

I Was a GSAMS Astronaut

Ulf Kirchdorfer, Regents' Distinguished Professor,
Assistant Professor, English, Darton College

I missed out on the Apollo XI lunar landing—in more than one way. In 1969, I was barely seven years old and too young to stay up late at night in Europe to watch the landing. Many years later my father conveyed to me his enthusiasm and lack of sleep surrounding that fateful moment.

I think I must have been about nine when I began to realize there was more to life than our earth and the same path trodden to and from school every day. When I was fourteen I knew I wanted to be an astronaut as sure as I was bashful to admit I wanted Farah Fawcett, who other kids had forbidden posters of taped inside their lockers. When I was fifteen I knew I would never be an astronaut; I had passed the six-foot-three mark our basketball-greedy coach marked on the ledge of the door that led to the track and football stadium. That day I walked home past the hobby store that sold Estes rockets and exact Revell models of Apollo space craft, knowing fitting inside these models in my imagination would now never be enough. Then came the Space Shuttle and offered some hope: halfway normal people-intellectuals even—were allowed to orbit the earth in what looked like an airliner made comfortable by having most of the seats taken out. Still later, after a seminar in seventeenth-century poetry in my Masters program at Ohio University, I saw on a tiny black-and-white tv a teacher along with other human beings explode into aerial death. I thought, "It'll be a long time before they let another teacher into space. They are just too worried about the bad PR and maybe lawsuits from parents of traumatized school kids."

I establish somewhat at length my longtime interest in the space program because I see a definite connection between it and GSAMS (Georgia Statewide Academic and Medical System), that is, the use of technology to teach interactively across vast distances. GSAMS also offers that romantic appeal of the pioneering spirit and work; before us we have untapped the potential to improve the human condition, while simultaneously exploring the possibilities of technological functioning and improvement of that technological functioning.

What I want to offer now are some of my experiences as a GSAMS astronaut in the hopes that some of you will want to join the program and also in the hopes that some of you will not want to join the program—GSAMS is not for everyone—you either like it, take to it, or you don't like it, and don't take to it.

Sometime in the spring of 1995, I was called into the headquarters of our Vice President for Academic Affairs and briefed on a new program. This program would involve teaching English composition to a selective and selected group of high-SAT score seniors in high schools as close as a twenty-minute drive and as far as an hour's drive away from Darton College. The course would start on the semester system calendar of the high school, that's during the summer break for nine-month faculty, and the course would have to be offered early in the morning so as not to interfere with the high school students' regular day. Practically speaking, these requirements meant that I would have to be on campus by 6:40 a.m. Monday through Friday, starting two weeks before the fall semester and give up any planned break, because I was teaching summer school.

I immediately jumped at the assignment; it helps to be a junior faculty member when making such decisions. But there were also incentives—overload pay for teaching the regular classload, the chance to work with brilliant students, and most of all, the chance to pull off a pioneering first. When I considered all the tests and sacrifices the astronauts had to make in the space program according to Tom Woffe's *The Right Stuff* (giving sperm in a test tube was one of the easiest tasks outlined in that program), I thought, well at ease, GSAMS-space here I come (my syllabus soon said, almost too cleverly I thought, "Class meets on the air"). My decision to jump was also rewarded by the help of our new Coordinator of Distance Learning and Technology—again, I want to stress how important the combination of technology and the human element is in the endeavor of GSAMS education.

When I jumped, I faced the following, first thing in the morning, on an everyday basis more or less, with the Coordinator of Distance Learning and Technology:

7 a.m., Check-in time

Make sure all other sites are up and running. Site-facilitators and teachers must be on-site to check that the equipment, including microphones, video, Elmo projector, fax, and phone are working. Given the combination of human nature and technology, problems were frequent, especially at the beginning.

The instructor, site facilitators, Southern Bell, CLI, and, thank God, the Coordinator of Distance Learning and Technology, had to work out problems such as the loop of the participating schools not being complete (someone at Southern Bell had not made the correct switch connection, for example). We had to deal with the sound not coming in or echoing so well that a premier Hollywood Sci-Fi production would receive an Academy Award for such a perfected sound affect (the Coordinator of Distance Learning and Technology had to serve as a liaison between CLI, Southern Bell, and the individual sites).

We dealt with sound but no video; video but no sound; "frozen" video and no sound; one school not having funding for another toner cartridge for the fax; students being locked out early in the morning from their expensive GSAMS-room; and finally, acts of God, such as a tornado playing with reception dishes in one county and a beaver chewing through cable for balance in another county. And finally, the Coordinator of Distance Learning did discover that faulty equipment had been installed and the installation not been correctly done either, at more than one site.

But I want to stress the positives: First, I was a GSAMS astronaut; I wasn't working for NASA or the Soviet Union, in a shell of metal under a veil of dangerous secrecy; I was on safe ground controlled by the University System of Georgia. Any blowups or explosions took place off-camera, microphone silenced, with the assuring gravity of terra firma experienced as the Coordinator and

I played soccer with a big yellow trash can just outside the GSAMS classroom. Most beautiful of all, the links of the GSAMS logistics were ironed out in a team-spirit and work-ethic that connected secondary and post-secondary education. The high school students, high school teachers, principals and vice principals, counselors, even parents, along with the Darton players, connected to give the term and program "Partners-in-Excellence" new meaning. At this point, it must also be said that without the Coordinator of Partners-in-Excellence, who laid the groundwork between the institutions, Darton College could not have offered any GSAMS instruction whatsoever. It requires more than expert diplomatic skills to bring together several high schools in a program that might by some be perceived as one that robs the bright high school students from what would have been their regularly scheduled English classes, or worse, a program that involves "all that technology stuff." Furthermore, key people at all schools, and in all positions, were responsible for having a vision and fighting for that vision to be brought into existence. To employ a metaphor involving other than space travel, the boat was definitely rocked in education when GSAMS instruction was introduced as a possibility. I believe the boat will continue to be rocked and be rocking for some time to come, but we must realize again that boat or space travel is not for everyone, and never will be for everyone. This acceptance does not mean, however, that GSAMS education should not be furthered, because it is highly effective. One short-term measurement of effectiveness came one year later, just before Christmas, when I had finished teaching the second English 101 composition class via GSAMS to high school students taking advantage of the Post-Secondary Option. This year's class had 29 students sign up, out of their own volition, and out of an entire quarter's worth of our daily encounters, only one day had technical problems.

Once the kinks were ironed out in the first-year pilot program class, I was gratified and somewhat surprised that the boundaries between the different institutions (high school and college) were transcended. The walls of the individual classrooms disappeared and geographical distances became irrelevant as the students came together in one classroom that met on the air. Interaction between students and the instructor was instantaneous, This instantaneous interaction resulted from the technology: whoever speaks appears on the television monitor. Thus, the cascading of alternating and numerous faces in no particular order erases the boundaries of the classrooms as individual sites.

Furthermore, the voice-activated technology encourages a more active student participation. To be seen, that is, to be part of the class, the student must be heard, that is, he or she must speak. Furthermore, the voice-activated video technology has the advantage of not necessarily making the instructor the focal point of the class and so encourages poor-based learning to its fullest extent. In summary, distance learning, such as offered by GSAMS, in this case English composition, allows some of the more traditional boundaries of passive and contained learning to disappear. It is ironic that television technology, which we associate with passivity, becomes such an active tool in learning.

The hands-on learning experience of the classroom in which all students are physically present in one locale is not lost in the distance learning classroom. Students use facsimile machines to share with all participants their writing-in-progress. In addition, the instructor is able to collect timed in-class essays via facsimile and return these and other assignments in a manner at least as timely as in the traditional classroom. Another advantage of using the facsimile method is that the professor is able to retain copies of the students' work for monitoring of future progress.

The space-age travel used in GSAMS teaching and learning can be supplemented by old-fashioned automobile travel to have contact between the instructor and students at the individual sites. Thus, some days the class can be broadcast from school X or Y. Such visits should be kept to a minimum, and are mostly useful in the beginning stages if some technological difficulties threaten to lower morale. Phone office hours as well as the availability of e-mail communication also facilitate the interaction between students and the instructor. Again, these forms of communication are backup resources; full benefits of instruction can be achieved from live interaction on the air during scheduled class time and will be the norm, I believe, as soon as GSAMS technology and training are up to par.

To conclude, I wish to report on the academic success of the students participating in composition courses offered via GSAMS by Darton College and ask for a new assignment. Students currently have a 100% completion rate and receive an average grade of 3.0 on a 4.0 scale upon successful completion of a course. These students are high-caliber students headed mostly for the creme de la creme four-year institutions upon graduation from high school. As a GSAMS astronaut, I wonder if students of lesser academic ability would be well served by a composition course offered by GSAMS. I say, borrowing from a Robert A. Heinlein book title, "Have Spacesuit, Will Travel." The State of Georgia generously pays for the adventure, and I know some of us just can't afford to pass it up. Either way, we are on the receiving as well as the giving end. •