**Reconstructing Spaces for Writing at an HSI:**
**How Blackboard Transforms Students' Writing Behavior**

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## Abstract

This discussion will examine how the introduction of the online hybrid environment of the Blackboard Learning System into the traditional classroom learning site impacts the writing processes of students at a mid-sized Hispanic Serving Institution on the U.S.-Mexico border. Rather than relying on Blackboard to enrich or supplement traditional writing practices, within Blackboard, HSI students construct a new writing and learning space that is at once real and imagined. In the HSI environment, Blackboard exists as an alternative thirdspace located (nestled) among the spaces of students' lifeworlds. Using examples drawn from Blackboard-based writing of over 100 students, I show that within Blackboard as an alternative space for writing, students' and instructors' goals come into alignment creating a learning environment that allows HSI students to successfully negotiate their home, work, and educational spaces. Students' writing behavior within Blackboard allows a substantive view into how students at a large HSI campus, which is also a commuter campus, reconstruct themselves as writers, moving toward higher levels of writing achievement in the context of this hybrid learning environment.

## Introduction: Writing in the Era of Cyberspace

The proliferating integration of electronic technologies into the production of writing has changed the college writing class landscape and the delivery of college writing instruction. Where once upon a time, the delivery of writing instruction depended on handwritten drafts and literal cut-and-paste activities, electronic venues have revolutionized the way students perceive and use spaces where writing happens. Today, it is impossible to conceive of writing instruction in spaces that do not include cyberspace "writing tablets."

In a quantum leap that has left the traditional classroom behind, an increasing number of writing courses are being taught completely online with student-teacher interactions occurring completely in cyberspace. It is not likely that we will ever backtrack toward the traditional (now antiquated) method of delivering college writing where students wrote dutifully at their desks and submitted handwritten essays at the end of the period. Today, when we are not in a totally cyberspace environment, we operate in hybrid spaces that retain some of the aspects of the traditional writing classroom while introducing new pedagogies and reconfiguring student-teacher interactions within the alternative space of web-enhanced teaching, such as that provided via the Blackboard Learning System.

However fluid and innovative writing instruction becomes as new technologies reconfigure the production of writing, there are several constants:

(1) For a multiplicity of reasons, many students do not feel comfortable with writing; many overtly admit that they hate writing.

(2) A great deal of time and effort is required to produce effective writing.

(3) Students' perception of the writing classroom as an unsupportive environment impacts their attitude and achievement in writing.

(4) For students from non-mainstream backgrounds, the traditional writing process is

necessarily disrupted—and in many cases truncated—because of the forces that pull

students away from full attention to writing demands.

This discussion will examine how the introduction of the Blackboard Learning System
into the traditional classroom environment impacts the writing processes of students at a mid-
sized Hispanic Serving Institution on the U.S.-Mexico border. Drawing on theories of spatiality
(Soja, 1996; Reynolds, 2004), theories of writing pedagogy (Elbow, 1973; Trimbur, 2000;
Matsuda, 2006), and theories of learning (Wesch, 2007; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Ambrose,
Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010), I suggest that rather than relying on Blackboard to
enrich or supplement traditional writing venues, HSI students, within Blackboard, construct a
new writing and learning space that is at once real and imagined. As the cornerstone of my
hypothesis, I use E.A. Soja's theory of "thirdspace," which he defines as "an-Other way of
understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial
awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the
rebalanced trialectics of spatiality-historicality-sociality," (Soja, 1996, p. 10). Soja's term invites
us to envision important spaces metaphorically, seeing those spaces not only as physical space
that is occupied but also as sites constructed by "occupiers" to perfectly fit exigencies created by
that particular place/space. By extension, there is the possibility that for spaces occupied by
multiple users, there will be areas of common reconstruction but distinctly individual
reconstructions for each user. This thirdspace construct seems suited to exploring the ways our
multiple student users have appropriated the space of Blackboard to reconstruct a new learning
site for the production of writing. I suggest that in the HSI environment, the Blackboard

Learning System exists as an alternative thirdspace located (nestled) among the spaces of students' lifeworlds where the writing process is reconstructed as students "make adjustments and compromises . . . in the process of accommodating to [this hybrid learning] place" (Reynolds, 2004, p. 14). Within this alt-space for writing, students' and instructors' goals come into alignment creating a learning environment that allows HSI students to successfully negotiate their home, work, and educational spaces.

### The HSI Environment

Students at Hispanic Serving Institutions defy easy categorization. Historically, HSIs evolve because they are located in regions with large Hispanic populations; however, HSI mission and/or vision statements rarely make direct reference to an institution's Hispanic enrollment (Laden, 2001, p. 74) which means that if accommodations are to be made for this special population of students, they are made at the instructor level only if the instructor is willing and able to make adjustments. For institutions with a predominantly Hispanic population, such as my institution, the HSI designation becomes the most salient aspect of the institution's ambiance.  My south Texas institution has an 89% Hispanic student population, well in excess of the U.S. Department of Education 25% Hispanic full-time FTE requirement (UTPA Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Additionally, as a regional institution, my institution draws 93% of its students from the four-county area of deep South Texas known as the Rio Grande Valley—and the majority of these students live at home and commute to campus. The conflation of the commuter campus environment (where students come and go to campus around home and work exigencies) and the HSI environment (where students feel the inexorable pull of *familia*) creates an educational

landscape that pragmatically and pedagogically embraces Blackboard as a thirdspace for teaching and learning, allowing students to triangulate the spaces of family, work, and education.

Commuter students many times appear to be indifferent students, but they aren't; they are "just-in-time" students, driving into campus from home or work only minutes before class starts and frequently still arriving late to class. Unlike the on-campus residents, commuter students *interrupt* other activities (work and family) to drive to campus, sometimes for a single class. Because their *real* work and home lives are off campus, as soon as the last class is over, they exit; no time is allotted for studying in the library, working in computer labs, or conferencing with professors during office hours not because they do not want to participate in such traditional academic activities but because they must attend to family and work demands. Admittedly, the commuter issues apply to any institution that draws the majority of its student body from the local community or contiguous larger region.  However, when that local community is predominantly Hispanic and predominantly working class, the learning ambiance of the HSI/commuter campus is significantly influenced by these two factors. In other words, HSI/commuter students must not only uphold cultural expectations that sometimes interfere with institutional, educational demands, but they must also negotiate the realities of coming and going to campus while sustaining normalcy in their "real" world lifespaces.

The real world work demands faced by HSI students are a direct consequence of the way Hispanic students finance their education.  National statistics reveal disturbing details about how Hispanic students pay for college: (1) they receive the lowest cumulative financial aid awards of any racial/ethnic group; (2) they receive the lowest federal aid awards; (3) they are less likely than all other students to take out loans (30% vs. 35% of all other students) (Santiago, 2008, p.

34). Laudably, the strong Latino work ethic propels Hispanic students into the work force early so as to contribute to the family coffers and to finance their education. My institution has no published statistics on the number of students who work while attending the university despite the fact that mandatory student evaluations of teaching ask students to fill in the number of hours they work each week; anecdotally, however, we know from the explanations and excuses offered for late submissions, for absences, and for non-submissions that well over half the students in any given class have full or part-time jobs. Many students leave the university each day to go straight to work for an eight-hour shift which puts them back home late at night, and that's when they start their school work. Other students work night shifts. Others work full time jobs and secure permission from employers to leave work for a class here and there. Others work all day and then come to campus for back-to-back evening classes starting at 4:30pm and ending at 10:00pm. Many stagger work hours around class time, frequently driving to campus for a single class and then immediately leaving to return to work.

In addition to the work issues, there are the issues related to family obligations. Because of their strong ties to *la familia,* Hispanic students sometimes appear to be distracted by family issues (and they frequently are). At my South Texas university, it is not at all unusual to have absences attributed to having no babysitter, to having to take a parent or grandparent to the doctor, to having to sit with a hospitalized family member, to having to collect a younger sibling from school—the list goes on and on. And because Hispanic *familias* are closely knit, a tragedy in even a distant part of the family resonates among all members; so the metaphorical and material immediacy of family considerably changes the learning landscape. One of my first-year writing students missed two weeks of class recently because his grandmother was dying in Mexico and the whole family went to be with her. During his protracted absence, he missed so

much instruction and so many assignments that he was on the verge of failing the class. A

female student missed one of our once-a-week classes, but she walked in tearfully at the end of

the period: her child had been left at daycare past the closing time because the person she had

entrusted to pick up her four-year-old son had failed to show up. Child protective services had

called my student as she was on her way to class. In tears, she told me, "I can just see my little

boy waiting there, thinking no one was ever going to come pick him up." Another student missed

many classes because her cousins were in a horrific automobile accident. The examples are

endless. While these examples are drawn from an HSI student population, clearly these problems

are not unique to Hispanic students. My point is that at a campus where the population is 89%

Hispanic and almost 100% commuter, these examples are not once-in-a-while situations, but are

instead the norm, calling for teaching and learning *adjustments* that seem to be perfected in the

thirdspace of Blackboard.

Perhaps the most distinct difference between HSI students at my South Texas institution

and traditional students at predominantly white institutions is the number of Spanish dominant

speakers who populate our classrooms. The English Language Learner label is not applied to

college-level students because the untested and to date undocumented assumption is that if an

ELL is able to get into college, he/she has attained a level of competency in L2 to succeed in

university-level work. The reality at HSI campuses located in borderland areas is that many of

our students are immigrants, many of them having been in America for only a few years. They

have remarkable stories of achievement, not just in mastering English, but in succeeding in other

curricular areas. One of my recent first year writing students had been in the U.S. only since his

sophomore year in high school—and he ended the course with an A! Another student, a dual

enrollment student in another FYW class, had been in the U.S. only two years; if he were an elementary school student, he would have still been considered a newcomer (Hodge, 2001).

Most poignant are the stories of immigrant students from Mexico for whom the classroom space is promoted as a place of hope but then is transformed into a hostile environment. One of my advanced composition students described her experience of moving from Mexico to the U.S.:

> When I was seven years old, I left Veracruz, México, with my mother, big sister, and my brothers. Arriving to Texas, I knew my journey would be difficult, twice as difficult, to find a voice in a language and a land not mine. I was no longer living in my *mágico* world. I was now invisible; at least that is how I felt for a few years. Mother, always told me that just . . . living in the United States was a privilege and knowing *el ingles* would give me power, it would put me in the race for competitiveness, and progress.

Another advanced comp student wrote about the trauma and "otherness" of being an immigrant student, with vivid details about the way the classroom space becomes a hostile space when teachers punish non-native English speakers:

> Writing for me has been very challenging especially because I am an immigrant from Mexico. Back in 1984 when I first started school . . . at "S." Elementary, Spanish was not acceptable in class. The way the teacher would ground me was during class by either facing the wall during recess or be put in a corner in class for speaking Spanish. Learning to read, write and speak English was very difficult mainly because the teacher was always getting after me, since I did not understand or spoke any English. I do not remember having any good experiences when I did writing in elementary school. The thing that I disliked most in school was when the teacher would ask for my journal and

made me read it in front of the class, which I did, but sometimes I was too embarrassed to share with the class. I went home and cried alone without telling anybody. One day I even asked my parents to get me out of school but they told me that schools in the United States will give me an excellent education.

Certainly, not all HSI students, even at a borderlands campus, are actual ESL students (Newman, pp. 23-24). Anecdotal evidence from my campus indicates that up sometimes, up to one-fourth of our students in any given class are true ESL students, having acquired L1 literacy in Spanish by living in Mexico and attending at least a few years of school there before immigrating to the U.S. Such evidence comes to light in classes where literacy development is a salient component of the classroom discussion, such as in English, rhetoric, linguistics, language, sociology, and education courses, admittedly small classes of approximately 30 students, where conversations about literacy matter and ultimately inform the learning experience.  No institutional data is formally collected on the provenance of the students' English language acquisition at this campus; however, professors for whom such information matters are keenly aware of the rich literacy stories that students bring to their classes and their education in general.

Other students were born in the U.S. to immigrant parents, raised in homes with non-traditional literacy practices where the child becomes the literacy coach for the parent, and where even after several generations of U.S. residency, the family preserves Spanish as the home language.  Though born in the U.S., children from these families are raised in Spanish-only homes, so entering the school system is a traumatic experience—so scarring that years later they remember it vividly and painfully.  In a talk at my institution, South Texas writer Viola Canales,

born in the U.S. but raised in a Spanish-dominant home, recounted the trauma of her first days in school: "I used to cry every morning before going to first grade. . . . School didn't *reflect* my world. There was no mirror in first grade" (Newman, 2009, p. 67).

Hispanic students, especially those with backgrounds and life circumstances (such as low socioeconomic backgrounds, literacy histories shaped by having little English language support at home, and persistent memories of the traditional writing classroom as a hostile learning environment) must become experts at negotiating the academic spaces they inhabit. Unfortunately, in higher education, we do not readily make adjustments for students whose language, cultural background, and lived experiences do not match the hypothetical educational hegemony; instead, we assume a linguistic homogeneity that fails to take into account the linguistic diversity of our students (Matsuda, 2006, pp. 637-638). In the absence of instructor-generated pedagogical practices that recognize cultural, linguistic, and experiential diversity, HSI students must autonomously make adjustments if they are to successfully triangulate home-work-education spaces. In the context of writing in the university environment, HSI students have demonstrated remarkable abilities of adaptation as learners in replacing the traditional classroom and its traditional blackboard with the success-oriented cyber Blackboard as a preferred site for writing.

### The Traditional Blackboard: "The information is up here"

The Blackboard Learning System appropriates the label for what used to be one of the most recognizable sites in a classroom: the old-fashioned slate blackboard (now widely replaced by the laminate whiteboard and the screen for projecting media-based lessons). If we consider the way blackboards have been used literally and metaphorically in the delivery of instruction,

we can begin to move toward conceptualizing the cyberspace Blackboard as a liminal thirdspace for writing and learning for HSI students.

In "A Vision of Students Today," a video produced by Michael Wesch and his introductory cultural anthropology students at Kansas State University (2007), several frames focus on a teacher at the bottom of a large, tiered lecture hall, writing on the blackboard, "the information is up here." This short, declarative statement captures the pedagogical contradictories represented by the *traditional* blackboard: without the blackboard, there would be no vehicle for delivering the information that students need; however, to get the information, students must be actually looking at the blackboard. In an extension of the statement, we could almost say that the information exists *only* if and when it is written on the blackboard. The traditional blackboard, thus, is not just a classroom instructional site; it is also a symbol of knowledge and learning. Additionally, it functions simultaneously as an exclusionary as well as inclusionary device, depending on whether students' eyes are trained on it or have strayed from the focal learning site in the classroom. Furthermore, when the teacher *assumes* students have prior knowledge and mastery of a concept and therefore does not put that information on the board, the students who do not have adequate or appropriate prior knowledge are excluded.

Within the spaces of historicality, sociality, and spatiality (Soja, 1996, p. 6), the blackboard metaphorically and realistically represents the dynamics of distribution and allocation of power in the classroom. Historically, instructors' use of the blackboard exists on a continuum, at one extreme as a site for punctuating a formal lecture or extended lesson with occasional words and phrases that the instructor wants to emphasize to the other extreme as a site for writing an entire lecture or extensive notes for students to copy, in some cases with the

blackboard completely and overwhelmingly covered with teacher writing. (Today, in the age of ubiquitous PowerPoints, the blackboard has been more or displaced by PPT lessons, but, like the blackboard, PPT exists on a continuum from well-planned effectuality to unconsidered overkill.)

Socially, the blackboard has offered an opportunity for students to communicate random messages, usually surreptitiously, usually anonymously, before the teacher walks in, or as a site for reminders of all sorts, always with the appended "Do Not Erase," or as a disciplinary venue when, in lower grades, students' names are written on the board as a result of inappropriate behavior.

Geographically, the blackboard moves the teacher from behind the desk when he/she approaches the board to illustrate a lesson, thereby actually, physically *delivering* the lesson. The blackboard moves students to the front of the room as active learners when they are asked to demonstrate learning by working out a math problem on the board or writing a sentence. However, the traditional blackboard site is also fraught with possibilities for failure in situations when a teacher writes something on the board and asks for volunteers to answer; a public incorrect response can trigger embarrassment for the learner. In short, the blackboard as a classroom staple has existed in multiple dimensions, with these various configurations simultaneously existing and being perceived by students and teachers in a sort of "triple dialectic" (Soja, 1996, p. 6) but always with the teacher and students positioned in real time and real space in this environment and always as a symbol of teacher authority.

The blackboard persists as an iconic representation of classroom dynamics. Consider the students who must be moved closer to the board so they can see; this movement marks them as deficient and different from the learners who can see the blackboard perfectly well from the back of the room. Consider the students who sit at their desks with no pencil or paper in defiance of

the tacit teacherly expectation that things written on the blackboard should be copied down and saved as learning resources. Consider the students who choose to sit at the back of the room—distancing themselves from the teacher—and concomitantly from the blackboard. Historically, a student's choice to sit at the back of the room signals resistance to the usual power dynamics of the classroom. However, choosing to sit at the back endows the student with a certain amount of power. The teacher, noticing the resistance, is compelled to "win over" the student, to try extra hard with this learner—or in an unfortunate turn of events, in disciplinary action; regardless, the resistance results in attention. Consider the students who copy everything the teacher writes on the board in unconsidered allegiance to the usual power structure symbolized by the blackboard; after all, if it's on the blackboard, it must be important and must be copied.

Consider the teacher who, in deft and powerful appropriation of the blackboard dynamics, uses the board as a way of wrenching the students' attention away from each other and toward the teacher at the front of the room. A scene from the movie *Dangerous Minds* (Simpson & Bruckheimer, 1996) offers a perfect example of blackboard as attention-getter (and power-establisher). New teacher Louanne Johnson, standing helplessly and ineffectually in front of a class of students indifferent to her presence, quiets her rowdy class by writing on the board, "I am a U.S. Marine. Does anyone know karate?" Later, in a verb conjugation lesson she writes, "We _____ green beans for supper," but the noisy students go on about their business talking so loudly to each other that her voice can't be heard over theirs. She pulls their attention toward her by erasing the first sentence and writing, "We choose to die." The blackboard, then, represents teacher power and student submissiveness: writing on the blackboard forces students to look toward the teacher and, at least for a moment, to pay attention to what is on the blackboard. In

the case of Louanne Johnson (a white female teacher), she wielded the authority of the blackboard to reconfigure the power dynamics of the classroom: until she wrote her attention-getting sentences on the board, the students (Latino and African American), noisy, disruptive, cohesive as a group, had ownership of the class and they had no intention of letting her teach them anything or even of acknowledging that she was in the classroom.

The distribution of classroom power traditionally represented by the blackboard is particularly relevant for Hispanic students who have to negotiate language barriers raised and maintained by the teacher. Such barriers keep the learner silent and excluded from classroom activities and transform the classroom into an unfriendly, frightening place, as illustrated in this passage written by the student whose comments about moving to the U.S. were cited earlier:

> I am seven years old, in Mission, Texas in Mrs. P's first grade classroom. Mrs. P. writes an arithmetic problem on the board. I raise my hand, in hopes that she would pick me. Mrs. P., unsentimentally smiles and says, "M., Do you know the answer?" I do not answer. I stand with a phony bravado and I feel the *gringo* children looking at me. "M., do you know the answer?" I stand there silent, wanting the earth to swallow me slowly. My heart wants to scream, "*La respuesta es ocho!!...la respuesta es ocho!!* (The answer is eight!! The answer is eight)! Beginning to wish the teacher understands my sign language, I start drawing a big circle in the air. Giggling, laughing, pointing, they cannot seem to keep their eyes off of me. Are they laughing at something I did, or something I am? I return to my desk, feeling degraded, humiliated, and overwhelmed with a longing for my native tongue. Defeated, I retreat into silence for the rest of the long, lonely school year.

The student-teacher dynamics described in this story are emblematic of the worst type of student-teacher interactions, with the learner feeling powerless, voiceless. In this story, the traditional blackboard is the trigger for the experience, reminding us that the traditional blackboard can transform private achievement or failure (for example, writing or quizzes that students produce individually at the privacy of their desks) into *public* achievement or failure, with potentially disastrous consequences for Hispanic students trying to position themselves in the space of the American classroom.

The traditional blackboard, then, functions symbolically as a fulcrum for shifting long-established (frequently negative) attitudes about the classroom toward reconceived notions about learning when a new system, such as the Blackboard Learning System, is introduced.  In the context of the HSI, Blackboard positions students in an imagined-and-real space where the traditional classroom (and its blackboard) is replaced with a far more student-friendly cyberspace site in which students reconstruct themselves as learners and writers.

## Blackboard as a Thirdspace for HSI Writers

The trialectics of historicality, sociality, and spatiality of the traditional blackboard transfer easily in reconceived form to the electronic dimension of Blackboard.  In many ways, the tensions of power dynamics represented by the traditional, physical blackboard are reconfigured and elided by the cyberspace Blackboard. In the traditional writing classroom, the teacher, associated with distribution and control of knowledge, is too often perceived as a critic bent on finding fault with student writing or as a presumed expert unwilling to guide students to satisfying and successful writing experiences as the following student comments show:

*The words of a first year writing student*: I do not like writing because I have never excelled in it. When I was in 4th grade, I got a 2 on my writing composition and in 7th grade, a 3 (I have always wanted to get a 4 but the stories I write are never good enough). Grammar—that's one of the things I don't like about writing because if you mess up on part of a sentence, every single little thing in the sentence is messed up. When I was in 8th grade, my English teacher tried to make the whole class like writing, but, with me, she failed.

*The words of a junior in an advanced composition class*: When I was in Middle School I had an English teacher named Ms. M. who was severely demanding and hard headed with the way she wanted us to write our essays. It was her way or the highway; she wouldn't let us use our past experiences when writing essays in her class. She pretty much said "forget about what you learned in middle school and elementary in regards to writing." I can remember learning as a young writer in middle school to always try and write in detail and add more to the story, but Ms. M. would always put me down by saying "You're just blabbing on and on about useless nonsense, it doesn't make sense." But in my opinion that was very crucial and useful nonsense because it shows more character to the point I was trying to get across.

*The words of a senior in an advanced composition class*: Throughout my elementary, middle school, and high school education, I've carried the trauma of my writing assignments being stamped on with red, circle pen marks and never positively commented on. Discouragement was the end result of my fourth grade year. Frequently being told "you're not doing this right" or "you're not doing it the way I showed you" and having my TEACHER writing all these red marks everywhere and to top it off in front of

my classmates made me a discouraged writer. As soon as I would turn in my assignments, there she was marking my paper with all these red scribbles. Dreading to walk up to her desk!

These students' comments point to the long-lasting negativity associated with the traditional school writing environment, an environment in which the teacher manages the distribution and control of knowledge and students associate the writing classroom with failure. Stories like these are, unfortunately, not uncommon in the HSI environment. Hispanic students are taught to respect authority, especially their teachers, and to accept the judgment (grades) unquestioningly (Newman, 2007, p. 20), a situation that promotes the adversarial relationship between learner and teacher that can occur in the traditional classroom when learners' needs clash with teacher dictates. In the writing classroom, particularly after years of enduring "arbitrary authority" wielded by the teacher, and particularly when that authority figure is a member of the dominant white culture and the student a member of a minority group, students come to see the writing teacher as someone who is preventing them from achievement and from access to power (Gale, 1996, pp. 8-9). Adjusting this unequal distribution of power is vital to promoting students' writing achievement.

In the realm of writing instruction, the reconstruction of pedagogical positions endows the learner with a powerful tool for controlling manifestations of the writing process. Blackboard space functions liminally as a "real-and-imagined" thirdspace that creates "another mode of thinking about space that draws upon the material and mental spaces of the traditional dualism but extends well beyond them in scope, substance, and meaning" (Soja, 1996, p. 11). In other words, understanding of the *real* blackboard with its long-standing representation of the power

dynamics of the classroom makes the cyber Blackboard the preferred learning space. Consider the way we position the traditional blackboard: we talk about *the* blackboard, with the definite article giving it a realness and a fixed spatiality in the classroom. But, cyberspace Blackboard is referred to *sans* article, positioning it everywhere and nowhere; each user constructs the real-and-imagined thirdspace by bringing together exigencies of space-historicality-sociality into this new learning venue.

Something that *is* missing in Blackboard is a representation of the teacher: there is no teacher "visible" when the student opens up the Blackboard site, as shown in Figure 1 (the homepage for my first year writing class):

Figure 1. Blackboard Page
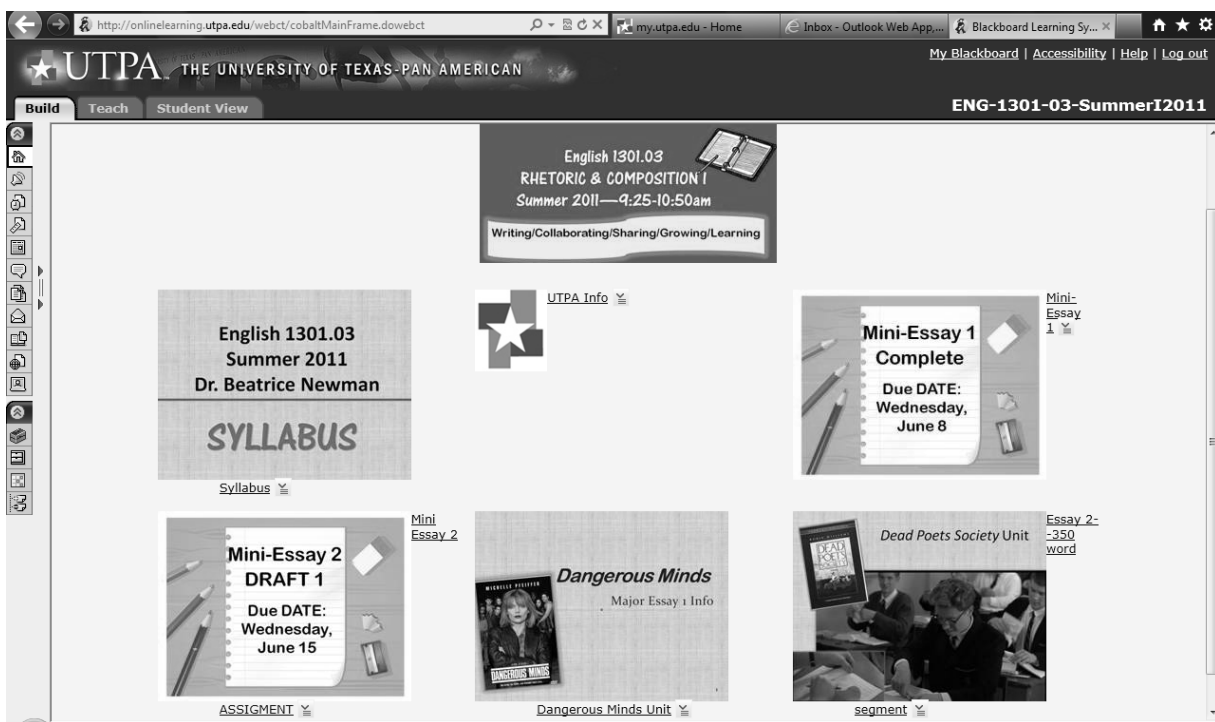


Even if I included an actual photograph of myself, it would operate as an avatar, for it would be a cyber representation: I'm not really there; my "presence" is manifested by my name, course information, and assignments. In the traditional classroom space, the teacher *presence*

can easily dominate the space, as evidenced by my analysis of the symbolic and real pedagogical

implications of the old-fashioned blackboard noted above.  But in the Blackboard cyberspace,

the teacher is a disembodied presence, and that creates a new learning environment for students,

albeit an environment to which they easily adjust   Blackboard, the teaching/learning space

remains figuratively a "teacherless" writing class such as the ones described by Peter Elbow in

his classic *Writing Without Teachers* (1973) in which he argued for shifting focus away from

teacherly didacticism toward self-motivated *writing* behavior:

> The teacherless writing class is a place where there is learning but no teaching. It is
>
> possible to learn something and not be taught.  It is possible to be a student and not have
>
> a teacher.  If the student's function is to learn and the teacher's to teach, then the student
>
> can function without a teacher, but the teacher cannot function without a student. (p. ix)

Elbow's metatext is that the traditional, spatially fixed classroom can be an antagonistic space

that interferes with the real process of writing; he suggests that based on the years of school

experience which teaches students to suspect that everything they write is error-laden, student

writers erect a sort of filter and this filter interferes with the "natural way of producing words . . .

voice—which is the main source of power in . . . writing" (p. 6).

Clearly, there *is* a teacher in Blackboard, but he/she exists only as the student chooses to

conceive of that individual.  In the absence of the spatiality of the real classroom—with its

traditional blackboard (or white board) at the front of the room, students desks, teacher desk at

the front, teacher with the red pen—the student writer is free to create an imagined writing space.

In Blackboard, students reconstruct the traditional writing process in ways that give HSI students

remarkable control over achievement, accomplishment, and self-satisfaction.  The cyberspace

Blackboard easily usurps the real classroom space as a traditional learning site, as a social site, and as a site in which teacher-student interactions are carried out; now all of this is productively reconstructed in the thirdspace of Blackboard. While much of this reconstruction may reflect the "migrating" of effective classroom interactions into the online environment (Warnock, p. ix), ultimately, when the walls and limitation of the traditional classroom fall away in Blackboard, students consistently seem to reconstruct themselves as empowered, diligent, successful learners, regardless of how they may have conducted themselves in the traditional classroom site.

## How Students Write in Blackboard

Writing in the thirdspace of Blackboard pivots on three fundamental reconstructions of classroom dynamics: (1) reassignment of the space where *real* learning happens; (2) revised manifestations of student effort and motivation; (3) reconfigured student-teacher dynamics.

### Blackboard: Where Real Learning Happens

Since I've begun using Blackboard as my vehicle for writing instruction, I observed how students relocate themselves in this academic thirdspace. Two student stories, one from a colleague and one of my own, shed light on how students reassign the space of *real* learning Blackboard.

My colleague's story: A student in my sophomore literature class sent me a writing question on Blackboard, but I didn't have time to write a response before class. I expected she would approach me in class to ask the question, but she didn't. Previously, she had sent me a question about one of her Blackboard discussion question grades, again a question she could have asked in class. Instead, she chose to continue her questions about this grade over several Blackboard queries. In class, she acted as if we weren't

having this exchange over Blackboard, but I still left it up to her to bring it up in class—she never did.

My story: A student in my FYW class brought to our in-class conference a writing segment I found deficient, mostly because as demonstrated by the product he showed me, he had not done his assignment. He didn't say anything; he walked silently back to his desk—and I went on to my next in-class conference. Late that night, I got a Blackboard message from him:

I did put forth plenty of effort in my paper. I included a strong topic sentence and thesis, but did not expand to the 500 words. I did, however, struggle with finding solid material on which to base my essay, starting and restarting my essay several times. What I mean to say is that I in fact spent quite some time in developing what I believe to be a very strong beginning to my essay.

These stories suggest that for both of these students the space of *real* engagement has been deferred to Blackboard; the traditional classroom space, perhaps because of the historical associations, seems an inhospitable place where student goals clash with the instructor's goals, so students choose silence rather than assertiveness. For example, my colleague's story suggests a mismatch between instructors' and students' views of raising questions in class. For the instructor, questions from students signal engagement and provide an opportunity to clarify points. As instructors, we welcome questions, but probably because of past classroom experiences in which a question became an opportunity for public humiliation (and my students offer endless stories of such classroom interactions), students seem reluctant, perhaps even afraid, to ask questions. For many HSI students, in part because of the power dynamics

represented by the traditional classroom, asking a question in class involves risk-taking: the instructor might label the questioner as deficient or inattentive, or, worse, the instructor might humiliate the questioner ("you should already know that" or "If you were listening . . . ").  While the instructor might not respond this harshly, an insecure student prefers not to take the risk.  My story reveals a similar situation: by rejecting my student's incomplete submission, I created a non-supportive classroom environment; but instead of defending his effort in the classroom site, during our face-to-face conference, he chose silence, and probably felt powerless, voiceless, and angry.  Both of these writers, however, relocated themselves in the thirdspace of Blackboard as serious, diligent students, and created a cyber instructor, faceless and presence-less in Blackboard, but more caring, less intimidating, more receptive to their needs.

When Blackboard is an option for learning and writing, the real classroom is no longer seen as the primary learning site, so much so that students avoid classroom learning interactions and defer their engagement to the Blackboard site. I come back to the need for this "deferment"—at an HSI that is also a commuter campus, the time investment of getting to class is intrusive; in many cases, students have far more important things to do than to show up for class. This reality requires adjustment on the instructor's part: on one hand, this reconstruction appears to be a rejection of traditional delivery of instruction (and concomitant resistance to the subject matter of the course).  However, I believe this reconstruction more accurately signals evidence of students' interest in learning and achievement.  In short, when students prefer the Blackboard site as the place where their learning takes place, it is a pedagogical plus—as long as we recognize and adjust to the change.

**Blackboard: The New Writing Community**

In pre-Blackboard times, conferencing with a student on a written draft involved one-on-one class time; he/she went back to his desk to tinker with the draft and exchange drafts with classmates while I worked with other students individually. In the traditional classroom writers' community, the conferencing and peer review contributes vitally to the sociality of the writing process: so much so, that for years, this approach has been the staple of most compositionists' pedagogy (Yancey, 2006, p. 5). That scenario has changed dramatically with Blackboard. Although I continue to conduct in-class one-on-one conferences, students resist working actively on their drafts *in class* following our conferences.  Despite my repeatedly entreaties that they use our class time to refine their writing and ask me questions, they choose instead to chat with each other.

What has happened is that Blackboard has become a thirdspace in which the writing process has been reconfigured. While as a professor I value class time as valuable for revision and on-site conferences, my commuter students see this class time as an interruption, an unnecessary wrinkle in the triangulation of their work-home-education spaces. In the context of thirdspace, the sociality and spatiality of the writing classroom is no longer a time for improving writing in the presence of and with the assistance of the professor/coach and with feedback from peers, but instead for prepping for writing by sharing stories with other writers and by incubating rather than working directly.  From my perspective, it *seems* that they are wasting classroom time; however, I believe what they are really doing is deferring the *real* work of writing for Blackboard at the time and hour and physical space when they choose to inhabit that space. In the context of the production of writing, this act of deferment is a manifestation of the student writer's need to withdraw from the immediate situation, to close his/her eyes so as to concentrate

intently on the writing task at hand and to block out influences that might inhibit successful completion of the task (Ong, 1975, p. 10; Elbow, 1987, p. 50-52). At this point, I have considerable anecdotal evidence that this deferment of true learning activity to Blackboard is resulting in increased achievement in student writing: the 100 plus students on whose writing this current study is based have shown sustained improvement in depth of thought, quality of expression, development of ideas, critical thinking, and overall engagement with their writing tasks, the sort of improvement and growth that marks the progression of student writer from novice to expert (Sommers and Saltz, 2004). (I am currently working on a study that examines the quantitative and qualitative improvements in writing evidenced in the Blackboard environment.)

Blackboard expands writing time and space metaphorically and realistically.  For one thing, deadlines, which I now allow my students to set as a class, are no longer anxiety-inducing for them. In allowing students to set the deadline (albeit within some parameters), teacher authority is relinquished somewhat, but the trade-off is writers who are more participatory. In Blackboard, drafts and final copies and other assignments are not due at absolute times as they are in the traditional classroom.  While there is a Blackboard dropbox due time and date, the liminal space of Blackboard makes all deadlines fluid. The traditional turning-in-your-paper-at-the-beginning-of-class in the real classroom creates a fixed, rigid deadline controlled by the teacher and resisted by the student (consider all the times students skip class because they were unable to complete the assignment by the deadline). The fluidity of the Blackboard deadlines stems from the freedom students feel to work within the writing spaces they have created— sometimes at 10pm, sometimes at 2am, sometimes at 5am.  They routinely vote for a midnight deadlines, explaining that they work until late evening hours. And the glitches possible because

of Blackboard in many ways ease the submission anxiety: in cyberspace, there's always an acceptable, viable excuse ("I had technical problems; I know my paper is three minutes late [or x number of hours late], but I hope you still accept it"). Somehow, a comment like this one pulls the instructor into the thirdspace of Blackboard and the "excuse" is not a feeble request for more time but instead evidence of student diligence. Rhetorically, the student is posing as a serious, committed student whose work is *there* somewhere in cyberspace but just not in the dropbox; he/she is constructing me (the cyberspace instructor in the thirdspace of Blackboard) as an understanding professor who is more interested in the process of completing the writing assignment than in having the assignment in the dropbox by the cutoff time. If we juxtapose this with the resistance to on-time submissions that students demonstrate in traditional classrooms, the thirdspace of Blackboard is a decidedly friendlier pedagogical space.

## Blackboard: Where Every Student Is a Real Writer

Blackboard also has transformed my role as reader of student writing. Perhaps not all Blackboard instructors read drafts and papers as they come in, but I do. Students have on-demand feedback—and they expect it. One student wrote in his end-of-class essay that, on the day he submitted a writing assignment he found particularly challenging, he was checking Blackboard every 20 minutes to see if I had posted his grade—an assumption of my instantaneous availability. While no instructor can be available on demand, this student's comment points to his interest in reader feedback, a mark of a writer who has moved beyond the novice stage and is progressing toward the maturity of a writer who recognizes the connection between the instructor/reader/expert's commentary and the potential for writing improvement. Another student grew nervous when her friends from class had already received their feedback

for a major draft and she hadn't; she sent me her draft again, just in case.  What I see in such

student behavior is assumption of ownership not just of the submission but of the writing

process.  In the thirdspace of Blackboard, students seem much more focused on succeeding on

the assignment—and on being rewarded for that diligence—than they do in the traditional

classroom setting.  When Blackboard becomes a major venue for instruction and learning, the

power dynamics of the traditional classroom are reconfigured significantly.  Students take a far

more active role in their learning and they seem far more interested in having their

accomplishments acknowledged.

Working in the Blackboard thirdspace, empowers learners to see themselves as serious

participants in the writing community. I offer the story of "Sammy", a first year writing student.

For his first major writing conference, he had written only one sentence (he was supposed to

have a 350-word segment), and he had no explanation, no questions, and unfortunately, we

couldn't have a productive conference if all he had written was a single sentence. He just

shrugged his shoulders. Back at his desk, he pulled out his phone and spent the rest of the period

texting and chatting with the kids in his group.  It is difficult not to think of such students as

disinterested underachievers.  Sammy surprised me, however.  At 2:30am that night, he sent his

Blackboard submission with a comment: "I'm still working on this but I have 500 words now.  I

can't work anymore; my brain is pooped."  Sammy's comment points to the way student writers

locate themselves in the thirdspace of Blackboard. In class that day, his behavior, his lack of

preparation, his apparent disinterest in his own success had given me reason to think of him as a

potential failure.  In the classroom, because he was unprepared, he was unable to participate

meaningfully in our class interactions; however, at home, in the space of Blackboard, he was a

writer, proud of what he'd accomplished and he moved into my own writing world (I know what a "pooped" brain feels like after a long writing stint).

A student in my advanced composition class included reflections about her completion of the assignment each time she submitted a draft or a final version, such as this one submitted with a short childhood experience narrative:

I enjoyed writing this narrative more so than the expository essay. I was able to expand a little more because I had details I could include but then again, I couldn't keep it at one page. I tried to re-read it to see where I could cut out information but I found that everything I included was relevant to the story. I tried, but the length was a disappointment I guess since it should have been one page. It was fun though. I'm sharing it with my cousin as soon as I can. Thank you!

Another student, who had to work until midnight, submitted his draft at 1:29am with a note: "I know its late and i apologize. Thank you for accepting it." The notable thing about this message is that the student somehow envisioned me at the other end of his message—why else would he be apologizing for the late hour.  He crafted an image of his professor as someone eagerly awaiting (and receptive to) his submission: he didn't say "please accept this."  No, he pre-empted the acceptance by thanking me for it, not giving me a chance to refuse the submission (perhaps not even considering that I *might* refuse the submission).  While this may be evidence of the student trusting the instructor to *want* the assignment regardless of the time of submission, it is a trust that seems to be enhanced by Blackboard where time and space—and submission—boundaries are relaxed.  In contrast, the fixed beginning and ending time of the traditional classroom meeting can create a *distrust* in the student: if he/she doesn't have the assignment on

time, there is no submission and, while the instructor may accept a late submission, in the immediate temporality of the classroom, the student is *marked* as non-participatory, unprepared, disinterested. Blackboard eliminates those markings.

These students have found in Blackboard an entré into the community of writers. Telling me *about* the experience of writing is a self-selected option. In the old, pre-Blackboard days, when I collected drafts in class, no one said anything about the process of producing the drafts (unless I asked them for a short reflective piece); they just added their submission to my pile of essays. And, if they didn't have a submission, that was that. Perhaps, this absence of the visual pile of essays is significant in Blackboard. Students see their submission in isolation; they envision me receiving *only* their submission. Where once upon a time in the world of the brick-and-mortar classroom, just getting the work in was the primary goal, now, the processes of producing and delivering the writing seem to be as important as the actual writing, eliminating a perceived problem in composition instruction: the isolation of writing from the actual conditions of production and delivery of writing (Trimbur, 2000, p. 189).

The Blackboard submission format seems to have created an exigency non-existent in classroom submissions. In Blackboard, when students *deliver/submit* their writing, they are *communicating:* the dropbox exists in letter format (to: instructor, from: student), and the comment box perhaps compels students to *talk,* albeit in cyberspace, explaining their submission and their process. When they write comments about the process of producing their writing, they clearly are positioning themselves as a writer writing to another writer. I see this as a reconfiguration of the student-teacher dynamic facilitated within the thirdspace of Blackboard where time and space boundaries are elided and student-teacher transactions become writer-to-writer communication informed by mutual trust born in a new pedagogical thirdspace, where the

student projects the best teacher qualities onto the fictional/imagined cyberspace instructor. In

Blackboard and other cyberspace writing venues, the student's professor is always a fiction, an

extension of the writerly task of creating an imagined audience for every writing task (Ong,

1975, pp. 9-11). In Blackboard, students assume the task of creating an imagined teacher in a

way not required by the immediacy and reality of the traditional classroom where the teacher is

*there,* present in real form before the students. Clearly, a student who has had actual classroom

interaction with an instructor will be better able to construct a cyber instructor fashioned from

the *best* teacher qualities the student has observed; interestingly, however, operating in the

blended environment of face-to-face instruction and online learning, students seem to ignore the

teacher qualities that might jeopardize student success, instead, constructing an imagined

instructor tailor-made to meet the student's pedagogical needs.

This creation of the fictionalized but *ideal* instructor enables students to erase and

reconstruct the dynamics of traditional classroom interactions which frequently lead to

opposition between instructor and student goals. Students have learned through years of

reinforced experience how to navigate the traditional classroom space. When students enter a

classroom, they are entering not just that particular classroom, but, in the context of Soja's

spatiality-historicality-sociality trialectic, every other classroom they have ever entered. The real-

and-imagined space of the traditional writing classroom activates pre-existing negative

perceptions of writing classrooms and writing instructors, triggering students to demonstrate

work avoidance by submitting substandard work (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, &

Norman, 2010, pp. 68-72): they admit to dashing off their work 10 minutes before class; they

arrive late because they have been working in the computer lab up to the last minute; they wave

their flashdrive before me and tell me, "my essay is in here"; they had to study for a test and "didn't get" to the essay. Unfortunately, perhaps in an effort to avoid confrontations or perhaps in an effort to reward students even for a little effort, instructors frequently accept such excuses, thereby reinforcing avoidance behavior. Work avoidance creates feelings of failure all around: instructors chide themselves for accepting substandard work and perhaps see students as lazy or disengaged while students submit substandard work just to get the work done, knowing they could have done a better job if circumstances and motivation had permitted it (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010, pp. 67-68).

In the year that I've been using Blackboard, these work avoidance issues have diminished significantly. Blackboard seems to have created a space where student and instructor goals are idealized and synchronized. Students seem to reconstruct themselves as learners and writers: in Blackboard, drafts are almost always longer than the minimum required wordcount. Non-submissions are almost non-existent; and when someone does fail to submit an assignment, I immediately contact the student and almost always, the submission shows up.

Admittedly, I am surprised—and quite pleased—with the higher level of student participation that I've seen in Blackboard. My explanation is that Blackboard has allowed students to create an unboundaried thirdspace for writing. In the HSI environment, the home-work-school spaces grind against each other resulting in students' resistance to writing because they have to *interrupt* activities in work and home spaces to comply with deadlines and productivity expectations. So, the classroom (and by extension the instructor) becomes intrusive and hostile. In the thirdspace of Blackboard, however, students reconfigure the writing process and reconstruct themselves as motivated writers within that triangulation. In the unboundaried space of Blackboard, student achievement rises: the writer replaces his/her reduced expectations

for success (quite common among student writers) with heightened expectations for success

(Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010, pp. 69-72).

It could be that what I am seeing as a reconstruction of the writing process in this

thirdspace is actually a manifestation of the larger shift toward learning contextualized in

technology, a necessary shift given the way students variously labeled Net Gen or Generation Y

have been immersed in technology from the time they were born, students who feel more

comfortable *producing* and *discussing* their writing online than in the traditional classroom

(Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, p. 1.2; Warnock, p. xxii). Evidence from my study and observation

of the approximately 100 college writing students on which I've based my comments here

suggests that Blackboard is much more than an extension of NetGen students' technological

savvy. Blackboard does indeed position students in a thirdspace where the old realities of their

frequently negative experiences with writing instruction in writing classrooms give way to a new

reality of student-centered, learner-managed writing. My study of these college writers as they

have repositioned themselves in the world of writing via Blackboard resonates with the findings

of the U.S. Department of Education's analysis of online learning (U.S. Department of

Education, 2010): student writers feel more control over their writing efforts and

accomplishments in the online environment; additionally, the opportunities for reflection about

their writing—their comments about completing the writing task when they submit the

assignment—move the writer toward a self-consciousness about writing that is vital to growth

toward "expertise" (Sommers and Saltz, 2004).

**Conclusion: Writing and Teaching in the Thirdspace of Blackboard**

My analysis of how Blackboard impacts students' participation in writing is firmly grounded in my observations of the way students at my HSI commuter campus have adeptly located themselves in the thirdspace of Blackboard. Blackboard encourages learners and teachers to reposition themselves within reconstructed dynamics of classroom power. Ironically, while the traditional slate blackboard represents the historically authoritarian means of distributing knowledge, the cyberspace Blackboard offers a means of democratizing the pedagogical field.

This democratization is particularly important for Hispanic students whose achievements are frequently tentative and whose completion rates at institutions of higher learning lag significantly behind their white counterparts: in 2010, college completion rates ranged from 39% for whites to 19% for African Americans to 13% for Hispanics (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Given the interruptions and interferences experienced by many Hispanic students as they navigate their way through college, it seems appropriate to take note of Blackboard's potential for helping HSI students succeed. For students whose lifeworlds (family, cultural expectations, work) function as constraints in traditional learning environments, Blackboard expands learning time, space, and opportunity.

Without question, the evidence I have provided in this discussion is anecdotal rather than psychometric, but it is a starting point in considering how online instruction, even if it is simply blended into traditional instruction, can enhance the learning experiences of the vast numbers of Hispanic students at HSIs. And at HSIs such as my institution, where other issues (commuter status, limited financial resources, and literacy background, for example) significantly impact the general institutional ambiance, Blackboard and other online learning venues hold the promise of higher levels of student achievement and positive reconstructions of student-learner dynamics.

As I have reconstructed my professor persona in the thirdspace of Blackboard, I have watched my students emerge as more confident writers within that liminal space that they control and that gives them ownership of their writing. Consider the way one student described his *thoughts* about our FYW classroom before he even entered the physical space: "My first thought [was that this] English 1301.03 class was a dreadful and condensed room with harsh teaching and un-wanted attention. This very thought was due to past experiences and teachers' negative influences." This comment encapsulates the trialectics of spatiality (the writing classroom as uncomfortable space)-historicality (the writing teacher as antagonist)-sociality (the learner's adversarial relationship with writing instructors). Happily, at the end of our Blackboard-enhanced course, this student replaced his disturbing description with an image of a confident writer: "This semester may be over but I am going to continue to use my new outstanding skills in writing to help better myself for the future. I'm leaving this English class with a better attitude because the rhythm of writing is at the tip of my fingertips now and my confidence has risen from what it once was and will forever stay that way."

Clearly, numerous variables figure into transforming a reluctant writer into a confident writer. While my discussion is focused on *writing,* my analysis of HSI students' facile adaptation to the online learning environment of Blackboard suggests that we should look critically at online learning venues as routes to higher levels of achievement for Hispanic students: why do HSI students so readily position themselves in the thirdspace of Blackboard? How do HSI students make the necessary pedagogical adjustments that lead to success in this cyber thirdspace? What can we learn from these adjustments and adaptations that will enable us to promote achievement among Hispanic students? HSI students are by no means unique, but they

do bring to the forefront of our national discussions on access and equity the need to create and sustain learning environments that promote achievement for historically underrepresented groups. As transition from traditional classroom spaces into cyberspace classrooms and cyberspace blackboards, we need to pay critical attention to how this repositioning can improve teaching and change learning. Blackboard, I believe, is a powerful tool for reconstructing teaching so that students' writing goals are met and writing becomes a vehicle for academic and personal growth rather than an occasion for failure. In the context of an HSI, where many students' literacy histories are tinged with unpleasant memories of classroom spaces, it seems appropriate to embrace the cyber thirdspace of Blackboard as a venue for successful teaching and learning. In such an environment, student writers position themselves in the newly constructed dynamics of Blackboard as a real-and-imagined cyber thirdspace in which writing happens successfully and meaningfully.

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