

## Computers and Practice

# Using What We Have

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Many of us now have powerful teaching tools in our computer-equipped writing classrooms: networked workstations, "chat" programs such as the Daedalus' INTERCHANGE, and powerful word-processing, graphics, style-checking, and translating programs. But how often do we really use what we have? Not often, at least in my own case. So, looking back over the past semester, one class plan stands out—one in which my students and I did things in our computer classrooms that we could not have done in conventional classrooms. For at least this sequence of activities, the computers became something more than slick typewriters.

My goals in this sequence of writing activities were several: to exercise our voices by trying on a number of different roles; to stretch our powers of synthesis and generalization; to use the students' own writing as a "data base" and thereby suggest to all of us that students' writing is important; and to give students practice in documenting their use of other texts in their own.

We began with what I've come to call a "quick-write"—a ten-minute brainstorming session in which writers write individually and, having written, instantly "publish" their work by saving it to a public "box" or subdirectory. The full prompt, which the class picked up from our on-line "Prompt" box, reads as follows:

I. Now that the war is over, what could the United States turn its attention and its resources to? List as many major initiatives as you can. A foolish example or two: increase butter

production at home; send a manned spacecraft to Mars; escalate the war against drugs. Make the list long and wide-ranging.

II: Now that the list is wide-ranging and extensive, imagine that you are the President, about to speak to the nation. You begin:

"Fellow Americans. We have concluded the military operations in the Gulf. Now it is time to redirect the same energy, skill, and resources that we have devoted to this triumphant effort. I lay before you the outlines of a new national agenda, one that will carry us through the next six years of my presidency."

Now continue, outlining the agenda.

When you've finished, save to the R: box—filename R:qk4xxxx. I'll have them read and graded by Wednesday. Tally sheet in the T: box, filename T: Quicksum.

I need to note here that I was not "teaching" during any of this time; as the students wrote and published, they were following on-line instructions they had picked up from the Prompt box; they had been told to do this in our on-line "Class News," to which they access when they log on to the system.

While the class was working on its quick-write, I opened an INTERCHANGE session and presented as its first message the instructions for the coming structured conversation: "In 50 words or less, tell us, your real audience here, what tasks we as a nation should now turn our attention to." *Viva voce*, I gave these instructions:

Write and send your contribution; in five minutes, I'll ask you to read through the entire transcript, and then respond to the person whose contribution appears below yours on the screen. The person at the end of the strip responds to the person at the top of the strip.

After 20 minutes of this scripted writing, reading, and responding, I opened the session to unstructured responding: anyone can respond to anyone.

This brought us to the end of the first hour of this two-hour class, a time when I tell the writers to take a five-minute break—to move around, leave the room, walk in the halls. During this time, using the command COPY QK4\*.DOC O:, I copied all the quick-writes in a batch to the O: or "Outside Reading" subdirectory, and, using the word-processing program's merge function, merged the quick-writes into a single file, named "O:Merged.doc." This move made the quick-writes

easier for the class to read through, and since the quick-writes would become part of the data for a later writing, it made it possible to search this merged file for key words and, thus, access the data in different ways.

After the break, students returned to their workstations, and I gave them their next writing task: they were to become researchers and were to ask themselves the question, "How does a more-or-less random group of freshmen at the University of Massachusetts respond to the question, 'What should be our national goals in the post-Gulf-war era?'" As audience, I suggested that they think initially of a grandparent or aunt/uncle, someone who is friendly but likely to think of today's college students as an essentially frivolous, beer-drinking, over-privileged generation.

As their data, the writer/researchers had two major texts: the merged quick-writes in the O: box and the INTERCHANGE discussion session, which was still open to them on their screens.

Using the hypertext function that is a part of INTERCHANGE, I asked the students to link sets of INTERCHANGE messages, using key-words of their own choosing. They might group, for instance, all messages that contained the word "environment" and discover how many people mentioned this as a national goal. They might, further, describe the range of positions taken, and the relative weight of the several positions. Then they might group all the messages that spoke of "homeless" or "unemployment." They'd have to take notes on paper here, given the limitations of the software, but that's OK.

After 20 minutes of hypertext searches, I asked the class to leave INTERCHANGE, return to their word-processing program, and to read through the merged quick-writes in the O: box. I used this reading time to close out the INTERCHANGE session. While an INTERCHANGE session is still open, each contribution to the discussion is carried as a separate file, to make possible the hypertext searches I've described above. When a session is ended, all the separate files are merged, and the transcript of the discussion is then available in two forms: a chronological transcript and a transcript sorted by author. I copied the two transcripts into our I: box, where we by convention keep the transcripts of INTERCHANGE sessions. Now the transcripts could be searched by the word-processing program's SEARCH function: not as slick a retrieval system as the INTERCHANGE hypertext function, but one that returned us to the world of the word-processing program and permitted students to cut passages from the discussion directly into their analytical essays. Now the researchers, in effect, had their data in useful form and could proceed with their analysis and their writing. Here is the prompt I wrote for this

analytical paper:

Now it's time to write the "view" piece at full length, and to a new, particular, imagined audience.

Your audience: an adult, perhaps a parent, or grandparent—someone who thinks that you-all, as college students, are just "kids," a bit overprivileged and a bit thoughtless. Your piece is a quiet argument, one suggesting that, on the basis of your survey of first-year students, you as a group are thoughtful, mature people, likely to do at least as well as my generation when you find yourselves in power. Your pitch: First-year students have considered the state of the nation and feel that the nation should now turn its attention to particular subjects, particular problems. Your authority: the data that you've collected and your own intelligent presentation and analysis of this data.

Some ground rules: you must quote at least one student voice from the INTERCHANGE transcripts; you must quote at least one student voice from the quick-writes; and you must quote, in total, at least three students from the two sources combined.

Further, you must do some cumulative, statistical analysis of the information you have. For example, "ten of the sixteen students surveyed said that we should turn our attention to the environment."

You must document the quoted passages. You'll note that I've titled the O:Merged and I:Inter4 documents, and I've paginated them, so you have title and page number to work with. Consider these as documents that have been published on-line, in the UMass/Amherst Writing Lab.

Finally, you must have a title.

Sources:

O:Merged contains the quick-writes, merged.

I:Inter4 contains the INTERCHANGE transcript, arranged chronologically.

I:Inter4#2 contains the INTERCHANGE transcript, sorted by author.

I note here a few procedures that I follow that help all this go smoothly. I try to maintain a presence on-line myself—not by flashing messages to the students' screens, which our system mercifully does not permit, but through the voice that you've heard in the prompts that I've reproduced above, through on-line comments on students' writing, through an on-line grade book and attendance file, and through my own participation in the INTERCHANGE sessions.

Further, I'm there as a voice in the "News" that students can and do get from the menu when they log on. Here's the "News" for the day in question. As a bit of context, we meet at 8:00 in the morning.

Today a quick-write, beginning when you begin. Due at 8:30. You'll find the prompt in our prompt box, P:QK4. Instructions for writing and saving are there. Good morning! Time to jump-start our minds!

I keep a definite but low profile in the INTERCHANGE sessions. Here the line between "moderating" and "oppressing" is perhaps impossible to draw. I try to respond to several students during each session—and to different students each time. Here's an example of the resultant dialogue.

**Charlie Moran:**

Bill, Christina, Amy, and all others who have written about the need to shore up education: this seems to be the issue that you-all pick out. Can you tell me: do you do this because of your situation? Because you are in a class, being graded by a teacher? Or do you choose education as the issue because you feel this, independent of the situation?

And a response to my response:

**Sarah:**

Charlie, I thought about that, too. Do most people show a concern for the problems of education primarily because they are in school now and are paying big money to attend school? Will we become less interested once we have our careers underway and are no longer directly affected by education? We will have children though, which will keep us in contact with the problems. Personally, I will always try to help in solving some of the many problems in education.

And finally, I read and respond to the quick-writes as soon as I can—in this case, during class. I give these quick-writes a grade—check, check-plus, or check-minus—and I list the grade on our quick-write tally sheet. In class news, or *viva voce*, or both, I tell people that I have read and graded these, and that they can see the quick-writes and the tally sheet on-line, at their convenience. I regularly respond, too, to mid-process drafts with on-line comments that students access in our T: box.

In making these moves, I try to become myself an on-line presence. If I want students to work in an on-line environment, then I need to be comfortably working there myself—as a model, as a co-worker in this particular vineyard. Further, as Andrew Feenberg and others have noted, in an on-line environment we may need to "weave" the words of the participants together, creating at least the illusion that the whole has coherence, meaning, and direction. A student wrote to me last

semester, "Sometimes I think that I'm typing into a black hole named 'Moran.'" So I'm trying to foster the illusion that I'm there—reading what is being written. Clearly I can't carefully read everything that is being written, but I can respond as often as I can and, thereby, seem to be on top of the writing.

And a note on our system of "boxes," which I have mentioned but not explained. We have 20 writing classes housed on our system; each has its own log-on script, so that when students in my class log on as "Moran" they are mapped to our set of subdirectories; when Marcia Curtis' students log in as "Curtis," they are mapped to their set of subdirectories. Each class has eight subdirectories, four read-only and four read-write. The read-only subdirectories are places where texts are shareable and, to the students, fixed; the read-write subdirectories are places where texts are not shareable and can be modified. Teachers have read/write privileges in all boxes, so that we can do the kinds of housekeeping I've described above: moving, copying, merging and deleting files, as we need to. Further, we've made it easy for students to navigate this system by mapping each of these boxes to a "virtual" drive. In this way, if someone wants to save a file to the G: box (full path F:\Userhome\Moran\Guided-W), all they have to do is save the file to "G: filename." If they want to load a file from the G: box, they request "G: filename." For them, the complex system of subdirectories is transparent; they see that they have eight boxes, each with assigned uses. We've also made as a menu option a subdirectory map, just in case some of us get lost.

Finally, a note on my procedures in the INTERCHANGE session. This is, as you've doubtless noticed, a highly structured activity. An on-line discussion can be turned over to the students, or it can be initiated and moderated by a teacher. In this case, I have a goal in mind, and the INTERCHANGE session is designed in accordance with that goal. Before the students come on to the INTERCHANGE session, they have written their quick-writes on the discussion topic, so we get in this on-line discussion the fruits of their considered thought. Further, students get a chance to read and to react, in writing, to each others' positions. Each member of the class contributes, and each contribution is read by everyone. Because we are principally engaged in publishing and reading our views, I set up just one, main conference with twenty participants, rather than the several small conferences I might set up for small-group sessions. I also build in a structured reading time, so that students will read through the entire transcript before they begin responding.

The difficulty with an on-line conversation with twenty discussants is that unless you build in a preventive structure, some writers

will receive no responses to what they have written. I've therefore structured the responses so that everyone gets a response. "Respond to the person whose message appears below yours" ensures that everyone will get a response. Without such a safeguard, some writers will get several responses and some none—not a good situation.

So where does all this leave us? Not with a "class that really worked," but a class that depended upon, and fully utilized, the computer environment. To do what we did, we needed the quick publication that becomes possible on a network; we needed the almost-synchronous discussion that is possible on a network; and we needed the hypertext and search functions of the software so that we could rapidly scan, analyze, and reconfigure the data that we had. And it's all so smooth and fast: everything that I've described above happened in two hours.

But could we have done what I've described in a conventional classroom? Two of our colleagues think we could have. I don't think so. Let me imagine how it might have been had I attempted this sequence of writing activities in a room filled with student desks, or even in a room with stand-alone computers in it.

**Class #1:** students write the quick-writes. Do they then pass them around, taking notes as they do? They could—but then they get to read each piece once; they can't return to it whenever they want. More likely, after class the teacher hurries to the copy center with the twenty quick-writes, and has a twenty to thirty page booklet ready for the second class, complete with page numbers. It's not pretty, this book, or even entirely readable, because a few students have written in blue ball-point pen, despite instructions to the contrary, and the copies are therefore extremely faint. Nor is the text easily searched for keywords. And we've used 600 sheets of paper.

**Class #2:** students, sitting in a circle, discuss the question posed in the quick-write. The discussion is tape-recorded and transcribed by—whom? the teacher again? That's several hours of work. The INTERCHANGE transcript of our discussion, had it been printed out, would have filled ten single-spaced, typewritten pages. Then off again to the copy center to make twenty copies of the transcript. Or: the discussion is videotaped and replayed two or three times, while students take notes. There's more class time spent. And we can't easily search either the typed transcript or the videotape. To get the effect of the INTERCHANGE hypertext search using a written transcript, we'd have to cut up the individual contributions to the discussion and assemble them, like notecards, in stacks. And what about a contribution that referred to more than one subtopic?

**Class #3:** copies of transcripts are returned to students, and they are given instructions for the essay they are to write, due at the beginning of Class #4. On my Tuesday-Thursday class schedule, this cycle has taken two weeks, with much copying, transcribing, and distribution of packets. We could have saved much of the copying expense by placing two copies of the documents on reserve in the library, but then only two students could work on the materials at any one time, and I'd guess that this relative inaccessibility of the materials would prove fatal to the enterprise.

So I don't think it's entirely the computer-groupie in me that speaks here. Outside the computer-equipped classroom, I would not have thought of doing what I have described above. Had I thought of it, I would have dismissed it as too elaborate and time-consuming, and finally not worth the effort.

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#### **Note**

I need to acknowledge here my indebtedness to my fellow teachers, who have caused me to think hard thoughts about what we are doing in the computer-equipped classroom. Chief among these are Marcia Curtis, Elizabeth Klem, Nick Carbone, Ray Jones, Emily Isaacs, Lisa Melanson, Dix McComas, Peter Elbow, and Janet MacFayden.