Word Processing in First-Year Comp

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Introduction

In the December issue of College English, William Marling comments that he is convinced that "the best places to introduce microcomputers are upper-division writing classes (Marling, 1985, p. 808). I contend that first-year composition courses are better places. Marling's primary reason for having advanced students use the micro is that the first-year students took too long to learn the system. My experience with a class of first-year students at Texas Southmost College (TSC) leads me to believe that, with a minimum of instruction and some common sense approaches, beginning writers stand to gain the most from the use of word processing.

My experience with word processing prior to this class was with a TRS-80 model III and Super Scripsit. I became a convert after writing and editing my dissertation using Super Scripsit. However, I decided to experiment with the micro in composition classes only after TSC purchased 24 Epson micros for several of the computer classes. After I became familiar with the Epson
word-processing system—probably one of the easiest such systems to learn—I decided that students might be able to learn it in a short enough time to make it of use to them in composition classes. I decided to use it one of my classes, and since our English department was also conducting departmental grading of final essays, I thought I would try to determine if the performance of students in the class using micros was observably better than in my other classes.

I chose my 8 a.m. class on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, because I could get the computer lab at that time. The students who enrolled in that section knew nothing about my plans until they arrived in class the first day. I knew nothing of their familiarity with computers or keyboards. Class was conducted as usual for the first three weeks, and the first essays were handwritten—rough drafts, revisions, and final copies. The essays were graded and returned as usual.

In the fourth week, the first class period was used to provide instruction on the Epsons. My goal was to give students enough information in fifty minutes to use the Epson word-processing system on the micros. I showed them how to turn on the computers, insert disks, boot the system, type in the editing mode, make insertions, make deletions, center text, store documents, retrieve documents, and print documents. I then gave them a one-page summary of commands we had covered.

The next class period was spent entering, storing, retrieving, editing, and printing students' first essay. Several students had difficulties; however, all but one student managed to get a printed copy of their essays.
The one student who did not finish had never used a typewriter and was completely unfamiliar with the microcomputer keyboard. To my surprise, of the other 22 students in class, 15 had had at least one full year of typing instruction; 3 others had had one semester and the remaining 4 were familiar with the keyboard but did not touch type. I might point out here that these students are for the most part economically disadvantaged and of the 23, 19 are Hispanic. In a more affluent school, I suspect the number of students with typing skills as well as the number of students familiar with computer keyboards would be higher, making instruction even more efficient.

After the first two in-class sessions with the computer, students started working on another computer-assisted essay. I had them use a method I had employed myself when I made the change from writing by hand to using the computer. Students wrote their initial drafts and made some revisions by hand. Then they typed the essay on the Epsons. After making a printed copy, the students again revised the essay using the printed text. After making the revisions on the printed copy, they entered them on their stored text in the computer and made a final printout. These initial 500 word essays took about five hours of writing time from the planning stage through the final computer-printed copy. Two of those hours were spent in-class on the computer where I was available to help students with writing problems and problems with the computer. The one student who had no keyboard experience chose to turn in his essay in handwritten form but continued to use his class time on the
computer because he was excited about the neat, official look of the printed documents.

Because the final essay in TSC's first-year composition classes is written with a three-hour time limit, my goal was to have as many students as possible use the computer on their final exams. By the fourth essay, all but three students were able to compose an essay, revise it, type it, revise it again, enter revisions, and print it—all in three hours or less.

Results

By the end of the semester, more than half the class which used computers reported using the word processor for written work in other classes. Every student knew how to use block commands and reformat papers, and some discovered how to use the graphics program we had purchased.

My students tried different things with the computer. They were not intimidated by the new technology, and little formal instruction was necessary. Most of the time, one student learned from another. When the manual was made available to them about the middle of the semester, my job as computer instructor was over; I returned to full-time writing instructor with the added benefit of having all but one essay in the class printed rather than handwritten.

My hunches about the computer improving students' final essays turned out to be only partially correct. Since handwriting has a significant effect on the evaluation of writing, I suspected that students who used computers would have an advantage on the final essay simply because their texts would be printed. I also
believed that these students revised more than others since they didn't need to recopy a whole essay to make a decent looking copy.

The computer did not, however, improve the students' writing performance. All final essays were graded by two other English teachers who knew neither the students nor the instructor who taught them. Of the 19 students who wrote the final essay, in the computer class, 17 passed and 2 failed; in the other two classes, 22 wrote the final essay, and 19 passed. Other than the use of the computer, I tried to make the instruction similar in all classes.

The computers did seem to provide more incentive or more reason for students to remain enrolled in my classes and attempt the final. The retention rate in the computer class was significantly higher than the rate in the class that did not use computers. During the semester, the drop-out rate for my other two composition classes was 43.8%; in the computer class it was 17.5%.

I fully recognize the effect that the novelty of using the computer may have had and that such an effect may soon disappear. I also realize that there may be other factors which caused the difference in retention rates. Nevertheless, the students in the class that used microcomputers got the bonus of learning to use a computerized word-processing system without having it interfere with their writing performance.

Conclusion

Because of the experiences with this class, I am using the Epsons in a sophomore technical
writing course and plan to use in it my first-year composition classes next fall with a more detailed study of the effects on students' performance. I agree with Marling that advanced composition students can benefit from using micros with word processing, but I believe the beginning college writer may also stand to gain. In the lounge, history teachers and others tell me about students from my class who have started turning in computer printouts of homework and research papers. More than forty instructors attended two sessions I lead on using the Epson word processor available on campus. Even Javier, the student unfamiliar with the keyboard, learned that there was a more effective way to write; he is enrolled in typing this semester, and I see him practicing on the Epsons daily.

References


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