

To whom it may concern

During the period October 1, 2000 - February 28, 2001 I was a participant in the course *Phenomenology Online*. The course was offered by Professor Max van Manen at University of Alberta, Edmonton assisted by Norm Friesen.

However eager I was to learn more about phenomenology, I worried about two things. First, would my standard of English be good enough? Second, being a novice in the area of computer communication, would I be able to cope with the technology?

It very soon became clear to me that Norm had thoughtfully considered possible pitfalls in advance, and he had created a user-friendly web board, a welcoming virtual classroom, which I immediately felt comfortable with. In fact, it was not until I started to write an article about my experiences of the online course that I realized that Norm actually had used his technical skills to make my computer transparent. Since I never experienced any technical problems, I was able to fully concentrate on the subject at hand. The very few impediments were dealt with immediately, mostly before I even realized that we actually had some sort of minor technical problem.

I never had any problems with how, when, or where to post my messages and the other students' postings were easily accessible. The way Norm had designed our web board encouraged us to communicate and respond to each others postings – which we eagerly did. Some of us were inclined to get sidetracked and started discussions that did not really have anything to do with the seminars. In an ordinary class, if you start to talk or whisper to the person sitting next to you, the teacher will probably give you an angry look or ask you to be quiet, or if you are very young you might be sent out in the corridor. Well, Norm did sort of ask us to leave the classroom, but in a very polite and encouraging way. He promptly added a room "Open Forum" to our virtual school building and we were asked to please continue our discussions there. After some time, yet another room was added, the "Absenteeism". As most us had noticed, some participants suddenly disappeared for shorter or longer periods, and of course, you wondered what had happened. The "Absenteeism" room was created so that we could, as the posting said, "tell us if and for how long you are detained from participating for a few days or week(s) due to illness, travel, computer problems, holidays, extreme fatigue, love affairs, etc. This will keep us from guessing why someone seems to have suddenly disappeared from Hyperspace during the week."

Norm did not just set up a web board, and left it to us to deal with, so to speak. He was there all the time, supervising, communicating, and refining the technology. There is no doubt in my mind that the warm and friendly tone between the participants did not arise solely from professor Van Manen's tactful teaching. Norm's technical support made us forget about the computer and thus we could concentrate on our discussions.

During the same period, I was also teaching a class online from my university. Unlike the "Phenomenology Online", the tone among the participants was far from warm and friendly. In fact, they rather immediately started an angry discussion about natural science vs. human science, and for a couple of weeks they were at each other's throats. It would have been easy to ignore the hostile postings, and simply establish. "Well, that's computer teaching for you!" However, since I simultaneously had this wonderful experience of what computer-mediated communication could be like, I persistently strived to make my students see *the miracle of Techne*. No doubt, I would not have been able to handle the situation without Norm's design as a model. I learned a lot both as a student and as a teacher and of course, I was happy to share my experience with my faculty.

The fact that two years later some of us still keep in touch clearly says something essential about Norm's significance for the course; the memory of the remarkable online experience lingers.

Sincerely,

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