Vignette:

Julie, a co-operative education student circa 1994, is a single mom working on a co-operative work term away from her university. She is 18 credit hours away from graduation and hopes to complete her degree with one more semester. To accomplish this, Julie needs to either take six courses in her final semester or find a way to get three credit hours while on her work term. She has found a course offered through her university’s Distance Education department which will fill the three-credit requirement, although the particular course is not her first choice. However, the flexibility makes completion possible, and her GPA will be a lot better if she keeps the on-campus term to a manageable five courses. She signs up, receives the material, and starts. Materials are sent to her for self study, Julie picks up a textbook at the university bookstore while registering and making tuition payments, and she’s off. A typical workday is hectic, but manageable: get up and ready, eat breakfast and feed the baby, drop off the baby at daycare, public transit to work, work with a nice half hour walk at lunch, public transit back to the daycare, home to feed and bath the baby, bedtime, supper, and study time for the course. Its flexible, but not social. The opportunities afforded by co-operative education and distance education are engaging, but ‘adult conversation’ is handled exclusively at work. Julie, a good student, manages an ‘A’ from the distance course, and the next semester will be busy but manageable.

The following semester, Julie heads back to campus. She quickly revives her friendships with several other students, and time on campus has its elements of fun. Several courses are offered in a seminar format, where students make presentations and are expected to offer input to the discussion topic. This adds to the experience, and makes the on-campus time considerably more enjoyable than the time spent in the evenings working alone.

In 1997, Julie is considering a Master’s degree. She is employed full-time and doing well, but the idea of progressing in her chosen career is luring her back to post-secondary education. A new opportunity has presented itself via a part-time Master’s program with a strong ‘distance’ component supported heavily by the World Wide Web (www). The web component of the program leads to a Graduate Diploma, and admission to the full-time Master’s program would include consideration of work done toward the Graduate Diploma. Again, the flexibility is appealing to Julie, but the thought of more isolated courses weighs heavily on her judgement. The idea of trying a new course format using computers extensively seems a little intimidating, but she has found one course that looks interesting, and decides to give it a try before committing to either an extended part-time program or another year without regular paycheques.

The course, offered in a novel ‘virtual’ format, boldly promises strong interactive components, and has a significant portion of the grade allocated for ‘constructive
participation.’ The final note in the outline states that the course is offered at both a Canadian and a European university simultaneously, and the idea of ‘meeting’ international students catches her. Julie registers for the course with rather high expectations, and not just a few concerns about the ability of a computer-mediated environment to be ‘easy to learn,’ ‘easy to use,’ and ‘stable.’

Julie’s application for admission to the course as a post-graduate student without full program registration is approved by the professor, and she registers, pays, buys a textbook, and fights back the feeling of deja-vu this process carries with it. Julie has a computer at work with full Internet access, and she can work with a browser quite easily. Daycare can be extended into the early evening one or two nights per week, so she decides to try the course using her office computer right after work. Course ‘virtual office hours’ run in the morning to accommodate the European time zones (making their office hours in the evening there), and she can arrange to make this time up at work. If this course works out, she intends to buy a computer for home and register with the Diploma Program; if not, at least she hopes to gain a little Internet experience through the course.

The instructions included in the course materials identifies a web site to access, an account name and an initial password. The first exercise is to sign onto the site, find the course number, open the introductory lecture, and respond to its instructions. The ‘lecture,’ written in a rich HyperText Markup Language (html), introduces the professor and the teaching assistant complete with a short video clip where they say ‘hello’, and discusses the objectives and format for course. The notes then ask the student to create a short resume in an on-line forum available only to the other students in the course, and post a note saying that (s)he is here and properly into the course. As a joke, the prof states that if you can’t access this lecture, please phone. Julie scans through the resumes of students already in the course, apprehensively clicks the ‘post a message’ button, and announces her presence. After successfully completing that task, and armed with the information the other students have provided, she starts to work on a short resume describing her current academic situation, her interests, and her reason for taking this course in this particular format. She adds that she is still a little wary of a distance format, but that this seems different.

The course starts with an introduction of terms of reference, material to be covered, and a rather lengthy description of the format. Each student needs to download a copy of the chat facility used for ‘virtual office hours’ weekly, and weekly participation is mandatory. For the first few weeks, the lecture material used to start the course is comprised of a ‘lecture,’ written in HTML with hypertext links to additional material such as the chat software, software available for download to complete exercises and assignments, additional reference material, or interesting sites. Midweek, the professor posts a ‘top ten list’ (with apologies to David Letterman) of the most important issues he
expects the student to learn. These issues come from the assigned textbook material, the lecture notes, or the postings of students commenting on the week’s readings. The students are expected to comment meaningfully on the readings and/or the top ten list, stating whether they agree with it, and to offer other items to include if they feel something was missed. To keep some order in the postings, students are asked to post a maximum of three times per week, and to keep their total weekly postings to a maximum of two screens full of text. The participative component of the course is made up of the student’s weekly contribution plus a group effort where they are responsible for one week’s top ten list. The groups post a list at the beginning of the week starting in the third week, and have an opportunity to revise it after seeing the other student’s feedback.

In order to get the students familiar with the WWW, the teaching assistant is offering prizes for the first student to follow the clues offered in the ‘Internet scavenger hunt.’ The first hunt is a piece of cake: the TA wants a student to identify the ‘definitive’ top ten list on the web. Julie quickly finds David Letterman’s page, but then notices one of the European students has already won. Julie posts a note begrudging the fact that the European students get a ten-hour ‘head start’ due to time zones, especially since the TA appears to be nocturnal – most of the material is posted late in the evening. Since the top ten needs to be done by the students after the third week in groups, Julie decides to sign up with one of the European students to get an edge. She can post a message in the evening, and expect a response when she gets up in the morning. This will optimize her chances of doing well in the participative component by maximizing the number of times they can send messages back and forth. She scans the on-line resumes again, and sends electronic mail to the current scavenger winner congratulating her and asking about her interest in snowboarding. The European student responds that she is coming to the host university on an exchange semester soon, and a friendship starts to form.