
Computers and Composition: Do They Mix?

Russell Lord

English teachers in general have a mixed reaction to using technology in writing courses. Many feel that in order to retain the humanistic orientation of their discipline they need to stand firm against the aggressive force of the inhumane machines. Others feel that the tidal wave is too strong for their waning barriers, and like Matthew Arnold they hear their cause retreating

...down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Is the pen, which was once, according to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, mightier than the sword, no longer a valid weapon? My experience with first year composition students at Plymouth has led me to believe that we no longer need fear the barbarous hordes of technology. Indeed, they have become our allies, indeed, our aides-de-camp. Let me show you how.

Last fall, the English Department made a bold move by instituting a computer classroom. Such a step required planning, and the Department did extensive research both in the literature on the subject, and in working with a consultant from the University of Massachusetts. We found one classroom large enough for the project (Rounds 223), and in consultation with the Academic Computing staff were able to devise a suitable arrangement: a network of twenty-two IBM 286 computers was set up around three sides of the room, with two printers (a dot-matrix and a laser printer). We were able to retain the traditional classroom format

in the center of the classroom, with chairs facing the teacher's desk and the blackboard. In this way we could use the space for courses that would not use the computers. We decided to maintain consistency with the majority of other computer clusters on campus and use the word processor they used, PFS Write Professional, which, although it lacks some features of Word Perfect and Microsoft Word, has proven easy for students to learn.

One instructor experimented with the program in the summer, but it began in earnest in the Fall Semester of 1991 with three experimental Composition classes. I shall confine my observations to the results in my own classroom. During the previous spring, I had found it useful to establish small groups of four or five students who could work with each other in discussing and revising each other's papers. The method, if properly controlled, served to stimulate interest and critical awareness, but I realized that it would not work in the computer classroom, since the greater part of class time needed to be spent at the terminals. In order to maintain the advantages of an interchange of ideas under these conditions, I found it useful to have students work in pairs, criticizing each other's papers after each of three drafts. I used the *St. Martin's Handbook* as a basic text, a modern approach to composition that stresses revision of a series of drafts in a way especially suited to computer capabilities.

I became aware right away that the students were enthralled by the computers. Of course, they all knew beforehand that the course was to be using computers, and signed up for it with that understanding. Nevertheless, I felt it wise to let an expert introduce the class to the machines, and Roger Kleinpeter, Academic Computer Director, graciously offered to do so on their first day. This early experience gave the students a sense of security about the program that for most carried through the semester. Although there are always a few holdouts, most young people today take naturally to computers, and usually in any class there are a few whose expertise is far beyond that of their learning-deprived instructors. A few students knew right away how to access the library holdings, for example; something I was unaware of. They also discovered how to use the wordcount facility, and other aids present in the word processor.

The attachment to their machines, however, made an immediate change in the classroom atmosphere which required a reorientation on my part. I became almost a secondary appendage to the scene, something in the background to which they might appeal if anything went wrong, but by no means as significant as the keyboard and the screen immediately in front of them. I could, of course, gather them together in the center of the room to discuss important techniques, or other matters of importance. But that was no longer the focus of their real concern. I might try to regain more of my traditional commanding role when I graded their papers, but even that seemed less important now that the immediate task of creating words on the screen was before them. Nor is such a teaching role really undesirable. After all, our real purpose is to enable students to develop their own potential, not to glorify our own knowledge or ability. If a new method achieves this, more power to it.

Just what did the computer cluster add to student work itself that could not be accomplished without it? First, it provided a work-station that took away the possibility of interruptions which might occur in a dormitory room with a more traditional mode of homework composition. Second, it enabled a very effective use of the class period itself, with students eager to get down to work even before the hour began, most of them already at the computers before I arrived. Third, for the students it meant that a neighbor or I could examine a printout of an essay and make suggestions for major change without causing a rewriting of the whole. This process has still to be perfected. Students need to learn critical skills in order for it to function smoothly, but the computer has helped them develop these skills more effectively than traditional methods.

My own input has so far been piecemeal, at the specific request of students, since it is nearly impossible to cover all twenty work-stations efficiently during a fifty-minute class period. We are planning to make a monitor computer available to the instructor so that he can read a writer's work from the screen on request. But that has yet to be implemented.

The question then is, did it really achieve its purpose? As with most experiments, the results are not easily measurable. Some students who

have facility with words will progress as well with pen and paper as with computers, although they may find it possible to move faster in the new mode. I kept a portfolio of classwork over the semester, and although the papers are neater than they might otherwise have appeared, overall improvement in most cases does not appear dependent so much on the computer as on the diligence with which they developed a critical sense through interchange of ideas with classmates and with the instructor. The old virtues of diligence and willingness to listen for helpful instruction still carry more weight than any mechanical advantage the computer may provide.

Computer use, of course, has drawbacks. Printers go awry. Terminals cease functioning. Students find themselves unable to recover programs on disks that contain a week's work. These frustrations, however, can be overcome, as the computer center becomes able to handle most of them quickly and efficiently. And in truth I find the computer classroom a remarkable innovation. For me it has provided a wholly new set of challenges, both in overcoming mechanical problems, and in reorienting my own teaching to cope with effects of the new technology. For the students it has provided a new kind of learning, one that develops more reliance on themselves and their classmates to really criticize and help each other, with less dependence on a *magister*, and more upon their own inherent abilities which the non-threatening computer provides.

That they recognize the advantages becomes clear when we examine what is becoming of the program. This semester the number of classes has increased from three to five. I am using a program called "Mindwriter-Descant" that directs the choosing of topics, developing ideas, gaining awareness of audience, organizing and outlining material, and other elements often neglected or superficially expressed, which students are eagerly following before they begin the essays themselves. Such a program could not be effectively pursued without a computer, and it already seems to enlarge their capacity to write substantially. We are moving the computer classroom into a new locale, the former Robert Frost House, where it will be even freer to move forward. We need, however, still to realize that we have in the computer

merely an advanced type of pen and paper, one perhaps better fitted to our age, but still a tool which demands the same essential literary and humanistic understanding that have always characterized good writing and good writing instruction.