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BREAKING THE BLOCK: BASIC WRITERS IN THE ELECTRONIC CLASSROOM

ABSTRACT: *This essay fuses theories about Basic Writers and writer's block and addresses, through the use of hypertext, how computers can help Basic Writers who experience this writing difficulty. The essay begins with a discussion of Basic Writers and writer's block, moves to a discussion of a "Stretch" class that I taught in the 1997-8 school year at Arizona State University, and then focuses on problems that the students had in their writing. I discuss the two main branches of their difficulties – problems with genre and problems with the linearity of texts – which may be partially alleviated through the introduction of hypertext theories to the class. Consideration of such highlights specific problems that basic writers may have and adds a new perspective to arguments concerning computer aided instruction and its usefulness in the writing classroom.*

Teaching from the Internet, Computer Assisted Instruction, Teaching in the Electronic Classroom – teaching writing in the computer classroom is no longer a path of the future, but is a reality of the present. As such, there are many articles and books espousing the glories and the difficulties of teaching in this electronic environment. Do the computers help students by re-enforcing the notion of recursive writing and revision? Do the computers isolate students? Do they turn the writing classroom into a computer classroom? All of these issues are terribly important and have been discussed, from positive and negative viewpoints, in publications for the last 20-30 years. With all of the words which have been written concerning the electronic writing classroom, however, there has been only cursory interest in and discussion about how the electronic classroom will help or hinder two large segments of the writing population – Basic Writers and students who experience writer's block. In this essay I fuse the two segments and address, through the use of hypertext theories, how computers can help Basic Writers who experience writer's block. Such work, I believe, will highlight this neglected segment of the writing population and add a new perspective to arguments concerning computer aided instruction and its usefulness in the writing classroom.

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Defining Basic Writers

Before addressing how computers can help Basic Writers who experience writer's block, one needs to explore the various definitions of Basic Writing. Since I was new to the teaching of Basic Writing when I began to teach it in 1997-8, I began my reading with Mina Shaughnessy's 1979 book *Errors and Expectations*. Since Shaughnessy's book is so well known I will not point out the specifics of her arguments, but will note that she focuses the book on the pervasive problems of sentence-level issues, with chapter titles such as "Handwriting and Punctuation," "Syntax," "Common Errors," "Spelling," "Vocabulary," and "Beyond the Sentence" (4).[1] Although Shaughnessy may be correct in her analysis of the Basic Writers who she encountered, one must be conscious of the fact that not all Basic Writers' problems are at the sentence level. It is for this reason that the instructor must remember the qualification made by Shaughnessy that "I have reached the persuasion that underlies this book—namely, that Basic Writing students write they way they do. . . .because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes" (5). Instructors need to recognize that false starts made by Basic Writers may involve commas and spelling, but they also may include coherence and cohesion, organization, and even the pervasive difficulty of writer's block.

It is not solely Basic Writers who experience writer's block; however, one should recognize that there are similarities between the two. Often the same difficulties that authors illustrate as hallmarks of Basic Writing are also those mentioned in association with writer's block. For instance, to define the difficulties experienced by Basic Writers, Shaughnessy notes:

> By the time he reaches college, the Basic Writing student both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer. He is aware that he leaves a trail of errors behind him when he writes. He can usually think of little else while he is writing. But he doesn't know what to do about it. Writing puts him on a line, and he doesn't want to be there. . . Some writers, inhibited by their fear of error, produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin, crossing out one try after another until the sentence is hopelessly tangled. (7)

This is remarkably similar to Zachary Leader's interpretation of Mike Rose's description of writer's block;

> it is the application of rigid, inappropriately invoked or incorrect rules of composition; misleading assumptions; premature

> editing; the absence of 'appropriate planning and discourse strategy'. . .conflicting rules or strategies; and inadequately understood or inappropriate evaluative criteria. (17)[2]

Because of such misplaced rules and criteria, the author becomes paralyzed and is unable to write; he experiences writer's block. Illustrations like those recounted above prompt one to begin to see that writer's block and Basic Writing dovetail into one another. From this conventional view, one might expect to encounter the following scenario:

A Basic Writer comes into a writing classroom with a fear of making grammatical mistakes. This fear of mistakes has been conditioned by the copious amounts of red ink that the writer has seen in the past on essays. Because of this fear, the writer is quite apprehensive in writing sentences, keeps forming them over and over again in his mind, until he thinks that they are "perfect." But the sentences are never perfect, and the writer thinks that he can't write until they are perfect. So, the writer can't write. The writer can't get any words on the page, loses the flow of his thoughts—he experiences writer's block.

In some contexts and for some students, a scenario like the one recounted might be appropriate, however, teachers would do students a service to re-think some of these points which are accepted as "facts." To this end, it may be valuable to examine the issues surrounding a Basic Writing class that I taught in a computer mediated classroom at Arizona State University during the 1997-1998 school year. The observations that I made while teaching the students may serve to problematize the assumptions often made about Basic Writers and writer's block and show how being in a computer classroom and actively drawing on hypertext theories can aid in instruction of these students.

Basic Writing at Arizona State University: the Stretch Program

At Arizona State University, the "Basic Writing Program" is called Stretch.[3] This program consists of English 101 content which has been "stretched" over the course of a year, instead of a semester. The first semester of the program is Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC 101) and the second part of the program is English 101 (First-Year Composition)[4] Stretch is governed by several basic concepts, which are as follows: Basic Writers are capable students but lack experience in writing and therefore need "time to develop effective writing strategies" including "reading strategies. . .invention techniques. . .composing methods. . .and revision and proofreading strategies." In addition, the goal of all First-Year Composition classes, and more advanced writing

classes also, is to "help build a writing community" among the members of the class (Glau, webpage). Sometimes the creation of such communities is difficult if the students are only in contact with each other for 15 weeks; however, students in Stretch are in contact with each other for an entire year. Because of this extended period of time, the students have the opportunity to become very familiar with their peers' personalities and styles of writing. As such, it has been my experience that the writing communities which result from Stretch classes tend to be stronger and, perhaps, more fruitful than those in single semester writing courses.

At ASU, students are identified as Basic Writers through scores on the SAT or ACT tests. This is, admittedly, a problematic method of placement. One of my students noted, "How can you base whether or not a person can write on that stupid SAT test? They don't let you write anything. Is writing all about being able to correct a sentence? I don't think so" (Student A 1).[5] The method of placement for the Stretch Program is primarily based on logistics; it would be very difficult to do a written placement test for the more than 4,000 students who enroll each semester.[6] Nevertheless, the method of placement re-enforces the conventional notion that the level of skill a student has in writing is directly related to sentence-level concerns such as fixing commas or identifying clauses. Admittedly, grammatical concerns should not be ignored; they are very important and lack of skills in grammar can make a text difficult if not impossible to read. Nevertheless, difficulty in fixing commas does not make one an "unskilled writer." It is truly difficult to determine the definition of Basic Writers, since it is a very subjective area that must be determined by context. I will confine myself to discussing the type of writing and writing difficulties encountered by my students in the 1997-8 Stretch class and I will, therefore, define Basic Writing within this one context.

My Stretch Class

My Stretch class was computer mediated[7] and occurred in the same classroom both Fall and Spring semesters. It consisted of 19 students during the WAC 101 portion of the class and 17 during the English 101 portion; two students did not return for the second portion of the class and no new students were added. I entered the WAC 101 class with preconceived notions, largely based upon literature about mechanical errors and Basic Writers, concerning the types of difficulties that the students would encounter in writing. My assumptions, however, proved to be incorrect. In the diagnostic and first graded essays that the students turned in, the anticipated mechanical errors were either simply not there or minimal. For instance, only two stu-

dents had difficulties with sentence fragments and run-ons. There were a few difficulties with verb tense, spelling, and commas; but only slightly more than in a regular English 101 class. The most marked difference between the Stretch class and a regular English 101 class was the reported infrequency of writing academic prose in high school (some had significant experience in "creative" and "experimental" writing), procrastination, and attention span.[8] It was not, therefore, a matter of mechanical errors which marked these students as Basic Writers, but a lack of exposure to writing and a deficiency in listening skills.

The Questionnaire: Basic Writers and Writer's block

Because the hallmarks of Basic Writers and writer's block seemed to be the same, particularly concerning mechanical errors, I anticipated that the two were connected and perhaps fueled each other. This was an incorrect assumption. Perhaps my notions about Basic Writers and writer's block as discussed in earlier sections might have been appropriate in some situations. Nevertheless, being wrong in my assumptions intrigued me and made me begin to re-evaluate my perceptions of Basic Writers from the students' point of view. What were the difficulties that they perceived when they wrote? When did they have difficulty writing? When was writing easy? Did the computers isolate them, or did they create a new social environment which was liberating?

I made several observations concerning these questions during the 1997-8 school year; however, I think that the best comments came from the students themselves. At the end of the Spring semester, I approached them with a questionnaire about their experiences over the course of the year.[9] Questions ranged from the most helpful and least helpful parts of being in a computer classroom to more specific questions on where they composed most of their papers (in class, the computer center, the dorm) to if they encountered and how they overcame writer's block.

In response to the questions on writer's block, I found that the standardized answer that I had so easily assumed at the beginning of the school year did not apply to this group of students. All of the students acknowledged that they had encountered writer's block in the past,[10] but when asked why and when they encountered it, their answers were dissimilar from answers I would have expected when I entered the class nine months earlier. The following are some of the responses received concerning at what stage in the writing process the students encountered writer's block:

Student A—I get writer's block only when I know something must be changed but I can't think how. So I guess in the editing process.
Student B—usually at the beginning
Student C—the introduction
Student D—The first paragraph. I usually don't know where to begin. As soon as I get the 1st paragraph my thoughts usually flow onto the paper.
Student E—I experience [writer's block] right at the beginning. Once I start writing, usually I am O.K. from there. The hard part for me is just starting.
Student F—In the body paragraphs of the essay (all from page 2 of survey).

The responses indicate two patterns of difficulty concerning blocked writing that this group experienced while composing texts and how these patterns define the group as "Basic Writers." The first writing difficulty, reflected by Student A's response, is "unfamiliarity with genre issues," which I will deal with shortly. The second point is "linearity of texts," reflected in the latter five responses. I will comment on these later in this paper.

Genre Issues

Concerning "unfamiliarity with genre issues," one may view Student A's response in various ways. Initially, it may be interpreted as consistent with the standard explanation for writer's block, that the writer becomes so encumbered in the process of making a sentence "right" that he can't write anything. This explanation has merit, but is somewhat complicated by the answer which the student gave to the question, "Why do you think that you had writer's block?" to which he answered, "Because I didn't have much knowledge of the style of the papers" (2). What the student may be identifying in this description of his experiences with writer's block are not mechanical concerns but genre concerns. The student encounters difficulty not in how to write a sentence *correctly*, but how to write a sentence so that it is *appropriate* for a particular genre; he didn't have the strategies needed when confronted with new writing situations. For instance, one of the essays that the students in my class were assigned was the "Profile" paper, where the student's task was to write a journalistic essay on a person, place, or event which included details from observations, interviews, etc. For this essay one of the genre concerns was tone—one

needs to write in an objective manner, not including opinionated comments. In addition, the formality of the prose is determined by the audience of the essay; an essay written for *The National Enquirer* would have a less formal tone than an essay written for *Arizona Highways.* If the student doesn't understand such genre concerns, then writing prose which is *appropriate* for genre and audience becomes very difficult, perhaps to the point that the writer experiences writer's block. Adequate introduction to genre, however, can alleviate such writing anxiety and facilitate the writing process. This notion is reinforced by Student A's comment that he no longer encounters writer's block because he has a clear understanding of the genre he is asked to write in and the styles of writing appropriate for that genre (2).[11]

Student A's response encapsulates an explanation of why at least one member of this group of Basic Writers experienced blocked writing—difficulty with genre. Although not identified as a cause of writer's block by the other students, unfamiliarity with genre may have been a potential block in the past for the student writers. Problems with genre certainly is not confined to Basic Writers, but because of their inexperience with writing it likely causes more problems, particularly the inability to begin writing, than it might with more experienced writers. One of the most effective ways that I have found to introduce a new genre to students is to give them examples of the genre and, following this, to ask them to generate possible topic ideas themselves. None of the students in the Stretch class, however, identified invention activities like generating topics for various writing situations as part of their previous writing processes. Without the tools needed to begin to craft essays, it is not surprising that students would have difficulty in writing tasks.

When asked "How does your class help you to work through writer's block?" two students identified invention activities and two students identified research and peer comments, most likely also invention,[12] as useful block breaking activities. Most composition teachers today do emphasize the role of process in writing tasks and, certainly, the introduction of invention is part of this process. The process of invention can of course take place outside of an electronic classroom, however, I found that the computers allowed the class to share and comment upon each others' invention work in wider manner than would be possible in a non-electronic environment. In addition, the students in my class were able to print out the *exact words* that their peers used to critique the topics, rather than relying on verbal comments which may or may not be remembered correctly.

For instance, an example of an invention activity that I used in the electronic classroom was asking the students to post five possible topics that they were thinking of using for the assigned paper, such as the Profile, on the class discussion forum.[13] Students would make com-

ments on their peer's topics after all of the first postings were made. Using the forum to introduce students to possible topics quickly gave them exposure to various genre issues before choosing a topic and beginning the drafting process. Comments, for instance, ranged from how hard or easy the topics seemed to be—it is more difficult to profile a car race which occurs once than a coffee house which one may visit at any time—to offers of collaboration among students with the same or similar topics. Because of this on-line collaboration, the students were able to comment on many more topics and receive feedback from more peers than would have been possible if the discussion occurred in small groups. Employing the discussion forums in this manner truly allows writing to be a socially constructed activity, where the exchange of ideas occurs among all of the students in the writing community, not just between two or three of its members.

I believe that this variety in exposure to their peers' ideas and feedback helped to decrease incidents of writer's block among the students in the class. Perhaps the best indication that the computers helped students with these genre issues came from the students themselves. To the question "Does having the computers decrease/increase your ability to deal with writer's block?" one of the respondents noted, "Increased, because of the forums" (Student B 3). Another student noted that she enjoyed having discussions on the forums more than having large group discussions (Student D 1).[14]

Linearity in Texts

Not only did such on-line discussion help the students to become more familiar with genre issues, but it also introduced the students to hypertext. It is through the use of hypertext itself and an understanding of hypertext theories that instructors can begin to help students to use computers to break through writing difficulties such as writer's block. In understanding what is so unique and beneficial about hypertext, one must first recognize the linear organization of "normal" text's construction. The materiality of the written page, in English, is linear. Prose is written from the top of the page to the bottom in lines that are read from left to right. One does not normally begin an essay by flipping to the last page and reading the last sentence first. We should ask ourselves, why not? The reason is because we have been taught to read and also taught to write with a preconceived notion of how an essay should be arranged—linearly. Furthermore, the vocabulary used to discuss the parts of an essay reinforces the linearity of the text. For instance, a student will note that the "introduction" is the beginning of the text; it introduces the subject of the paper. The "body" paragraphs come next; they are the body or middle of an entity, which

is the text. The "conclusion" comes last, with its obvious root word as a signifier.

When faced with vocabulary, writing, and reading practices which reinforce linearity, how can a teacher help students with writer's block, which is rooted so deeply in linear organization? Certainly, there are ways to approach this problem in a non-computerized classroom, but the utilization of computers and hypertext is a valuable asset in aiding students to relieve writer's block.

George P. Landow is author of several books on hypertext including *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. In it, Landow quotes Theodor H. Nelson, who coined the term "hypertext" in 1960—hypertext is "*nonsequential writing*—text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen. As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways" (4). In the Stretch class, we used the most commonly recognizable form of hypertext, the negotiating of links from page to page on the Internet, as a research tool. We also frequently used two more simple forms of hypertext, the class homepage and discussion forums. At the beginning of each class, the students would log onto the course homepage and link to messages, discussion questions for the day, and so forth. In the process of receiving and posting bits of information, the students clicked onto links and moved backward and forward through the webs of information in different ways. As one student would be reading the message board, another student may be checking the syllabus on-line, linking to e-mail, and so forth. Each class period began with hypertext. Because of this, there was a constant reinforcing of hypertext "organizational" structures.

The idea of "organization" in hypertext is an important concept that, not surprisingly, has been influenced by literary, rhetorical, and composition theory. For instance, much hypertext theory is informed by the work of Jacques Derrida, especially the book *On Grammatology*, and Roland Barthes' *S/Z*. The primary manner in which these works inform hypertext theory concerns the notion of "decentering" the text. This is accomplished through looking at written information in non-linear manners, by seeing beyond the organizational hierarchy of the "page."[15] Text ceases to be a static and unified structure; rather, one detects "blocks" of text which may be understood and manipulated in a variety of ways.

Derrida's theories, particularly, have been effective in crossing a variety of disciplines and specializations. In her 1989 volume, *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction*, Sharon Crowley reviews some of Derrida's work and shows how it may be used practically in the composition classroom. In the process of doing this, one of the points she makes about the power of deconstruction is its ability to make a

text fluid and adaptable to various writing and reading perspectives. She notes,

> any stable formal structure posited for a text is broken by virtue of its essential iterability; one can always link a written syntagma from the interlocking chain in which it is caught or given without making it lose every possibility of functioning, if not every possibility of 'communicating,' precisely (16).

She continues by pointing out that the ability to quote from Derrida in the sentence just recounted, and the audience's comprehension of the sentence, is proof of her assertion that sections of text may be lifted, moved, and manipulated outside of established textual hierarchies. With this in mind, the text becomes fluid; its blocks of information in the form of phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and so forth may be moved about freely and used in a variety of different ways.

The notion of "decentering" established textual hierarchies—such as the simple introduction, body, conclusion of an essay—is reflected in the basic foundations of hypertext. According to Landow, hypertext "provides an infinitely re-centerable system whose provisional point of focus depends upon the reader," and I would also include "the author" as reader (11)[16]. Because of the fluidity of the text, the author or reader is not forced to follow any sort of "standard" organizational pattern. He or she is given the freedom to follow links which allow him to move about the text in a seemingly infinite number of ways. Thus, the "blocks" of text that concern Derrida, and the lifted bits of prose which Crowley's sentence exemplifies, may manifest themselves as tangible, moveable bits of text on the computer screen of student writers.

Linearity of Texts and My Stretch Class

As noted earlier, at the beginning of each period, the students would go to the class homepage, which often resulted in linking to the class discussion forum. On the forum, students posted comments on assigned readings and completed invention activities, among other tasks. In the process of posting to the forum, the students would also access their peers' comments through links (the student's name) and reply to their peers. Because of the fluidity of the links, the "center" of the text often began with the discussion question posted for the day, but very quickly became displaced. If a student posted a particularly interesting comment on an assigned reading, for instance, other students would begin to comment on it. The "center" would change to that student's comment, until of course a respondent to the peer be-

came the "center," and so forth. Throughout a discussion forum, the "center" of the text continually shifted from moment to moment, entry to entry.

As with the invention activities on the forum, each student had the opportunity to post his or her ideas concerning a given topic. In addition, they had the ability to almost simultaneously access 17 other perspectives on the forum. The original input that the students had, therefore, often would change over the course of discussion as they read different perspectives posted by other students. What initially seemed to be the "right" or "moral" answer to an ethical question, for instance, began to be complicated by other students who brought different ethical codes and life experiences to the discussion. In this manner, hypertext organization and discussion manifested concretely the social construction of ideas and of texts, both individual and communal.[17]

In addition to the content of the information generated through forums, this process of generating text allows the students to act as both *authors* and *readers* of hypertext.[18] For instance, the organizational hierarchies are not as relevant in this medium as they would be if the students were required to write an in-class essay on paper. In the discussion forum, there is no need for an introduction or a conclusion. One might even posit that there isn't a true "body" of structured information either, as the students are free to write complete questions, sentences, phrases, lists, in capital letters, with(out) punctuation, etc., whatever was necessary to comment on the assigned question or their peers' work. The main concern was simply that their peers could understand their comments, that the communication so integral to Derrida's deconstruction would be effective.

Because of the daily re-enforcing of hypertextual organization, it is easier to characterize the word processing programs that the students used to write their essays as a form of "pseudo-hypertext." In doing this, the organizational hierarchy of essay writing—begin with the introduction and proceed through to the conclusion—begins to break down. On a basic level, Landow points to the connection between hypertext and word processing when he discusses the "ease of cutting, copying, and otherwise manipulating texts [which] permits different forms of scholarly composition" (22). But truly, this is just the beginning of how computers may be used in composition. More important for writers who experience writer's block is the idea that "hypertext makes determining the beginning of a text difficult because it both changes our conception of text and permits readers to "'begin' at many different points" (58). Within true hypertext, such as a web page or the discussion forums mentioned earlier, the beginning and ending of a text is subjective and based upon which links the reader wishes to choose. This textual fluidity may also, with some work, be

applied to word processing.

Beyond the cutting and pasting options of word processing programs, the computer can also aid writers who experience writer's block through the "changing perceptions" of where the "beginning" of the texts are. These changed perceptions will not happen automatically, though. Teachers must make explicit for the students the options that word processing programs make available and how these options connect to the hypertext organization used on the Web. To exemplify the way in which word processing can change how students think about and approach writing, one needs to recall the student survey respondents, particularly Students B-E. Although one of the students who answered the survey (Student A) had difficulty with genre issues, five of the six students recounted blocks at the beginning stages of writing. They had difficulty in writing in an introduction (four responses) or body paragraph (1 response) format. When the students were asked why they thought that they encountered writer's block at these stages, the answers ranged from to having a hard topic (1), to not knowing why (2), to not knowing how to start (2). Concerning this last point, one student wrote "I didn't know where to begin or how to begin with a *good* opening paragraph" (Student D 2, italics added).

Student D's comment is very revealing of two different concerns that students have when writing. One concern is "where to begin" and the second is how to begin with a "good paragraph"; both points, I think, deserve some attention. From the first point, one might surmise that the students had difficulty with beginning the narrative because they were in need of more invention and organizational activities. I believe that this, because of points noted earlier, would not be correct. Although only two of the students ventured reasons for their difficulty with the introduction, four of them did note that they literally had trouble getting those first few sentences. They felt "stuck" at the introduction. One might ask, why?

Unlike the traditional explanation that sentence level mechanics were the culprit of writer's block, these students were blocked by the notion that the introduction needed to be written first. The reason for this may lie in the fact that the introduction is where one traditionally "begins" an essay, whether one is reading or writing it. "Introduction," however, is quite different from noting that one has difficulty in "getting started", "jumping in" or even "composing" a paper. Although we may use these words as synonyms for beginning, there are actually nuances of difference among them. "Beginning" implies that there is an imagined linear structure with a start and a finish; one is attempting to initiate one of the boundaries of this continuum—the introduction—in order to get to the other—the conclusion. Of the three other phrases, "getting started" does, admittedly, have some of the same qualities of linearity invested in its meaning; however, the linearity is

not as embedded in its meaning as it is in "begin." One may "get started" with a conclusion, a body paragraph, and so forth; it is a much more fluid term. The other two terms do not have linearity as an inherent part of their meaning. "Jumping in" seems to negate any organizational hierarchy, as one may enter the text from any point indiscriminately. "Composing" also can be non-linear in meaning, especially if instructors have emphasized that composing papers is a recursive process, including deleting and adding information in revision, editing, and so forth. For these reasons, it is significant that the student used "beginning" rather than any other term to indicate the step in the writing process where she encountered difficulty.

Also important in Student D's statement is the idea that the introduction had to be "good." People who have had experience with the writing, revising, and editing process, the word "good" may seem a bit comical. It is very rare (if it ever indeed occurs) that a writer composes a polished introduction to a text during the drafting process. Normally, the introduction of texts are written and rewritten as the arguments in the body of an essay evolve and become more solidified. Often the introduction of long works, such as books, are left until last. Indeed, how can one introduce a text that has not been written yet? But students, particularly Basic Writing students, do not necessarily understand this and develop writer's block at the beginning of the writing process because of their idea that the introduction *must* be written first and if they can not write it, then they can not move on to the body paragraphs. One must remember that "Basic Writing students write they way they do. . .because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes" (Shaughnessy 5). They have not yet had enough experience writing to realize that it is OK to throw out an introduction that doesn't work. They don't understand that the draft introduction is very rarely if ever "good."

The benefit of viewing word processing through the lens of hypertext organization is that one does not need to approach the essay to be written in a linear fashion.[19] If the difficulty of writing occurs in the "beginning" of the paper, then the introduction should be, in essence, ignored. Spending time trying to craft a "good" introduction often results in the student being very reluctant to modify the introduction, even if it doesn't fit the rest of the paper. The student then must be convinced through conferences with the instructor, peer review, and as a last resort grading to understand that the "good" introduction written at the beginning of the writing process does not necessarily reflect the direction the text took at the end of the process. The student would be better served to ignore linear structures and simply "jump into the paper," by beginning to write the body paragraphs first.

The fluidity of hypertext organization, which emphasizes the interchangeability of blocks of writing, can allow students to see how

their blocks of text may be moved around in the paper. The second sentence of the third paragraph may serve as the topic sentence of a new second paragraph. The last paragraph written may end up being the introduction that so eluded the student when he/she was trying so hard to compose the "beginning" of the paper. What results from this fluidity is, in essence, a "re-visioning" of the text. Through the ease of moveable text, the student should begin to see the various possibilities in his/her ideas, possibilities that might not be explored if they are not easily manipulated on the computer screen.

Some Problems to Consider with the Electronic Classroom

Although there are many benefits to using computers in the classroom, only some of which are noted in this paper, one must always keep in mind that the use of the electronic composition classroom may not be particularly beneficial to all students, such as first year composition students who may be primarily concerned with the basics of writing, rather than with computers. Also, students who come into a class with little or no experience with computers may feel completely overwhelmed and experience writer's block and other writing difficulties because of computer anxiety. Although the instructor should anticipate such potential problems and strive to make the students feel comfortable with the technology at the beginning of the course, he/she must remember where the emphasis of the phrase "electronic composition classroom" lies. Such classrooms should be writing courses first; they are not computer classes. The computers are tools to aid students in the writing process; they should not subsume writing as a priority.

For some students, however, difficulties with technology will overshadow the purpose of the course, resulting in the course becoming a frustrating "computer class," not a writing classroom. Basic Writers, particularly, may fit into this category.[20] In addition, one must remember that Basic Writers often need additional time and more individual attention during the composition of essays. Difficulties with learning computer applications may take valuable time away from the writing process, time which is needed by such novice writers. For such students, computer mediated instruction may not be beneficial and should not be obligatory.

Student A's comments re-enforce this argument. Although he was a gifted writer who excelled in the class and was in no way overwhelmed by the technology, throughout the course he often questioned the necessity for and application of computers in writing classrooms. At the end of the course when questioned if computers helped or hindered his writing process, he noted, it "hasn't done either. My writing

skills have improved because of the class. . .the computer is not a teacher; it can't improve my skills. But it hasn't hindered them either" (Student A). Although I would agree with Student A's assertion that the computer isn't a teacher and that it alone can not improve writing, I believe that the benefits of introducing computers in an electronic classroom are far greater than any difficulties which one might encounter with them. The major advantage of using computers is that their applications can change the way that students think about their texts. They can use word processing programs from the point of view of hypertext theories to "re-vision" texts, thus helping students through writing difficulties like writer's block.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I referred to a quote by Shaughnessy, "Basic Writing students write the way they do. . .because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes" (5). For the Basic Writers in my class, the inexperience manifested itself in the students' inability to begin writing. Although I do not presume to generalize that all Basic Writers' blocks are caused by genre issues, I suspect that this may be the cause of more blocks than we recognize. Instead of just focusing in on the grammatical issues in a Basic Writer's prose, instructors should begin to look at his/her texts in a more global manner. In doing so, teachers may find that some of the greatest difficulties in writing, from the student's point of view, are getting past the blocks caused by an inability to "begin." Through the help of computer composition, the students may begin to re-think the linearity of texts. They may recognize that "beginning" a text doesn't necessarily mean writing the "introduction"; texts truly begin in invention, which may lead to the composition of body paragraphs, the conclusion, even the last sentence. Writing is a recursive process including multiple revisions; teaching with the computer and emphasizing the non-linear recursive opportunities in word processing may help students begin to see the possibilities of their texts.

Notes

1. Shaughnessy's book has been invaluable in shedding light on and re-evaluating the difficulties of Basic Writers, whose writing previously may have been labeled "dumb" or "incomprehensible." The book, though it has been problematized recently, is still useful in introducing teachers to the beginning of Basic Writing programs. It has unfortunately, however, also been taken as the last word on Basic Writing by some people, a problem that I encountered when I began to teach Basic Writing courses.

2. Leader, interestingly, also notes that "if by cognitive blunders are meant errors or deficiencies in knowledge, then these are the blunders of unskilled [basic] writers" (17). Such comments indicate how closely the definitions of Basic Writers and writer's block overlap.

3. For more detailed information about the Stretch Program at ASU see Greg R. Glau's "The 'Stretch Program': Arizona State University's New Model of University-level Basic Writing Instruction," in *Writing Program Administration,* 1996.

4. All papers I taught originated from assignments in the *St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, with the exception of the last paper in WAC 101 which was developed by Dr. Greg Glau, Director of the Stretch Program at ASU. In WAC 101 during the year I taught, the papers included "Remembering Events," "Remembering People," "Sub-Cultural Analysis" (profile). In English 101, papers included "Profile," "Explaining Concepts," and a teacher's choice paper. The last paper that I chose in English 101 was a collaborative mini-research paper on a "student choice" social issue.

5. The names of students have been omitted and the surveys have been lettered Student A-F.

6. For Fall 1998 there were 4072 students who enrolled in entry-level composition classes. Of this number, 3165 were placed in English 101, 413 in WAC 101, 289 in English 105 (Honors English), 168 in English 107 (ESL English 101), and 37 in WAC 107 (ESL WAC 101).

7. When I say "computer mediated" I mean that each student had a computer in the class and used it to participate in class group and individual activities, such as those described later in this project.

8. After discussing with colleagues my surprise at the level of writing in my Stretch class, I found that this level was not inconsistent compared to other sections at ASU. What was common among the classes was, surprisingly, that the students seemed to have a shorter attention span and weaker listening skills as compared to personal observations of English 101 students. Although this observation is too vast to examine here, it is a point which might be useful for future studies concerning Basic Writers.

9. Of the 17 students in the English 101 portion of the class, 16 received surveys (1 was absent) and 6 were returned. Part of this small number of responses is possibly related to issues of privacy, as the students

who turned in the survey had full knowledge and gave permission for their responses to be used in research which would be publicly disseminated.

10. Although I did not define what I meant by writer's block on the questionnaire, I had discussed it during the course of the semester, just as I had discussed the meaning of invention, revision, and so forth. By the time that the students completed the survey, they were familiar with these terms and how they applied to their own writing processes.

11. Although the student does note that he no longer encounters blocked writing, one must be a bit suspicious of this comment. All writers at some point in their careers are faced with the "blank page," and most likely this student will be as well. It is significant, however, that he felt comfortable with the genre used in the class after learning invention strategies and planning techniques which helped him in the drafting process.

12. I believe that if the students meant peer review, that they would have identified this. Because they did not address peer review by name, I believe the students meant invention activities.

13. The software used in my Stretch class was called Web Course In A Box, which includes a windows-based "course page" program. From the main menu of the course page, the students click on an icon for "learning links" which takes them to a menu for "forums." They click on the appropriately named forum link, such as "Profiles – Topic Generation," for a given class period. The opening remark is a prompt from me such as "List five of the topics which you generated for homework last night. After posting your topics, comment on as many of your peers' topics as time allows. Be sure to be specific in your comments, taking into consideration the purpose of this essay, the intended audience, and authorial persona." After this prompt, the students click on a link to "reply" to my message, after which a screen with boxes where they are to write their message appears. After typing in the message and clicking the "post message" button, the response appears on the forum page under my original message as a link (indented 5 spaces) which the other students can access and respond to. Students click on one of their classmate's links, get a message screen like the one they used to post their own invention homework, and click on the "post message" button to post their responses to the peer.

14. This is a rather interesting comment as the forums *are* class discussion. They are, however, conducted in a format different from "traditional" class discussions.

15. I put "page" in quotes as an indication that some of the blocks of text may present themselves in printed form, but the blocks of text may also be on a "page" which is the computer screen.

16. Three chapters after this statement, Landow does make the connection between the reader of hypertext and the writer—"the figure of the hypertext author approaches, even if it does not entirely merge with, that of the reader" (71). Although it is important that Landow connects the two, I do not believe that he goes far enough in his assertions. In the process of creating the text and reflecting on it in revision, the author becomes a reader. This is especially true if the author has written the text in a truly "non-linear" manner. Reading the text as an audience member may be the first time that the author sees the text in a linear manner.

17. It is true that this sort of "decentering" may also occur in a class or small group discussion among students, however, this sort of discussion is not normally recorded in a manner in which the students can clearly see a progression, or evolution, of ideas. Also, the "anonymity" of the screen sometimes lets "voices" of quieter students be heard more than they might in a class discussion setting. For instance, I found that many of the students in my class who sat in the back of the room and did not participate in large class discussion because of shyness were some of the more "vocal" participants in forums. Thus, I have found that it is the record of the conversations coupled with the greater variety of class voices which makes the hypertext form of "decentering" quite useful in a classroom setting.

18. One may argue that students are authors and readers of print texts as much as they are when composing on the computer. To some extent this is true, however, I believe that the interaction of student/author/reader is amplified through the use of computers because they create, in the words of Walter Ong, a "secondary orality" for the writer which is more closely analogous to a real "audience" (and hence purpose, context, etc.) than that in print texts.

19. It is true that one need not begin with an introduction if one is writing on paper, a point which may be emphasized in the electronic and the non-electronic classroom. The hard copy of a paper, which is most often the copy that is graded for the student, however, will follow a linear format. With the final product in mind, a student may have a difficult time separating a linear draft from a linear final paper. In this way, using computers in class and emphasizing hypertext structures can help students to realize the difference between a draft and a copy of the paper which is "due."

20. Of the 19 students who began the Stretch class, only about three owned computers and about five had prior experience with computers, particularly word processing. Although the students did learn the applications rather quickly, unfamiliarity with the programs was a difficulty during the first month of class. Some of the students still had difficulties with the Internet even at the end of the course.

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