

WITH THE INTERNET AS HIS BLACKBOARD AND HIS CLASSTIME AS HIS
PENN'S AL FILREIS IS IN THE VANGUARD OF
TEACHING REVOLUTION

Had you been enrolled in a typical course at a typical college this past semester, you might have prepared for each class by — well, by showing up.

You'd slide into your seat, pull out a pen, open your notebook, and sit back. Waiting.

Waiting, passively, for the lecture to begin.

Had you been enrolled in English 88, a modern poetry survey course at the University of Pennsylvania, showing up for class would have been the *last* thing you did.

First, you would get to a computer. Days in advance. In the library. In your dorm room. Perhaps at 2 a.m. — whenever your college-aged mind was alert and inspired.

You'd log on to the course Web site, www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/

You'd click your way to information on the forthcoming class. When preparing for the session on William Carlos Williams' role in the modern poetry movement, you would have had the opportunity, through the Web site, to do the following:

- Watch a video clip of Williams' commentary on his poem "This Is Just to Say."
- Read Flossie Williams' "Reply" to her husband's poem.
- See a 1936 photo of Williams lounging in a chair.
- Read Williams' poem "The Rose Is Obsolete."
- Laugh at a Saul Steinberg cartoon from the *New Yorker*, spoofing overuse of the rose as a poetic metaphor for love.
- Watch a video of Penn English professor Alan Filreis — who teaches English 88 — giving a mini-lecture on poet Gertrude Stein's writing.

By this time, you would have a firm grasp of the traits that distinguish modernist poets and Williams in particular.

But you still wouldn't be ready for class.

Next, you'd hit the e-mail, scrolling through messages sent by some of English 88's three dozen classmates, via an e-mail distribution list, or listserv. You'd scan their youthful, bubbling reactions to modernist poetry and to Williams.

You might respond.

You might check back later, say at 7 the next morning. Seeing that one classmate's comments had sparked a raging online debate, you might dive back into the verbal fray.

Only then would you be ready for class. By this time, after the marathon preparation, after utter immersion in that day's course material, after sharing your thoughts and getting feedback from peers, you would hardly want to sit back in one of the battered old chairs arranged for class and wait for Filreis to lecture you.

You'd want to — well, you'd want to *engage*.

For a few years now, the higher-education world has been abuzz over the proliferation of courses offered entirely over the Internet, as experts predict the change this electronic form of distance learning will bring to the academic world.

But at the same time, a little-noticed, far quieter technology-driven revolution is taking shape on college campuses. And it could drastically alter the way college students learn in traditional college classrooms.

Scattered here and there across the country, quiet innovators like Al Filreis are harnessing the power of Web sites, listservs and other computer-based innovations to change their teaching style and let students play a more active role in their own ed-

BY JAMES O'NEILL

CLASSROOM FULL OF TALK,
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ucation. Some, like Filreis, have completely banned the lecture from the classroom, freeing cherished class time for an interactive exploration of course material.

Spurring Filreis to change is a sense of the incredible physical and financial costs that schools and parents incur to bring professor and student together for face-to-face contact. "It's so expensive that we'd better damn well do some good stuff in the classroom," Filreis said. What's the point of having students sit passively while a professor lectures? That's just a transfer of information, Filreis argues. Real learning occurs in the discussions that faculty can ignite and then subtly steer during class time.

Many aspects of this "new" teaching style have been in use for years. But technology has increased their power and broadened their reach.

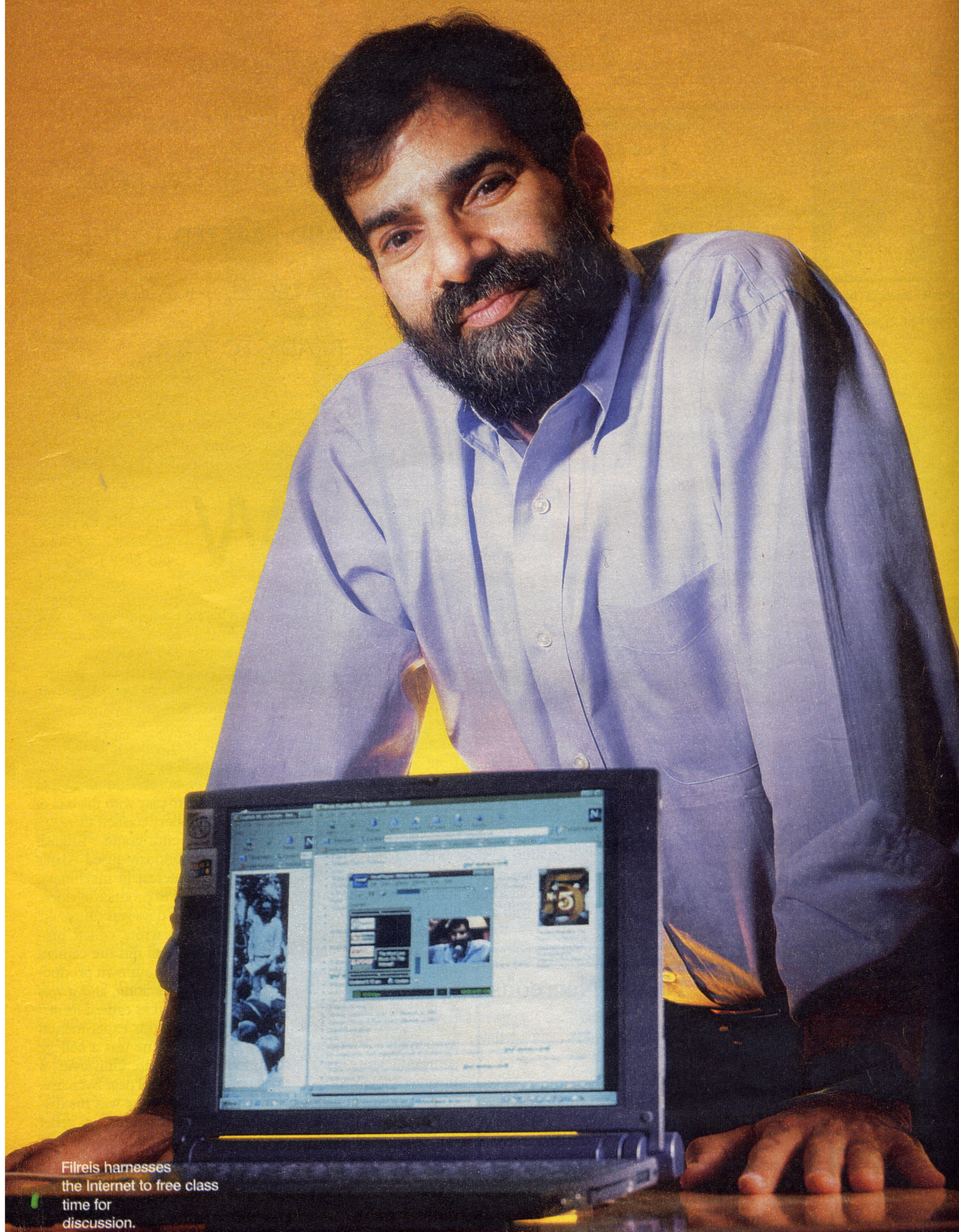
Discussion-style courses, for example, are decades old. But today's campus innovators are using technology to let far larger classes experience the kind of interactive learning that had once taken place only in tiny seminars.

Chatty, engaged students are nothing new. But e-mail listservs have allowed students who might be shy in the classroom to participate in peer discussions of course material. "Students who think deeply but slowly can participate more freely this way," said Christopher Dede, who codirects the Technology in Education program at Harvard's Graduate School of Education.

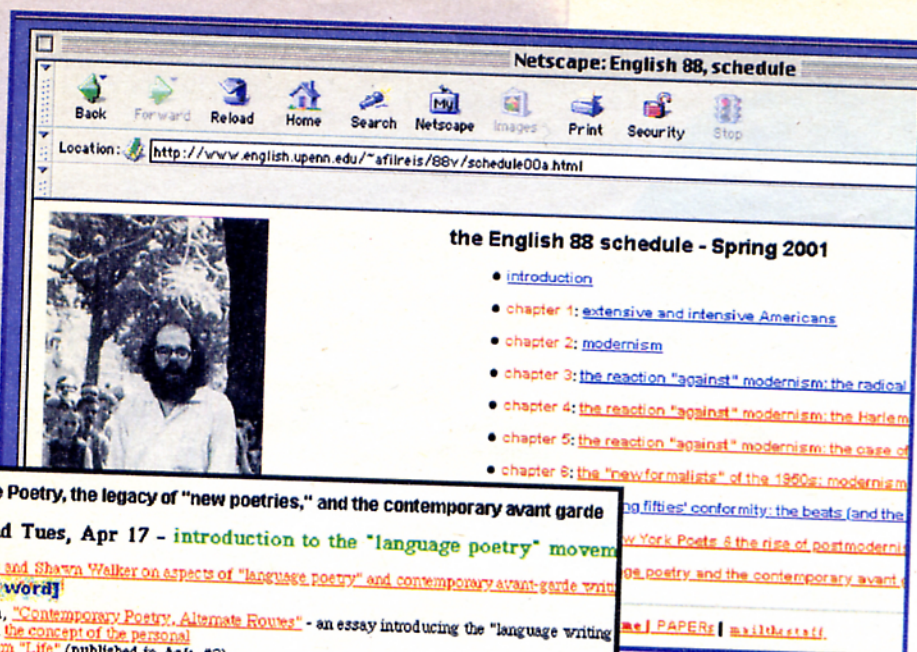
Videos, audio tapes, and other multimedia enhancements have also been available to students for years. But they used to be stored in the library or a lab, and it took extra effort for an interested student to seek them out. Today, through the Internet-based course Web sites that professors like Filreis

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James M. O'Neill is an Inquirer staff writer.



Filreis harnesses the Internet to free class time for discussion.



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have designed, students have instant access to a plethora of resources — anytime, anywhere. This is, after all, a generation of people for whom the first action after unlocking the dorm room door or turning off the alarm clock is to log on to their personal computers. And, Filreis points out, "Students have a different clock. They start to be creative at 9 p.m."

Practitioners of this new pedagogy are transforming students from passive to active learners and altering the power structure of the traditional lecture-dominated classroom. That shift in power — away from the professor and toward the student — is also a reason many professors remain reluctant to embrace the nascent revolution. As Dave Maswick, associate dean of information services at Bard College, says, "When a scholar uses technology in the classroom and he's not comfortable with it, he is suddenly perceived as less than an expert by the students. He's no longer the all-knowing scholar."

But as the type-writer generation of academics retires, some educators insist these technology-driven innovations in pedagogy will rival the printed book's unveiling on Europe's university campuses in the mid-1400s. Doug Davis, an Internet-savvy professor of psychology at Haverford College, says, "We'll look back on this mo-

Chapter 9: Language Poetry, the legacy of "new poetries," and the contemporary avant garde

Thurs, Apr 12 and Tues, Apr 17 - introduction to the "language poetry" movement

- audio: Al Filreis and Shawn Walker on aspects of "language poetry" and contemporary avant-garde writing [the visible word]
- Jerome McGann, "Contemporary Poetry: Alternate Routes" - an essay introducing the "language writing on the concept of the personal"
- Lyn Hejinian on "Life" (published in *Acid* #3)
- Alan Davies, "Formal Poetics and the Language Poets"
- George Hartley, "My Emily Dickinson"
- Susan Howe, "Multiplicity States"
- Lee Ann Brown, "The Second"
- William Butler Yeats, "The Second"
- Frost's "Mendicant Wall" + ? by S
- Ideas for poetry experiments from various other sources
- Bernadette Mayer, list of journal
- Bernadette Mayer, biography
- Charles Bernstein, "Nuclear Blast"
- Charles Bernstein, "Thinking I T"
- Charles Bernstein, biography
- Charles Bernstein, "I Don't Take"
- Charles Bernstein, "Veil" - visual
- Charles Bernstein, "There Horse"
- Charles Bernstein commentary on

EXPERIMENTS

1. Homolinguistic translation: Take a poem word, phrase for phrase, line for line, McCaffery, Robert Fillious, George B

Jackson Mac Low

Kandinsky Nature Nacreous { Forties 8 } by Jackson Mac Low

Kandinsky nature nacreous fountain - pachyderm totalizing web-footed cloisonné frets glassy-eyed threats promulgating tapster renunciatory petulant gropes cleats tansy garment-district-tört fortune - whimsy blister - sieve

Dreadlocks watchpocket Cheez-Whiz masculin gross - Sétebos debt-node fantasy - grain gramophone notable chrome - plaster logicide - c fantabulation-corner normalize ease mix lapw goat forget-it eclipse - module nettle-berry rug - proctologist

The Web site provides audio and video elements, as well as text.

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ment as the beginning of the end of the traditional 19th-century liberal arts education.”

What made Al Filreis — the product of placid, conformist, suburban 1960s New Jersey — a revolutionary?

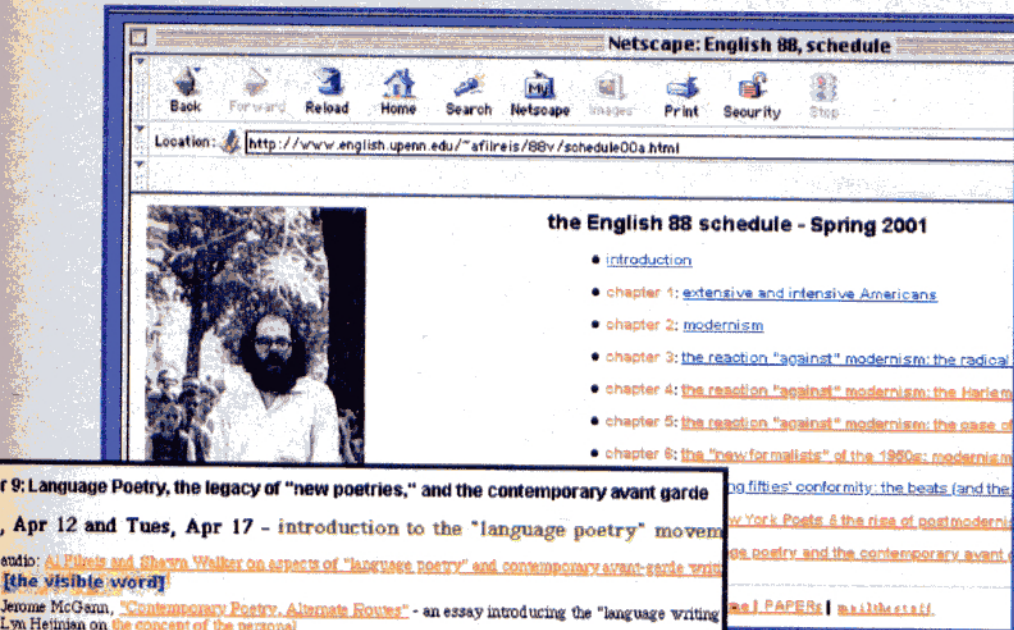
Three key aspects of his personality drive his experimental approach to teaching: an agile, nonconformist mind; an attraction to gadgetry; and a fascination with experimental poetry.

The interest in gadgets came from Alan’s father, Sam, an engineer. Sam Filreis loved projects, and a crawl space in the family home in Springfield, N.J., is still filled with remnants. Young Alan often secreted himself in the crawl space to play with the bits of tools and machinery stashed there.

Alan’s seventh-grade English teacher serendipitously fused Alan’s creativity and interest in machinery. “We learned how to produce a ‘video’ — which in those days was unusual,” Filreis recalls. “We wrote, edited, produced, directed, and did the camera work and acting for our own productions. It was very exciting, and it was tech and literature in its earliest form.”

His romance with experimental poetry began when he was a college sophomore, at Colgate University, a small liberal arts school near Syracuse, N.Y. The first milestone was his discovery of Walt Whitman, a rebel against flowery poetic language and the traditional rules of form.

“I was turned on by him,” Filreis said. “He was freely expressing his feelings. His long lines seemed antipetical. He didn’t mind yawping. It was an awakening for me. Here I was, a suburban baby boomer, still confined by curriculum. Here was someone



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ideas for poetry experiments com

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totalizing web-footed cloisonné frets
glassy-eyed threats promulgating tapster
renunciatory petulant gropes cleats tansy
garment-district-tört
fortune - whimsy blister - sieve

Dreadlocks watchpocket Cheez-Whiz masculi
gross - Sétebos debt-node fantasy - grain
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Photo Credit: © 1997 by Anne L. Jones

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"I'd love to be liberated from the semester so I could teach whomever, wherever, whenever," Filreis says.

who violated the rules of poetry. Whitman got me to realize that you can rewrite the rules of expression."

Besides finding Whitman, Filreis came under the wing of Carl Peterson, a "wonderful, acerbic, somewhat misanthropic" poet who was dating Filreis' favorite Colgate professor. "Carl would talk with me about poetry in ways that my official teachers did not," Filreis said. "I used to go to his apartment and sit in the living room, often drinking wine, discussing Whitman and other poets." Most important about the experience, Filreis said, was his epiphany that "the learning space was not in the curriculum, was not on campus, and was not the place where my regular teachers were."

In the early 1980s, while pursuing his doctorate in English at the University of Virginia, Filreis began to teach. At the time, the university purchased early-version desktop computers. "They were big white

machines, in the shape of a huge space helmet," Filreis said. "They ran a word processor program called Magic Wand."

Filreis stored set pieces on computer, each describing a common student writing mistake. He gave each set piece a number. Then, marking student papers by hand, he put a number in the margin near each mistake, and attached the appropriate computer-generated commentary.

"This changed my relationship with the students," Filreis said. "I wanted to engage the students in a conversation." In effect, he had created a low-tech prototype of the teaching style he would later refine. He calls it "dialogic pedagogy."

When e-mail and the Internet appeared, Filreis, who arrived at Penn in 1985, easily integrated these new tools.

The core of that teaching philosophy mirrors the course material of English 88.



o I could teach

Postmodernist poets focused on the process of their poetry, rather than on what the words in their poems actually said. The purpose was to make poetry and language new again.

There's no better way to describe Filreis' teaching style. He uses technology to free class time for discussion, which to Filreis is more important than the course material itself. The point is to develop his students' ability to think critically, not to have memorized every last fact about Gertrude Stein. And yet, he said, through that active engagement with the material, students end up remembering more of the content.

Here's Filreis' teaching style in action: By late April, the students in English 88 are studying the postmodern

poets.

Shortly after class gets out one day, the English 88 listserv starts to

hum. Some students like the postmodernist message. Others think a poem whose words made no conventional sense was ridiculous. At one point during the raging debate, Filreis e-mails everyone a brief message to guide the discussion along. He cites a quote from one student, who chafed at the postmodernist experiment: "I disagree with the idea that effective poetry can consistently be made by imposing an arbitrary set of rules on some subject and following them rigorously," wrote the student, Jacob Kraft.

Filreis' seven-word reply reads: "Is this not what a sonnet is?"

The online jousting plants the seeds for an equally charged debate in class a few days later over an elegy performed in 1975 by postmodernist Jackson Mac Low, called "A Vocabulary for Peter Innisfree Moore." Mac Low took his friend's name, used a computer to churn out every word

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that could be constructed from reshuffling the letters of the name, and then got friends to read those 960 words aloud in a staged performance. The work generates intense give-and-take among the students on whether old-fashioned elegies did justice to the dead.

"Who's to say words can capture the essence of a human being?" says Laine McDonnell. "Who's to say these words of Mac Low's don't capture his friend more?"

"Aesthetically, it leaves a lot to be desired," pipes up Jake Kraft. "The postmodernists are only interested in the process. They throw aesthetics out the window."

Now that Filreis has broken down the walls of the classroom, he wants to break through all other confines of the university setting. "I want to start recruiting 'teachers' from the extended Penn community," he said, clearly thinking back to Carl Peterson's influence on him at Colgate. "I want more electronic mentoring. I want to deepen the experiment. I'd love to be liberated from the semester so I could teach whomever, wherever, whenever."

Thanks to technology, he has already liberated himself. He has created a program through which faculty can mentor incoming freshmen over the Internet before they even get to campus. He has cajoled some faculty to participate in online book groups for Penn alumni. And his own Web site — which registered more than 2.6 million hits in the last six months and includes extensive resources on modern poetry, the 1950s and the Holocaust — has become a helpful tool for high-school teachers nationwide.

Filreis is one of a small but growing cadre of professors across the country who are changing classroom pedagogy — and not merely by turning the old-fashioned lecture into a glitzy PowerPoint presentation. Many colleges provide grants and training for professors interested in using the new technology, and on every college campus there's at least one professor harnessing the basic technology of the Internet to free class time for richer, student-driven discussion.

Some of the most creative proselytizers of the technology-dependent approach teach in the humanities. At Gettysburg College, Chris Fee, an assistant professor of English, provides students with "virtual tours" on one of his course Web sites — 360-degree photos of ancient ruins in Scotland that he has researched. He also requires students taking his Viking Studies class to create their own Web sites, each centered on a different aspect of Viking life.

"If I just tell them the information, they're only going to remember so much," Fee said. "If they have to do the work, they'll remember it more." And when students know their Web project will be viewed by the general public, they have incentive to do better work. "It does fire their imaginations."

At Haverford, psychology professor Davis has created a Web site for his Foundations of Personality course that links students to a class discussion group, provides audio clips of his class lectures, includes an online glossary of Freudian terminology, directs students to the Freud Museum Web site in Vienna, and even lists the personal Web sites of other professors and students, to illustrate that anyone can now engage in "ego psychology," by "studying folks' projections of themselves into the Web."

Davis said the technology lets students "think about the course material between classes, at whatever time of day they want to." If they find themselves struggling with the material, they can go back to the Web site, listen again to an audio tape of his lecture, and then contact Davis by e-mail with a question — at any hour of the day or night. (There's a downside, he said: Students have a tendency to print out everything from the Web site, reducing the campus library computer equipment to an expensive copy machine.)

At Penn, the students concur that the Filreis technique stimulates classroom debate. "Through this full immersion in the material, you have to think about it in a different way," said Laine McDonnell, the student who spoke up for the computer-generated anagram elegy by Mac Low. "With the class participation, I felt I always had to be on the ball. You have something at stake when you go into class."

Two recent Penn graduates became close friends after exchanging ideas on a Filreis listserv. "We never would have spoken to each other if we just sat across the room in class," said Andrew Zitcer.

"What's nice about the listserv is that Al's is just another e-mail," said student Sara Rabold. "He becomes more a companion in the conversation, rather than someone I'm being lectured by. I felt comfortable to disagree with him."

During the first week of May, Penn students typically hole up in library cubicles and dorm rooms, cramming for finals. The next week they linger on campus, waiting for the designated days to complete the nerve-wracking exams.

Not English 88ers. Typical of the group was Kraft, the postmodernism skeptic, who jetted home to Denver before finals week ended, and took his English 88 exam from there.

Filreis had e-mailed his students the exam. They were supposed to read the instructions, study without looking at the questions, and then, on their honor, take two hours to complete the exam. They were to e-mail the answers back to Penn.

The last part of the exam was an essay question, asking students to expound on the themes of modern and postmodern poetry. True to his mantra, here's how Filreis ended the exam: "Answer this question briefly in your own words:

"Can we 'make it new?'" ●