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Teaching Word Processing: A Cooperative Effort

Jane Lightcap Brown

Few college composition teachers are as fortunate as the instructor whose paper I heard at a recent conference on composition and computers. To the amazement of the audience, the instructor reported that his freshman students arrived in his composition class already knowledgeable about the functioning and uses of computers and word processors.

My composition students, and perhaps yours, are often different. Not only are the students largely unfamiliar with computer use for writing purposes, they also exhibit at least some degree of apprehension about entrusting their writing to a machine. A quick survey I took on the first day of class revealed that only two of twenty-three freshmen had previously used a computer for academic purposes (although nearly all the students admitted that they had annihilated zillions of alien invaders on computerized games). The survey also showed that only five of the twenty-three freshmen possessed even minimal typing skills. And twenty-two of the twenty-three students said they were experiencing feelings ranging from moderate anxiety to moderate terror about computer-written essays.

Compared to some teachers of college composition, I have a most fortunate instructional situation. My students and I have access to thirty Apple computers (twenty-seven of which are networked) in the centrally located Learning Resources Center, which is open from early in the morning until late at night six and one-half days each week. The center's activities are monitored by a full-time director whose work is supported by students trained as computer assistants.

The writing center enables students to use such word processing programs as WordStar, The Write Choice, Word Perfect, and Apple Writer. However, to minimize the teaching and learning problems of my beginning students, the center director and I selected the Milliken Word Processor, a program simple enough for elementary school students to use, but one which permits the user a variety of composing, revising, and printing options. One of the most important services that a writing center director can perform for composition teachers is to assess computer software and make recommendations about programs which are fitted as perfectly as possible to the capabilities and needs of the students who will use them.

In leading young writers toward skill in composing on a computer, the teacher and writing center director must also be aware of the students' requirements and levels of capability. Before students begin to master the intricacies of writing on machines, both teacher and center director must help to reduce the impact of the students' computer-knowledge gap. Teaching the students to use word processing requires a careful introduction to both the workings of the computer and to its revising capabilities. Designing a curriculum to introduce beginning writers to the word processor is a task that involves the best cooperative efforts of those responsible for the instruction—the writing center director and the composition instructor.

Introducing Students to Word Processing

The relatively simple processes of starting, or booting, a computer program and pressing various keys can intimidate almost any word processing novice. The teacher and the center director must encourage students to experiment and grow more comfortable with the computer as a writing tool rather than as a space-age enigma. As word processing instruction for my students began, the most immediate problem was to persuade the freshmen that their slightest touch on a computer keyboard would not cause the machine to self-destruct. "I know I'll break it!" The freshmen chorused. "What'll I do if something cracks and falls off?" To alleviate such fears, I distributed a step-by-step instruction sheet which the writing center director and I had prepared to explain the functions of the Milliken Word Processor.

Bringing a computer console to the classroom for a brief demonstration and reassuring students that typing skill is not required for successful word processing are desirable introductory steps. During a one-hour orientation to the Milliken program in our class, I asked the non-typists to demonstrate the program to their peers on a portable terminal and monitor. After the students saw that even their least well-prepared classmates were capable of

composing and changing brief written selections on the machine, the computer-destruction myth was itself destroyed, and we moved on to other problems and solutions.

My experience showed that introducing beginners to word processing requires that the instruction take place on two separate planes. Both the writing center director and the instructor need to become familiar with these instructional modes in order to reinforce the students' learning from its beginning through stages of gradually increasing competence. One plane of teaching involves familiarizing the student with the FUNCTIONS of the computer and of the word processing program, letting the student grow confident of her skill in using the computer to plan, draft, revise, and print her work. The more practice the student is allowed without the pressure of time limits and grades, the more competent she will grow. Some students will want to learn every possible computer function just in case a need arises for one of them to be used; other students will operate better on a "need to know" basis, adding to their knowledge of computer commands as their sophistication increases. Either approach allows students to gain proficiency in using the computer.

The second plane of instruction focuses on the PROCESS of computer-assisted revision. Only after the student has mastered the mechanical aspects of word processing will he feel comfortable with transferring his writing experiences from the familiar paper to the less familiar computer. Our experience has shown that students who master revision skills on paper can then proceed not only to making similar changes on their computer-written work, but to understanding the reasons and need for such changes. The computer's capabilities, perceived in the light of practical application, become for the students not so much miracles of switching words and letters from place to place, but enhanced methods of improving what has been written through a series of drafts.

By separating and concentrating on these two planes of teaching early in the academic session, the teacher and the writing center director may more readily assure that students overcome their apprehension about using an electronic pencil, eraser, scissors, and paste while simultaneously acquiring the skills necessary to shape their writing into its desired final form.

Getting Started with Word Processing

To begin work on these two planes of learning, the students were given a simple writing assignment immediately following their orientation to the word processing program. The assignment read,

Write a paragraph of at least 200 words on any topic you like. File the paragraph under the title PARA 1.

Print PARA 1.

Here the student's choices were minimal; her only problem was deciding what to write about and what approach to take in developing the topic. The length of the assignment was sufficient to give her some real practice with the keyboard without intimidating her, particularly if her typing skills were minimal. Even the name under which she was to file her draft was specified to avoid confusing her with computer-talk about the way in which she could designate a first draft with a name and number, and so on.

One student's response to this assignment typified the slightly astonished, still unsure attitude shown by many beginning computer-users. "I am starting out with one short sentence," she wrote. "Now I can't think of anything to add. The keys get in the way of my thinking. How do I get 200 words on a machine? I'm getting scared about printing it, too. But at least I found out how to make capital letters."

Teaching the Various Skills of Revising

As researchers have learned, a primary advantage of using word processors to teach writing is that the revision processes are simplified. Yet a student who is beginning to work with what seems to be a technologically mysterious machine is concentrating so hard on pushing the right buttons that she has little patience for the niceties of insertion, deletion, rephrasing, moving text, and other transformations of her written drafts into the kind of prose that a writing teacher or any other audience would enjoy reading. The student quoted above is a case in point: the trouble she experienced in composing a fragmented paragraph was nothing compared to the potential problems she could have had in revising that work.

A carefully structured revision exercise can help students master the necessary skills. The next part of my students' first word processing assignment encouraged them to begin revising, without pressuring them to accomplish major changes. The assignment, designed to help students practice both computer functions and revision skills, reads as follows:

Now revise PARA 1, practicing as many of the following skills as are appropriate for your paragraph:

1. Add information (letters to correct spelling, words, whole sentences to clarify your meaning);
2. Delete information (letters to correct spelling, words, whole sentences if necessary);
3. Move information (words, sentences, whole paragraphs).

4. File the revision under the title PARA 2 (leaving PARA 1 as it is in your file).
5. Print PARA 2. Bring both paragraphs to class.

While the students worked on these assignments, they had constant access to the teacher and the writing center director. These resource persons did not seek interaction with the students but remained available in the writing center. I believe that no writing instructor should abdicate responsibility for accompanying students to most, if not all, of their first word-processing sessions and designing in-class activities that thoroughly integrate manual writing and revision with those same skills performed on the computer. The teacher who moves from the classroom to the writing center with her students is stating by her actions that she understands and supports writing activity in both locations.

The presence of informed guides in the writing center is essential. While students are becoming used to composing on a strange machine, they prefer having familiar persons to ask questions of and to complain directly to, persons who have the writing know-how and the computer expertise that the students want to gain. Both the teacher and the center director should serve as such guides. If writing teachers and directors will recall how they felt the first time they sat down in front of a computer, they will have more sympathy for the uncertainties and apprehensions the students are suffering.

Removing the pressure from computer writing is also important. For my freshman, the initial writing assignments were not timed in order not to penalize those with minimal typing skills. Students were allowed as long as four days to complete writing PARA 1 and PARA 2, though most finished the task in a day or two. Back in the classroom, students exchanged their first and second drafts and worked in small groups, noting what changes had been made by revising and what clarification or improvement those changes produced in the text. During class discussion we reviewed the specific computer procedures required to effect those changes (discussing even what sequences of keys to press, for example, in order to move this or that phrase from one section to another in a paragraph), thereby reassuring every class member that such revisions were not only desirable, but attainable.

Moving from the most elementary changes within sentences and paragraphs to more global, whole-essay revisions may be accomplished by setting guidelines for students and then allowing them plenty of time to practice their new skills. After several weeks of work on the word processor, the students received copies of a handout entitled "What Can You Do When You Revise?" The questions it contained were open-ended and could be applied to a composition of any length:

- Find your main idea and your supporting ideas. Be sure you have provided enough detail about each topic sentence to let your reader understand it fully. Wherever you need to ADD information, do so, concentrating especially on reasons, results, and examples.
- If you have repeated any ideas, combine or delete redundant material.
- Check word by word to find the kinds of errors you often make (spelling, punctuation, and mechanics). If you tend to make lots of errors, do lots of checking.
- Review sentences to make sure you have varied the beginnings.
- If you can think of a more exact word or phrase, substitute it for an inexact expression.
- If you have used a word too often, make changes, using your thesaurus for guidance.
- If your strongest proof is not last, consider moving it to that position.
- If sentences are out of order anywhere in the paper, move them into correct order.
- If you need transitional expressions at the beginnings of paragraphs or within paragraphs, add them.
- In a final re-reading, pretend that you are the reader and have never seen the paper before. Do you completely understand what is being said? If not, make changes until you do!

Using student-written samples, the class manually practiced each of the listed skills, separately and in combination, with class members sometimes writing alone and sometimes sharing ideas in peer-evaluation groups. The purpose of such extensive practice was to familiarize students with revision techniques accomplished apart from the word processor so that, knowing both the advantages and the messiness of hand-written revision, students would feel enthusiastic about using the word processor to effect more extensive revisions.

Conclusion

By mid-term the students had gained enough proficiency with the word processor so that most could write and revise a draft in two or three hours, although they were encouraged to take additional time if they needed it. They were also permitted to write their work by hand if they wanted to do so. The Learning Resources Center contains a number of tables and chairs for such activities so that the instructor and/or writing center director may oversee the work of students engaged in a variety of writing approaches; however, few students, even the slowest typists, chose to write manually. Their preference for the word processor showed their belief that their work

would be more successful if they took advantage of the processor's revising capabilities. The writing center director helped by advising the students of the hours during which the Learning Resources Center was least busy so that they would have freer access to word processors and more guidance from the computer assistants.

At the end of the term, the students completed an anonymous questionnaire designed to determine some of their perceptions about using the word processor. Of the twenty-one novices to word processing, one said his writing skills on the machine had increased a little; four said their skill had increased moderately; and sixteen asserted that their writing abilities had increased greatly. More significantly, eighteen of the twenty-three class members said they planned to use the word processor in preparing future coursework and personal writing, thus showing their confidence in word processing for all their writing, not just that done in an English composition class. Though the students earned grades no higher than usual—most earned C's—the students' responses show that the majority perceived word processing as beneficial to their writing activities.

The students also made complaints on the questionnaire. Several students resented having to share the writing center computers and the director with students in other disciplines, apparently feeling that their own work transcended other assignments in importance and urgency. One person felt that he should be trusted to insert the program disk into the computer himself, instead of having to rely on the center director or a computer assistant to perform that service for him. His desire for independence appeared to be a positive sign that, as a writer, he was stretching toward the independence that writing teachers everywhere would like to encourage in their students.

These negative comments, however, bear little weight when compared to the immensely positive attitudes of students who, at the beginning of the quarter, had stared suspiciously at the computer and wondered if they would damage it beyond repair. Cooperative preparation in the classroom and in the writing center, as well as step-by-step instruction and extensive practice in manual and machine revision and in computer functions, helped move beginning writers toward increased competence and self-confidence.

Jane Lightcap Brown, an Assistant Professor of English at Georgia Southern College, uses word processors and original interactive software to teach composition and literature. She has published a number of papers on microcomputer instruction and is presently researching the instructional applications of micros and the use of databases to facilitate undergraduate research teaching.