Issues of Attitude and Access: A Case Study of Basic Writers in a Computer Classroom

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ABSTRACT: I conducted teacher research in a basic writing computer classroom to discover what two basic writers brought to the computer classroom that could complicate their interactions with technology and their ability to write with computers during our class. My discussion is twofold: First, I explore the writers' differing attitudes towards computers, writing, and writing with computers and the effects of these attitudes on my pedagogy. Second, in the guise of presenting opportunity, the computers accentuated the differences in the students' past technological opportunities. The computers empowered the two students by giving them access to the technology for their writing, yet the students were at a disadvantage when compared to their classmates who were more experienced in using computers. I conclude by discussing the effects that these case studies and the issues that emerged from them have had on my pedagogy.

It's Monday, 10:10 a.m., and our basic writing class begins. The twenty students start their daily ten-minute freewrite—or freetype—on the personal computers in front of them while I roam around the room, making sure that all of the computers are working. Some students already have two paragraphs typed as I walk by, and with fingers flying, are on their way to a one-page journal entry. But a few students have barely managed three sentences and sit, typing slowly and looking intently at the keyboard. I give the class an extra five minutes to write because some seem to have just started, but I know that this will only allow the slower students to type a few more sentences, while others will produce another half of a page. I wonder how I should account for students' different abilities with and knowledge of computers.

Most of the research on computer use in basic writing classrooms does not acknowledge scenarios such as this. The early literature from the 1980s on computers and basic writing students tends to present computers as a

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saving grace for basic writers. Researchers praise computers for increasing students' motivation and enjoyment of writing (Moberg 47; Rodrigues 337), for increasing the amount of text produced by basic writers (Etchison 39), and for leading students towards better revision practices (McAllister and Louth 417; Daiute 137; Dalton and Hannafin 340).

Twenty years later, research on computer use in college and the benefits of basic writing computer classes still tends to paint an idealistic picture. The recent Pew Internet and American Life Project enthusiastically portrays college students as having easy access to computers and much experience with computers. It reports that 20 percent of college students began their computer use between ages five and eight, and that 85 percent have their own computer (Jones 6). However, this portrayal of the majority's connection with and access to computers glosses over the students who did not grow up around computers because of their economic or cultural situations. Similar idealism prevails in recent literature regarding computer use in basic writing. In their nationwide survey of developmental writing teachers, Stan and Collins report that "positive evaluations of using technology overwhelmingly outweighed the neutral or negative ones" (32). And Kish presents computers as the answer to basic writing students' difficulties with writer's block.

Some research, however, has begun to question the overwhelming amount of praise for computers in writing classrooms. Gay was one of the first to argue that computers alone do not empower writers (63). Dowling similarly argues that computers do not necessarily facilitate writing (234). Moreover, Agnostina and Varone found that teachers in computer classrooms tend to intervene with basic writing students during their writing process, which is not always a positive or welcome experience, particularly if it distracts writers from their writing (46). But the caution signs raised by these articles and others like them have not been glaring enough to slow the technological bandwagon from picking up more basic writing programs and teachers in the name of progress. My own experiences teaching in the basic writing computer classroom point to the need for more research into the computer experience; attitudes; genealogies, which Sloane defines as an individual's memory, understandings, and prior experiences with writing, reading, and technology; and overall technological complexities that basic writers may bring to the computer classroom (50). More needs to be learned about this subject, particularly given the speed with which computer technology and our relationships to it are changing.

In their nationwide survey, Stan and Collins uncovered some contradictions and disparities between what writing instructors had to say about using computers in basic writing. I feel those contradictions in my own teaching: I could discuss many positive aspects of teaching in a computer classroom, among which are pedagogical variety, student interest, expanded audiences, a broader definition of "writing," and so forth. But I also need to consider individually the students in my classes who struggle with the computers. I feel that there is personal and pedagogical value in doing so and harmful repercussions for these students in failing to do so.

In an attempt to do just that and to address some of these issues in my own teaching, I began conducting teacher research with basic writers in my computer classroom during fall semester 2002. I wanted to explore the following questions: What do some basic writers bring to the computer classroom that could complicate their interactions with technology and their ability to write with technology? And how can I, as a teacher, account pedagogically for differences I see in students' abilities to write with technology?

After detailing my methodology, I present two case studies of basic writers and discuss the importance of attitude and access, two key issues that emerged from my case studies. I conclude with a reflection on three ways I have changed my own pedagogy as a result of my teacher research and case studies.

METHODOLOGY

I chose to conduct teacher research with four of the twenty students in one of my basic writing classes. Ruth Ray defines teacher research as "systematic and intentional inquiry" performed by teachers (173). She further defines "systematic" as research that "implies methodical data gathering, analyzing, and reporting" (173). According to Ray, teacher research differs from other composition research because of its "collaborative spirit; its emphasis on the interrelationship between theory and practice; and its interest in bringing about change. . . *from within the classroom"* (183, italics in original). I chose to conduct teacher research not only because my questions arose from my teaching but also because my purpose for conducting the research matched Ray's words exactly: I wanted to bring about change from within my classroom.

I also chose a case study approach in part because of Sloane's work in "The Haunting Story of J." In this article Sloane addresses the need for indi-

vidual genealogies of students in computer writing classrooms because our experiences with technology are always influenced by memory, learned responses, previous experiences with writing, reading, and communicative technology, and by our individual and cultural genealogies (50). As Sloane says, "Writing is also an intellectual and emotional activity of splicing together prior selves, understanding, and experiences" (52). Because of their detailed focus on individual students, case studies allow researchers to access these "prior selves, understanding, and experiences." My case study differs from Sloane's in its focus. Sloane looks at a student's genealogy to discover the motivation behind his composition choices, whereas I focus on the influence of students' genealogies on their interactions with computers and on their ability to write using computers.

The four freshmen, Valerie, Tom, Matt, and Maria,[1] who agreed to participate in my case study, were placed into basic writing based on their performance in a one-hour essay placement test, which was read and scored by a minimum of two readers. The stated goal of English 111, the basic writing class at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, is to help students develop reading and writing abilities that they will need to be successful in their university careers. English 111 classes are capped at twenty students and are held in computer writing classrooms stocked with a computer for each student and a printer for the class as a whole. Each class meets twice a week for two hours and five minutes for each class period. Throughout the course, the students write three drafts of five essays of at least 750 words, numerous shorter "exploratory writings," in-class freewrites, and grammar assignments, and produce a final magazine collection of their essays.

As their basic writing teacher, I observed Tom, Valerie, Matt, and Maria throughout the semester and collected and read all of their exploratory writings, two drafts of each paper, and occasional freewrites and in-class assignments. I also spoke with each individually about each paper. In my capacity as a researcher (which does overlap some in data-gathering with my capacity as a teacher), I took notes on each student's writing and computer concerns after meeting with them for each paper, I asked them to write a letter to me about their computer experience in the class, and I interviewed each formally and extensively towards the end of the semester to ask open-ended questions about their family, class, and cultural backgrounds; their experiences with writing in general; their experiences with computers in general; and their experiences with and attitudes about writing with computers in our classroom and elsewhere.

Although I asked each student to participate in my research for different reasons (outlined below), all demonstrated aspects of their writing process with the computers that intrigued me. Tom, an African-American student, had talked with me and written frequently about his experiences growing up in a violent, inner-city environment. I suspected that Tom didn't have much access to computers in his dorm because he produced the smallest amount of writing both in class and in the final draft of each of his papers. I asked Valerie to participate because, as a hearing-impaired ESL student, she worked with two computers during class; on one, Valerie communicated with her interpreter, who typed everything that was said in class, and on the other, Valerie did class work. I wondered what kind of effect, if any, the multiple uses of computers had on her. Matt, a caucasian freshman, always came to class early to work on the computers. Only once during the entire semester was Matt not already present in the computer classroom when I arrived, usually thirty minutes before class started in the morning. I wondered why Matt would opt for computer time rather than sleep, a choice not made by many freshmen! I also observed that Matt didn't get as much writing done in class as many of the other students. Maria, a Hispanic and ESL student, was the only student who turned in hand-written drafts of her papers. I wondered if this was by necessity or by choice, and if the latter, what her reasons were for choosing to write without the computer.

Although I collected data from all four students, the findings I present in this article are based only on data gathered from Matt and Maria, primarily because of space issues in the article, but also because I gathered the most data and conducted more extensive interviews with Matt and Maria. Tom and Valerie both struggled extensively with writing in the course, and the times we arranged to discuss their papers and for formal interviews were spent working on specific pieces of writing rather than discussing writing and computers in general. As I worked with Tom and Valerie, my role as teacher took priority over my role as researcher. Plus, meetings with Valerie required a sign language interpreter to be present, which resulted in almost no informal meetings and formal meetings bound by the time constraints of the interpreter.

PORTRAITS OF TWO BASIC WRITERS IN A COMPUTER CLASSROOM

Matt

Matt was born and grew up in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in a low-income neighborhood, which he described in detail in one of his essays and in our informal discussion about the essay. Both of his parents work, but he does not know exactly what they do, although he does know that his mom works on computers as part of her job.

While growing up, Matt did not have a computer in his home; his parents got their first computer when he was in high school, but he told me that he still never used it much because he "never learned how to use a computer." It seems that Matt's home computer goes unused most of the time, since he reported that his parents also rarely use the home computer. Matt's first time using a computer was on the family's home computer. He used AOL to go online. Matt told me that his high school did have computers and that all students were required to take typing, but the school computers were "Apple and old." Until he came to college, Matt used computers mainly to type essays for high school classes. Now he uses computers "for stuff on campus—essays, looking stuff up. I have a lot of online quizzes from classes." He also e-mails occasionally, but said that he doesn't e-mail or chat "like other people do."

Matt also doesn't have much practice with writing. In his high school, they did "a lot of oral presentations and stuff like that," but did not write much. Matt told me that if he didn't have to write, he wouldn't; it's not something he likes to do.

Despite his dislike of writing and his relative inexperience with computers, three different times in our formal interview, Matt emphasized his desire to learn how to type. He also said that writing on the computer is currently more difficult for him than writing by hand. "I like typing," he said, "but I just think it's easier to write something. I just want to learn how to type quicker." This desire may stem from Matt's feelings of inadequacy on the computer: "I know how to *use* it [the computer]," he said. "But I think I might need more time in class, just cause, . . . I type slower than I would write . . . so I think I really need a little bit more time."

Although he feels inadequate and uncomfortable with his typing ability, Matt likes computers and wishes he knew more about them because, as he told me, "you're going to need to learn how to use them, to use them

good when you get a job and stuff, so that's why . . . I like to use them." Matt is particularly concerned that he needs to learn how to use the computers for his future job (he wants to go into business).

Matt likes having computers in our writing classroom because they provide an opportunity for him to use computers without distraction. "At home I get distracted," he said, whereas in the computer classroom,"I get a lot more done. It's easier in class cause everyone else is doing it too, so you don't get distracted." His tendency to get distracted in his dorm is the reason Matt comes to class early to work on his papers. He also comes in at 8 o'clock in the evening to work, even though he has access to friends' computers in the dorm. "The lab's open 8 to 10," he said. "Sometimes the dorm's too loud and the library's usually packed at night." For Matt, our classroom computer lab provided him with a place he could come to write without distraction and a means of improving skills he will need in the future, even though the computers require more time for him when writing in class.

Maria

Maria grew up in the Dominican Republic, the youngest of three children and the only girl. Her aunt raised her because the family's poverty forced Maria's parents to travel. Maria's father enlisted with the Dominican air force, which required that he travel from city to city, and her mother traveled regularly to Venezuela to buy clothing that she would resell in the Dominican Republic. Maria's two older brothers immigrated to Dorchester, Massachusetts, when she was 13. In high school Maria began living with her brothers during the school year and returning to the Dominican Republic in the summer. Maria's first language is Spanish, but she speaks English well and someday wants to be an immigration lawyer.

Because of their poverty, Maria's family did not have a computer while she was growing up, but her brothers bought her a used computer when she turned 16 in response to her complaints that "there was never time to use [the school computer]." When I commented on her brothers' generosity, Maria laughed and said that they had their own motives: It turned out that they used it to play video games. "So where is the homework? They used it more than I did. They said, 'Hey, we paid for this.' I said, 'But it was for me!'" Maria told me that her parents' reaction to the computer was negative. When she showed her parents her computer, her mom said, "Get that away from me!" and she still "doesn't even touch it."

Two years later, Maria is using the same computer, which is now even more outdated. "It's sooooo slow," she said. "It takes it like 5 minutes to download a picture." The computer's speed is why she writes her essays first on paper. When I asked about her handwritten drafts, she said, "Just forget about it. I write all of my drafts on paper." She also tells me that it's too expensive to print her drafts on campus, so she waits to type them until her final draft. Plus, she said, "It's easier for me to write them down, to think, instead of just typing up whatever's in my head. . . . Computers are easier, but if you want to think about it, then it's pencil and paper I think is easier." Maria told me that she's trying to talk her brothers into getting her a new computer, but "they say they need a computer [first]."

Although she writes a lot of papers for her classes—sometimes twice a week for her anthropology class—Maria calls herself a "slacker" when it comes to writing. She doesn't write e-mails, although she thinks it's "really fun" to get e-mail. She told me, "My friends say, 'Why don't you ever answer me?' I say, 'We talk on the phone. What's the point?'" She also complained to me during one of our informal meetings about her cousin in the Dominican Republic, who e-mails because it's their only way of communicating. She gets tired of having to respond to his e-mails: "I hate writing back," she said.

Despite her dislike for writing e-mails and papers on computers, Maria feels comfortable with her knowledge of computers, with one exception: She explained that when she types, "I have to look at the keyboard. . . . I think it's so annoying. Other people type without looking at the keyboard. That's the only thing that's so not fair." And, as I noticed in class, Maria enjoys computers. She stayed after class to surf the Internet, to find "cool" sites, and to ask my advice about making online purchases. When I asked her how she feels about computers in general, Maria stopped complaining about her slow computer and the cost of printing and instead emphasized the convenience of computers for research and for presenting finished versions: "I do love computers," she said. "It's so much easier. It beats going to the library. No books. And it looks better when you type something up than when you hand it in written down. I love my slow computer!"

DISCUSSION OF CASE STUDIES

Of the many interesting issues that arose in my observations of and discussions with Matt and Maria, I've chosen the two that I see as the most

intriguing and important in their effect on my pedagogy. My observations of and discussions with Matt and Maria helped me realize that I need to provide the basic writing students in my class with a balanced perspective and pedagogy in regard to computer use. The two areas that I will discuss are students' attitudes toward computers and students' access to computers.

Students' Attitudes: "Cause You're Going to Need to Know How to Use Them"

As can be seen in the earlier portrayals, neither Matt nor Maria likes to write in general. Matt likes writing only when he can choose something that interests him or that relates to him, but told me, "I don't think of myself as a writer. If I didn't have to write, I don't think I would write. If it wasn't required . . . it's not something I'd like to do." When I asked Maria if she likes to write, she said, simply, "No." Maria calls herself "a slacker cause I just write enough to get by." She told me that she does like to write poems about things she's passionate about, like sexism and bilingual education. She often wrote poems during freewriting when I did not provide a writing prompt.

In contrast to their negative attitudes towards writing, both Maria and Matt like computers in general and like having them in our classroom. In fact, even though Maria frequently complained about her slow computer in our informal discussions and our formal interview, she ended the interview by telling me, "I love my slow computer!" Matt explained his positive attitude toward computers by referring to his future—that he'll eventually "need to know how to use them." Matt's responses seem common, according to Stan and Collins. They note that students tend to see computers as a "useful tool" and "feel they are learning the technology of the future" when they use computers (32). Matt and Maria's positive attitudes toward computers reflect society's positive and idealistic views about computers and the benefits of computer literacy. Although Sloane argues that students' attitudes toward computers echo their parents' attitudes (57), I saw society as having the biggest influence on Matt and Maria's attitudes about computers and about writing with computers. Both students' comments fit well with Selfe's discussion that society perceives computer literacy as a means of ensuring economic success.

Matt and Maria's positive attitudes toward computers do not transfer to their attitudes toward writing with computers. Neither enjoys writing with the computer—Maria even hates to write e-mails on the computer, as discussed earlier. This dislike of writing with computers seems natural, given

both students' dislike of writing in general, but it does not conform to the larger research studies on students' attitudes in relation to writing with computers. Gay found students' attitudes toward writing improved with computer use (68), and Stan and Collins report that this finding is consistent across research and "has been generally accepted as a first step toward subsequent writing improvement" (24).

Both students seem to feel empowered and positive about the presence of computers in the classroom, particularly given their perceptions about the importance technology will have in their futures, and yet both feel hesitant or inferior when it comes down to their abilities to use and write with the machines. Matt doesn't know how to type well and wants to "know more about them [computers]," and when I asked Maria if she was comfortable with the computers, she compared her abilities with those of other students, pointing out her shortcomings. When speaking with me, Matt referred primarily to "typing" when he discussed writing or composing on the computer, whereas he referred to writing with pen and paper as "writing."

Batschelet and Woodson argue that this distinction between writing with computers and computers as machines/technology is made only by beginning writers and does not exist with experienced writers (qtd. in Stan and Collins 23-24). As a writing instructor, I am used to writing with computers and see writing as necessarily connected to computers, but the students in my classes may not always connect writing with computers and may need pen and paper writing assignments until they become accustomed to writing solely with computers. As a basic writing teacher, then, I need to be aware that students may have negative attitudes about writing with computers even when they have positive attitudes towards having the computers in class. If one of my goals is to help students enjoy writing and become more confident in their writing, I need to help students overcome feelings of inadequacy and hesitation about using the computers to write.

Students' Access: "Other People Type Without Looking . . . That's So Not Fair"

For basic writers, writing is an unfamiliar and often complex territory to be navigated with caution. Stan and Collins agree, defining basic writers as lacking self-confidence and "unpracticed and unskilled in composing specific forms of texts valorized traditionally by faculty" (22, 20). For Shaughnessy, the definition of basic writers as inexperienced beginners who

"must, like all beginners, learn by making mistakes," explained many of the reasons why basic writers write the way they do: "Some writers, inhibited by their fear of error, produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin" (7). Shaughnessy's descriptions are increasingly relevant when we add computers into the mix of basic writing classrooms. What happens in a computer classroom when basic writers, who by definition lack experience in writing, also lack experience with computers?

Both Matt and Maria's abilities to write with a computer and their access to computers directly reflect their family, class, and cultural backgrounds. Neither student had used a computer or owned a computer until they were in high school. Even after receiving access to home computers, neither student used computers regularly or saw their parents using computers at home. Maria's brothers used her computer, but only to play video games.[2]

Both Matt and Maria continue to have difficulties with computer access. Matt is grateful for the access afforded him by the classroom computer lab because "the dorm's too loud and the library's usually packed." Yet, as Moran discusses, this allows Matt "institutional access," which still disadvantages him when compared to students with "home access" (218-19). And although Maria has access to a computer, its age and speed, combined with her economic situation and inability to afford printing, limit that access to such an extent that she handwrites her papers.

I found Faigley and Porter's definitions of "access" to be helpful when analyzing Matt and Maria's situations. Faigley says that "information literacy" requires more than just speaking of access as equipment and technical skill (135). Porter's definition is similar, but three-fold: access includes (1) infrastructure (money and machines), (2) literacy (education and training), and (3) community acceptance (freedom to speak online) (99). According to the first part of both Faigley's and Porter's definitions of access as equipment and machines, our classroom computer lab has provided Matt and Maria with more access to technology by providing them with the opportunity to use the machines for their writing, an opportunity that is harder for them to come by than for other students. In their comments to me, it's evident that Matt and Maria both see the computers in our classroom as empowering—Matt gets to practice his typing, and Maria gets to present me with an occasional in-class draft that, because she wrote it using the computers in class, looks better than her handwritten drafts. Maria has the opportunity to use the classroom computers after class to surf the Web, and

Matt finds writing on the computer during class easier—"cause everyone else is doing it too." Many researchers claim that computers in the classroom are distractions for students because of anxiety over the text's visual appearance or because of the physical disruptions of the keyboard and computer environment (Sharples 94; Crafton 272; Dowling 232, 228), but in Matt's case the computer classroom provides him with access to computers without the distractions he finds in other places of institutional and dorm access.

However, when referring to the second part of both Faigley's and Porter's definitions of access as "information literacy" and "education and training," the "access" that the computer classroom provides Matt and Maria is more problematic. The basic writing class pedagogy at my university, as outlined earlier, does not encompass any education or training with computers until students assemble their final portfolios the last week of class. Then, they are given a handout on formatting their papers to look less like student essays. Our basic writing program pedagogy focuses instead on the drafting and revising process of writing, not on training in word processing or practice typing. Yet we usually assume students have a certain degree of this second type of computer access, education and training in computer use, which is a poor assumption when our classes include students such as Matt and Maria. Although Matt and Maria's cases may be exceptional, they do show the importance of addressing individual circumstances in our pedagogies.

For me, having computers in the classroom seems to be a "Catch 22" when viewed in terms of equity. Olson says schooling ought to be a "maker of opportunities" (204). Basic writing computer classrooms can be viewed as makers of opportunities—the basic writing classroom becomes a place to give all students the opportunity to write with technology, an opportunity students like Matt and Maria do not readily have. Yet, even as computers in the classroom create opportunities, they may accentuate differences in opportunity. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, as I roamed around the classroom each day while students wrote, the differences between those who had the opportunity to learn to write with computers early and those who didn't were very clear. Unfortunately, as Conway says, marginalization and alienation can result from "even the most well-intentioned attempts to empower 'at-risk' populations" (91).

We therefore need to be careful when we make arguments that computer classrooms provide students with more access. For example, as co-

director of a basic writing program, Grabill decided that a need of basic writing is to "introduce sophisticated writing technologies to our students for reasons of access—students could not be successful at our university without access to these technologies" (94). It's unclear if Grabill is referring to access to the machines only or also to the information literacy and training in use of the machines. But Grabill's conclusion is clear: "In effect, we provided our students with an advantage" (100). Yet this claim of advantage and Grabill's justification for requiring basic writing to be taught using computers takes a more long-term approach to issues of success and access, defining "advantage," "access," and "success" within the context of the university, not within the context of the basic writing class itself.

For the two students I followed and interviewed, writing on computers in the classroom did not lead to more empowerment when viewed from a more short-term focus on the class itself. Both Matt and Maria struggled with writing on the computer. Matt, in particular, wrote significantly less in class than most other students. For example, Microsoft Word's word count feature allowed me to see that Matt's freewrites (15 minutes of writing in response to open-ended prompts) for the entire semester averaged 113 words per freewrite, compared to the class average of 190 words per freewrite. The two students who sat next to Matt averaged 224 and 273 words per freewrite, which may have contributed to Matt's awareness of his slow typing and his self-comparisons to other students. Maria also struggled, although not to this extent, averaging 147 words per freewrite. Maria was also very conscious of the fact that "other people type without looking at the keyboard. . . . That's so not fair."[3]

In their nationwide survey of basic writing teachers, Stan and Collins found that students "just plain write more—more words, more pages" when computers were added to the basic writing classroom (33). Even if it is the case for the majority of students, those without access and extensive computer experience are further disadvantaged in the writing classroom because other students write even more, while they, in turn, write even less.[4] Of course, Matt and Maria's typing struggles and lower word counts may be a result of their struggles with writing in general and not solely a result of their struggle with writing on computers. But for students such as Matt and Maria, the computer may add "complexity to an already complex process," as Crafton says (322). Crafton believes that we tend to see computers as "labor-saving" devices, but if they do complicate writing or the writing process for some students, students might actually need more time when we

ask them to write with the computer, a fact that Matt was well aware of and spoke about in our interview.

Moreover, Nichols found that writers who were unsure of the word processing system or who weren't excellent typists experienced many interventions and complexities in composing that negatively affected their short-term and long-term memory and interrupted their focus on their writing plans and goals, a focus that Perl and Flower and Hayes found so crucial in distinguishing between beginning and expert writers. Using the example of Gina, whom he defines as a "better" writer, Nichols suggests that better writers than basic writers are more likely to use a word processing system to their advantage (92). I have observed in my teaching that it's not necessarily *better* writers who can use the computers to their advantage, but in the case of producing more writing at one time, it takes *computer-experienced* writers. The extra tasks involved when writing with computers require more for some writers than what they would otherwise need to write with pen and paper.

Without knowing individual students' genealogies, we may easily overlook the difficulties that lack of computer experience produces for some students in computer writing classrooms. Stan and Collins record that almost all instructors in their survey agreed that students with minimal or no computer skills presented a problem in class, mainly because the instructors had to teach them the necessary word processing commands and uses (37). From Stan and Collins' article, it doesn't seem that many instructors recognized any long-term problems this lack of access and experience presented for students. Stan and Collins report that most instructors thought these problems disappeared as the semester progressed, with one exception: students who lacked typing skills, they found, were at a "decided disadvantage" (37). Stan and Collins conclude this section of their report with a quote and a question from one instructor surveyed: "A small handful of students . . . fall way behind. . . . Should knowledge of word processing be a requirement for entry into a basic writing course?" (34).

When addressing questions such as these, we need to remember, as Thomas says, that "before anything else [basic writers] need to learn hope and self-confidence" (59). Being enrolled in a writing class in a computer lab when they do not have much computer knowledge may lead students to doubt their abilities when what they really need is confidence. In their presentation of some of the problems and contradictions in computer use in basic writing classes, Stan and Collins argue, "Technology can serve to

alleviate or even transform a basic writer's anxiety about writing—or it can erode still further a basic writer's confidence" (22).

After struggling with issues such as these while working with and interviewing Matt, Maria, and students like them, I am convinced that "providing access" is a much more complex concept than just providing the machines. Access issues run deeper than computers, programs, availability, and use in a writing classroom—they stem from and encompass students' family, culture, and class genealogies that affect their interactions with the classroom component in the overall picture of access.

There are plenty of research studies showing that computers can help basic writing students, and I've seen this in my own classes. But in some cases, computers can also further disadvantage students, and I need to take this into consideration in my pedagogy. I therefore believe that *the option* to write with computers is a good one for basic writers. Without the availability of computers in classrooms, students with less access to machines may not be able to make the decision to write with them, while students with home access always have that option. In this sense, computer classrooms do provide students with *access to choice*. Perhaps we need to combine Grabill's long-term definition of "access" and "success" with a short-term definition based on success in the writing class. The following section outlines three ways in which I have altered my pedagogy in an attempt to balance providing access to computers without further disadvantaging some students.

ALTERATIONS TO MY PEDAGOGY

First, I have adopted Moran's and Duffelmeyer's suggestions to have students write technology narratives at the beginning of the semester. In this technology narrative, Duffelmeyer asks students about their attitudes about technology; the influences of their parents, friends, teachers, schools, and society in general on their attitudes and uses of technology; and their individual chronologies with computers (295). Moran suggests that these technology autobiographies will not only help us learn about students' connections, or lack thereof, to the technology we are asking them to use, but are also the first step in helping students become "reflective and critical users" of the technology (220). Technology narratives allow me to discover what students bring with them to writing and to computer use.

I now assign these technology narratives before establishing a firm

plan for my course so that, if needed, I can change my approach and assignments to account for individual students' access issues and genealogies. I have at times added computer instruction to lesson plans, allowed individual students more time with assignments, accepted handwritten drafts from individual students, and, most successfully, have held office hours in the computer classroom in response to technology narratives. The smaller writing class gives me a unique opportunity to tailor my curriculum for the students. Students will probably not get this flexibility and attention to their individual genealogies in larger classes.

My second pedagogical change is striving for a balanced approach to using computers in the classroom. Even in a class with computers available, I now assign writing without the computers. I require a balanced portion of the writing in the class to do be done with pen and paper for those students who aren't empowered by computers and for whom complexities added by the computer might take away from the focus and time needed to put their thoughts and ideas in writing. Despite what students may think, the existence of the machines in the classroom does not necessarily give them access to knowledge about computers, to stellar typing abilities, to future success in jobs, or to prolonged access and contact with computers in the future. What it does give is access to choice and to the opportunity to write with computers if students choose to do so. I therefore try to present the computers as a choice instead of deciding for students that all writing in the class—or even the majority of writing in the class—will be done on computers.

Third, I try to follow Kish's statement when planning assignments: "Computers are tools to aid students in the writing process; they should not subsume writing as a priority" (154). I have decided to avoid assignments in basic writing classes that might subsume writing by involving technology in the writing process in even more complicated ways than word processing does. Stan and Collins report of a variety of uses of software in basic writing classes, including Web page projects. In their article, they quote Jeffrey Maxson, who defends assigning Web pages in basic writing classes using the following rationale: "students already possess expertise in understanding and interpreting images, sounds. . . . Hypermedia authorship can thus serve to introduce them to academic literacy through means with which they are familiar" (28-29). Although I have assigned Web page writing and creation to students before, after my teacher research, I have decided not to assign Web page authorship in basic writing because producing and

supplementing writing with images and designs does add complexity, regardless of students' familiarity with reading images. Given the definition of basic writers discussed earlier, I use computers only for word processing in my basic writing classes.

Above all, as basic writing teachers, we need to avoid making assumptions about our students' computer knowledge and about the effects of computers in our classrooms and instead make active inquiries into these issues. This requires us not only to research issues surrounding computer use in basic writing classrooms, but also to get to know our students better so we can see the attitudes and genealogies that they are bringing with them to the computer classroom. We also need to carefully consider our goals for our students' learning and make decisions regarding the use of technology in our classrooms based on these goals. Let's not jump on the technology bandwagon wholeheartedly if it causes individual students in our classes to fall further behind in their journey as writers.

Notes

1. Students' names have been changed.

2. Olson says that this use of computers as a "personal video arcade" is common in lower-class homes because users are only required to know how to load the program, whereas in middle-class homes, computer use more typically involves sophisticated programming and interaction with the computer (202).

3. The computers in our classroom are not equipped with any typing tutorials. I should have looked into this possibility for Matt. Instead, I offered to be in the classroom at additional times in case he wanted to come in and type or write. He continued to come to class early and came only one additional time outside of class time.

4. Conway's study of four basic writers in a computer classroom also presents a perspective different from Stan and Collins' report, perhaps because Conway is also looking at individual students instead of conducting larger, more general research. Conway argues that computer classrooms may lead to more alienation for some students, as they did for the four students she observed, three of whom, she argues, actually became "nonwriters" in the course of the class. Like Matt and Maria, the students Conway followed did not produce more writing or become more confident in their writing as they wrote on computers in class (80).

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