

A CEA Forum Roundtable

Teaching in a Laptop Classroom: Merging Traditional with Technological

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As more universities move to incorporate laptops into their first-year writing classrooms, students and teachers must reevaluate their understanding of classroom space. Because laptop classes are often placed in traditional classroom settings, students and teachers are forced to negotiate between two environments: traditional and technological. Traditional environments lack the tools students need to compose in the digital age, but technological classrooms often eliminate comfortable discussion and learning environments. While Vanessa Cozza's article focused on observations of computer labs, this section will reflect on two different classroom designs from my own teaching experience: one that required students to bring laptops and one that required only paper and pen. Because traditional classrooms were likely designed without taking technology into consideration, teachers should be aware of what the design of the classroom says about the design of the course. Classroom design affects pedagogy, access, and learning, and therefore, should be considered by the teacher. The difference in design between traditional and technological classes fashion two very different learning environments, and when combined in the form of a laptop class forces a conscious effort and struggle on the instructor's part to use the classroom space to fit his/her teaching pedagogy. While neither technology nor

composition was likely at the forefront of the classroom designer's mind, when we enter these rooms we must learn to negotiate the space we are provided. In this article, I will reflect on these two experiences to investigate the problem of merging the traditional with the technological.

Traditional Environments

The first classroom I taught in was as traditional as they come. Figure 3 illustrates the design in this classroom. Instead of desks, this room contained tables that were pushed together forming long rows. Because of these rows, I could only move along the side of the room without

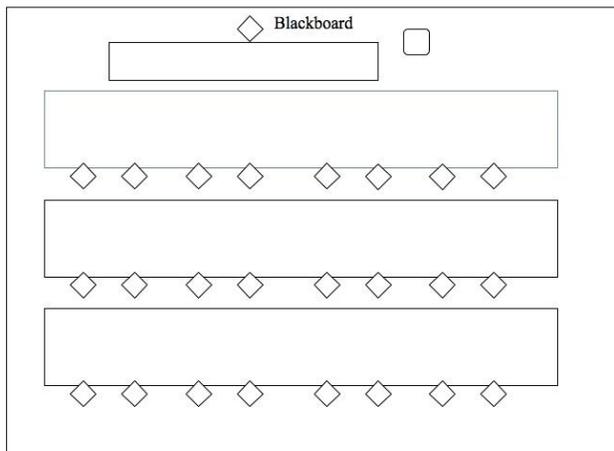


Figure 3: Traditional Classroom

becoming a major distraction. This design did not allow for movement or flexibility.

These long tables, accompanied by a blackboard and podium at the front of the classroom, created a classroom that was clearly made for lecture, which is not a common practice in my teaching because

I believe students can only learn to write

by writing. During a writing workshop, I would quite literally have to climb over tables to reach my students. Worse, a comfortable discussion environment was out of the question. The tables could not be reorganized so my students could face one another. Instead, due to the forward facing design, I was always front and center and my students were always the audience rather than active participants. If I wanted to decenter myself, my class and I had to leave the classroom.

This classroom lacked modern technology, and the traditional design implied that the teacher, not the students or the writing, was the center of the classroom. The inconvenient design of this classroom led to exactly what it was made for: lecture. Although I frequently attempted writing workshops, my inability to negotiate the design of the room led to what I felt were unsuccessful workshops: I spent more time trying to get to my students than I spent helping my students with their writing. Worse, I was a distraction: my students would look up every time I moved around because I was climbing over or under a table, asking them to push their chairs in so I could move behind them, or making some other distracting movement. Another problem arose because most of my students preferred to compose using technology, but the classroom environment only allowed for longhand writing. When students left a writing workshop, they needed to transfer their assignments from paper to a computer (since the writing program required them to turn in word-processed documents), making more work for my students, and diminishing the importance of writing in the classroom. My experiences in this classroom have led me to believe a comfortable environment is not only beneficial in a composition classroom: it is necessary. Although I want my students to voice their opinions and feel free to ask questions, the design of the traditional classroom, made it nearly impossible for my students to understand this. The design told them that I was clearly meant to be the focal point of the classroom, and despite my desire to make their writing the central focus I had a hard time conveying this in the provided environment. As we move from traditional classrooms to laptop classrooms, we should consider how traditional environments combined with modern technologies will affect our students and our pedagogies.

The Merge: Incorporating Laptops

The first time I encountered a different, non-traditional, teaching environment I was amazed by how much the design affected the classroom atmosphere. Although my classroom was designed to be traditional, desks in rows facing the front as seen in figure 4, the class was not. My students signed up for a laptop section, converging a traditional environment with a technological one; all students were required to bring their computers to class every day. In

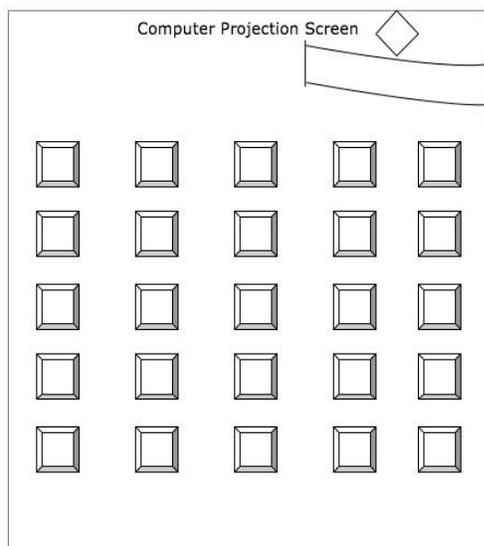


Figure 4: Lap Top/Flexible Classroom

Richard Selfe's "Planning Technology-Rich Environments," he recognizes one of the many benefits of a laptop classroom: "Students and teachers should be able to collaborate both on and off computers. In such a case, wireless laptop computers might help make classes more flexible when combined with rolling tables and chairs" (75). The mobile environment that results from a laptop classroom which Selfe refers to allowed for the

decentered composition classroom I could not have in the previous, more traditional example. Even though we did not have rolling tables and chairs, my classroom was wireless, so students were not only able to communicate with one another face to face but also on the Internet using discussion boards, emails, blogs and wikis. We could reorganize the desks in groups or in a circle for discussion, all the while keeping technology available. The addition of technology also allowed them to write, research, and revise in a classroom with an instructor, which is vitally important in a composition course. Unlike the traditional classroom that lacked technology, my

students could now leave a writing workshop and continue to compose in the same manner as they had in my classroom; they didn't need to spend extra time transposing written word to a computer; and they could research with my help during class time.

The addition of laptops to this traditional classroom environment allowed for a variety of classroom activities both electronic and traditional in nature. Many days my class remained in the rows that were provided, but just as often we moved into a circle to have a discussion or the students moved around the room (taking their computers with them) to form different groups. While this classroom was not made with either computers or composition in mind, the flexibility of the environment allowed for writing workshops, lecture, classroom discussion in a conversational circle, and easy group formation permitting a variety of activities to improve student writing. Another benefit of this classroom was an overhead projector connected to a computer for the teacher's use. Balester makes the point that a "blackboard draws attention to the front of the room. As teachers become more accustomed to electronic text and place less emphasis on lecturing and more on writing or peer interaction, the blackboard becomes less useful" (139). In a classroom where all of the students have computers, however, having a computer projector is both practical and useful. Sample drafts can be displayed from the projection screen for the whole class to critique, or notes can be typed and then placed directly on Blackboard, which includes course management, content authoring, collaborative discussions, virtual classrooms, as well as testing and grading. Without technology, the teacher would need to print pages of essays, distribute them to the class, while also lacking the means to comment on a text that all students could see and then have access to. This projector combined with Blackboard

allows the instructor to easily transform the once computer-free room into a versatile laptop classroom.

However, incorporating laptops into a classroom can have drawbacks as well. The small desks allowed students to use either a laptop or a book, but they could not compose their essay while following along in the book. Further, the projector's placement, like the blackboard in the traditional example, once again assumes a centralized, lecture classroom—all classrooms have limitations. In addition to the small desks and projector, the forward-facing design of the room created a further problem by forcing the teacher to the front of the room. Balester explains, "All eyes are on the teachers—except when they are on the screens; the monitors are the major competitors for the students' interest, and this is exacerbated by the fact that from the front of the room the teacher cannot observe the student's monitors" (137). Yet, despite the potential distractions for students and teachers, the laptop classroom provided a much better learning environment. In laptop classrooms students are able to compose, research, collaborate, and revise in more convenient ways than in a traditional classroom where digital technologies are unavailable. So while many perceive technology in the classroom, especially personal computers, to be an annoyance, I feel the benefits far outweigh the negatives.

College students use the Internet constantly, and this has provided composition teachers with a new tool for instruction. The differences in my classrooms allowed me to either take advantage of the Internet as a tool, or to teach while ignoring the existence of technology in general. Richard Selfe explains that "user centered design teams might also be assigned the task of operationalizing this goal—encouraging collaboration—in a virtual—or online—teaching and learning environment. Such environments generate an enormous number of options for

collaboration” (75). In the traditional classroom model, online collaboration was not an option. Students did not have access to computers in the classroom, and I did not have the tools (a computer projector) to demonstrate how they could use the Internet to collaborate beyond the classroom. How can we teach research today without access to Internet databases in the classroom? The projector allowed me to incorporate technology into my instruction at a time when the digital age can no longer be ignored. The design of the room in the first example assumed modern technology was not needed for teaching. Yet, as Brittany B. Cottrill’s article explains, if a university’s goal is to train students for a world where technology is ever present, then the university should include computers, the Internet, and other modern technology in its training.

In Michigan Tech University’s instructional goals, found in Richard Selfe’s “Planning Technology Rich Environments”, the importance of “[supporting] the concept of communicating for a variety of purposes, using a variety of communication strategies, aiming for a variety of audiences” (63) is stressed. When teachers enter a classroom that merges technology with the traditional, then students can use a variety of communication strategies: they can close their laptops and have face-to-face discussions; they can comment on each other’s essays and send them back and forth via email; students can have multiple conversations at once on a discussion board; or they can all create a document together using a wiki. Without technology, the traditional classroom cannot promote various, contemporary communication strategies. The second classroom example, which used laptops in the classroom, not only allowed for multiple forms of communication, but also promoted students’ capability to investigate and discuss the meaning of different audiences. Even though multimodal composition is not yet a part of many

composition classes, this does not mean students cannot have multimodal experiences. While traditional instruction should not be left behind, it does need to take the technology of the day into account.

Facilitating a Smooth Merge

While neither of the examples I have provided are what I consider ideal, I think they can tell us a lot about what is ideal for a laptop classroom. An ideal environment for a laptop classroom would be relatively similar to figure 4. However, one major change I would make

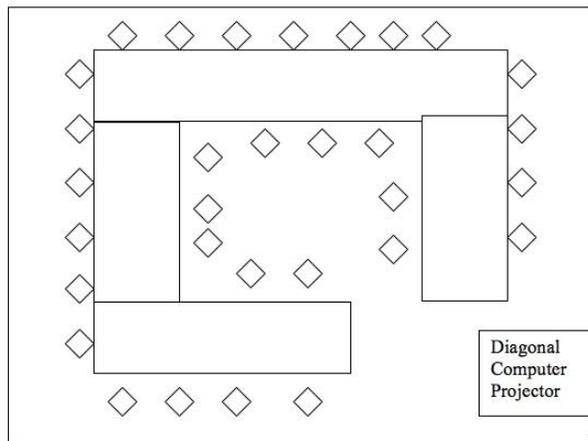


Figure 5: Ideal Laptop Lab

would be to use tables with more surface space as opposed to the small desks that allow either a book or a computer to be used, but not both at the same time. Another alternative, for those who have little control over where their laptop sections are placed, is to use an e-book. I have made this adaptation, and my students seem to be more comfortable. They are no longer

struggling to look at both a computer screen and a book that lies on their lap. In an ideal lab, tables would be in a perimeter design, with chairs on both sides, so both the students and myself could move around easily (figure 5 provides an example). Using a perimeter design provides a shared environment that does not imply lecture as the main form of communication. A diagonal projection screen in the corner would keep the classroom decentered without eliminating the benefits I previously outlined. Balester argues that this design is successful because of the center:

There is no “front” to the room, no particular focal point for the teacher, although there is a center... Unlike the front, the center is a shared space—a theater-in-the-round—where teachers and students find more room to move about freely, and even when someone has center stage, the students can observe not only the central figure but each other as well. (142)

The chairs in the center are designed for discussion and collaboration, while the perimeter design is also designed for easy discussion promoting a collaborative learning environment.

The use of laptops in the writing classroom provides new freedom of movement and composition not possible in either a traditional classroom or a computer lab. Because classrooms are often designed without technology or composition in mind, teachers are often forced to do what they can with the classroom provided. As we move even further into the digital age, the excuses become tired and the importance becomes more evident. As writing teachers, administrators, and scholars we need to recognize that writing is no longer done with pen and paper (at least not for the majority of our students). As Luuk Van Waes and Peter Jan Schellens’ “Writing Profiles: The Effect of the Writing Mode on Pausing and Revision Patterns of Experienced Writers” illustrate, the composition processes on paper and on monitors are different, and therefore, if we expect to encourage a self-found process our students can bring home from the classroom, then computers have to be present. We need to encourage the programs we are involved in to recognize this truth; we can no longer best serve our students without these tools. However, if universities and composition programs decide to require and/or provide laptops in the future, flexibility and space will need to be considered when designing and assigning educational buildings, classrooms, and courses. As the inevitable merge of traditional and technological spaces and classes progresses, composition teachers, administrators, and

theorists can not ignore this site of conflict, but instead, need to examine this schism in theory and practice in order to develop teaching practices that embrace the potentials rather than ignore the problems.