

THE ONLINE CAMPUS OF MERCY COLLEGE

By Boria Sax, Ph.D.

For me, to write for a public in Poland is a bit like addressing an author whom one has been reading for many years. During the 1980s, I worked for Amnesty International, coordinating hundreds of local groups that had adopted prisoners of conscience in Eastern Europe. Following events at a distance, I and my colleagues felt awed by the resilience of the independent trade unions and universities in Poland. The Irish author O'Brien once observed that the three nations that best succeeded in transmuting their suffering in beauty were Russia, Ireland, and Poland, a judgment in which I am inclined to concur.

But the era of Solidarity now seems very distant indeed, even though the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe only took place less than a decade and a half ago. Today, intellectual debates are more likely to be focused on technology than on ideology. One thing that remains unchanged is that people – in the United States, Poland, and the world - must still work intensely to develop new kinds of community. This is the focus of our activities at the Online Campus of Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, New York, where our mission statement reads, “To place old traditions and new technologies in the service of a learning community.”

Dr. Frank McCluskey, who founded the Online Campus, chose to hire people not so much from technical fields such as computers as from the humanities and social sciences. Most activities online are conducted by means of the written word, which seems to regain, through the mediation of contemporary technologies, some of its primitive power to wound and to exalt. Without physical presence to soften their impact, sentences become more powerful and more dangerous. Our literary and philosophic traditions, with their understanding of the power of words, can provide important perspective as we navigate the uncertainties of life in cyberspace.

A sense of community is always based on respect for the individual. Teaching effectively requires at least as much personal and social sensitivity online as in a geographic setting. Learning effectively requires a more active engagement online than in a geographic setting, as online students must learn to set goals, monitor their own progress, and seek out assistance when necessary. We try to use the time saved by the use of new technologies to give all participants in the process of online education individual attention. Karen White offers guidance to our students, while Ralph Stavitz instructs faculty members in learning software and pedagogical technique.

Online academic support is provided largely by the “Wizards,” a program of online peer tutor/mentors that I started in 2000. Since 82% of the students at Mercy College are first generation students, the students may be unfamiliar with the culture and expectations of an institution of higher education. This alienation can be compounded by the relative novelty of online learning. Many students do not entirely understand what is expected of them, and many are shy about requesting tutoring or other assistance. To address these problems, we have utilized the special trust and intimacy that students enjoy among their peers.

The wizards are successful students, who are strongly encouraged to share their experiences with the class, showing how obstacles to learning may be overcome. Their duties include monitoring the class for students who are experiencing difficulty, tutoring students, keeping the discussion going, assisting with learning technologies, and modeling the role of a successful student. They are not allowed to engage in any activity related to grading, since that could add an element of tension to their relationships with other students. They receive \$1,000 per course each semester, for which they are expected to work 100 hours.

Surveys show a consistently high level of satisfaction with the Wizards by both faculty and students. In one additional survey of 109 taken in the fall of 2001 students in courses with and without Wizards, for example, 97% said they felt “comfortable” courses with Wizards. In a survey of faculty who worked with wizards conducted at the end of the spring 2003 term, all of the professors who responded without exception said that they would like to have a wizard in future courses . When asked to rate the helpfulness of the wizard in their course on a scale of one to four, slightly more than two thirds gave the wizard the highest rating of “very helpful.” One professor wrote, “One student referred to our wizard as the class ‘guardian angel.’ We know that angels can go where professors cannot! A wizard can be a

sounding board, a clarifier, and a support for both student and instructor.” In 2003, the wizards program won the Sloan-C award for “Online Learning Effectiveness.”

Like a town that grows up around a factory, the community of an online campus may transcend its original purpose. Perhaps the ultimate success for all of us is when, for many of our students, this community can become a part of their identity, as surely as the neighborhood where they live.

Dr. Boria Sax

Coordinator of Online Academic Assistance. Boria is a well-known author and scholar. Boria runs our online writing center and is our online "community organizer." Boria Sax has a doctorate in Intellectual History and German from SUNY Buffalo. He currently works as Director of Online Academic Services at Mercy College.