Summary Minutes, Rhetoric and Communication Study Group

Meeting with Professors Tom Martin and Neel Smith, Classics

Monday 18 November 2002

Present: Susan Berman, Pat Bizzell, Loren Cass, Laurie King, Brian Linnane, Ed O’Donnell; Absent: Dan Bitran, Mark Hallahan, Mary Morton, Catherine Roberts, Phil Rule.

FYI: Phil has an audiotape recording of this meeting if any of the absent would like to hear it.

What follows is a summary of the main points, made mostly by Neel with reinforcement by Tom [thanks Laurie and Neel, for corrections incorporated in this final draft].

Digital information has four main properties that are revolutionizing how scholarship is done in the humanities, disciplines that rely upon the transmission and interpretation of culture.

1. Any kind of information can be encoded with binary digits [bits].
2. Electronically encoded information can be transmitted without loss of information [no more copier’s or printer’s errors, etc.].
3. Digital information from different sources can be easily combined in a single text [e.g. an entire article cited could be made available via link, rather than simply relying on quote plus bibliographic entry as in print scholarship].
4. Content and presentation are easily and clearly separable, rendering content easily accessible for use by others [e.g. if Tom Martin has found and recorded every instance of a particular concept in Herodotus, another scholar can use that text in his/her own work without having to re-find and re-copy the material; etc.].

Issues:

Accessibility and openness, liberal arts values, are greatly increased in the “digital library.” Users need to be aware, however, that they are addressing much larger and more diverse audiences than in traditional rhetoric and that they need to consider new “ethical” issues, e.g. the rudeness of sending a file in a format that most cannot open.

Peer review can be more exacting in that entire source texts might be expected to be provided; source code of programs used to organize data might be scrutinized; etc.

Data storage becomes a special problem in the humanities because this scholarship requires keeping material old enough to be considered obsolete and discard-worthy in other disciplines.
Increasingly, the interchange of information on the Internet will depend on mark-up language to describe semantic content. Students and faculty all need to know how to do this but so far, this type of instruction has been neglected in the Holy Cross curriculum outside of computer science courses.

Implications for curriculum:

We discussed these only briefly but touched on the following:

1. Electronic communication skills are best taught across the curriculum, in disciplinary courses, and not in only one “ghetto-ized” area.
2. Faculty development is crucial to enabling these skills to be taught in more courses. Faculty should not off-load all technical concerns onto the IT staff.
3. College should be encouraging the development of such courses rather than prohibiting them outside of computer science.
4. Faculty should be included more in institutional decision making about IT policies, practices.
5. It’s time now to begin offering workshops on these matters for faculty.