An Interview with Cynthia L. Selfe

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Shared knowledge can get in the way of interviewing someone you’ve known for fourteen years. Some small problems are easily remedied. I can add the last names of people we know in common. Some others are embarrassing. The lavish praise Cindy piles on her colleagues and graduate students makes me uncomfortable—the Irish matriarchs in my family never bragged about their own kind. Still other problems are frustrating. If readers believe what Cindy says—that her successful work in the profession was due to a series of lucky breaks—they will miss out on something significant about Cindy. So let me try to provide enough context to allow the readers to add a few grains of salt to her self-effacing comments.

When Cindy began her career at Michigan Technological University in 1981, she moved into an office two doors down from mine. As a part-time teaching summer courses, I left the stifling hot building soon after my office hours. No matter what time I came or went, I recall always glimpsing the back of Cindy’s head. I was intrigued at how her long hair at that time stayed securely piled up on the top of her head with a simple bone chopstick holding it in place. Perhaps the willpower that kept her focused on her work while other faculty enjoyed the brief northern summer was also threaded into her hair. A short, stocky woman, she sat hour after hour typing into her computer. In July, she wore thick sweatsuits with waffle-textured long johns peaking out around the edges. What seemed like oppressive heat to those of us acclimated to northern winters was chilling to Cindy who had done her graduate work at the University of Texas, Austin. Red cans of Coca-Cola were piled on her windowsill. She sustained herself on Coke and Milky Ways—these two nonperishables required no distracting preparation time. She had a warm Texan greeting for all who passed by, but she never hung out for idle gossip. Her generous collegiality extended to all, even those who did not exhibit her work ethic and those who disdained or suspected her enthusiasm. Humanities scholars were expected to exhibit a bit more cynicism.

Cindy and her spouse, Dickie, had arrived in Houghton driving a rusty 1974 Toyota. It was the most noticed car in the parking lot, not only because it was often the first to arrive and the last to leave, but also because it changed color in patches from year to year. Dickie had arranged with the local body shop to use up whatever paint they had leftover in his numerous last ditch efforts to hold the rusting body together one more
season. No matter what the weather was, the windows of that car were always rolled down, and the inside was littered with chewing gum wrappers and loose change. Sometimes, especially near payday, twenty dollar bills were carelessly scattered on the seats. If students helped themselves to extra pocket money, Cindy and Dickie didn’t seem to notice. Or else, they just didn’t mind.

In just ten years, Cindy's unstinting work habits moved her from assistant professor through the ranks to full professor and through a series of increasing administrative responsibilities to department chair. She is now the youngest department chair at a competitive research university and the only female now holding that position. Since 1981 when she received her degree in curriculum and instruction, she has created a new field—computers and composition, and she continues to give it new direction. In addition to serving the university in administrative roles ranging from Director of GTA Education to Director of the Center for Computer-Assisted Language Instruction, she has served the profession as an active member of the MLA Committee on Computers and Emerging Technology and theCCCC Executive Committee. She has also chaired the NCTE College Section Steering Committee and the NCTE Committee on Instructional Technology. With eight books and thirty-eight book chapters and articles to her credit, she also edits, with Gail Hawisher, the CCCC Bibliography of Composition and Rhetoric and Computers and Composition: An International Journal for Teachers of English.

Some might want to attribute Cindy's productivity and success to workaholic habits. Although it is true that some aspects of her work seem to make Cindy high, it is clear from the kites, toys, and snapshots of friends in her office and the way her desk is positioned to catch opportunities to wave at all who pass by that for Cindy work is play, an opportunity both for collegiality and for social change. A bowl of fresh fruit has replaced the Milky Ways and a Boss electronic scheduler insistently reminds her of her many meetings, deadlines, and appointments, but the door is always open, and graduate students, colleagues, and secretaries have equal access to her time and energy.

Unpretentiousness, generosity, openness, and collegiality are not universally trusted, and it's significant to note that this interview took place on an emotionally intense day right after a difficult faculty meeting precipitated by questions about administrative decision-making. Had I been in Cindy's position, I would have requested that we reschedule the interview on a less demanding day, but Cindy arrived at my office for the interview feeling fresh and positive about the outcome of the meeting.

It is not unusual that the interview began with Cindy telling me how to manage the equipment nor that it ended with her comment that I would have difficulty making sense of what she said. Throughout her career,
Cindy has taught others how to make technology work for humans, insisting that hardware and software must be made to serve the aims of liberatory pedagogy. This goal is so much larger than herself that she has difficulty seeing how much she has contributed to making it happen.

CLS You have to say what the date is and stuff.
NMG Yes, I already did that—I wanted to check to see if the equipment was working.
CLS The last interview I had—the only other one I’ve had—was for Writing on the Edge; Carolyn Handa did it. It was great. She had a tape recorder and a back up. We did it in a hotel room; it took two entire hours. I was sure that I was totally incisive and articulate—it was hard to believe. [Laughter]. And she called me up a week afterwards and said, “You won’t believe this—neither tape recorder was working.” We literally had to do the tape over. [Laughter]. It was the most astounding thing.
NMG How embarrassing for her.
CLS Yes—fortunately, she’s a good friend of mine. We laughed about it because it was all so absurd, and it made the second try less stuffy.
NMG So you had to do the second one on the phone?
CLS Yes, yes. We did. [Laughter]. I was not equally as incisive—in fact, I was barely coherent. It was an experience. You never know what you sound like until you see yourself in writing—it’s an interesting phenomenon.
NMG Well, Cindy, your accomplishments are many, and you’re probably one of the youngest department heads, maybe the youngest, that this university has ever had, and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what brings you to this spot. What sort of work habits or attitudes did you bring to this position that would help people understand how straight and quickly you have risen to positions of great responsibility?
CLS You remember in HU601, our pro-seminar for Ph.D. students—Marilyn Cooper was teaching it—and she had people come in and talk about their careers and their work, and I came in with Vicki Bergvall and some other folks, and Marilyn was asking the questions—how did you get from graduate school to here and formulate a research agenda and then end up where you are now—that’s what she asked of all of us. All I could say was that it seems to me to have been a series of surprises to me—almost as if things happen by chance at a particular time—that led me along the way and brought me to this place.

Now Marilyn said, “That’s a terrible answer, and besides that, it’s not true.”

But from where I sit, I tell you the honest truth, the things that have happened to me do seem surprising. It was a surprise to me, for instance,
that I got my first job as a junior high school teacher in an all Black school district outside of Houston, Texas, that was so poor even Houston would not annex it when they were annexing everything for miles around. This district did not have air-conditioning—the classrooms were unbearable for everyone, often over a hundred degrees.

NMG No air-conditioning in Houston Texas?

CLS It was the pits. And it seemed at the time that the job there was a big mistake. I couldn’t get a position anywhere else because I had gone to Scotland to teach in a secondary school after graduating from the University of Wisconsin. That was also unexpected—the Peace Corps turned me down, right out of college. So instead I saw this ad about teaching abroad—by chance—one a bulletin board, and I went to teach in a coal-mining district outside of Glasgow. By mistake, I stayed there too long—I was having too much fun, and I didn’t realize that you were supposed to apply for jobs during the summer so that you actually had a job when fall arrived. The only job left when I got back to the states was this job outside of Houston, Texas. I stayed there three years and learned more about teaching and the concerns of teachers in that district than I could have anywhere else. In that district, you lived by your wits—there was no money for instruction, no field trips, no instructional materials, no professional development, nothing. I left because I realized I knew so little about teaching—my only thought was to go somewhere to learn more. It was coincidence—chance again—that the only place I could think of to go back to school was the closest university, in Austin—The University of Texas. It was also chance that Texas, at that particular time, was entering a terrific period for English education, rhetoric, and composition studies—Jim Kinneavy and Ed Farrell and Julie Jensen and Lester Faigley and Steve Witte and Maxine Hairston and Gayatri Spivak and John Ruszkiewicz and Jim Sledd all happened to be there. And just by chance, even though my application was not real hot (in fact, it was the pits), another graduate student dropped out a week before, and Geneva Pilgrim had only one pending application—which was mine—and so I got into the English Education program at Texas.

I had no plans, I mean none, except to learn how to be a better teacher. But I did come into contact with these wonderful people and learned what they were doing and tried to apply it to the kind of work I was supposed to be doing. So much happened by chance and lucky mistakes.

I mean Michigan Tech was mostly chance, too; it was the only job offer I got—I was not exactly a scintillating job candidate, as you can imagine. And, I was so dumb that I didn’t even realize how lucky I was. At one point, I thought Art Young was the Dick Young at Carnegie Mellon. [Laughter.] It was a whole series of mistakes and luck.
NMG Well that’s a typical self-effacing Cindy answer.
CLS Marilyn says it’s not chance—and I know she is right in many ways—but it sure seems like it from my perspective.
NMG Well—people are going to be reading this.
CLS [Laughter.]
NMG And they haven’t had the opportunity to observe you, like I have, for fourteen years, and I know there is an incredible amount of work to it.

CLS There is—but it’s not the work. It’s true, I work, and I work long hours and I work hard hours, and I love my work. But the work is one of the things I always have enjoyed. When I got the teaching assistantship at Texas or the job here, I thought, "Wow, someone is paying me to do really swell stuff—stuff I really want to do."

NMG What has drawn you into this kind of work? Can you identify anything in your formative or your undergraduate years that led you into work that you love so much?

CLS Well—in my formative years I guess always loved to read. Always, always, always. The first—and I suppose the only—prize I ever got in school was a book about Pocohantas when I did a book report. My grandmother always took me to the library, and we checked out books. My mother read, and my dad read. And I suppose I should tell you that at one time I wanted to be a nun because I saw pictures of nuns walking around with books in their hands in gardens and I thought those books were novels. And I liked novels so much, I thought, "Whoa, hey this is a swell profession." Until I found out they were missals or prayer books. That didn’t sound so swell. I was not a Catholic either, but nuns seemed to have such a swell time reading.

I didn’t plan to be an English teacher—that was another piece of chance. When I started college, I went to Stephens College to major in equestrian sciences, and I still have more hours in horse and stable management than any English teacher in the United States. But I kept falling off. I mean constantly. I’m not built for it—I’m too short and fat, so I have a terrible center of gravity. So I would train horses and teach them how to jump, and I’d be dumped. I was in the hospital all the time it seems. So a teacher said, "You’re going to kill yourself. This is probably not what you should end up doing for a living." I hurt my back, and I was in traction, and so I thought, "I’ll change my major"—at that point, I was planning to stay at Stephens College.

But—here’s chance again—I happened to be walking on campus barefoot, right—it was the sixties after all. And the Dean of Students caught me walking barefooted—Stephens was known as a finishing school—and I got in major trouble. That night I was telling my roommate, Connie Gilmore, about it and I said, "Look, this is not going to work. We’ll
never get finished, and we'd better get out of here." So I said, "This is how we should do it. You get out your psychology book (she was a psychology major), and I'll get out my English lit book (I still liked to read novels). And you look in the back and see where the people who published stuff in psychology went to school, and I'll look in this book to see where people who published in English literature went to school, and then we'll go to those schools." So we applied at a couple schools...

NMG That was a smart move.

CLS It was a very smart way of doing it, but we didn't know that at the time. We both applied at a couple schools. I applied at Stanford and at Wisconsin. Got turned down at Stanford. Got accepted at Wisconsin, and so I went there to major in teaching English. That's the only thing I could figure out to do—to teach. So I don't know—it seems like one chance leads to another, by luck mostly. As Marilyn says, it doesn't sound right—I know there is hard work involved and that chance is not all there is and that social circumstances dictate the outcome—literate, educated parents, good schools, excellent teachers—but it never seemed that certain. I do love to read, I love language, and I love books and all of those things yes, but I've been incredibly lucky, incredibly lucky.

NMG Well, your comments about horse and stable management have made me want to ask this question next. A lot of your time in higher education has been spent in positions of administration. [Laughter.] What has drawn you to administrative work and what sort of philosophy has guided your administrative experience?

CLS That I know. Because I've been reading this science fiction book that has made me think about it—I really like making things and making things work. Now Marilyn goes for this because she likes that kind of work too. She likes making systems that work for people—constructing environments that allow people do good work. That's one of the things I learned from working with Art Young when he was Head at Michigan Tech—he was able to create an environment in which all kinds of people felt good about their work. Every time I'd see Art, I'd feel so good about what I was writing or studying or teaching. A lot of people have done good work here at Tech because of Art. So I like administrative work because I like to organize environments and systems.

I also like administrative work because it gives me a chance to try out, in practice, some of the theory that I read. As Chair, I get to ask, "Can I construct these systems in ways that help accomplish the social and political agenda that I read about in composition studies?" And I get to think about what kinds of systems or environments will support a reformist social agenda and a liberatory approach to pedagogy. "How can we make things better?" It's one version of, "How can I go back to that school district outside of Houston, Texas, and make that better for the
students and the teachers who are there?" So whereas some faculty members might think of administration as taking away from their scholarly work, I consider it an application of—and multiplication of—that scholarly work because I can help make systems that support people like you and Marilyn Cooper and Carol Berkenkotter and Randy Freisinger and Beth Flynn and Diana George. That's a wonderful feeling. Wonderful. And all those students that you teach and support in turn, multiply the power of that system, too. So I get the feeling that the effect is greater, in that sense.

NMG Of all the administrative positions that you've been in, which would you say has taught you the most?

CLS Oh, it's no doubt—Chair. Oh, there's no doubt. This has been so tough. I mean it's been so tough and so good at the same time; it's a um—it's like golf. I've never been hot at golf. I do a little of this and a little of this trying to get the game in shape to play it without being totally embarrassed, and being Chair is like doing that for me. It's been very challenging. All the time.

NMG What are some of the things that make it challenging?

CLS Those systems I was talking about are very complicated systems, and no one system works for everyone. And like Joe Comprone used to tell me it's not enough just to want to do good—when, as Assistant Head, I would say to him, "I'm trying to do the right thing here, Joe." I interpreted his remark to mean that it's not enough to want to do good, it's important to find systems that actually work—and work in the best possible way for the greatest number of people. At Michigan Tech, we have such a range of people in the Department of Humanities that it's hard to find systems that can sustain and support all of those scholars and teachers in the ways they need. This situation has taught me to become a little more postmodern in my approach to administration. I've tried to put redundant systems into place so that if one system doesn't work for somebody, another system will. I suppose the goal is to layer enough systems, one on top of another, to allow the maximum number of people to get satisfaction and support and recognition in multiple ways.

I have also tried to keep intact the best part of this department—the one that Art Young helped establish—the sense of community we have. It's a challenge to get people to understand that there is a common weal and a great deal of satisfaction in supporting a diverse community of scholars. So Michigan Tech is a pretty special place, and we're pretty lucky to be here. And if Art Young got people to come here, it's my responsibility to encourage people to stay here, and to help them recognize what a great collection of talented people we have collected, and to support everyone so that we can continue that community.

NMG You've been in the same spot—Houghton, Michigan—since you began as an assistant professor, and now you're chair of the depart-
ment, and Michigan Tech is not a place where people expect to stay. Is there something that has kept you here and what is that?

CLS It's been the colleagues—especially those in composition studies, you, and Marilyn Cooper, and Diana George, and Beth Flynn, Carol Berkenkotter, Randy Freisinger, Craig Waddell, and Dennis Lynch—but, it's everyone, in fact. It's such a wonderful place to work. For me, it's such an intellectually rich environment.

NMG Can you give some examples of that richness and how it contributes to your work?

CLS Yes. I've always found examples here. The field of computers and composition is a fairly nascent field. And to many people it looks relatively dull because it focuses on technology, and most composition scholars, including me, feel that technology doesn't hold much interest in and of itself. But studying computers and composition here in the Department of Humanities is not boring or limited—mainly because this group brings so many different perspectives to bear on language and discourse problems; and I get to work daily with folks teaching linguistics and discourse analysis, languages, philosophy, polar studies, the narratives of Latin American women prisoners, risk communication, cultural studies, feminist studies, literature, communication, critical theory, or rhetoric. I mean all those perspectives make a much richer representation of problems associated with technology.

So while I came here with a pretty dull focus on technology, working with Bruce Petersen helped me see the benefits of coming at technology problems from the perspective of empirical observation and textual analysis; and working with Billie Wahlstrom helped me learn about communication theory. I mean, I didn't know communication was a field. When Marilyn came, she helped me understand how critical theory and social theories could help illuminate technology problems. So, after working with each of these people, I'd read and find out some interesting stuff and bring that to the study of technology. And Jennifer Slack and Diana George have taught me tremendous amounts about cultural studies. And Beth Flynn about feminist studies. And from you and the MTU Writing Center staff, I've learned amazing amounts about the concepts of centrality/marginality, resistance/power as you have talked about them being played out in university settings. When I read your work, I think, "Oh, this is astounding, the same problem happens here, too. Maybe I can talk about it in connection with technology use. Maybe I can talk about the same concept over here." So the different perspectives that my good colleagues bring to their problems is what makes my work richer. That's what is so generative about this community. Like the stuff that Diane Shoos does in visual representation—you know, I never thought about how gender was represented visually in various systems. That's what
started me thinking about the paper that I was doing on computer interfaces and their reproductive functions.

And then there are the graduate students—Stuart Selber or Karla Kitalong or Allan Heaps or Kate Latterell—they’ll be reading a book in Diana George’s course about decoding advertising, and so in order to keep up with them I have to read the blasted book and once I read the blasted book, I say, “Oh, well here’s a notion I can try in my own work,” and so I apply it to a technology problem. That’s one of the reasons I like working with graduate students—they are fascinating colleagues. They enrich my work in a very exciting way.

**NMG** You have a real receptivity to new ideas, a real interest in being a bricoleur.

**CLS** Yeah, I suppose it may be receptivity. But, I’ve never thought of it as receptivity. In my best moments, I think, “Well it’s really neat that you’re taking from all these different fields and helping to enrich computers and composition studies.” In my worst moments, I think, “Oh God you’re just skimming this stuff on the surface, and really what you need to do is go back and read Marx. [Laughter.] I mean read the entire *Das Kapital.* If you’re really going to understand Marxist theory when Laclau and Mouffe or Fredric Jameson anybody else talks about it, you have to go back and read all the people that they read and all those other people that those people read.” Half of the time I think I’m sort of dilettante, and the other half of the time I think I’m a bricoleur.

**NMG** That’s always an issue in doing interdisciplinary work—that feeling that you’re skimming off the surface.

**CLS** Yeah, the feeling that you’re broader than you are deep—or not even broad enough.

**NMG** I want this story on the tape, even though it may not seem to fit right now. Would you talk about your chairs? The chairs you built?

**CLS** Yeah, the birch chairs that I built?

**NMG** You talked about how you like to make things and gather things together and try to get them to work for people. To me, your chairs are a metaphor for your work.

**CLS** There’s a series of science fiction books I’ve read that Johndan Johnson-Eilola gave me—I can’t remember the titles of them all. But one of them is *Alvin the Maker.* And it’s about a science fiction world, a fantasy world where there are two forces—one is the forces of Makers and the other is something like the Destroyers. One set of forces is anti-entropic—the Makers—and one set is entropic, the Destroyers. The Makers don’t know they’re Makers—it’s just sort of built into them at birth. So if they’re just sitting there on an afternoon in the grass, they weave little baskets of grass. Or if they’re sitting on a wall, they pile up little rocks where the wall has fallen down. If they’re sitting near someone’s desk and there’s a pile
of papers, they neaten them up. You know? And all these little gestures, these anti-entropic gestures make order and coherence in the world, even at the physical level. And I think I do that intellectually in computers and composition and administratively, as you said, but especially I started doing that a couple of years ago when I felt a great need to start building these chairs [laughter] out of birch wood or willow—it was the most astounding thing to feel the need to build these chairs. I had never built a thing out of wood in my life until then; I barely knew how to hammer a nail. And I dreamed, I actually dreamed designs for these chairs. So I’ll go to bed at night and into my head will come designs for these chairs. One night, a design for a bed came into my mind. Now what business do I have building chairs when I have so much else to do? I think it has something to do with fighting entropy and making things coherent and orderly in a small way.

NMG You’ve spent a lot of time building programs and establishing a field and contributing to building that field. But lately in your work, there’s a lot of critique of that work. There is some of that entropic force entering in. Are you starting to push against some of what you have made in some way?

CLS No, no, at least I hope it’s not entropic. But it’s an interesting characterization that’s sort of plagued me in the last years. Computers and composition has not been a field, you know, for long. In fact, when I was at the University of Texas, another one of those lucky chances was that a fellow graduate student asked me to help him with his dissertation study. You know how you participate in each other’s studies, and you code for one person so that person will code for you so you don’t have to pay somebody? Well somebody asked me to do that—and it was Hugh Burns. Well, Hugh Burns is like the godfather of computers and composition studies. In exchange for helping him code for his dissertation, he taught me how to write my dissertation on the university mainframe computer—in 1980, when most humanists knew very little about computers. That experience was enough to convince people that I “knew” computers.

NMG You wrote your dissertation on a mainframe?

CLS Yeah, on a mainframe—mainly because that way I didn’t have to pay for a typist, which was a big deal because Dickie and I had a combined income of $300 bucks a month. And I didn’t have a typewriter; and I couldn’t type if I did have a typewriter, so that started me into computers and composition. But there wasn’t much of a field there. My early work was like everybody else’s at that time—I was enthusiastic about trying out the new technology and hoped that English teachers could make some positive educational change with it. And I think they did—I think technology has helped some teachers to see their instruction
and some of the social structures that help shape their instruction from new perspectives. And some of these teachers have been able to make some important changes, especially in composition studies and literacy studies.

But then, when I came in contact with Billie Wahlstrom’s work and Marilyn Cooper’s work and some of Jennifer Slack’s work, I started to get more specific about the extent and the nature of these changes. I started to think harder about what ways computers had helped teachers change things and in what ways they hadn’t—in what ways computers were part of educational systems, and social formations, and political tendencies, and how these all affected the ways in which technology was used and not used. And now I think I can do the field of computers and composition more good by pointing out both the forces that serve to limit the positive work we do with computers and those tactics or strategies that help support such work.

NMG Can you identify a point where you felt the pull more toward critique and less toward enthusiasm?

CLS Yep. Well, I don’t think my more critical work has lessened the enthusiasm I have about technology or my belief that technology can support and even magnify the efforts of good, reflective teachers—if that were not true, I wouldn’t be working in computers and composition; I wouldn’t even get up in the morning. I mean it’s like not a field most English teachers want to work in. It’s not considered essential; it’s not high on the belle lettres scholarship scale or even on the rhetoric/composition scholarship scale. But I guess I think that by being critical, and working hard to create the right environments, you can help build better systems involving technology. The first paper that this attitude shows in, I suppose, is the one in the ADE Bulletin, “Computers and the English Department.” Billie Wahlstrom had me read some stuff that made me see that our culture wasn’t necessarily distributing access to technology evenly or in the same ways for different groups of people. It made me think about English departments and the fact that clerical workers were able to access and to use technology in very different ways than were faculty, and that faculty were accessing and using technology very differently than were administrators, and that administrators were accessing and using technology in very differently ways than were students. And I started questioning and being more critical about the things I had been writing and seeing things differently, but still with the goal of helping people set up better environments for teaching and learning.

But people see my work in two ways. One group of people sees me as being very critical about technology—too critical in fact—and the other group of people notes that I may be too optimistic about technology. Sometimes classroom teachers who come to hear me talk about technol-
ogy, for instance, are disappointed when I point out some of the problems that still exist with our uses of computers—and I suppose that these folks need some optimism. But Michael Joyce said, “Even when you’re being most critical, you have this utopian streak in your work. Each time you write, you think this approach [laughter] or this perspective or this strategy or this direction might yet pan out.” He was right, too.

NMG You do have that wonderful seriously utopian streak in you.

CLS I know, I do—must be one of the reasons I’ve stayed in the midwest so long. If I didn’t believe that computers actually can support the kind of instruction that good, reflective teachers want to enact—make life a little bit easier and more exciting for teachers and students, connect people in new ways, open some new educational opportunities—if I didn’t believe those things, why would I work in this field? Why not choose another field that I think could accomplish those goals? Or another profession?

Sometimes, I worry about what happens when we get so critical, so immersed in the impulse of the critique, that we get paralyzed—that we put off any productive action at all because we want to propose a route without flaw—of course, that’s impossible. I knew I had gone to the edge of the critical abyss in my own work when I gave one of my pieces to Marilyn Cooper to read. The first three quarters of my paper said, “Well, here’s one of the important problems associated with technology and here are some of the complications of this problem, and oh my god, here are all the related difficulties associated with this problem, and here are all the bad things that we’re doing now to create this problem, and here’s what we haven’t done yet, and we really better get moving, but we also have to watch out that we don’t accept any approaches that smack of an uncritical acceptance of technology.” This went on for thirty pages. Then the last quarter of my paper said, “So here are the things we can do. [Laughter.] And here’s what I think might pan out. And here are positive uses of technology in different classrooms across the country. Here’s some hope.” Marilyn said, “Well—you did such a good job on the first three quarters of the paper, I don’t believe a word of what you said in last part.” [Laughter].

For me, deconstruction and postmodernism and critical theory, at their most dangerous, all share this point of excess—the point at which critical intent or activity can serve to paralyze teachers. And if you teach, you can’t allow that. The critical intent can help you do better, be sharper in your thinking, but it shouldn’t make you succumb altogether. I think it can help improve matters to acknowledge that a system is rotten or wrong, but that’s no reason to get paralyzed over it. In fact it’s just the opposite—if you can see the problems in the system or the approach, there should be some hope you can make things work differently. I guess I was
Jewish in another life because, for me, if you see a problem or an inequity or a way you can make something better, it’s your obligation to try to do so whenever you can. I also think it’s important to work in a field, a profession, where you can make something better in the general scheme of things. And that’s why I’m a teacher, and an administrator, and why I work in the field of computers and composition.

NMG It’s interesting to hear you speculate that maybe in another life you were Jewish.

CLS [Laughter.] Yes, I wonder what else I was?

NMG Do you have any other ideas of where that desire to make things better, where that hopefulness comes from?

CLS Oh, I think it’s also partly a liberal impulse from the sixties. Many of us became teachers and educators and social workers and politicians because we felt we could make things better. We thought we could do that, and the impetus is still there. I think the critical impetus is part of that. It’s most productive when the critical impetus is turned into a productive impetus. When we move through critical interrogation to a productive end, and then rest a minute, and then start the process again. Yeah, I think it was the sixties.

NMG I want to ask you again about that black school district. You said you left there with a desire, knowing you weren’t reaching the kids.

CLS Desperate. Desperate. I knew I didn’t know enough about teaching—from the very first day. I had done my student teaching at West High School in Madison, Wisconsin—where the professors’ kids went. They were so well read. They were so white. They were so good. [Laughter.] Then I went to teach in that coal mining district in Scotland—and I was absolutely incapable of understanding what those students needed and how I could help them get it. I made such a sad and pathetic attempt at teaching—you’d never [laughter] guess that I had been educated at all. I was underprepared to deal with kids who didn’t own a coat—you know—who had broken blood vessels in their faces because of the cold. Who had to spend hours before school walking their father’s greyhounds because the family depended on the racing money these animals made during the weekend to feed the kids. Who never even considered post-secondary education as an option. It was just the most astounding sort of system to be put into after I had taught in Madison and worked with very privileged kids.

When I came home from Scotland, I went to work in that all Black school district outside of Houston and things were not much different. I was teaching a class called Combined Vocational Academic Education—CVAE—where kids were put if their academic achievement was low. They’d do half their day in academic work, and then they went out and did an apprenticeship. They worked on things like road crews—I mean
this was not like an apprenticeship to be a machinist or a clerical worker or a factory employee, it was an apprenticeship to the worst kind of poverty and hard physical labor. They were in junior high school, in seventh grade, and most of them were 16 or 18 years old, each of one of them held back numerous times, but still trying to hang in there. The system had done such violence to them, but they were still able to make fun of it. They called themselves the CAVE boys, turning those initials around, and making fun in a sort of perverse way of the fact that people considered them unintelligent and essentially uneducatable. And there was so much to make fun of—including me.

On my first day of being a real teacher—where I got paid for it—I went into the classroom, and these kids were dancing on top of the desks chanting, “We are the CAVE boys. We are the CAVE boys.” I was not prepared to understand the extent of the problems these kids were facing—I could only deal with it on a superficial level, “I’ll give out a diagnostic test.” You know? “This is what I am supposed to do. I know how to do this teaching stuff. I’ll figure out what these kids know.” By the time I got them off the desks and passed out these diagnostic tests to those twenty kids, the first kid was finished and holding up his paper. And waving it. I went back to the kid and took the paper and said, “You’re finished? Are you sure you don’t want to check your work?” [Laughter.] And he said, “I’m finished. See I even left a message on the front.” So I took the paper and in these huge block letters was “FUCK YOU.” These kids were not dumb, and they knew exactly what was going on.

But I still didn’t understand—I mean the whole problem. My next ploy was even more desperate, I thought, “I’ll set them a task—working on a passage in the literature book, writing something.” And I said to them, “I’ll get my book, and if you have a problem, come up to the desk, and I’ll help if I can. I’ll give you feedback.” So I’m sitting there at the desk, and they’re quiet, and I think, “Huh—this is working really well—I can do this.” And some of the kids came up, and they formed a semi-circle between me and the rest of the class. I was answering questions and going over papers, but, in the meanwhile, what I didn’t see in the back of the semi-circle—a kid was flipping lit matches into the trash that other kids had filled full of wadded up paper. There’s a trick where you can fold up the match book, and you rip off matches, and shoot them across the bottom of the matchbook so that they burst into flames in mid air. The trash can burst into flames of course. And all of sudden there was lots of smoke, and the students jumped out of the windows and ran out of the building and pulled the fire alarm. And I think, “This is the first day.”

NMG The first day?

CLS But wait—it’s not ended yet. I was game, if not very smart. I eventually got them all together again. By this time I was terrified. So I thought, “Well, what I’ll do is—I’ll work on writing, and I’ll go through
and show some essays on overheads, and we'll talk about writing.” And I had overheads prepared cause I had gone to Wisconsin's teacher-ed program, and I knew what I was doing. [Laughter.] So I started with these overheads, and we're all looking at them. And while I was blathering on, the kid in back of me is stuffing paper into the fan of the overhead projector. He finally stuffed enough paper into it that the fan stopped and the machine got hotter and hotter and hotter. In the middle of a sentence, the whole overhead projector exploded. All over the room. The glass exploded. It was like a cartoon. That was the end of my first day of teaching school. It would break your heart.

The second day, I went into another teacher's class to find out what to do. That's always my strategy—go to somebody else to figure out what to do. So I went to see a teacher who had the quietest class in the whole school. The students, when they were in that class, were always attentive, and they were always working, and they always had their pencils going strong. He always seemed like he had some sort of control over the situation.

So I said to him, “How do you do it?” And he said, “I always give them some sort of task they can accomplish, and they take some pride in the task, and they accomplish it.” And I said, “You know—you're right. I need to get some tasks like this, some tasks they can accomplish and feel good about.” So I said, “What are you having them do right now?” And he said, “I'm having them count the number of Es in the social science textbook. And the person who gets closest to the correct number of Es gets a piece of candy.” He said, “That works all the time.”

NMG It sounds like Paul Willis' work, Learning to Labor. So do you think as a profession we are any closer to addressing these situations?

CLS I know there are teachers and students in schools all over the country who are experiencing the same problems. And I know the problems are aligned along the existing axes of race and gender and socio-economic status. I know they are. So in some ways we have improved and in some ways those tendential cultural forces are still working against real change. Those factors of race, and socio-economic status, and educational opportunity are still tied together. I know they're linked, and I know there are teachers who don't know how to deal with it just like I didn't know how to deal with it. That's one of the reasons I have remained so active in the National Council of Teachers of English. I work a lot with public school teachers as well as community college teachers, and I assume many of them have had days like those two I described to you.

NMG I wanted to ask more about your service to the discipline, which has been incredible; I wanted to know what motivated that.

CLS It's that. It's that experience teaching in public school settings. I worked at that school in Scotland and at the school district outside of Houston for three years—just three years out of my life. There are
teachers who do ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty years. My God. I consider myself a pretty stubborn and pretty optimistic sort of person. If I encountered those difficulties, what must these other teachers be encountering? What kind of a life, what kind of hope do we have for our country, our culture, our society? I think college teaching—well there are a lot of problems with it, but it's so much easier for college teachers. It's so much easier. And teaching secondary school is so much harder now than when I was in there. Holy moly—I mean you've got guns and drugs and murders and cops in schools to deal with; you're worried about mainstreaming and accommodations for disabilities in classes that are growing progressively larger; you have to think about standardized tests and the new national educational standards and standards that your professional organization is debating; you have to worry about taking professional tests and continuing education credits to remain certified as a teacher; you're facing increasing attempts to censor books, declining print literacy, increasing poverty, and increasing litigation in a whole range of areas; and all these things are in addition to teaching in your content area. The main thing I retained is my admiration for public school teachers and my interest in a reformist educational and social agenda.

NMG Let me ask this question. You learned so much from your years of public school teaching, and you talked about loving books and imagining yourself living in a garden with books. What drew you to technology?

CLS Computers are fun. Just plain fun. There's a sense of play associated with these machines—you see it when students learn how to use them. And good teachers can use computers to take a lot of the drudgery out of writing, so for many folks, they become swell language toys. They allow you to do things that you couldn't or wouldn't do otherwise. That's why they often help produce enthusiasm in people who learn how to use them. And that enthusiasm gets transferred to the language activities. There're not too many times in our academic lives where we just have fun with things. [Laughter.] Fun is not bad.

NMG I'm not sure about the order of my questions now, but I know you've done a lot of collaborative work, and you've mentioned a number of people who have been significant influences on your thinking. How does that fit in to your overall image of yourself as a professional?

CLS I think it has to do with what I was talking about before. I think problems are always more interesting—especially language problems or problems involving discourse—when you bring more than one perspective to bear on them. You make a richer, more robust representation of the problem, and collaboration helps me do that. I have not enjoyed everybody I've collaborated with, but I've been really fortunate to have had really excellent collaborators—Gail Hawisher, Billie Wahlstrom, Marilyn
Cooper. You just couldn’t get much better than that. And their work enriches anything that I’ve thought about. It’s really a privilege and a joy to work with those people.

NMG When you talked about computers being fun—you and Gail did so much to establish the field. Was it just the attraction of doing something fun or more?

CLS I don’t know about Gail. I know she thinks computers are fun, too, but I don’t think she’d characterize it as only that; neither would I.

NMG I guess I’m asking if it’s fun that motivated an incredible amount of dedication to a field?

CLS For me fun is a part of it, but the other part is the urge to reform, to make change. But you’ve got to have fun while you’re doing it, though. Otherwise you couldn’t commit that much effort and time.

NMG Now did your interest in computers start from having done your dissertation on the mainframe?

CLS That made me a massive expert. [Laughter.]

NMG More than I’d ever want to be.

CLS Well very few English composition teachers at that time knew much of anything about computers—so knowing how to format and print a dissertation on a mainframe computer was just about as expert as one got in those days.

NMG Did you come to Michigan Tech with the intention of developing that expertise?

CLS No. In fact, I worked in writing across the curriculum for many years and still continue to.

NMG I wanted to ask you more about that.

CLS That’s sort of what Art had in mind—I suppose. In fact the only time Art ever advised me not to do something that I wanted to do, and he was probably right. One day I told him I wanted to start a newsletter called Computers and Composition. He said, “Ah, geez, I’m not sure. You know you’ve got to get tenure. [Laughter.] Don’t you think that should wait until you get tenure?” And I said, “No, I think really want to do this.” “OK,” he said, “Here’s five hundred dollars.”

NMG So he was moderately supportive?

CLS Oh, God, that was majorly supportive. Five hundred bucks—that was major bucks. So he was really supportive.

Now that was a project where everything came together. Writing about computers was fun and there were important questions to ask, and it occurred to both Kate Kiefer and to me that computer technology might provide some ways of addressing the educational problems we saw, so it was a congruence of circumstances.

NMG Did the university’s technological context influence you?

CLS Oh yes, of course. I mean most universities didn’t have computers. The fact that there was somebody in the Humanities department like Jack Jobst working on technology—wow, that was something.
NMG What kind of reactions did you run into?

CLS Very positive. At Michigan Tech, honestly, people have been so supportive. Bill Powers, as Dean, I think, helped Art underwrite the first efforts of Computers and Composition. So, I’ve been at the right place at the right time. The university has a technological mission. I have an interest in technology. The fact that I’m a woman in technology, a woman at a technological institution, mostly works, too. MTU recognizes the need to have women in leadership positions, so I couldn’t have been in a righter place at a righter time. I’ve gotten support all along.

NMG It makes me wonder about the people who feel they don’t get support at this university.

CLS Well, that’s one of the big challenges I have as Chair—is figuring how this happens. I know it exists. The level of support for part-timers is a good case. The dangerous comment is always, “Well, you can’t do anything for people in these positions.” And in some cases that’s right; we have not succeeded in accomplishing some things. But in other cases we can do something and can do it right so that people can feel good about themselves and continue doing the outstanding work they’re doing. From my perspective, I just have to keep trying to change things in terms of policy, and change things by working with one person’s situation at a time.

NMG Let’s go back to the writing across the curriculum thread—you’ve been very instrumental nationally and internationally giving workshops on WAC. What do you see as important issues in WAC right now and how do you feel about the success of WAC at this university?

CLS I’ve done lots of work in writing across the curriculum, mainly because Art and Toby Fulwiler and Jim Kalmbach and Randy Freisinger and Bruce Petersen and Beth Flynn taught me a great deal about the uses of language and its role in learning. For me, written language has a primary role in supporting learning; language allows us to constitute the world and invest it with meaning. And that’s my purpose in the WAC workshops—to help other teachers figure out how best to use language in their classes and understand more about how language works.

But, increasingly, people have asked me to talk about writing in a technological context, so I do a lot now with writing across the curriculum and computers—how to support writing across the curriculum efforts with technology. That’s a growing area of interest nationally.

But, even though there has been lots of progress, lots of work accomplished in writing across the curriculum, there are still plenty of teachers in plenty of disciplines who don’t feel it is their responsibility to deal with writing in their classes at all—with or without computers. And there are other factors, too, that still seem to work against writing-across-the-curriculum efforts. Composition studies is getting more specialized,
for instance, and this trend may continue to work against writing-across-the-curriculum efforts. Because WAC is still seen primarily as service and programmatic work rather than a scholarly specialty. This is not true, of course, because there are as many good scholars doing work in writing across the curriculum as in any other field in composition studies. But, this perception, along with a whole host of things, is working against programmatic efforts—the growth in graduate programs, increasing specialization of scholarly areas, the trend toward valuing theoretical work, the increasing focus on publication, tighter budgets—you name it.

NMG How do you feel about composition becoming more disciplined, more institutionalized, less tied to the general education mission and more structured into the academic ways of doing things?

CLS Well, I know there's a developmental rhythm to professions and disciplines, so that they begin and mature and sub-divide pretty regularly—like when Speech split off from English studies. There may be something of this sort taking place in composition studies as the field matures and scholars in it pursue more specialized areas. But while we generally think of maturation as good or normal, there're some limitations perhaps with that concept, too. In composition studies, I think increasing specialization means that we may not always be attending—as much as we like to be—to some of the general education issues. At research universities, we see this leading to a situation in which senior professors—some of the most experienced teachers and active folks in the profession—seldom, if ever, teach first-year or second-year writing courses and think that graduate classes are the only kind of teaching that they should be assigned to because these classes allow them to work in more focused ways on their scholarly specialization. And we continue, partially as a result of this situation, to depend on, and to exploit, part-timers that are not on the tenure track and that are not treated well in the profession—to these people, we assign four courses of first-year English at a reduced level of pay. We’re going to have to address this situation or we’ll—well it’s not right, we can’t live with it.

What I don’t want to end up with in composition studies are two classes of people—those who teach and those who do scholarly work. At Michigan Tech, it takes really top notch educators—people like Diana George or Marilyn Cooper, for just two of many instances—to remind us that some of the best scholars are also the best teachers and that these people seek the challenge of teaching first- and second-year students in order to invigorate their understanding of theory or scholarly work. So while there are tendencies in the profession that serve to separate teaching and scholarly work, I hope we don’t give in to the impulse because it would be a real mistake—bad for the profession. I would not like to see that happen.
In this regard, I think college teachers can learn quite a bit from elementary and secondary teachers. I’m chairing a task force right now with Richard Lloyd-Jones on NCTE/CCCC relations, and some people have expressed the opinion that the CCCC has a very different agenda from NCTE and may want to pursue its own course as a separate organization. I think there are some benefits and dangers associated with that particular map of the profession of English studies. We really do have some differences—to deny that would be silly. Teaching college is not the same as teaching in secondary or elementary school, so a separation in organizations may give us some space in which to address problems in a more focused way. But we also have a lot to learn from secondary and elementary teachers—especially about linking scholarly work and reflective practice in meaningful ways—and I would hate to see the things we have in common be lost through such a split. These are plenty of big problems we need to tackle together.

NMG What troubles you the most right now, what do you see as the most vexing questions in the profession?

CLS The two-class system we see developing at some institutions, that’s a vexing professional situation, and it troubles me quite a bit as an administrator and a member of the profession, but it’s not a question. As a scholar and teacher, the most vexing questions are the same old ones I’ve always wrestled with in my work on computers. Can we use computer technology to address some of those problems that plague our educational system—the inequitable treatment of students because of race, age, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status—even if only in momentary, fragmentary, or partial ways? Can teachers use computer technology to help make positive change? Can we use computers to help us initiate and sustain reform in our classrooms? Can we use technology to teach better and learn better? Those are still the problems I’m messing with. I guess you could say they are particularly vexing.

NMG I wondered what your next project will be?

CLS H’mmm. Well, I took this class, from Dieter Adolphs, in critical theory because I didn’t know anything about critical theory. And also because he was going to talk about modernity, and I didn’t know anything about modernity either. And I’ve always wondered about postmodernity, and I figured out if I could learn about modernity, I could figure out postmodernity. And in taking that class, I really got into Habermas. And I was looking at Habermas and thinking about e-mail, and I wanted to explore the relationship between e-mail and Habermas’ ideal speech situation and, you know, is it really like that? So I thought I’d write a paper about theorizing e-mail. But when I started writing toward Habermas, I got sidetracked with Jameson and ended up writing a paper about e-mail and the politics of reproduction. I never did get to Habermas. [Laughter.] So I’ve got to go back and get Habermas.
NMG Could you highlight some of what you came up with in that paper?

CLS Yeah—It's going to be in a book that Pat Sullivan and Jennie Dautermann are editing. What I tried to look at were the claims that the Clinton administration, mostly Al Gore, had been making for the national information infrastructure and the information superhighway as forums involving written literacy—some very optimistic and astounding claims. I mean, I'm optimistic, but [laughter] holy moly. These guys are saying that this technology is going to democratize the world, that it's going to involve our citizens more actively in political issues, that it will save our economy and that it will improve the education of the country's children. And I kept thinking, "Wow! When is this going to happen?" So I took those claims and I looked at e-mail, and I tried to show how technological systems like computer networks are aligned with dominant social forces and cultural formations that generally tend to reproduce themselves—not only in the technological systems themselves but in most educational systems where literacy is practiced, not entirely or inexorably, but generally and tendentially. Then I tried to show how the space for resistance existed alongside within the system, of course [laughter], using Jameson and Faigley and Victor Villanueva—that kind of work. But I never got to Habermas, and I wanted to.

NMG You wanted to get to Habermas.

CLS I really do. All of the classes I've taken at Michigan Tech make me want to write papers. I took a Discourse Analysis class from Vicky Bergvall—and I started on an analysis of asynchronous conferencing lists online—oh, that was fun.

NMG You're still very much the student.

CLS Yes, but it's harder as Chair. I asked one faculty member if I could take a class from him, and he said, "No." [Laughter.] Who can blame the guy?

NMG He said, "No?"

CLS It's a little more difficult to get people to agree. [Laughter.] I actually would like to take Diana George's cultural studies and composition. That will be my next one.

NMG But you have to ask permission.

CLS Oh yes.

NMG Well—just two more questions. If you could do anything next—no restraints, what would you do?

CLS I would do exactly what I'm doing. I must have a limited imagination [laughter], I guess, in not being able to see anything better than what I'm currently doing. But I very much enjoy the teaching and the related scholarly work that I do and the administrative work. I do wish I could learn faster about the administrative stuff, to make it a little easier on the people I work with. Because the problems I see I'm not always able
to address adequately, so I wish that were a little bit easier. And I would travel a little bit less cause that’s been hard this year. I mean—I go out and speak to teachers at lots of schools about computers and about the Michigan Tech programs. And while that’s fun and healthy for me to see what’s going on in other places, you get worn out. You’ve got to work twice as hard before you go and twice as hard when you get back. But you get to learn lots, too. I just gave a keynote at a portfolio conference that included a lot of public school teachers, and I learned so much from those folks—that kind of involvement makes me better, a better administrator, better teacher, better scholar. So I keep going. But I’m going to cut down on that a little bit this year.

NMG The final question: if you could give advice to people just beginning in the field, new scholars, from the perspective of your experience, are there certain things you’d want them to know?

CLS Well, I don’t know. I don’t think I could give advice.

NMG Anything that worked for you or didn’t work for you?

CLS So much has been chance and luck. [Laughter.] I keep telling you. I guess what I’d like graduate students or young colleagues to know is they should choose something to study and work on that will make a positive difference in people’s lives. They should choose problems that will make the world a better place. That reform instinct that I got in the sixties I think is still a good instinct.

NMG Do you still see this instinct in students who come out of the seventies and eighties?

CLS Well, in the students I work with I do because nobody else will talk to me. [Laughter.] I mean, those are the students who gravitate toward my kind of teaching, and if I ask enough questions enough times, like “What difference will this make? What are you trying to get people to do? How is this better for teachers? How does this help students? What does this contribute to the profession?” If I ask these long enough and frequently enough, people will either get the idea and say, “Yeah—I want to make a positive difference.” Or they gravitate toward other people who are doing other interesting things and have a different teaching approach. So that’s generally who I end up working with. Students I work with here are so unusual, I mean they are so wonderful—I mean you don’t have to tell them much. The graduate students are so smart.

NMG We’re all above average, right? It sounds like Lake Wobegon.

CLS Now, I’ll tell you I’d be hard-pressed to find students who are as bright and thoughtful. You know, it seems like most of the graduate students coming out of institutions now are so much more sophisticated, so much smarter, so much better read, so much more knowledgeable, so much more suave. Let me count the ways.

NMG Well—we’re all socially constructed. We’ve had the benefit of faculty here.
CLS Absolutely. But I had some great teachers, too.
NMG And it’s a more mature field now.
CLS Ah—it must be—and it’s a good thing. Look at those curriculum vitae for entering people when you sit on search committees. Those people have done so much—they have publications, they have editing experience, they have dissertations that will knock your socks off. Cripes— they’re wonderful. I suppose that’s why I don’t worry so much about the big problems we face—we’ve got resources.
NMG Well, this was good, Cindy. Is there anything you’d like to add at the end?
CLS I just don’t know how you’re going to make any sense out of it.