Overseas students share findings about literary life with a little help from Web

BY ELAINE RAY

It's called "Literary Institutions," but a less stodgy moniker might be "Postcards on the Web" or "Credits for Culture Vultures." Whatever its name, the comparative literature course offered by the Overseas Studies Program (OSP) this quarter represents the latest effort to use technology and pedagogy in innovative ways.

Every Wednesday morning from 16:30 to 18:30 Greenwich Mean Time, Russell Berman, professor of German Studies and director of the OSP, logs on to the web for two one-hour chat sessions with a dozen Stanford students in Paris, Berlin, Florence, Oxford and Santiago. During these "live" discussions, students post their reactions to the assigned readings and report on their observations about literary institutions in their homes away from home.

Berman defines a literary institution as a set of "organized structures and values within which meaningful practice takes place." They can include settings "pertinent to the production and dissemination of literature," such as publishing houses, literature courses in schools and their curricula, book reviews in the press, theaters and bookstores. They might also include "more abstract expectations" about reading and writing, such as implied norms of value and quality, canonic structures, assumptions regarding genre or about literature, and authorship.

"We have students comparing literary life in different cultures. That's a very exciting dimension," Berman said. "The course does include some specifically literary
readings, but it's not a normal literary course by which one would assume close reading of texts. We're coming up with a sense that there are significant differences in the expectations that are directed toward literature in the various settings."

In addition to the scheduled Wednesday sessions, students are encouraged to participate in asynchronous discussions, which they can log on to at their convenience. Using "The Forum," a networking tool developed by the Stanford Learning Lab, students can post reports and comment on the postings of others. During the early weeks of the quarter, students were expected to get together with classmates at their overseas campus to discuss the assigned readings. Those texts included Berman's book *The Enlightenment Travelogue and the Colonial Text;* Salman Rushdie's *Is Nothing Sacred?;* Literature and Society: *The Politics of the Canon* by Ngugi wa Thiango; and Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony.* A designated "scribe" would then post reports of those group discussions on the course website. Although students can communicate privately with Berman, when the need arises, he encourages them to make their comments in the "public sphere" whenever appropriate.

"Chat sessions are comparable to discussion sections, but they're quite different," Berman says. "The role of the instructor involves much more trying to invite students to respond to each other, because they can't look at them." Berman says that when students first enter the chat space for the synchronous Wednesday sessions, there are a few minutes of small talk, but soon headier discussions take hold. "It has very high velocity. We have a lot of participation."

For Jennifer Lay Shyu, a junior music major interested in popular views on music performance, the most interesting aspect of the course is "how different it is reading other's thoughts on the spot as opposed to hearing them. It's nice connecting with people on common ideas when they are complete strangers," Shyu said in an e-mail from Oxford. "Some of them you want to meet over a cup of coffee in the future, and others you know you'd have a fistfight with if you had the chance." She said one of the challenges, however, is that you don't always know if other correspondents are being
witty, sarcastic or serious, since you can't see their facial expressions. There's also the danger of unwittingly insulting someone. She lamented the fact that the live discussions can veer in another direction so quickly that ideas often become obsolete in a matter of minutes.

"It's jarring having 20 people trying to comment on everyone else's comments ideas become obsolete very quickly in a chat. Once you're finished typing out what you wanted to say, the conversation has moved on to a new topic. I wish that the professor would home in on one idea and be careful not to go off with others. It's very exclusionary, especially when the rest of us are still pondering on the original question," Shyu noted, adding that the course has "quickened" her thought response.

Reinhold Steinbeck, program manager of the design and deployment team at the Stanford Learning Lab, says that while the live sessions are good for dynamic, spontaneous discussions, the asynchronous discussions lend themselves to more thoughtful exchanges. "They really support a reflective, deep discourse approach to the discussion, because you can actually read someone's comments and then you can think about it and post your response," he said. Steinbeck added that the Learning Lab also has tried to personalize the communications by adding passport photos of the participants to the site.

The technological tools that make all of these discussions possible were developed by the Stanford Learning Lab, established in 1997 by President Gerhard Casper and the Commission on Technology in Teaching and Learning. The lab collaborates with academic departments and other entities to improve student learning and promote creativity in education by using technology that is pedagogically sound.

"We want to make sure that this is really a team effort looking at the course from scratch and not just adding technology onto an existing course," says Steinbeck, who adds that he spent fall quarter meeting with representatives from OSP and other staff at the Learning Lab to organize the course. "It never is a technology driven process. In this case, because students are actually distributed all over the world, this course could not be conducted in this way without the technology. So it becomes to some extent a crucial component, but again it's not the component that drives the course."
During the second half of the quarter, students are spending much of their time conducting in-depth group research projects on literary institutions. Students can choose to work with classmates from their particular overseas campus or with students in the other locations. That research usually involves visiting literary institutions such as libraries, museums, bookstores, K-12 classrooms and theaters, and recording their observations. For instance, in examining the role of bookstores in Paris, students might investigate how books are typically acquired. Are online booksellers catching on? Are books expensive for the average reader? Are the titles on the bestseller list there primarily works of French authors; do they include writers from other French-speaking countries such as Senegal; or are they French translations of American books?

Unlike the traditional classroom model, in which students take in information offered by a faculty lecturer, the "Literary Institutions" course places students in the role of researcher, while the faculty member facilitates and advises, says Makoto J. Tsuchitani, academic technology manager for the OSP. "The course is structured on an active-learning, or learner-centered, model, where we're trying to empower the students and have the faculty member step back from his role as 'the disseminator of knowledge' and act more as a facilitator. In general, the philosophy for overseas studies courses has been for the students to get out in their local community and meet people, use the language and utilize the local resources in their course work."

Sending students off on their own does not mean leaving them to their own devices. In fact, this course seems to involve more professionals than the average lecture or seminar. In addition to Berman and a teaching assistant who is based on the main campus, the course relies on Tsuchitani, Steinbeck, other Learning Lab personnel and mentors from each of the five overseas campuses. The mentors serve as links between the students and the larger overseas community. Steinbeck has devoted full-time hours to the designing, implementing, troubleshooting and evaluation of the course.
Indications are that the course has been successful. And so far the technological glitches have been minor. Steinbeck says that early on there were concerns about the quality of the Internet connection from some of the European campuses. To solve that problem, the Learning Lab enlisted the help of the SwedenSilicon Valley Link (SSVL), an academic program with offices on the Stanford campus that explores the impact of the global information infrastructure on the future of academic life. Course information is stored on a campus server, making maintenance easy, but connections between the main campus and students in Europe are made via the SSVL's high-speed Internet link from Sweden to the Farm.

Connections like these have rendered the technology used in the course virtually transparent, Steinbeck says. "As we looked at the conversations going on in both the synchronous and the asynchronous area, very rarely did we come across questions of 'How does this work?' or 'Where am I? I'm lost.' The tools we deployed are helping them to really focus on their learning experience, which is a very positive outcome." SR