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Teaching Writing in the Age of Online Computers

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Abstract

This narrative inquiry reveals some behavior of digital-era students learning writing in a new digital classroom. The teaching methods, the physical design of the classroom, and the impact of the new technology are observed, along with the pedagogical theories in use. I suggest that a basic and significant change in students' writing behavior has occurred as a result of students' previous experience with online computers.

If we are serious about understanding the dynamics of the composing process, we must analyze how encounters with today's writing technologies, especially computers, are themselves haunted by earlier versions of textuality, speaking, authoring, and reading. We must explore how subjects, their writing instruments, and the scenes in which they compose are always determined in part by personal and cultural histories ... [and we must] explore how writers compose at the computer (Sloane, 1999, p. 51).

The classroom has the brightness of an early March morning after a night of snowfall, so I have turned off the florescent lights. There is a rich silence with only the soft tapping noises of computer keys as all the students stare intensely at their laptop screens while their fingers rapidly lift and descend. One student is staring at the wall, but her fingers continue to move; another writes in a journal with a pen instead of using her laptop. As I walk through the class, looking at their screens and watching their fingers, I reflect on how different the behavior of these students is from that of the students just three years ago.

In this class, the students are learning the intricacies of writing academic papers with all the pre-ordained structures and citation rules. I have taught similar classes in the Interior Design Program at Sheridan since the early 1990s. Currently I am teaching a pre-thesis course, readying the students for the thesis course of 30 pages, a quite onerous task for visually oriented students.

The students are engaged in a **freewrite**, a timed, 10 minute writing exercise where I have instructed them using Elbow's (1973) description.

[W]rite for 10 minutes Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, "I can't think of it." Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it's fine to write "I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say" as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you never stop (p. 3).

I ask the students to do a freewrite almost every class, as I have in all my writing classes since the mid 1980s when I first encountered the work of Peter Elbow (1973), and James Britton (1982) and, through Britton's writings, Lev Vygotsky (1962). I believe that in order to write well, whether you are writing for academic, business, or literary reasons, you must have an easy flow of text, a rich and supple output of words. The freewrite is an exercise designed, like scales for music lessons, to help students link to their "inner speech" (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 148). Their ability to find and write words expressing their thoughts is central to their ability to recognize and learn writing genres and styles, "Learning to write is an exercise in slow underground learning" (Elbow, 1973, p. 84) and "expressive writing" (Allen, 2002; Britton, 1982), is the essential foundation on which people build their writing skills. So I ask my students to freewrite regularly.

As I walk among the four-leaf clover shaped ("puddle") tables with students focused on their laptops and quietly writing, I walk behind the student who, earlier in the class, had been obviously messaging, using MSN, with three sections open. Now she is writing, like the rest, using MS Word, with the page size reduced to 25%, a size that allows writers to see that they are producing text, but limits the temptation to change or correct. This innovation, the reduced page size, was suggested by a student in an Interior Design class from four or five years ago. The classroom was the same, with puddle tables, laptops, and a data projector, but the students' behavior was different.

This puddle-table classroom is ideal for teaching writing. Not only is it bright, the puddle tables have spaces for four students to plug in their laptops for individual writing. They face each other, similar to a card table, so group work, where students give each other feedback acting as each other's audience, is easily accomplished. And their chairs are office-style, so they can easily turn and position themselves to look at the large screen and what I am projecting on it through my laptop. I am teaching in a "new classroom" with the "new tools" - a classroom that I love teaching in, but also a classroom where teachers must be in rapid transition, trying to keep up with the changes in the way our students use technology and language.

Some of these changes I discovered when I first fell in love with word-processing, with its spelling-checking function, and its ease of revising. A presentation by a young teacher opened my eyes to further differences between word-processing and typing. As a result of his talk on layout and page design, I bought William's (1994) book, *The Non-Designer's Design Book*, and studied it. As a reader and as a teacher, I know that the book, or essay, is judged by its cover and its overall appearance. "[E]very book, indeed, every scripted text - is a code of signals designed" (McGann, 1991, p. 124) to give messages to the reader, messages that the reader de-codes before she or he has read a word. My Interior Design students, I felt, should be giving the pre-verbal message that they were designers, so I began to teach basic design, layout and font choices, as part of teaching writing. Because I was teaching writing in the context of the new writing tools, word-processing and the web, I required theses to look designed and sophisticated. Of course, I required more than just attractive-appearing theses, they also had to be well structured and researched.

Some changes in how I taught writing with this new tool, the online computer, I found more difficult. Once I found out what could be done in Word (or Word Perfect and most other word processors) with Styles and the Outline View, I felt obliged to learn how to use it, and to teach it to my students. With the help of tutorials I found online, I taught myself Styles, which allows writers to format (and easily change) their headings and to generate a Table of Contents with a few clicks. I also learned how to use the Outline View (under View in the MS Word menu) which is exactly what it says, a way to outline, by creating the headings and sub-headings for a piece of writing. Now I teach how to structure information using the Outline View, merging the learning of how to structure with the technology. (The University of Hong Kong's **Writing Turbocharger** <http://ec.hku.hk/writing_turbocharger/faq/default.htm> is an excellent "online guide to writing with [a] computer" (University of Hong Kong's Writing Turbocharger, 1998) cleanly written with helpful, if somewhat outdated visuals.) Learning about **Styles** and the **Outline View** were changes I embraced, despite my initial frustration in learning how to use them, and I felt I acted as a responsible writing teacher in introducing them to my students. Now, in this bright morning classroom that is all I could ever dream of in design and equipment, I am looking at a change in student's language behavior that isn't the result of my lead.

The students in this classroom are "mobile" with all of them using laptops rented through the college, and, consequently, they are all on the same version of the computer programs they are learning how to use. And using laptops to teach them their subjects, especially CAD, (Computer Assisted Design) makes sense for them - they have 24/7 access for learning - and makes sense for the college, - which doesn't need to maintain and upgrade dedicated computer labs.

The students are also mostly in their late teens and early twenties, although there is a sizable minority of mature students. For

most of them, computers and the Web have been there while they grew up; they are used to them. Most of today's teachers are "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001) while our students are "digital natives" (2001) who "have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cam, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age" (2001). Three years ago, my previous time teaching this course (before a sabbatical and an alternate assignment) the students weren't quite so immersed in the digital culture; most could remember a time before computers and the Web were ubiquitous. They behaved differently in at least one interesting aspect.

As I walk back to the podium where my computer is docked, I don't bother checking my students' fingers. They are all writing; none have to be encouraged or coaxed to keep their writing continuous. This is very different from when I started using freewriting, and even distinctively different from just three years ago. When I started using freewriting in my teaching, in the mid-Eighties, my students were all handwriting. (My requests for a computer lab for teaching writing were always refused because writing wasn't viewed as a computer-based subject.) In that environment, even getting students to freewrite for five minutes was a challenge. Many wanted to stop and correct, many wanted to stop and think, many moaned and complained about their hand-muscles. Almost always, I stopped asking them to freewrite towards the end of term; it was just too wearing to push through their resistance. They didn't like to write, even though I never judged or even looked at their freewriting except with a glance to see that they **were** writing.

As I check the time to see how close we are to the end of my current class's 10-minute freewrite, I go in my memory to three years ago. Then, in the Interior Design pre-thesis course, most of the students were doing their freewriting on their laptops (with their screens reduced), though there were a number still handwriting. They weren't as resistant as my earlier students, but some complaints came in when I asked for feedback on freewriting. With this current class, when I asked for feedback using a "Stop, Start, Continue" format just before the Study Break, I was astounded when several students in both sections requested that we continue having regular freewrites. This widespread positive attitude toward freewriting, and the ability of all the students to write for 10 minutes without pausing are new, and I believe significant, language behaviors,

We are in a new age of communication, fundamentally different from even half a century ago, and the way we teach communications must change to incorporate this new reality with both its losses and its gains. As a writer and a teacher of writing, I have been privileged to be living while this, the quickest and most radical change in human communication, has begun. The tool, the platforms, and the communicators have all been metamorphosing, and we are dwelling in a new framework, and must, consequently, change our ways of teaching.

Many digital-resistant people would like to choose what changes are allowed, but I suggest that the computer and the Web are now central to the emerging World Culture. As Ong (1982) said in **Orality and Literacy**: "[t]he interaction between the orality that all humans are born into and the technology of writing, which no one is born into, touches the depth of the psyche" (p. 175). Our students' major writing tool is the computer, and their interaction with it is profoundly different from previous generations' interaction with pens or typewriters. These "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) use writing to "talk" to others much more than they use it to compose academic text. They are used to a casual, oral-style of written interaction to socialize. They are used to writing quickly without making corrections and changes, because the **compose-and-send** style of messaging, or "chatting," requires quick text-input to keep up with the conversation(s).

My students freewrite with ease and pleasure because they are used to writing socially rather than formally; they are used to "chatting" online, and using their writing to entertain themselves rather than for the formalized critical thinking required for an essay. (I have seen this ease in freewriting in other program courses this past term, even among writing-adverse students, so it isn't limited to one particular program.) I delight in their ease of freewriting; I see the students' easy text flow as signifying that they are more ready than the pre-digital generations to learn how to create formal academic essays, especially with all the aids that the technology gives us.

When I collect their papers, I see the students have produced texts, "embodied phenomena" (McGann, 1991, p. 13), that are graphically (that is, non-linguistically) designed to suggest the writers are, indeed, designers. The evening after the bright and positive freewriting in class, as I settle into my marking chair. I flip through the first few with increasing concern and what I find depresses me. Some are extended opinion pieces with almost no facts given or authorities cited. The prose is supple, mostly, but the content is shallow. They freewrite well, but some are writing their academic texts in the same style as they chat online.

As I continue in my marking, I find some very well-written papers, well researched and structured, and feel more positive. Then I notice one other factor which I believe supports what I have noticed through the change in their freewriting. None of the papers are shorter than the required 15 pages; in fact, a significant proportion are longer, and some substantially longer. That used to be rare; most would just reach the page limit, and some would use super-sized fonts and/or lots of illustrations to pad out their work.

Now, in this new digital world, students are more comfortable producing writing and their prose is less constrained and constricted. Some may still have spelling errors or use the wrong words, some may research shallowly and show little evidence of critical thinking, and some may fail to structure their material for the reader, but they all can produce a flow of words. This is new, and, I believe, a direct

result of their use of the online computer as a social tool.

Does it improve them as writers? In terms of the amount of their text output, it does. Does it make them good writers of academic papers? Yes and no. They still have to learn how to think critically, how to structure material, how to cite authorities, and how to use the capacities of the new writing tool, the online computer. Some will learn those skills, and some will have trouble learning them. All, however, now start out with the ability to link to their "inner speech" (Vygotsky, 1962, p 148) and that is a major difference.

And who knows what other differences will appear in our writing classrooms as students come to us with longer and more complex digital experiences affecting their behavior as writers. Now that I've started noticing changes, I will be watching for more.

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