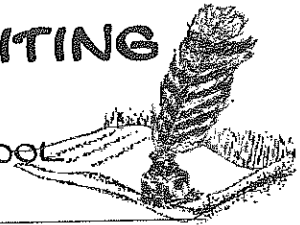


THE ELECTRONIC CONVERSATION: USING TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE STUDENT WRITING

BARRY GILMORE
LAUSANNE COLLEGIATE HIGH SCHOOL
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE



Beginning this year, every student in my school has a laptop computer in class. It's a privilege most schools and students don't dream of; and for three years I've been dreading it.

I'm not a Luddite, but I am certainly a skeptic. I tried using PowerPoint for teaching and for student reports, and I disliked it—too many bells and whistles, not enough substance. I've seen the grammar exercises and quiz programs that are available to teachers, and they often seem little better than electronic versions of the worksheets from books I stopped using long ago. Online resources will be helpful to my students, but nothing—and I mean *nothing*—can replace a paperback copy of a novel in the hands of my kids for sparking a discussion.



But I'm coming around.

To begin with, current research suggests that students who type their written work tend to write more, to compose more complex sentences, and to score higher on writing tests than those who only write by hand. A recent study from the American Council on Education conducted at Ball State found that electronic composition increases the time students spend on written assignments, their attention to detail in writing, and the sense of accomplishment they feel with the completion of an assignment. ("Writing,

Computers, and Literacy Programs"). What's more, having my students type their work helps me grade faster and more easily, and anything that helps reduce the piles on my desk is a good idea in my book.

So sure, except for the timed essays my AP students write, it makes sense to have students type their essays and creative pieces. But computers in the classroom? I've never quite been able to picture it. The logistics aside, how do I know two kids aren't playing games or instant messaging one another in the back of the room? How do I control the use of spell check or combat plagiarism from the Internet?

Coming to Terms with Technology

Some of these issues are still hotly debated in our school. But in my own quest to integrate technology into my English classes, I've had to do a lot of thinking about how computers can—and can't—benefit my students. There are, of course, numerous ways computers can augment those things I already do; I already add images in PowerPoint presentations to my lectures, have students complete research on the Internet, and use a Web site to post my homework assignments each week. I'm more concerned, however, with the role

technology will play in the basic elements of my curriculum—reading, writing, and analysis. I don't want PowerPoint to replace the formal essay.

I've tried, therefore, to consolidate my thoughts about the benefits of using computers to teach writing into a few points. I believe that these are relevant whether I am teaching in a room full of computers or in a room with only one.

- The goal of the teacher should be to use technology mainly in ways that enhance the curriculum by offering activities that cannot be completed *without* technology. Although there are some useful programs that can simply replace similar tasks that I've traditionally done on paper, that's not the best use of computers in my classroom (though it's not an unacceptable use, either).
- It's better to embrace the way students write online than to combat it. Online discussion is closer, in many ways, to oral conversation than it is to handwritten work. The vocabulary and syntax of online discourse need not replace the formal writing I expect of my students; to the contrary, they need to understand that modes of writing appropriately alter according to purpose and audience.
- Typing can improve student writing and facilitate student thinking. Students with strong keyboarding skills will often find that typing is a medium; they must take the time to formulate thoughts carefully, but are not hampered by the tedium of handwriting.
- Students are more likely to revise when working on computers.
- Technology offers students opportunities to organize material in a linear, logical fashion and also to make creative

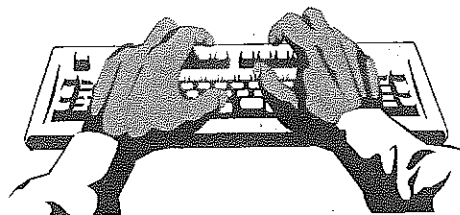
leaps and horizontal links from idea to idea and from one written work to another. Both abilities are important for a sophisticated writer and reader.

- Technology offers students an interactive forum in which the written word can coincide with discussion.

Putting these beliefs into action in a lesson plan isn't easy, but before my students ever got laptops I tried assignments that involved technology as a tool to improve—not replace or simplify—student writing. The following is an example of a lesson that can be used with any class that has access to computers at home, in a lab, or in the classroom.

The Electronic Conversation

Last year I taught *A Tale of Two Cities* for the first time. As I read the book again, I was struck by the number of recurring images and symbols that Dickens includes. Normally, I might have devoted a day or



two of class time to student group work—probably, I'd have asked my students to discuss an image or symbol thread

in groups, have one person write down notes, and present their findings to the class. This approach works well enough but is never quite satisfying to me, since the presentations are usually dry and the notes scanty. Last year, I tried something different. After assigning students in all three of my senior English classes to groups of three to four students, I gave the groups the following instructions:

1. Choose an image or symbol that recurs throughout the book. (A few of the topics last year's groups chose: blood and wine,

resurrection, footsteps and imagery of feet, water imagery, animal imagery).

2. With your group, compile a list of scenes (with page numbers and brief descriptions or explanations) in which your topic is evident. Your list must include at least ten scenes. (*This part of the assignment provoked more discussion among the groups than I expected, and as a result the lists contained some creative inclusions of scenes that directly or indirectly related to the group topics*).

3. Sometime during the next week, you must conduct a written electronic conversation on the topic. In this conversation, your group should discuss the thematic connections and the function of your topic. In other words, you should use this forum to brainstorm ideas about how and why Dickens used a certain thread of imagery or symbolism as if you were preparing to write an essay about your topic. There are several ways you might accomplish this:

- Exchange e-mails among members of the group.
- Arrange for an online conference using the conference feature of the school e-mail or instant messaging on another service such as AOL.
- Use one of the computer lab computers and type responses to one another over time in the same word file.

Your conversation must include at least five substantial contributions from each member of the group (You may include many more short contributions instead). The total conversation should be at least three to four typed pages. Turn in a typed transcript of your conversation one week from today.

The results of the assignment up to this point were surprising. I'd made the assignment partly as a way of saving class time (it did), but what I didn't expect was that the conversations would turn out to be interesting, productive, and enjoyable to the students. Moreover, most of the groups, after using some form of instant messaging for a conversation, turned in around eight to ten pages of text. Here's an uncorrected sample from one group's transcript, beginning with a quotation from the text:

Allison: but, the time was not come yet; and every time that wind blew over france shook the rags of the scarecrows in vein, for the birds fine of song and feather, took no woming. book 1, ch 5

Jenny: ok. ..what does that mean?

Caitlin: the scarecrows are the aristocracy

Lucy: once again the birds are dirty

Caitlin: i think

Jenny: wait a seec

Lucy: no,no,the wind is the scary mean people and the scarccrow are the porr people fighting the revolution

Allison: yeah lucy that's what I was sayin

Lucy: and rthe poor are scarred away until the revolution comes

Jenny: I think that there were so many times the thwe revolution could have occurred that (wind in vien) that when it actually cam the rich had no idea it was coming

When I discussed the assignment with my classes, they agreed that this conversation was different from any they had previously had about a book. The messaging format, they told me, forced them to react to one another as they would in a conversation, and at the same time to slow down enough to think through the way they would phrase a point or complete a sentence.

Instead of writing comments on the hard copies of the conversations, I e-mailed my students my own responses to their conversations, a technique on which I've since grown dependent, because I can include many more comments more

quickly when I type. Then, I gave them the following further instructions:

4. With your group, write a summary of one half to one typed page in which you explore the overall thematic issues of your conversation. You can refer to specific scenes, but since you have a list of scenes already, focus on the big issues. How do the various threads of theme, imagery, and symbolism tie together? What overall message does Dickens want us to take away? What complexities or subtleties about the connections between these scenes are important to understand? E-mail me this summary along with your list of ten scenes.

I posted each summary and list of scenes on my Web site. Here is a passage from the summary of the group whose conversation I included above:

Although the barbaric human is often mentioned, we feel that the most important thematic issue within animal imagery is how the poor people are referred to as dogs and pigs. But social class differences are also illustrated symbolically by other images, such as the description of the ragged scarecrows (symbolizing the poor), while birds symbolize the upper class.

Over the next several days, my students got online and looked through the postings. Then they completed the assignment.

5. Turn in a typed, formal essay on *A Tale of Two Cities*. You may write about your own group topic or one of the topics from another group, using ample evidence from the text. The essay should discuss some overall theme of the book as it is conveyed by an ongoing image or symbol.

The essays my students wrote were good. Were they better than usual? Perhaps slightly. But what I liked about this assignment was that my students were

eager to write the essays, were able to write them more quickly than usual, included a great deal of textual evidence and made interesting connections between scenes that resulted from paying close attention to the discussions of the other groups. Moreover, I liked the fact that my students had to move between modes of discourse, to revise informal text into formal text. Here is a paragraph in which the ideas generated by the above assignments appear in one student's formal essay:

In addition to the obvious use of imagery as a way of categorizing social groups, Dickens uses such symbolic language to foreshadow the coming revolution. In portraying the broken wine cask early in the book, he offers a general statement of "warning" for the reader that is wholly missed by the aristocracy, who, like "birds fine of song and feather," go about their usual business heedless of the coming turmoil.

The Follow-up: An Ongoing Use of Technology

The process of using technology to help student writing doesn't end with a student turning in an essay. My classes revise every essay they write—now, I have them use the "Highlight Changes" option in Microsoft Word to show me exactly which passages they revise, a technique that saves me a great deal of time when grading second drafts. I have them post finished essays on the Web with words and phrases hyperlinked to previous essays, creative writing pieces, part of their own e-portfolios, and other sites online. They can even use text boxes on a Web site to describe the process of writing specific passages and sections of essays, to explain what they were thinking and trying to achieve in a piece of writing.



My students will not stop handwriting certain assignments. I won't forego printed books for e-texts or class discussion for hours spent alone with computers in class. I believe, however, that it's my responsibility to explore the ways technology can enhance and augment my curriculum and to continue to seek ways the computer can improve the basic skills I've taught in more traditional ways in the past.

The above assignment proved to me that my students can work in multiple modes of discourse within a single assignment. Moreover, it showed me that the discourse of one familiar medium can actually augment my classes' expository writing. Best of all, this use of technology scored highly on the best gauge I own as a teacher, however unempirical it may be. When we finished the last revisions, one student asked, "Can we write essays this way again next time?"

Works Cited

American Council on Education. "Writing, Computers, and Literacy Program." 2002. 6 February 2003 <http://www.acenet.edu/programs/cost-awards/readAbstract.cfm?awardID=115>

