Integrating Computers into the Writing Classroom: Some Guidelines

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As the teaching of composition with word processors increases, so too do the concerns of teachers and program administrators about how this technology affects the attitudes and composing processes of students. We know that most students come into our writing classrooms with plenty of fears already: fear of exposure, fear of disapproval, fear of failure. For a time, at least, computers only make it worse. As students see it, computers generate additional worries for them: learning strange but apparently essential "keystrokes," interpreting cryptic data at the top and bottom of their monitor displays, and--worst of all--losing everything they have written or perhaps even destroying the computer with a couple of ill-advised presses on the Keyboard. It is
not surprising, then, that students often feel uncertain, uncomfortable, and even frustrated at the outset of a computerized composition course. A few are even more reluctant to write than usual.

There is an obvious need to integrate computers into composition classrooms in a non-threatening way. The design of our CompuWrite program at Central Michigan University has forced us to find ways of doing so: the computers are in the regular composition classroom, not a separate lab, so they are a constant factor in the students' and instructors' classroom lives. There is one computer for each student, so students are largely on their own, unable to rely on a partner or team to help them operate the machines and learn word-processing techniques. As a result, many of them are more than a little anxious when they begin the class. We try to deal with this problem by applying certain basic principles of good teaching to a learning environment that has been modified by the presence of computers. Since our major goal during the first two weeks of class is to minimize our students' anxieties about both machines and writing, we move slowly at first, keeping things as simple as possible and encouraging our classes to adopt an experimental attitude. Above all, we try to keep writing, not technology, the center of the course, even when we are introducing word processing to the students.

The anxieties of our CompuWrite students fall into two categories: fear of operating the machines and fear about writing itself. David, a typical CompuWrite student, spent the first
session worrying about losing his words in the machine. It took him time to realize that what was on the screen was for the most part only a copy of material that was safely stored on his data disk. Renee, the student sitting next to David, did very little writing during the initial sessions; instead, she spent most of her time worrying about breaking the equipment.

Even those students who don't fear catastrophe often find the computer distracting. Their composing processes, tentative under any circumstances, are further disrupted by the addition of technology to their writing environment. Terry, another CompuWrite student, found it difficult to adjust to the keyboard, particularly the specialized control keys. For the first few sessions, she had to stop writing in order to refer to instruction sheets or to hunt for specific keys; she was frustrated by how the computer disrupted her writing. Bob found the blinking cursor a major distraction. In his first journal entry, he described the cursor as "Big Brother's hypnotic blinking." Other students have expressed resentments such as, "Geez! We gotta figure out what the instructor wants for this paper PLUS mess with this goofy computer."

To reduce these tensions, we introduce the workings of the word-processing program a little at a time. For the first few sessions, this introduction is done independently of the students' actual writing assignments for the course. The reason for this is simple: students worry less about losing words that will not be graded. Most of our CompuWrite instructors allow their students to do their first paper or
two using pens or regular typewriters. Some even delay the introduction of the computers for a week or so, believing that writing, not computers, should quickly be established as the primary focus of the course. Whenever it does begin, the introduction to the computers is structured around a sequence of writings that take the students through the stages of playing, transcribing, and composing.

During the play stage, when word processing is first introduced, students are asked to "work" on ungraded, low-risk files such as freewritings, notes to close friends, and journals. Sometimes these short pieces are focused on the students' experiences in the CompuWrite classroom. This allows them to let off steam; it also provides their instructors with insights into the problems their students are encountering. While doing these nothing-to-lose writings, students are encouraged to experiment with the keyboard, especially the control keys. Some of our instructors have even developed amusing exercises that challenge the students without intimidating them. A useful technique at this point is to have the students turn off their monitors for several minutes while typing. This exercise accomplishes two things: it keeps them from worrying about typographical errors during a freewriting, and it shows them that their words are not as easily lost as they might think.

During these first classroom sessions, explanations and demonstrations are presented in plain English so that novice users don't become intimidated. We avoid "CPU," "CRT," and other computerese terms. We also try to keep in mind that students do not need to be given a lot of
information during their initial sessions. They can do most of what is required in the first week or so of class knowing only the following:

1. Names for the parts of the system: monitor, keyboard, disk drive, and printer. Simple metaphors help: compare the computer to a typewriter, and compare storing material on a data disk to placing it in a file cabinet.

2. The distinction between the program disk and the data disk.

3. How to insert disks and turn on the machine.

4. How to save and retrieve files.

5. How to use the cursor keys and DELETE key to do basic editing.

Constantly practicing these simple word-processing functions is far more important in the early sessions than trying to learn advanced procedures. Indeed, later sessions should add editing or formatting features only as needed and if needed. Block moving, block deleting, line spacing and pagination can wait for awhile. More exotic moves such as justifying the right-hand margin and altering the characters/inch probably need never be mentioned. The less that novice computer users are asked to understand, the more relaxed and competent they feel.

The next stage of our introduction to word processing involves the student in simple transcription. We have found that new computer
users adjust more quickly to the word processors if they do their first graded paper at their classroom desks or in their rooms, then transcribe it into the machine. Through the mechanical process of transcription they become even more familiar with the computer keyboard. Too, transcribing usually requires some very simple editing, largely because when transcribing the students often skip words and commit typographical errors. By this time, our students are comfortable doing editing of this sort, even on a graded assignment.

Some of our CompuWrite instructors allow the second graded paper to be transcribed as well—usually requiring, however, that their students do their revising of the teacher-edited first paper on the computers. By their third paper, most students should be ready to try composing an entire paper on the machines. At this point, they will know how to operate the word processors well enough so that they can concentrate on their prose. In addition to being forgiving about the appearance of the first papers done completely on the computers, instructors should continue to keep the following principles in mind as they take their students into this "computers only" phase:

1. Keep the students and their writing the main focus of the course. Although computer literacy is valuable to students, they do not need to know very much about computers to use word processing in developing their writing skills. Instructors should stick to what is essential when introducing the features of word-processing programs;
"bells and whistles," though fun, tend to complicate the writing environment and divert the students' attention from their writing.

2. Go slowly and deal only with the technology that is essential at the moment. Showing students several basic functions of a word-processing program during one session is like teaching them ten punctuation rules all at once: it is ineffective teaching because it gives them too much to handle at one time. The major concern should be to have the students write with as little interference from the machine as possible.

By integrating these principles of (1) focusing on students and their writing and (2) proceeding slowly and selectively with word-processing instruction, both students and instructors should overcome the challenge presented by technology that, at least at first, complicates an already confusing environment. The presence of computers in the composition classroom need not be an additional burden if we always keep in mind their only purpose: to assist in our students' writing development. We have found computers to be valuable and exciting tools, provided we never forget that their integration into our classes must be governed by sound pedagogy.