different sense, smell. In the “Overture” to *Remembrance of Things Past* Proust struggles to remember his childhood days spent at an aunt’s house in the “country”. While able to retrieve many details of those visits he is never able to retrieve anything more than a bare framework of those times. Unable, that is, until years later when he dips a madelaine into lime-flower tisane (the same event took place at his aunt’s house) and in smelling it the whole world of his youth opens before him again.

My experience in using color to show words in multimedia lectures follows Proust’s story. Color, I am suggesting, like smell and like sound can make a deeper impression upon us than we may initially understand. I came to this conclusion as did Proust; that is, through experience. I initially started selecting certain words for emphasis probably just because “it could be done” (the computer made it possible). This practice evolved to choosing one color for each key word and using that word only in its “own” color throughout a series of lectures. In the midst of this experimentation I began to notice that students were using these “key words” quite differently from how students had used them in the past. I don’t mean correctly as opposed to incorrectly, but rather “more comfortably”, more frequently, and sooner. This change is particularly apparent in teaching Heidegger. Heidegger’s creation of new words poses fundamental problems for translators and for beginning students (and for anyone else who takes an intellectual walk with him). In the past it seemed as though students simply preferred not to use words like *Dasein, Enframing* or *Ereignis*. Or, if they used them that use was very self-conscious, very unsure. Now I find these same words have become the center around which students try to think through Heidegger’s texts. The same is true for Kant and indeed for many other philosophers I teach. Perhaps I could describe my teaching as showing students how to read. Letting students learn how to read is fundamentally different from dispensing information.
We need now to go back to the word “lecture”. “Lecture”, like “legend”, comes from the Latin legere, to read. The reading here is that which is done in public, and so is speaking. A multimedia lecture thus turns out to be speaking which is interwoven into a showing of words and a showing of pictures. We do indeed, then, have an integration of vision and hearing in my lectures, but the images and the sounds retain a distinct quality of their own. I just spoke of showing words as analogous to showing pictures. To me such showing is fundamentally different from the presentation of image or sound in a multimedia presentation which wants to dispense information. Once again that non-multimedia lecture on Nietzsche’s Dionysian and Van Gogh’s Red Vineyard in a darkened classroom becomes important. I am relatively sure that none of the students in that classroom that day had ever spent 50 minutes looking at a single painting (a possible exception is an art major). I recall three distinct periods of student involvement that day. First there was typical attention. This was followed perhaps 10 minutes later by a nervous shuffling in the room. I had not announced in advance that I would lecture for the whole class in the dark. Indeed, I had not even planned to do so. I expected to say what I need to say in front of the painting and then return to “business as usual”. Well, when the nervousness appeared I still had a bit more to say and so I continued. Soon, and very unexpectedly, the mood changed one more time — and before I knew it the class was over. That apparent Holzweg turned into a Feldweg of speaking and the showing of pictures.

My multimedia lectures, as just noted, are an interweaving of speaking and showing pictures and showing words. The warp of the lectures consists of the shown words and the shown pictures – they constitute the linear element; the weft is my speaking. As in any weaving the warp and weft threads are both inextricably held together and simultaneously held apart in their individuality. The showing of such lecturing is radically different from the display of image and sound in the multimedia presentation that thunders with motion and music. Showing in the way I am proposing has as its goal the progressive deepening of involvement in the material on the part of my students. The path taken towards this involvement requires my own progressively deepening involvement in the same material. Perhaps an example will bring such showing more fully before us.

In Descartes’ Second Meditation one finds his most famous argument which everyone knows through the phrase: “Cogito ergo Sum.” I might start a class sequence having just these words on screen. One step in examining this phrase would be to consider the usual misinterpretations. One of these misinterpretations takes Descartes to be saying, “I am anything that I think I am.” Because such positive self-assertion can indeed be psychologically
beneficial, many find it appealing and stop thinking about Descartes’ argument at this point — “What else could he be saying?”. To illustrate why this may not be Descartes’ actual argument I might then show the following phrases: “I think I am Michael Jordan, therefore I am Michael Jordan”, or “I think I am a snowflake, therefore I am a snowflake”. The point is obviously to get our thinking turned away from the content of thought and turned towards thought itself.

Descartes’ argument is better understood to be saying: “The fact that I am thinking, that fact alone proves to me that I exist”. The transition to Descartes’ own argument requires two changes in our typical thinking. We must give up our habitual privilege to the content of thinking and we must reconsider who it is the argument persuades. In the above example, it is obvious to any of my students that I am not Michael Jordan (I have some hair on my head). But for Descartes, the fact that he is thinking proves to him alone that he exists — the proof persuades Descartes alone. It does not apply to anyone else, except in the sense that their own thinking can prove to them (alone) that they exist.

I have found using a sequence of Rembrandt’s self-portraits to be exceptionally effective in making this turn on the Cartesian path in that second meditation. I usually start with an early self-portrait of the young Rembrandt. While showing this painting I talk of Rembrandt and Descartes being contemporaries living in Holland while their respective works under our examination were being produced. I then move on to showing another self-portrait, often one of the ones “in costume”. If I have chosen a Rembrandt in historical-biblical costume I will explain Rembrandt’s passion for this kind of painting and his using himself as a model for studying the biblical figures he was to subsequently paint. I will also point out that Rembrandt draws upon himself as the source of understanding and thus relies upon his own thinking as does Descartes. Of course Rembrandt and Descartes rely on their own thinking in different ways. Or, do they? Let’s imagine a self-portrait Rembrandt did in preparation for his portrayal of Abraham in Abraham and Issac. One might propose that Rembrandt said to himself, “I think I am Abraham, therefore I am Abraham.” A far more Cartesian reading of this would be to understand that Rembrandt can never become Abraham but he can understand Abraham’s relation to Issac on the basis of his own experience of his relation to his son Titus. The issue is the inner experience each of us has as parent or child; it is an experience we have wholly on our own — as we know wholly on our own that our thinking proves to us that we exist. There is radical anthropocentrism to be shown in the words of Descartes and to be shown in the paintings of Rembrandt.
One can show more of the complexities of Cartesian meditating by turning to one of Rembrandt’s self-portraits where he has a gold chain around his neck. He does this in spite of the historical fact that Rembrandt never actually received such an honor from the nobility of his time. Rembrandt gives Aristotle a similar chain in *Aristotle Contemplating a Bust of Homer*. I can never resist at this point showing a photograph of Andre Agassi with a huge gold chain around his neck. In all such cases the ones rewarded with such honor must also know of their vulnerability to the arbitrariness which can just as easily remove the honor as it did bestow it originally. My intention in facing so many directions from the shown words of Descartes and from the shown paintings of Rembrandt is to let both word and image be a showing with which we can linger.

This section of stories about multimedia lecturing can be ended with a return to the metaphor of weaving used earlier. In a weaving, as noted, the threads are both inextricably bound together and yet in that binding are held apart. My multimedia lectures clearly possess this binding that holds things apart. I show words and nothing else on one screen. I show a picture on another screen and nothing else. But once again one has to understand this “nothing else” carefully. The weft of these lectures is my speaking. And that speaking is what holds apart the shown words and images. I mentioned in passing that on one occasion I used a digital sound file of Seamus Heaney reading a poem. Then too that speaking was held apart — there were no images or words on screen. When we listened to Heaney’s voice we gave it the same complete attention we give a Cezanne painting or Heidegger’s word *Ereignis*. The listening to Heaney’s voice opens another *Feldweg / Holzweg* for my teaching.

I am just now beginning to ask myself “What is sound?” as I earlier asked “What is color?” I have thought on numerous occasions that I would like to have students listen to a piece of music in class. I find this prospect more daunting than I did speaking in a darkened classroom for 50 minutes. My approach, obviously, would be to have the music “held apart” just as I now know how to hold words or pictures apart. Talking in the midst of a recorded performance of a piece of music still seems the wrong thing to do. I did, however, make a first experiment with music recently. The last day of the recent Heidegger class I decided to explore Heidegger’s *Ereignis* musically. The simple part of *Ereignis* I hoped to show was the letting a thing come into presence in its own terms. We listened to four performances of the second movement of Beethoven’s *Symphony No.7 in A Major, Op. 92*. The conductors were in order of playing: George Solti, Bruno Walter, Arturo Toscanini and Wilhelm Furtwängler. I spoke before the sequence and briefly in-between each – but I mostly wanted all of us to just listen to these
radically different performances. At the end I suggested that what I heard in the progression showed an increasing allowance for the music to come to presence in its own terms. Solti makes the music very much Solti’s own, Walter makes it into the architecturalism of classicism, Toscanini is more at home in the color of Romanticism but does not dispense entirely with the architectural. Furtwängler seems most able to let the complexities of Beethoven come to presence held together and held apart. I expected much restlessness in class since we had neither words or pictures being shown nor my speaking. As is so often the case things turned out quite differently from my expectations. As in the class with nothing but The Red Vineyard before us, we seemed again to have found ourselves unexpectedly in that place where we were shown what Ereignis shows.

III

I embarked upon a second collection of Holzwege and Feldwege in my Cyberwald teaching in the Fall of 1994 when I started using e-mail and a Usenet newsgroup as an essential element in all my classes. These new projects did not come about in the gradual manner that multimedia lecturing did; but they did not come about because of any planning on my part either. My 1993–94 sabbatical ended abruptly with a detached retina, surgery and the subsequent loss of vision in my hitherto “good” eye. The most significant difficulty I faced then was reading. This was particularly worrisome not merely because I teach such a text-dependent discipline as philosophy, but moreso because in my 22 years of teaching I have never given an assignment other than the writing of papers. The beginnings of a solution for my visual problems began to emerge when I observed that I could most easily read text on a computer screen — a dark background with light print. Being somewhat competent with OCR software I knew that scanning the books I needed to read into electronic form would be time-consuming but workable. A colleague from Computing Services suggested one day that I have all my student papers sent to me as e-mail. In a subsequent conversation she suggested that I have a newsgroup set up for the class as well. And so it was quite by accident that I found myself integrating e-mail and newsgroups into my classes.

By that time I had already been using e-mail for 6 years; I had in fact already corresponded with some of my students via e-mail — the ones who had obtained accounts on their own initiative or in other classes. So, for me the new path then entered had to do with requiring students to use e-mail and the newsgroup. I was sufficiently uncomfortable with the idea of requiring this of students that I did in fact give that first class (on
Existentialism) the option of submitting their work in a more traditional format. I also made it clear the preferred format was the electronic one.

The first issue to be considered was the need to provide these students with training in how to use their VAX accounts. Here again I hesitated. I have taught myself essentially all that I know about using computers and am accordingly aware that I lack a comprehensive view of using our VAX cluster or, for that matter, of any hardware or software that I use. I learn how to do what I need to do. In most cases I merely know that I do not know a great deal about the software I am using. I arranged for a staff person from Computing Services to conduct a training session for my students. This turned out to be far more a Holzweg and too little the Feldweg I had hoped for. While obviously having a far superior grasp of the material, this computing specialist ended up presenting far too much material — analogous to the earlier-mentioned overhead transparencies used to present too much material all at once. I also remember that the first thing said about VMS Mail was, “I’m going to start with the two things you will screw up.” In terms of efficiency one can understand that point of origin. I however think it was not the most encouraging thing to say to students who were all using a VAX account that day for the first time — and some were sitting at a computer for the first time ever. I learned the lesson that day to conduct my own training sessions. I had the lesson repeated this year when I switched from using the VAX system to using our UNIX systems. Even more conscious of my novitiate grasp of UNIX I asked a UNIX specialist to do a training session. Same result. She tried to cover everything one can do in our X-Windows lab in 30 minutes. My concern was to cover (a) using Pine for e-mail and our newsgroup and (b) using the graphical Web browser Netscape.

The issue here is helping students learn how to use the technological resources available to them. I anticipated a significant amount of resistance from philosophy students to this integration of technology into the learning process. A corollary to the same perspective that says a philosophy professor would be the last person expected to use multimedia in the classroom says that only students of science and engineering are likely to welcome the integration of technology into their learning. Philosophy students, on the other hand, often think philosophy should, as one student said about her anti-technological fellow students, “… be studied barefoot, seated beneath a tree near a babbling brook.” Now add to this theoretical opposition the obvious fact that VMS and UNIX commands appear to every first-time user as nothing but runes (the OS/2 Podium discussed earlier had seemingly interminable strings of runes) and we begin to have a clear picture of the problem of introducing e-mail to philosophy students. And we
had to start with VMS Mail’s menu-less runes to boot; I switched to the much more user-friendly Pine as soon as it was available. Given the framework just sketched I must now admit that the path to using e-mail in my classes turned out to be very different from the anticipated arduous Feldweg.

In order to follow this latest turn, once again we need to move from the projected expectations one has about any journey to the experience of the journey itself. The basic use students were to make of e-mail was to submit their written assignments to me for grading. It is not unimportant in this context my writing assignments had evolved into what I call “Fragments” — the name coming from Kierkegaard’s book, Philosophical Fragments, which might be more precisely called “Philosophical Scraps” (as in scraps of paper strewn about). In asking undergraduate students for fragments I am saying that a definitive, conclusive argument is not the expectation placed upon them. Rather, in their fragments they are expected to begin thinking through the texts being studied and to begin putting their thinking into written form. The fragments are, accordingly, short papers and one is to be turned in every week of the term, starting with the second week. Thus, these students do a lot of writing that is spread out over the entire term. Having an assignment that needed to be turned in weekly meant obviously that they also had to be using their e-mail accounts at least twice weekly — to send me their fragments and then to get my comments and grade. This of course was for some two frustrating tasks per week, but it also was regular practice. The real response I received from students, however, was not complaints about user-unfriendliness but rather thanks for having forced them to learn how to use e-mail.

I call the use of e-mail in my classes access to my “virtual office”. Obviously students can also use my virtual office for a variety of things beyond submitting their written work. Parallel to the virtual office I create for each class a Usenet newsgroup, which I call the “virtual classroom”. Taken by itself my e-mail virtual office has actually been used by students in ways that basically resemble the use of my physical office. Here the new Feldweg imitates the old, with the major change being that now student and teacher do not have to be at the same place at the same time. On an almost exclusively commuter campus, this is no small benefit. Another version of the new imitating the old in the use of the virtual office is that students often are unwilling in person to ask questions that they think will make them appear stupid. I do, accordingly, receive a significant number of computer-related questions via e-mail; but I also noted a reluctance to ask me such questions in either the virtual of the physical office. An effective solution
was to ask those students who know the systems well if I could publish their e-mail addresses as electronic tutors. This has worked extremely well.

The newsgroup virtual classroom is a quite different story. In the virtual classroom everything seems new; Little that is pre- or extra-electronic has been carried forward into that place, nor have my own projections of its use been accurate. Let me start explaining how this expected Feldweg turned out to be a Holzweg. Having long been a participant in the electronic seminar, Humanist, my real hope for the virtual classroom was that it might become a place for discussion among the students in my classes. Someone on Humanist once called it an “electronic piazza”; one might equally think of it as an electronic cafe of the French variety. I now must admit that the terms piazza and cafe possess more of the informality I anticipated than do “seminar” or “classroom”. I had, also from the start, a second idea for the virtual classroom. For perhaps as long as I have been teaching, I had regularly had a feeling when handing a stack of papers back to students that since I had learned so much from reading all of the papers, students too would benefit from reading all of them. I remember saying this to many classes. Obviously I could have made photocopies for everyone — but like I could but (almost) never did bring slides of paintings to class, I never did make copies of all the papers for everyone. The newsgroup virtual classroom finally changed all of this. I simply asked students to post their fragments to the newsgroup as well as sending them to me for grading. This path made the free choice on the part of the students to read the others’ papers (or not) most fully their own responsibility. I know I could have used an e-mail distribution list and avoided the public openness of a newsgroup but even distribution via a class distribution list seems more to be part of an assignment than an option. On the electronic piazza my sense is that one chooses what one listens to.

I have now completed six consecutive 10-week terms in which each of my classes have used the just sketched virtual classroom. The simplest report I can make is to say that hardly anything turned out as I expected. The clearest indication that I had no idea where these paths would lead comes in the fact that my strongest expectation, the electronic piazza discussions simply have not materialized. At this point I seem to have many loose threads of thought and no tightly woven explanation — like my students, I have only fragments. On a practical level I know that in the fall of 1994 when these experiments began only a few of my students had computers at home, and those that did were quite unlikely to have a modem to use for dial-up access. At that time, then, students had to use computers on campus. This arrangement is only partially adequate since on this commuter campus students generally have limited time to spend on campus and use
that time for necessities like attending classes, working in the library and sending me *fragments* via e-mail. Browsing the virtual classroom is not a necessity and thus easily passed-by.

Such practical considerations barely get us started understanding the virtual *piazza*. Computers are getting cheaper and now almost always come with a modem. In the past year and a half the percentage of students using their computer accounts from home has risen dramatically. This access, a philosopher might say, is merely a necessary condition but it is not a sufficient one. Now with access a minor problem I must still report that a stroll on the electronic *piazza* has not become part of my students’ regular activities. Another very significant element in this discussion is that it is clear that in other classes at my university students do in fact browse the electronic *piazza* and do so extensively. I have looked in on (*lurked* is the word some use) newsgroups in classes in English literature and in political science and discovered very lively discussion. Perhaps we cross a path already followed. Maybe philosophy students are the *last* students anyone would expect to use a newsgroup for informal discussion.

An appropriate question at this point is why have I persisted in creating these virtual classrooms in 9 different classes taught in six consecutive terms if my expectations have not been met? The answer, in simple form, is that these virtual classrooms have turned into something else, they have created openings for teaching and learning I surely did not anticipate — although now in retrospect it all makes great sense. I remember so clearly an e-mail message that came well into the middle of the Existentialism class in which the virtual office and classroom first appeared. It was from a student who had never taken a course from me before. By the time the message arrived we had studied *Notes From Underground, Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and were well into *Being and Time*. Her message said, roughly, “I just now figured out how to use e-mail and get to the newsgroup. I had no idea I was allowed to write like that. You will be getting my overdue fragments soon.” It is of course true that writing courses universally hold up models of “good writing” and suggest that students imitate these models as best they can. But, transfer this framework to having Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard and Heidegger held up to you as models of writing to emulate. She of course immediately saw that her fellow students did not write like Heidegger. Such is hardly an insignificant lesson.

The *Feldweg* of the virtual classroom extends still further. I must say that when I used to express my desire to have students be able to read each others’ papers I typically said that in relation to a general idea I had that this
would be beneficial. I did not have specific elements of teaching or learning or even writing in mind, but rather a loosely woven fabric of all of these elements. What I have seen, however, as I watch these virtual classrooms be used is that quite discrete elements of teaching do receive individualized emphasis. Having already turned in the direction of writing *per se* we can note other forms of learning about writing that happen in the virtual classroom. One of the most difficult issues facing students in their writing is the identification of their audience. In my pre-electronic teaching I regularly proposed that students select (arbitrarily and imaginatively) a reader who was not me. This at best succeeded only partially. In the end I was giving a grade and I was the audience. The worst form of this is: “... tell me what you want ...”. Now, however, with the posting of fragments in the newsgroup the audience becomes very explicit. The improvements this has made in the writing I now receive have been slow, steady and unmistakable.

While the improvement in writing brought about by having a clear audience in mind is no small matter, it still pales in comparison to the changes in thinking the virtual classroom has brought forth. Before the end of the first class using the virtual classroom, I realized that my instinctive desire to make access to other student papers possible was matched by student desire to read the work of others. Outside of the e-mail message already quoted, indications that students were in face reading each others’ papers came in the most subtle of forms. I do not remember anyone (else) ever saying, “I just read Tara’s fragment, and ...”. But on numerous occasions I came to realize that the papers were indeed being read. I remember a student talking with me in my office and saying, “Someone said ...”; I knew that that “someone” was indeed someone in the class. My sense is that students did not want to make public their reading of each others’ work; but they also let me know, as vaguely as possible, that they were doing so and found it of real worth.

Six of the nine classes I have taught using these virtual classrooms have been advanced undergraduate classes. A few of the students in those classes have actually been enrolled in all six courses and many have been enrolled in several. What I have noticed in these students is a steady growth in comfort in making reference to the papers of others they have read. I am persuaded that this progression tells us that “computer mediated communication” as it seems to be called is such a fundamentally new form of communication that we all will require no small amount of time to learn just how it actually works. Here, as in all that we have seen on this path thus far, there is this nexus of new wine in old bottles. Let’s start with the combination of great caution students feel in referring to their peers combined with their feeling driven to participate in discussion with each
other. My first thought here is that students know that they really do not know how to respond to each others’ work — at least how to respond thoughtfully. They know, I suggest, that responding thoughtfully is something that must be learned, and something that is not easily learned.

I mentioned in class recently the fact that students in other classes use their newsgroups for discussion and that while having the same options the students in that philosophy class did not carry on their own electronic discussions. Several who had been in other classes with active newsgroup discussions commented: “But have you read what is actually being said in those discussions?” The point here is clear to anyone who has subscribed to many of the “unmoderated” E-lists. I have joined too many lists that have a huge amount of traffic that goes nowhere. And quite often the traffic on such lists comes from a very tiny fraction of the readers. In the case of the newsgroup virtual classroom in my courses there seems to be a moderator-less moderation. Perhaps the differences between the piazza/cafe and seminar/classroom terms come into play after all. Clearly, students see whether the ideas of others are being thoughtfully discussed in class newsgroups.

Obviously the virtual classrooms that come into being in my classes give openings to a different human desire from that which moves us to face-to-face argumentation. As I’ve said I require only that students post their fragments in the newsgroup, making them accessible to others. Perhaps, however, the word “only” here is misleading. There are in fact several messages being sent in this requirement. One is the already-mentioned making manifest of the audience and the need to make oneself clear to that audience. The other side of this message is that I make it clear, simply by having the requirement, that I think what they write deserves to be read. I also reinforce this by an occasional reference in class to a fragment that presents a point in a helpful way. To this point, then, one might see two messages in the virtual classroom, thusly constituted. Write papers clearly for your peers because they need to understand what you are thinking. These messages expand the sense of necessary conditions; we still have yet to have approached closely what suffices to allow the actual sharing of ideas.

Interactivity is obviously another word that has accumulated great worth in recent writing about technology and teaching. As it is ordinarily used it refers to the student’s relation to information. The multimedia presentation that astounds with full-motion video is a perfect example. One interacts, it is generally assumed, with that which itself is active. The interactivity I wish to consider here is of a different kind. In the virtual classroom there is an interaction between students — an interaction I am inclined to consider
unique. We might here compare three forms of student-to-student interaction: 1) in the normal classroom, 2) in out-of-the-classroom face-to-face discussions and 3) in the virtual classroom. The context of this comparison is the interaction that takes place in regard to thinking about the ideas of others — I am not concerned about the interaction regarding dispensed information.

In order to have the virtual classroom clearly enough before us to be able to see if it is the unique place I am proposing, we need to gather some thoughts already encountered. First of all, let’s look more carefully at my long felt desire to make it possible for students to read each others papers. As I have said, I had no concrete pedagogical outcome in mind in this desire. Indeed I did not predict the improved writing clarity that I have observed. Having mentioned this desire to colleagues on occasion I have most often received the reply, “Why do you want to have your students look at bad writing?” My approach to this has been quite different. In the good and in the not-so-good papers I see students struggling with difficult ideas. Failed beginnings as well as successful ones can be immensely instructive for both other students and, in a somewhat different sense, for me as teacher. In reading papers I am always looking for success in the presentations of one’s own ideas, the depth and appropriateness of the idea to the question being considered. The notion of “bad writing” too often is connected to a concern for correctness and plays a rather small part in the writing I am looking for from students.

In the multimedia classroom as well as in the virtual classroom I see my task as letting students learn how to read difficult texts, letting them learn how to think critically about those texts and letting them learn how to write so that they share their own thinking with others. This letting-learn means for me that I too must be involved in the very same learning how to read, think and write. I must, in other words, show them my own reading and thinking and writing. This does not mean completed reading, thinking and writing which presents conclusions as much as it means showing my own struggles in reading, think and writing. I mentioned earlier that in the multimedia lecture I show students my own reading, thinking, writing and speaking. During these lectures I am thinking about the questions the texts raise, I am not presenting finished summaries of the important points. Perhaps I should call the virtual classroom “the students’ classroom” because it is there that I see them having their chance to share their own reading and thinking and writing and speaking.
Returning now to the three possible forums for student-to-student interaction, we can of course note that all three may be adapted to the sharing just described. Dividing the traditional classroom into discussion groups is clearly a well-established practice — and is outside the focus of this discussion. My interest is in comparing the two forms of student-to-student interaction that takes place in isolation from the teacher and from the traditional classroom. When I mentioned to a recent class my curiosity about their lack of informal discussion in the newsgroup virtual classroom, the students pointed out (as noted earlier) the “quality” issue of such discussions in other class newsgroups. They also said that they did regularly talk among themselves about the material being studied in class. Taking these details into consideration, I am still inclined to suggest a different form of student interaction in the virtual classroom.

Obviously everyone will agree that electronic communication is unique — but many will immediately add, “and inferior even if more convenient”. The question at hand here is precisely whether electronic communication is always inherently inferior to face-to-face communication. As a professor of philosophy I immediately turn to Socrates as the great philosophical defender of the face-to-face Socratic dialogue. Socrates’ love of dialogue was so strong that he actually wrote nothing. Before concluding that I have called upon the worst of all possible allies here, let us note that Socrates was himself did not equally defend all direct dialogue. There is a crucial distinction that runs throughout Plato’s writings; it separates argument between adversaries from argument among friends. Adversaries generally have one intention, to win the argument and thereby to gain power in one form or another. Current American political argumentation is a perfect example. This also seems to be the prevalent form of argumentation on so many unmoderated newsgroups and E-Lists. It is supported, it seems, by a reading of the notion of free speech that thinks of nothing other than the freedom to express one’s ideas no matter how controversial. Freedom of speech can also be understood as the basis of argumentation among friends. In this context it means listening seriously to ideas different from one’s own and then discussing those ideas freely. It is this latter notion of argumentation among friends that I see taking place in the virtual classroom.

Socrates was exceptionally good in both kinds of arguments — between adversaries and among friends. But Socrates was an extraordinary person. Few people are good at argumentation in public. But we might also ask how good we are at argumentation among friends. The much-discussed elements of interpersonal communication — body language, facial expression, etc. — obviously lend themselves to both honesty and
dishonesty, openness and manipulation. Direct interpersonal communication is far from simple. The real concern here is obviously the extent to which the virtual classroom makes a place where argumentation among friends can occur.

I have already said that my students appear to be both hesitant to use the virtual classroom and desirous of doing so. Perhaps the very ambiguity of electronic communication lends itself to this response. Students know that this kind of communication is indeed different from other modes of communicating. It differs significantly because the other person is not physically present. This difference is not that the virtual presence of the other is an inferior substitute for real presence. Rather it seems as though the other is present in a different way such that one can say things to the other in both spaces that one would not say except in that one space or in the other. I must emphasize here that I am now talking about those who have become accustomed to electronic communication. Also I am neither talking about two-way e-mail conversation between students (for obvious reasons) nor about discussion notes posted to the newsgroup — I have said these have not appeared in my newsgroup virtual classrooms. I am talking, rather, about one student posting a paper to the newsgroup that is an indirect “conversation” with what another student had posted in a previous paper. I am talking, then, not about a virtual conversation in a literal sense, but rather of the conversation one has in one’s own mind with another, a conversation about ideas.

So what kind of presence does this virtual classroom have? Part of it is quite clearly the element of “publication”. The sense of an audience, and of having something important to say and the sense of listeners who want to hear different ideas from their own all mark this kind of communication. But there is still an important element of “conversation” here. The readers of the postings in the virtual classroom are also the students who sit together in the ordinary classroom. Thus there is an immediacy here that is lost in anonymous publication. And going still further, the conversation is not the casual conversation of everydayness. I just used the phrase, “...a conversation in one’s own head...” This conversation and the electronic one liberate us from the temporal constraints of direct conversation. One can pause, in both spaces, as long as is needed — but long pauses in direct conversation exploit the patience of the other. In a discussion of ideas it may very well be the case that one needs long pauses, indeed pauses unacceptably or even impossibly long for direct conversation. And yet, in spite of those pauses the conversation remains intact. The unique element of discussion in the virtual classroom seems to be precisely the combination of the sustained connection and freedom from momentary demands. The
listener in this conversation is not present, physically, but is nevertheless present as a quite specific listener. I persist in using the term “listener” here in spite of the absence of the physical sound of the other. Here, in this virtual conversation, one still hears the voice of the other as someone known. One hears the inflections of tone that give direct conversation much of its “striking” quality. This conversation is far more immediate than speaking with strangers in public.

III

Instead of a conclusion I want to tell one final story. This past Thursday, in a class on the Pre-Socratics the task was to look at Anaximander of Miletus. The text for the course presented a brief discussion of the oldest preserved map of the world in Western culture. This map is generally attributed to Anaximander. The text emphasized one point: the map is very inaccurate. This is of course correct. I decided to pursue the matter a bit differently. I wanted to try to raise several questions. Just what exactly is a map? How would someone collect information in order to construct the first map? How could the idea of creating a map come about? We spent some time looking at and discussing Anaximander’s map. We looked at some other maps (on screen, of course). We looked at two Vermeer paintings: The Geographer and The Astronomer. Somewhere in the midst of this we found ourselves in an unexpected immersion in questions about maps. I say “unexpected” because while that is exactly the place I hoped we would find, I also know that one never know whether or how well a class can find those places. We spent over an hour talking about maps. It was another of those days like showing The Red Vineyard in that darkened classroom long before teaching in Cyberwald became possible.

The story bears re-telling because it points to a thread that runs throughout this meditation. It has become commonplace lately in almost all discussions of teaching and technology to say that the lecture is among the worst methods of teaching. Cute little phrases like, “The sage on the stage will be replaced by the guide on the side” are repeated by administrators everywhere. I am very much in agreement that technology can indeed dispense information more usefully than the classroom teacher. But the assumption that all teaching is nothing but the dispensing of information seems a hasty generalization. My experience in all of my use of technology in teaching is that technology can be used to open and intensify interaction for all involved.

Let me take this latest example to illustrate this point. I could have created an interactive multimedia tutorial about Anaximander’s map. I could have
included all the images I used in class. I could have written commentaries about each image. Students could then, in their own time, work through the tutorial at their own pace. This all sounds rather compelling. But then I recall that during the class a few questions were raised when Anaximander’s map was first shown. The questions were far from simply requests for information. They expressed initial questions. As subsequent maps were shown the questioning evolved through new questions from additional students. When I got to Vermeer’s *Geographer* what I said was largely a synthesis of my own pre-class planned thoughts and the questioning that had just evolved. The proposed commentaries to a tutorial mentioned above could at best draw upon expected questions. But the questions in class that came from our looking at the images had a life of their own — they were far from the “expected”. We found much worthy of thought in looking at a bad map. But the essential thing is that we all had to be there. And it was a lecture. I don’t know what kinds of fragments I’ll get this next week, but I expect there will be some about maps.