Temporal Practice Online:
Navigating "Now" and "Then" in a Web-based ESL Course

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ABSTRACT

New pedagogical models are emerging to attend to the needs of ESL learners who may have to communicate online in their second language. The goal-based scenario approach, as deployed in Columbia Interactive's American Business Writing program, offers one such solution, allowing students to interact with fictional interlocutors in an online business simulation. Involvement in this learning environment forces students to experience two time frames simultaneously — the learning environment of real-time and the fictional environment of the online scenario. The overlapping of the two environments would seem to problematize the communication of temporal and spatial relations, yet effective business correspondence, where speed and clarity are essential, requires clear temporal anchoring. In this study, I investigate how learners navigate the time frames of a web-enabled learning experience and acquire pragmatic skills. Using assignments submitted in a Columbia Interactive course, I explore temporal practice in an online role-play. The data shows that students leave linguistic tracks of two time streams in their assignments, usually maintaining clear boundaries between the "here-now" of real-time and the "there-then" of scenario time, but occasionally weaving the two in inventive – and pedagogically satisfying – ways.

INTRODUCTION

By enabling nearly instantaneous transmission of information, the Internet has prompted a reassessment of time and distance as social phenomena. Online contact effaces the traditional boundaries of spatial region and time zone: the geography of cyberspace permits a virtual co-location of "here" and "there," confounding "common sense" practices in communicating temporal and spatial relations.

Consequently, communicative practices and focuses are emerging as adaptations to the demands of, and opportunities afforded by, the new medium. As native speakers reconfigure their practices, so ESL pedagogy must adapt to the new uses of English practiced online. Such a

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reassessment is particularly necessary in the ESP field of business English, which relies extensively on the latest in technological communication. Beyond the introduction of new vocabulary and social courtesies, though, new pragmatic concerns must also be introduced: the politics of carbon copies and blind carbon copies adds a new level to the strategics of business correspondence, while the turnaround time from an e-mail received to the recipient's reply is often used as a gauge for the commitment of one business to a relationship with another.

The Internet simultaneously offers solutions to the challenges it has created, enlivening the field of computer-assisted (language) education and offering a challenge to the notion of the geographically situated campus.[2] Detractors consider the displacement from classroom interaction a worrisome development, arguing that the physical co-presence of teacher and student lies at the heart of education. To them, spatial distance coincides with social distance, blocking the give-and-take of true communicative learning. For example, in a *New York Times Magazine* piece, Traub (2001) contrasts Williams College – "an enclosed garden, a place set aside from the world for which you were being theoretically prepared" (p. 90) – with the untamed, artificial world of the Internet. He also quotes Williams professor Steven Gerrard: "Our icon is Mark Hopkins [former president of the college] on a log...a university is a student on one end of a pine log and Mark Hopkins on the other" (p. 125).

But poignant as such arguments for dialogic interaction between teacher and student are, they rely on a paradigm of distance as static and disabling. Seen through this metaphor, the Internet serves as a mere channel for the transmission of information across space and time, with students as passive recipients of the knowledge that online content-providers deliver to them.[3] Some web-based courses do, in fact, follow this model, offering websites constructed as delivery systems for QuickTime lectures and html-translated hand-outs, with a few multiple choice questions to test the newly learned knowledge, rendering "the classroom experience" in two dimensions and separating the learner from the material. In such courses, the "there" of the original classroom never becomes the "here" of true experience, just as the translation exercises of the Grammar-Translation Method or the repetitious overload of Behaviorism never transfer beyond the classroom.

Other sites, though, attempt to develop new environments for learning, virtual worlds in which students navigate content spatially, exploring layers of information, experiencing distance not as a limit on their interaction with a teacher/expert, but as a form of consciousness. Such courses often simulate "goal-based scenarios" (Schank et. al., 1998) in which students interact with fictional interlocutors, playing certain roles and performing a variety of communicative functions. Involvement in such learning environments allows students to be both "here" and

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[2] For example, as Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College, wrote in an oft-sited *New York Times* op-ed piece in March 2000: "It is possible now for a professor to give a lecture in Cairo, for me to attend it at Teachers College, and for another student to attend it in Tokyo. If we can do all that...why do we need the physical plant called the college?" (Press and Washburn, 2001, para. 2). Levine's piece drew a great deal of criticism at the college and prompted a flurry of debate in the newspaper.

[3] cf. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) CONDUIT metaphor for communication. Education philosopher Nicholas Burbules notes the currency of the metaphor, and suggests its inaccuracy for both traditional and online models of education: "The most frequently used term is that [online education] is a new delivery system. But that is a very poor and very narrow description of teaching. It fits the lecture and textbook models, but for most people the enduring aspects of higher education are writing skills, critical thinking skills, learning to learn...None of those can be understood on a 'delivery system' model" (Press and Washburn, 2001, para. 15).

"there" at the same time — at once participating in the exploration of a virtual environment and simultaneously considering the direction and progress of their learning. Such an environment permits learners to exercise their skills in the new medium, toying with the emerging communicative practices of technologically-enabled correspondence.

However, the overlapping of the two environments would seem to problematize the efforts of language learners to communicate temporal and spatial relations with their interlocutors. Though rarely discussed as a pragmatic issue in ESL, temporal practice anchors effective communication, especially in technology-enabled situations where messages are often assumed t o be received instantaneously, though they may in fact be read sometime much later. Communicating clearly, then, involves using linguistic cues that situate oneself in a time frame, while acknowledging the temporal location of the interlocutor. Can students learn to communicate effectively their position in a fictional time frame? Can these pragmatic skills transfer beyond the online experience?

In this study, I investigate how learners navigate the shifting terrains of a web-enabled learning experience and acquire skills in technological communicative practice. Using assignments submitted in an online ESL course in business writing that I helped to develop, I explore temporal practice in an online role-play. The data shows that students leave linguistic tracks of two time streams in their assignments, usually maintaining clear boundaries between the "here-now" of real-time and the "there-then" of scenario time, but occasionally weaving the two in inventive – and pedagogically satisfying – ways. I also discuss the development of practical skills in temporal intersubjectivity necessary for effective communication in the medium.

AMERICAN BUSINESS WRITING: HIGH-INTERMEDIATE[4]

American Business Writing: High-Intermediate was designed by Columbia Interactive, a joint venture between Columbia University's School of Continuing Education and the online education firm CognitiveArts. Its pedagogical base marries the work of Frances Boyd of Columbia's American Language Program in applying business school case method to ESP learning (Boyd, 1991) with the goal-based scenario approach of Roger Schank (Schank et al., 1998).

Combining three overlapping curricular threads —business writing, English language, and American culture — the course sets a student in a fictional business scenario demanding a large amount of reading, listening, and writing: s/he is a new executive at the e-solutions design firm Heliant, which has just received news that the up-market department store Isabella's intends to establish an online presence. The scenario develops as the student writes messages and letters to colleagues and the potential client, reporting previous Heliant projects, pitching the firm to a representative of Isabella's, and eventually writing sections of the proposal for the final project. Complications arise as colleagues miss deadlines, the potential client misinterprets a message, and the learner's boss rushes to England for an emergency meeting.

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[4] A course demonstration is available at www.as.columbia.edu/exec/guest/demos/ALPDemo/demo.html. The actual course is not publicly available.

The course is divided into 14 units, each containing one to five e-mails, letters, or voice mails from colleagues and contacts, which then require the submission of a prompted document (in Microsoft Word[©]). The document should reflect an "authentic" presence in the scenario: in their submissions, students should acknowledge their recipient's status, needs, and personality, producing not only text but appropriate features that reflect the details of the scenario (e.g., letter headers with dates and addresses). A tutor reviews the student's submissions and provides feedback, determining also whether the student must revise and resubmit the document or proceed to the next task. Thus, revision and reflection on written work is built into the course design, as students are directed to online support materials, which include annotated models similar to the documents they produce.

From start to finish, the scenario covers the seven-and-a-half week period between Monday, October 11, 2000, and Thursday, December 2, 2000.[5] The student, though, can access the course for six months of real time, working through the narrative at his/her own pace. Adam Neamann, chief design architect at CognitiveArts[6], explains the pedagogical principle behind these two time streams as such:

> One of the problems with learning-by-doing in non-scaffolded environments [e.g., on-the-job training] is that students sometimes don't have the time to step back and reflect on their experiences and thought processes. By juggling the two different time streams, you can have some of the realism and motivation of real-life pacing, while still allowing the students to reflect and work at their own pace (personal communication, April 19, 2001).

Students can, virtually, manipulate the pacing of the time stream in the online scenario, stretching fictional "moments" into hours or days of exploration and reflection in real-time. Feedback from the tutors and the active revision process further expands those interstices and encourages deeper exploration. Such temporal manipulation, though, may prove problematic for stable temporal anchoring in the role-play scenario. The data analysis will explore how both time streams surface and interact in the students' documents.

DATA COLLECTION

Ten high-intermediate level ESL/EFL students (their level designated by the American Language Program at Columbia University) participated in an eight-week pilot test of the course between August 7, 2000 and September 29, 2000 (the entire period "pre-dating" that of the fictional scenario). They were all non-native-speaking corporate executives with multi-national U.S. firms, half of them situated abroad (in Mexico and Hong Kong), the other half at various locations throughout the United States. Their submissions comprise the bulk of the data for this study. For comparison, I have included submissions collected from a native-speaking venture

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[5] To my embarrassment, I did not realize until beginning this study that the days of the week are erroneously set for those dates in the year 1999 (the year the course was initially developed). Students in the pilot program (who form the data pool for this study) did not report noticing the mistake.

[6] For more information about the firm's pedagogical philosophy, see http://www.cognitivearts.com/.

capitalist enrolled in the course to test his investment (October 4, 2000 to October 12, 2000 — a period coinciding with the first "week" of the fictional scenario).

The scope of this study permits only a preliminary analysis of the data — variables such as student age, first language/culture, and level of acculturation will not be considered. Instead, I will focus on common discourse strategies in temporal anchoring, as well as responses from course tutors to those maneuvers.

DATA ANALYSIS

Writing in the "now"

Despite the design team's attempts to develop a temporally realistic and coherent role-play scenario, the students consistently betray their real-time positions: when writing e-mails or letters to scenario characters, they use real-time dates in the headers.[7] (Since the learners are not actually submitting their course assignments via e-mail, they have to construct headers themselves in Word© documents.) To a large extent, such positioning is a reflexive act in an inauthentic task, since such dates are normally generated by e-mail systems or prompted by word-processing programs. Still, in the students' writing, these dates are juxtaposed with fiction-embedded information — colleagues' e-mail addresses, e-mail subject lines, or the client's business address — which the students reproduce accurately.

The educational environment surrounding the course perhaps prompts this behavior: the learners date their assignments as they would any academic piece. They do not re-date their revised drafts, though, encoding instead a single static writing time for all versions of a document. (Only one student re-dated a second draft, changing the original draft date from September 7, 2000 to September 12, 2000 in the revision. She did not alter any of the temporal expressions in her piece though, confirming the non-salience of this dating process.) Thus, the submissions maintain a sense of time frozen (both in real-time and in the narrative) during writing and revision, echoing Neamann's depiction (personal communication, April 19, 2001) of the reflection and pacing behind the role-play methodology.

The scenario dates prove non-salient for the students, and the pilot tutors similarly neglect them as irrelevant to the standards of the course. On one hand, the dates may simply fail to attain relevance for the learners. Ong (1982) notes the non-salience of calendars in non-literate societies, that:

> it appears unlikely that most persons in medieval or even Renaissance western Europe would ordinarily have been aware of the number of the current calendar year...Why should they be? Indecision concerning what point to compute from attested to the

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[7] That the distance afforded by online communication enables play with fictionalized identity has been well documented and discussed. In *The Psychology of the Internet* (1999), Wallace notes that spatial-temporal locutions can "betray" an online writer's true identity. She relates the story of a male psychiatrist who masqueraded as a woman online to elicit data: his correspondents discovered the deception by clues embedded in "telling details of time and place" (p. 46).

trivialities of the issue. In a culture with no newspapers or other currently dated material to impinge on consciousness, what would be the point for most people in knowing the current calendar year? The abstract calendar number would relate to nothing in real life. (p. 97-98)

Though these students are clearly literate, Ong's comments may clarify some of the issues attending the learners' experiences of the course. The events in the course unfold within an online bubble, unsupported by other elements of the content, or even the social pressures that make real world calendars so vital. In addition, the course materials do not supply a calendar to reference the dates in the scenario. Another possible interpretation is that calendrical dates perhaps represent a level of projection into the fiction too difficult for the students. Fillmore (1971) describes calendrical time as "absolute time": "an objective, external reference point" (p. 31). Entering a fictional scenario and stepping further into a more objective time frame might constitute too great a cognitive engagement for students already struggling with the linguistic features of their texts. Notably, only the one native-speaking informant uses a fictional date in a submission (emphasis added):

> To: ElizabethPage@Isabellasco.com
> CC: AnnaRusso@Heliant.com
> Re: Answers to Your Questions on Heliant's E-Commerce Capabilities
> Date: **10/12/00**
> _____
> Heliant is pleased to answer your queries of **October 25** on Heliant's e-commerce capabilities…

Even though the writer dates Elizabeth's message accurately, he retains a real-time date in the header of the e-mail, rendering incoherent the time frame of his text: he appears to be answering her questions before she has even asked them. Despite the proximity of these dates on the page, the disjunction between the time frames passes beneath his notice. Thus, even the native speaker, presumably less cognitively encumbered than the ESL students, also fails to step fully into the "then" of the fictional calendar.

Positioning in the "then"

But the students do manage to integrate their discourse cleanly into the time frame of the scenario in other areas of their texts. Such constructions as "my **current** project," when discussing the account with the department store, or "it's me **again**," in the third turn of an e-mail exchange, display a mastery of realistic temporal positioning in the fictional environment. The learners appear to position themselves deictically in a fictional "now" that moves along with the narrative.

In addition, students rarely produce verb tense/aspect errors that suggest a misunderstanding of the time frame of the scenario. Lapses in verb tense accuracy seem more rightly attributed to learner comprehension error than to inability to project into the scenario time frame. For example, one Hong Kong Chinese student, in the first section of Heliant's proposal to

the potential client, reported some future events in simple present, suggesting that the project was already underway (though she reported past events appropriately). After her tutor explained this detail to her, without directly addressing the tense issue, she corrected the tense errors consistently, indicating that she had simply misunderstood the status of the project, rather than that the future time frame was beyond her grasp. Thus, scenario content which can be modeled from the messages of the fictional interlocutors seems much more salient to the learners that the abstract details encoded in the headers of the e-mails they receive.

Apart from a few formal documents (a cover letter and a request for proposal), the correspondence in the scenario communicates with the informal urgency typical of an American office: colleagues report events "just" after they happen; the client expects a "prompt response" to her questions; the boss's first e-mail concludes with the line "Please send me the report a.s.a.p., and copy the team as well. I want us all up to speed on this within three days, at the latest." (see Appendix A for the complete document). Following this message, most students include in their requests similar language, asking for data to be sent "in two days" (three counts out of 10) or "within two days" (two counts), or even "by tomorrow morning/noon" (one count of each). Here, students model their writing from their boss's text, using the deictic time frame she establishes for the communication in the scenario.[8]

Of the remaining students, two simply indicated urgency rather than a deadline, requesting the information "soon" or "a.s.a.p.," reflecting real-world business practice. The remaining student used a non-deictic strategy, requesting the information "by Monday," three days in real-time from the day she wrote the assignment, while the scenario time frame required the final report on a Thursday.

Hall (1983) defines entrainment as "the process that occurs when two or more people become engaged in each other's rhythms" (p. 126). He considers entrainment an unconscious negotiation between interlocutors in real-time. However, the students in the course do not experience real two-way communication, so they are forced to converge to the pace set by the documents they receive, even though they do have the buffer of real-time to consciously effect this convergence. Still, most students seem to entrain easily into Anna's sense of pace, probably in part due to the fact that they work in similar environments in the real world, but also due to the greater communicative salience of temporal deixis relative to the calendrical: the immediacy of the positioning seems to activate convergence into the temporal frame of the fiction. The course design – encouraging review and reflection upon model documents – supports this type of convergence.

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[8] This strategy, though, reflects a real-world problem in deictic positioning in written communication. Fillmore (1971) notes two periods in temporal deixis: "the encoding time, the time at which the message is sent, and the decoding time, the time at which the message is received" (p. 39-40). Though e-mail correspondence is generally considered immediate, especially in the fast-paced world of American business, this disjunction in sending/receiving can produce problems for the interpretation of deictic expressions. As Hill and Larsen (2000) note, "language users are increasingly forced [by electronic technologies] to adjust to an interlocutor's different temporal location...Such adjustments add even further indeterminacy to the deictic use of language" (p. 297). Neither the boss nor the learners make any sort of adjustment with respect to this problem.

Practicing temporal intersubjectivity

As authentic as these learners' deictic deadlines appear, they do not reflect the contextual richness of the deadline the native-speaking informant expresses in his submission:

> Anna asked me for a full report in three days. Ideally, I need this information back from you in two days, to leave enough time to write the report for her.

The writer enriches his deadline with additional contextual information, summoning the authority of the boss, establishing his constraints for finishing the assignment. He thus invokes a temporal field akin to Hanks' (1990) sense of referential practice, "a kind of communicative action which occurs as part of an interactive manifold" (p. 2), "to occupy a position, however fleetingly, in one or more sociocultural fields" (p. 514). By explaining the context of the deadline, in both business-relevant and personal terms, the writer clearly and sensitively frames for his colleagues the necessity of adhering to it. This strategy is particularly appropriate here, since the message marks his first contact with these unfamiliar interlocutors: in such a low-context setting, the content of the message must bear more weight.

In contrast, few of the non-native speaking students express more than a simple deadline for their interlocutors: only four mention their own deadline, of them, only two noting that the boss has prescribed it. Unfamiliar with their audience, the students err on the side of minimalism, failing to elaborate on the details that would make their requests more convincing to these recipients. As Ong (1982) writes of the difficulty of audience construction, "I have to be somehow inside the mind of the other in advance in order to enter with my message, and he or she must be inside my mind... Communication is intersubjective" (p. 177). Duranti (1997) defines intersubjectivity as "mutual understanding and coordination around a common activity" (p. 255). In this task, the students have to try to create this sort of interaction with unknown interlocutors, a difficult function, as Ong suggests.

The native-speaking writer is presumably more sensitive to the cultural expectations of American businesspeople, and more attuned to the low-context style of American discourse, as discussed by Hall (1976). In contrast with high-context cultures such as the Japanese, Americans tend to expect more explanatory content in their social exchanges. The pilot students come from higher-context cultures – Latin American and Asian – where explanatory details tend to be less elaborated. The native-speaking writer attends to the unfamiliar colleagues by clarifying his temporal expression, but the non-natives show limited strategic ability in imaginatively elaborating the audience's needs and writing with attention to them. They follow the boss's lead in expressing her deadline deictically, but fail to extend her technique fully into their production: she explains the need for the deadline (the importance of the Isabella's account, and for all of the team to be "up to speed" with the information), but they do not transfer this referential practice to their own writing.

Still, the learners seem to improve at engaging in such contextually sensitive referential practice as they progress through the course. In a later request, this time an urgent request to a colleague who has brushed off a previous solicitation, they scaffold their deadlines with interlocutor-appropriate content. The colleague, Jed, has been described to the students as

"really outstanding at what he does, but for all his technical brilliance, he often gets side-tracked."
True to form, Jed dismisses the student's initial request: "Sorry, but I have a project deadline for
Fido's Fashions looming, so I don't have time to answer all those questions. You can wait until
next week, can't you?" The potential client, however, demanded "a prompt response" to her
query two days before Jed's refusal.

     This charged context – more nuanced than the first task, and already involving a two-turn
interaction – offers the students a richer environment in which to embed their responses. A
typical student submission, containing the most commonly included details deployed by the
students, includes far more contextual support for the deadline than those in the earlier task:

> I am sorry to hear you are busy on the project with Fido's Fashions. We do need the
> answers for the specific questions Isabella's asked ASAP, though.
>
> Isabella's is getting ready to send out the RFP to build their site…The contract with
> Isabella's could be one of the biggest deals for Heliant to date…Everyone of us will
> definitely benefit [from it]…
>
> I would like to get the answers from you by the end of today…

Not only does the writer establish a very clear deadline, enforced with the urgency marker
"ASAP," she also supports the message with contextual information regarding the importance of
the account, and she includes a nod to Jed's busy schedule. Recognizing his tendency to "get
side-tracked," she acknowledges his current project and opens a wider perspective on the
company's situation. Thus, she attends to his personality and counters his protests, thereby
building a more intersubjective discourse.

     Ong (1982) writes that:

> the fictionalizing of readers is what makes writing difficult…It is not easy to get inside
> the minds of absent persons most of whom you will never know. But it is not impossible
> if you and they are familiar with the literary tradition they work in. (p. 177)

As the learners become more attuned to the "traditions" of communication in the fictional
American office, including the personalities of particular colleagues, they become more strategic
in their use of temporal expressions as well as in the deployment of contextually appropriate
details to support them (see student submission excerpted above). Course materials support the
learners in this endeavor, the strategy materials for writing requests, for example, offering advice
on "determin[ing] your relationship with your audience" and "decid[ing] whether you need to
motivate your recipients to satisfy your request." Thus, students seem to be following the
models set for them and integrating into the time frame of the scenario, not only at the level of
deictic expression, but also in terms of their referential practices involving time and deadlines.

Weaving the temporal threads

As they deepen their involvement in the scenario, the students also begin to expand on the fiction and carry some of the real world into it.[9] In a get-well note to a hospitalized colleague, one student includes the line: "This is a good chance to enjoy some books and movies, like those we were talking about last Tuesday," referring to a past event that never occurred in the online fiction. She also projects an imaginary future event in the same message: "Get well for the barbecue." And finally, in the voice of one of her male colleagues, she includes a reference to a real-world event also outside the online correspondence: "You're in a perfect place to watch Tuesday night basketball." At this point in real-time, the NBA basketball season had yet to begin. One could hypothesize that the writer has noted the scenario dates, and adjusted to them. On the other hand, her choice to ventriloquize this detail for her colleague may reflect her conception of stereotypical male discourse. The choice of a sports-related topic may then suggest more her fictionalization of that character than of her own awareness of the NBA schedule. Regardless of the reason, she weaves a string of events – past, present, and future – into a temporal frame sensitive to the situation of her ailing colleague, invoking a rich real-world context within the fiction.

Another student, in her urgent request to Jed, notes that the E-Solutions team has been working on the Isabella's account "for three weeks." Actually, in the time frame of the scenario, only two weeks have passed since the boss's first e-mail, whereas the pilot program had been running for three weeks – as with the assignment dates, "now" seeps into "then." The learner inaccurately encodes a real-time reference in the scenario, but her response again shows an engagement in referential practice, tapping into a time frame she imagines she shares with her interlocutor.[10] The expression thus reveals an engagement with both the fiction and the learning experience, the two temporal threads the learners navigate online, here woven together neatly.

DISCUSSION

In spite of their failure to date their documents according to the scenario calendar, the learners in *American Business Writing: High-Intermediate* do appear to converge to the time frame of the fictional scenario, even actively elaborating on it with temporal frames constructed from elements of real-time and their own imaginations. I see this interpenetration as a promising blend of reality with fiction, the role-play serving as a bridge between "now" and "then," between old and new knowledge. With language learning, the student must always navigate between an established personality in a native language and a newly emerging one in a second.

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[9] This integration of real and fictional personae is common in role-play activities. Wallace (1999) quotes a player in an online role-playing game: "Lots of people start out playing something totally different from themselves but most of us can't help bringing our own personalities into the character eventually" (p. 46).

[10] Another, more comical example of this phenomenon occurred in the pilot test of a lower level ESL course in the same suite of courses. The learner, in a message announcing a meeting time between his boss and a new client, wrote that "I can't attend the meeting at 4:00 PM, I can only attend at 3:00 PM. I need to go play domino [sic] with my friends at 5:00 PM and I can't mistake [sic] the playing day." Later, the same student asked one of his fictional colleagues out on a date, prompting his tutor to raise the specter of sexual harassment litigation. Still, for all his uncouthness, his responses reflect attempts to play with the fiction in inventive ways, blending personal life with the fictional.

The fiction virtualizes this interaction, offering a safe environment for practicing potentially tense interactions before the expression of those skills in the real world. A Mexican student implies this dynamic in her final evaluation of the course: "it [was] very helpful and I really feel an improvement in my writing, even for Spanish." The language skills learned and practiced in the online fiction seep out into the real world, just as real-time often slips into the scenario submissions, affirming the potential for interactivity in the online medium.

Overall, the course does seem to promote more skillfully intersubjective communication, yet one of the claims against distance learning is that it cannot truly recreate social exchange. The course does, in fact, lack authentic conversation between learners and their interlocutors: since materials are pre-scripted, replies to student documents do not truly reflect back the variations across individual submissions, nor do they encode shifts in the temporal framework effected by the time of receipt of the message. The students, thus, never engage in realistic multiple-turn exchanges with familiar colleagues, where they might establish deeper relationships (and referential practices) that further their language learning in more socially nuanced contexts. This limitation arises from any textual model, though: indeed, textbooks suffer from the same constraint. As in the classroom, the online tutor often will take on the role of the interlocutor to explain the consequences of a pragmatic or linguistic choice.

Despite the lack of multiple turn exchanges, students can observe and reflect upon developing characterization and language use in the online scenario. The boss opens the course with a request carefully framing deadlines for the first two tasks, but as she relaxes into her relationship with the learner, she behaves less formally, delivering her requests without deadlines or simply encoding urgency, much as in unmarked real world business correspondence among equals.[11] Support materials, in the form of subtextual notes students can access, draw attention to the development of Anna's communicative approach (and those of the other characters) through the narrative. This information emerges from a rich context to support the students' understanding of communicative practice in a realistic business office, albeit a virtual one. Learners, a step away from the scenario, can observe and reflect upon this office culture and the language use by which it is effected, and carry that learning back to their real lives: the interpenetration of the two temporal frames suggests they do just that as they apply linguistic skills that signal effective temporal practice.

In this way, the online model does not differ so much from a classroom environment in which a group of students may work through a series of role-plays in learning language behaviors guided by a teacher who addresses linguistic and cultural problems that learners raise as they explore the world of their second language. The medium, in fact, confers an additional benefit on the tutor, who can also capitalize on the temporal lag in his/her feedback to attend to more subtle pragmatic issues such temporal intersubjectivity, rather than focusing exclusively on more commonly taught formulae for courtesy in face-risking situations.

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[11] Though no corpus data exists for this observation (due in part to proprietary rights over office internal communication), a brief survey conducted in a law firm in Los Angeles confirms the anecdotal: of 21 informal e-mail requests to colleagues, 19 established no deadline, one expressed urgency with the phrase "as soon as possible," and only one notes a deadline in terms of a hard date and time (Harr, personal communication, April 24, 2001). The boss's documents reflect a similar distribution: six requests establish no deadline, three express urgency, one (the first email – a marked context) includes a deictic deadline, and none a date.

CONCLUSION

Viewed as a virtual environment rather than a mere delivery system, the Internet can allow for the personal exploration and social engagement central to all learning, not just to classroom interaction. In this environment, learners can safely practice at activities that would have more serious consequences in the real world – the businesspeople in the course discussed above work in high-pressure environments where missteps can affect their careers. In this way, far from a complete reconfiguration of traditional pedagogy, distance learning evokes Traub's (2001) depiction of Williams College as "an enclosed garden, a place set aside from the world for which you were being theoretically prepared" (p. 90). The two "campuses" may not be so different after all.

As technologies develop and new linguistic practices emerge from those developments, pedagogical models will have to attend to the needs of ESL learners. The goal-based scenario is simply one type of learning environment that can enliven the field, hopefully one that can become more realistically interactive. The geographically situated campus will hopefully never disappear, but the Internet can become a second campus itself, an environment accessible to learners the world over.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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www.cognitivearts.com

APPENDIX A
First e-mail the learner receives in *American Business Writing: High-Intermediate*

Inbox

FROM	SUBJECT
Anna Russo	Report summarizing clients similar to Isabella's

From:	Anna Russo@heliant.com
Date:	Monday, October 11, 2000, 1:12 PM
To:	You@heliant.com
Subject:	Report summarizing clients similar to Isabella's

Hi:

Welcome to your first day! I'd like you to gather some information in order to write a report. I just got off the phone with Elizabeth Page, the Tech Strategies Director from Isabella's. She seems VERY interested in upgrading Isabella's current informational website to a full-scale e-commerce store.

I'd like you to collect some information on any of our clients, past or present, who have needs similar to Isabella's. Then, I'd like you to communicate it back to the team. As our CEO likes to say, "Communication and teamwork make our dream work!"

Get started by writing an e-mail to the other four E-Solutions Executives in your division (Samantha, Jack, Thomas, and Terry). You can send one e-mail to all of them at theteam@heliant.com. Ask them to send you any information about clients with needs similar to Isabella's. Tell them to include the following information:

- client's company profile -- revenue, industry, location(s)
- their e-commerce needs
- the solution Heliant designed to meet those needs
- quantifiable results of the e-commerce solution

Then, summarize the information you receive in a report of no more than a page or two. If you notice any similarities among the e-solutions we've delivered, please include them at the end. They might help us develop our solution for Isabella's.

Please send me the report a.s.a.p., and copy the team as well. I want us all up to speed on this within three days, at the latest.

Thanks, Anna

P.S. This should be a nice way for you to meet your fellow ESEs.