COMPUTER APPLICATIONS IN WRITING ASSESSMENT

Speaker: David Humphreys, Cuyahoga Community College, Ohio
Introducers/Recorders: Jacqueline Searle, Cuyahoga Community College, Ohio
Janet Minc, University of Akron, Ohio
Janet Samuelson, University of Akron, Ohio

David Humphreys began the session by asking members of the audience several questions about their computer use to illustrate the pervasiveness of computers in our lives. When he asked, "How many of you have computers at home?" approximately half of the audience raised its hands. When he asked, "How many of you use computers when you teach or test writing?" several people responded affirmatively. Humphreys stated that the issue is no longer whether computers should be permitted into the classroom, but how they can be used most effectively in the writing process. He added that instructors must realize that they will often be dealing with students who are more computer literate than they. Teachers must, therefore, increase their computer proficiency.

Humphreys briefly described the use of computers in Cuyahoga Community College's writing classrooms. In fifteen to twenty sections of composition each quarter, students write all of their essays exclusively on computers. In addition, one section each quarter makes use of a portable computer at home, for which students are charged ten dollars. Student response to using computers in the writing class is very positive. Their fascination with computers is immediate. After being given forty minutes of instruction on how to use computers, students are asked to spend between twelve and fifteen minutes daily writing on them. Some students report having spent one or two hours a day writing on them.

Humphreys made several comments about what the computer can do for student writers. First, computers have the power to change the writing process by separating its stages more easily and therefore allowing students to focus their attention on specific aspects. For example, during the drafting stage, they can pay more attention to the content of their papers without having to worry about editing. This engenders a more relaxed, natural style, according to Humphreys. In addition, students can compare different versions of their papers with splitscreen viewing capability. They can also call up a précis of their papers by programming the computer to condense all of the topic sentences in their papers. Students can also experiment with the structure of their papers by switching paragraphs easily, and this helps them to see the development of what they have written. Humphreys noted that besides allowing students to make major revisions more easily in their writing, computers, by emphasizing the visual nature of writing, give students one more dimension to work with in trying to understand, and edit, their own writing. For instance, computers can show students the length of each of their sentences by printing them separately. Students can flip the printed copy sideways to see graphically how many of their sentences are very short and how many are unusually long. All of these functions draw students toward a concept of writing as discovery, allowing them to experiment and create with ease.

Computers, Humphreys indicated, can also aid writing teachers by helping them to create lists of problem areas that plague particular students and explanations of what needs to be done to correct the problems. Computers can also be programmed to stop at each mark of punctuation, so that students must slow down in reading their writing and think about their use of punctuation. Finally, many computer checks exist to help students correct problems with spelling, style, mechanics, and typing. These are particularly helpful because the computer is programmed to pose a question students must answer (e.g.

2. They characteristically took control of the writing process at points where the text was out of their control, consciously focusing on one skill in order to insure success at other levels. For example:

    (a) They ignored surface features and concentrated on audience, permitting more elaboration of details.

    (b) When they lost their sense of audience, they simply attributed characteristics to it and moved ahead.

    (c) When they lost momentum, they revised surface features for a brief period, and this gave them the confidence they needed to regain forward impetus.

    (d) While waiting for invention to proceed at points where they were blocked, both writers simply transcribed notes they had taken beforehand.

Sirc also reported on another study, which he had conducted using the same technique, of a student composing a strongly felt letter to a relative about a family situation. Sirc pointed out that as teachers we often regard writing as a purely cognitive activity, and don't acknowledge or emphasize the affective and psychological dimensions that powerfully influence a writer's handling of the task. Factors that emerged during Sirc's interviews with the author were that the topic of this letter was the writer's entire life, including past events, family relationships, future plans, opinions, and emotions, and that the letter incorporated a complex sense of audience.

Both Sirc and Anson concluded that student writers have the ability to examine and to evaluate their writing processes and products, and that teachers need to help them develop their ability to make projective comments on their drafts and evaluate their drafts and revisions. ■