A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE: THE WORD-PROCESSOR AND THE WRITING CLASS

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Writing teachers are living in exciting times because the greatest revolution in writing since the invention of ink might prove to be the increasingly easy accessibility of word-processing.

The last few years have also seen new methods of teaching writing. These methods stress the writing *process* – the thinking that occurs before and during the act of writing – rather than the final *product*. This means that in a composition class, we should not pay attention to what is wrong with the product, rather to how the student arrived at the product. It is not that grammar and the mechanical aspects of writing are ignored in this approach but that they get less attention. The newer philosophy favours teaching grammar in connection with composition rather than in isolation since much recent research shows that instruction in traditional grammar for its own sake does not improve writing.

The process approach to writing assumes that students learn to write by engaging themselves in the process of writing and by teachers intervening to help students through that process. The process of writing involves *prewriting, writing, rewriting* and *editing.* These are activities which overlap and intertwine. The composing process is, after all, recursive and ongoing rather than linear and final. Rewriting or revision is important because it is only through much rewriting that the writer can "discover" the framework, pattern or overall design of some assertion, focus or argument. Even skilled writers admit the process of rewriting as "primarily the process of making major alterations in the content or substance of their drafts" (Emig 1977).

It is here that the word-processor becomes a useful tool for the teaching of writing as a *process.* First, it makes it theoretically compelling to ask students to work through the stages of free writing, writing a rough draft, and revising several copies. This teacher's dream will otherwise be a student's nightmare. On a word-processor, writing is no longer tedious since students have the knowledge that they will be able to go back later and clean up

effortlessly – to shift words and sentences and to add and delete. (Word-processors vary in capabilities allowed, but even the simplest allows text deletion, addition and movement with various print format options; the better word-processors differ from their cheaper cousins in that they allow italics, superscripts, footnotes, etc.) Five revisions in longhand represent some hours of copywork; on a word-processor, five revisions can be done in minutes. The students it will certainly help most will be those who view writing as a chore since it relieves the physical act of writing, particularly for someone who has a handwriting problem.

Writing can be said here to be akin to skilfully playing a musical instrument or to committing a moment to canvas. The brain wishes there be an artistic and creative communication, yet there stands in its way all the slow and imperfect means of effecting that communication. Using a word-processor promotes the ability to communicate quickly and freely in writing.

It seems likely then that the confluence of trends in better ways to teach writing and the inevitable development and increasing availability of advanced teaching technology such as the word-processor will result in exciting changes in the way that writing is taught to and even viewed by students.

I also foresee possible future uses of the word-processor in the writing class:

1   The teacher would have the same options in dealing with the correction of students' writing as in a traditional class, since she could have a hard copy of the final product. But, in addition, she could refer students to appropriate computer-assisted lessons in grammar and rhetoric, and if she monitored student writing in process, she could suggest this remedial work *while* the student wrote the paper, not after.

2   Reference materials can be part of the system. Today, there are already numerous electronic editors, which will help one write, such as "Electronic Thesaurus", "Punctuation and Style Clean-up" and "Proofreader Plus".

3   Peer feedback in a process-approach writing class is possible without the discomfort of having to peer over somebody else's shoulder. It can occur *immediately* through the monitor screen or *later*, in the sense that students' writing stored on disc can be made available for other students to examine and give comments on. Moreover, if the teacher

wants to encourage peer feedback, she will be in a better position to do so, since she can watch interacting close-up on the screen. Additionally, interacting using the computer can be made a permanent record.

4   The computer extends possibilities for teachers to do research into what goes on when people write since it has the capability of capturing and saving each unique step in the writing process.

Innovations such as I have described are presently hindered by three obstacles:

1   Cost has not gone down steep enough to make computing a household name in education. Thus, not many institutions are equipped with the computer hardware necessary to provide terminals for individual students for the amount of time it will take for the students to sit and compose essays at the terminals.

2   The software which I have described for Application 3 above is not as yet readily available. Word-processors are readily available, but programming the terminals so that con-ferencing is possible will probably have to be done by a programmer.

3   People are not yet ready for these developments. People currently resist computers, just as their grandparents resisted cars and aeroplanes, preferring familiar modes of instruction to the ones they feel are complex and even threatening. Consequently, a writing class such as I have described would not be successful for the time being if students or teachers are forced to participate in it against their wishes. However, it might be highly successful for those who choose to give and receive the kind of instruction proposed.

Presently, research is scarce and inconclusive regarding the extent to which the word-processor is successful in helping students write. Nevertheless, it is hasty to dismiss the use of the word-processor as a fad. This issue is, in fact, no longer a point of debate for if we look around, we will notice that word-processing is becoming ubiquitous in society whether educators participate in the process or not. It would be prudent for teachers to gear themselves up for the day when people will think of the word-processor as they now do of typewriters and calculators and for the writing teacher to anticipate the advent of the word-processor as a writing aid.

Reference

Emig, Janet. (1977) "Writing.as a mode of learning", *College Composition and Communication* (May 1977) reprinted in Richard Gebhardt (ed), *Composition and Its Teaching*. Illinois: NCTE.