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NEW ROLES FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS IN THE COMPUTER CLASSROOM

Will Rawn

"One good thing about computers, they keep the students busy," someone once casually remarked to me. Now, at the end of my first year of teaching composition in a computer-equipped classroom, I find that remark astute. Students working with computers and printers are busier, and I suspect their increased activity may be related to some other differences I observe between computer and traditional classes. Certainly, those busy students in the computer classroom respond differently to me, and my role as a teacher changes as a result.

Those of us who have taught composition with the aid of computers are generally enthusiastic about the experience. My colleagues, for example, are in emphatic agreement that they would always prefer to teach composition in the computer classroom. Reviewing the results of her national survey of teachers who have used computers to teach composition, Linda J. Stine noted "how poetic and fantasy-full teachers got when describing the advantages of computer use in composition instruction" (32). While some students are initially uncomfortable about writing on the computer, most come to regard the machine as an aid to writing. Dawn Rodriguez observed that her basic writing students were more positive about writing after they had learned to use a computer

(336-339). In answer to a survey question, students enrolled in a computer composition course at my own college agreed unanimously that they would recommend writing on a computer to friends and classmates (Selzler).

The enthusiasm, however, exceeds any measure of the impact of the computer on student writing. Curiously, even a researcher who found a decrease in substantive revision when computers were used, reports that her student subjects were convinced computers enabled them to write better (Harris). For the past several years most research has focused on the advantages of the computer as a tool for revision. The expectation that students using computers would become significantly more proficient at revision appears reasonable since the computer eliminates tedious recopying. While many of the students in my computer classroom write more extensively, and some make more meaning changes than is typical of students in my non-computer classes, the improvement is not so dramatic as I had hoped. The sum of recent research suggests my experience may be typical. While most researchers find that students do revise more when they use computers, demonstrations of substantive improvements in revision strategies for the majority of students are lacking (Flitschen 105).

If there is a discrepancy between the shared excitement of both teachers and students and the evidence for improvement in student writing, it may be argued we are all victims of a contemporary technological fantasy. However, when we focus not on the product but on the participants, a dramatic change does become visible in the computer classroom. Comparing composition sections I have taught in the

computer classroom during the last three quarters to my non-computer sections during the same period, I find students in the computer classes spend more time writing and asking questions about their own writing than their peers working with ballpoints. I spend more time consulting with individual students in the computer classroom and less time discussing readings, explaining assignments, and motivating students to start writing.

Students in my computer composition sections generally continue writing longer than those in non-computer sections. For example, my notes show that in the second week of the Fall 1987 quarter I asked students to start an exploratory draft (after 15 minutes of prewriting activities) in response to the prompt, "Write about someone." After five minutes all nineteen students in my computer classroom were still writing; after ten minutes, fourteen were writing, three were reading their own drafts and two were talking. On the same assignment, given with the same prompts later that day in a traditional classroom, seven of the twenty students present had paused after five minutes. Only eleven were still writing after ten minutes, while three were talking and the remaining members of the class stared at me, stared at the door, or fidgeted.

A change I welcome is that students in the computer classroom tend to start a task with less prompting. I spend less classroom time on variations of the themes, "Write now," and "Get some feedback on what you're writing early." On the second day of the assignment mentioned above, a student asked me to read one of her drafts as soon as I entered the computer classroom, and several others followed with the same

request. For most of the period I conferred with individuals while the students wrote, read their own writing, and occasionally read one another's screens. In contrast, when I arrived in the non-computer classroom that day the first questions were of the "What do you want me to write?" variety. After reading my own exploratory draft and leading a discussion on possible directions for the next draft, I still received only two immediate responses to my offer to read student drafts. While students in the traditional classroom did write that day and several were ready to confer with me later in the period, I saw less of both activities than in my computer classroom.

At every stage, students in the computer classroom appear more ready to see their own writing as the central issue for the course, and more inclined to define, isolate, and assume control of their writing problems. Perhaps because it is easier for both of us to read a printed than a ballpoint draft, I hear more questions about particular passages, as opposed to the global "What do you think?" from these students. The student working at a computer also tends to start writing again more quickly after a conference than a student writing with a pen. Instead of the paper shuffling, hair scratching pause I sometimes witness after a conference, in the computer classroom I often hear typing as I walk away.

While a computer does not magically transform every student into an independent writer, the change in student expectations is sufficient to prompt some reciprocal modification of the teacher's role. Teachers in the habit of employing various strategies to push their students to write and discuss their own writing in class are likely to find

themselves being pulled to respond as fellow writers, as editors, or as facilitators for collaborative projects.

Certainly a teacher's philosophy of instruction will be a factor, but an increased emphasis on the students' writing seems inevitable in the computer classroom (Nash and Schwartz), if for no other reason than because the machine is such an obvious signal to write something. The eagerness of students in the computer classroom to work on their own writing can take us by surprise. In a course in which they had intended to devote a major portion of their time to discussing a collection of essays, Kathleen Skubikowski and John Elder discovered that student interest in another aspect of the course, collaborative writing projects on the computer, came to dominate every aspect of the class. When I want to lead discussion of a reading in the computer classroom, I need to insist on a break in typing and printing (I find myself promising brief discussions, "and then you can get back to work").

If we have not seen all the improvements in student writing which the computer might facilitate, the reasons may be in part that we need to learn more about revision and about teaching students to use word processing programs to their best advantage. Equally important, we need to adapt to a new relationship to our students. The change in my own role was dramatized for me one day early this winter when I arrived 15 minutes late for a composition class in the computer room. Most of the students were still in the classroom, but they were not waiting for me to tell them what to do next; they were writing.

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