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Terminal Writing in the Writing Lab?

Anne Wright

Chaos reigns. Or does it? When uninitiated visitors walk into our Apple Lab (which is a part of our Writing Lab) at Hazelwood West High, their first impression often is “How do you work when there is so much noise going on?” But when the fifteen printers stop, visitors are even more amazed by the quiet diligence and concentration of the students who are working at the computers.

Our Apple IIe Lab often accommodates twenty to twenty-five students and teachers, all or most of whom will be working on very different kinds of writing activities. For example, a typical class hour might include a home economics teacher composing a newsletter to parents on the *Newsroom* program, five to ten students typing various parts of research papers on *Applewriter*, a student or two making a cover sheet for a paper on *Print Shop*, three to five journalism students composing stories for the school newspaper, a student using the *Sensible Speller* to check a paper for misspelled words or to count the number of words in a contest paper, a student writing a paper for a political science class, a teacher assistant making a crossword puzzle on *Crossword Magic* for a vocabulary lesson, and the Writing Lab assistant updating Lab records on *PFS: File*. And while all these people are working, if no one is having problems, I may sit down at a computer myself to work on a grant proposal or to write an article.

Getting Started

We did not set out to have a computer lab. We planned a Writing Lab for tutoring students. To attract the attention of the school board, the

Language Arts Consultant for the Hazelwood School District added the idea of putting in one computer for its word processing capabilities. Now in our fourth year, each Writing Lab in the three high schools in the Hazelwood District has approximately twenty-five computers, and they are in use every hour of the day. We still tutor students who come for help with writing problems, and we still consider tutoring our main purpose, but I'm forced to admit that the Lab actually logs many more students who come to use computers than those who come for writing assistance. But then, the computer actually assists many students with writing, too. Not in the same ways a tutor does, of course; a computer can't help a student understand what a detail is and that expository writing must contain details. But students who have been nonwriters before will come to the Writing Lab to work on an assignment because they enjoy using the computers and because their paper will at least look impressive when they finish.

I'm not implying that neat, attractive papers in any way substitute for good writing. But I am saying that students who would produce *no writing* in a composition classroom almost always produce a paper if they can write it on a computer. And, of course, it is especially helpful if the computer is located in the same place as the writing tutors, who can help them with content, usage, and organization problems. So what we find is that students often come to the Lab to use a computer, but they leave having received help with writing problems too.

Using Computers with Whole Classes

The Writing Lab staff has worked hard to teach teachers in the English Department various ways that the computer can be used to enhance the writing process. The two teachers who staff the Lab, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon, also teach composition classes the half-day they are not in the Lab, so we have used our own classes to develop and test ways of using word processing and other programs in composition. The activities explained below have all been tested in actual classroom situations.

Perhaps the most important advantage of having twenty-five computers in one room is that teachers can bring their classes and every student can work on a computer. When we had to share computers (last year we had only ten), teachers were very reluctant to bring classes to use them because it took so long to complete an assignment when students had to "take turns." Now many teachers bring entire composition classes.

The main computer activity our classes engage in is writing second drafts of papers. The classroom teacher teaches students how to write a particular paper that has been assigned and has the students write a first draft in longhand. After peer sharing and/or teacher intervention, the whole class

then comes to the Writing Lab to type a second draft on *Applewriter*. This draft incorporates the revisions the students decide to make after getting feedback from peers and/or the teacher. Usually a class will spend from three to five class hours in the Lab, typing the second draft and revising it until the students are ready to turn in a “final” draft. We suggest that they print each day what they have typed that hour so that they can study the printout and make decisions about further revisions before they return. Their limited access to the computer (one class period a day) makes this step almost a necessity.

While the students are typing, the teacher and the Lab staff are available for help, both with computer problems and writing problems. In fact, we can get a much better idea of what the students are writing and where they might be having problems than we could if the students were composing in the classroom. In no more than a minute or two, we can glance at a screen and read a paragraph to see if a student has a good topic sentence or is using details and then provide some guidance.

For several reasons, research papers particularly lend themselves to word processing. The teacher’s ability to follow what is being written helps the students as well as the teacher. For research papers, it seems more helpful for the students to compose at the computer from the beginning, once they have completed notetaking and have a workable outline. The length of these papers often tends to cause students to get lost in the middle of a first draft and forget what they set out to do. But the printout they get each day provides a continuity because it is easy to read and there are fewer pages to read. And the process of writing the paper during the day at school and reading it over at night gives students the opportunity to think about their writing twice. In my experience, they do not do this when they are writing the draft longhand.

Before I started having students peer edit drafts of research papers, I felt almost defeated because the papers were usually so messy that no one but the writers could figure out how to read them. The computer drafts, of course, are easy to read, and peer editing is a much more valuable exercise when the students can work on printouts. In addition, endnote pages and bibliographies are much easier to prepare on the computer than by hand. Students usually make so many mistakes in preparing these sections of their papers that the ease with which they can correct errors is an important feature. Since most of our students are not very good typists or have no access to typewriters, allowing them to type their papers on computers results in final copies that are much neater and easier to grade than the error-filled typewritten pages or handwritten copies we used to receive.

Using Computers with Individual Students

Hazelwood's Writing Labs are primarily designed to be referral labs. Teachers can refer individual students who need special help or enrichment or who want to use the computer for writing. Many of our students are also self-referrals; that is, they want to come to the Lab for some reason (usually to use a computer), and they are able to persuade some teacher to excuse them from class and give them a pass to the Lab. Therefore, we often have, as I described in the opening paragraphs, many individual activities going on at the same time.

Journalism students frequent our Lab almost daily, writing their stories for the school newspaper. Their teacher says assignments that used to take three days—one to type, one day for the teacher to check, and another day to revise—can be done in one class hour, because the students take her the papers as soon as they finish them, she checks them on the spot, and they return to the Lab to make corrections.

Teachers of our required composition courses often send individual students for tutoring on the basic writing skills involved in expository writing. After we spend some time working with them, they almost always want to write their papers on the computers.

Students from our Modern Media class spend several hours each semester using the *Newsroom* program to produce a class newspaper. Since only one student at a time can use the *Newsroom* program, the students come one at a time throughout the semester to write their stories.

Last year the creative writing teacher started a mystery novel with her class. She wrote the first chapter, setting up the mystery, and each student added a chapter. These students all came to the Lab individually to add their chapters to the class disk, and we printed the whole novel when they finished.

Using Computers to Teach Skills

Everyone who has used a computer recognizes its value in revising. I find that it also makes teaching revising skills easier. One of my favorite activities involves loading a student paragraph on enough computers so that the whole class can go through an oral revision session. We discuss the strong points of the paragraph as well as which sentences need to be revised. The students make the corrections on their screens as we discuss them. Actually going through the revision process as we discuss it seems to help the students later in revising their own papers. Sometimes I have them make a printout of "before" and "after" to use as a guide when they are working on their own papers.

We also keep in the Writing Lab a large-screen monitor and a computer with disk drive and monitor on a rolling cart. If few computers are available, the portable unit with large screen provides an excellent way to teach revision skills. Special cords and connectors, which are easy to obtain from any computer store, are needed to connect the computer to both monitors. Teachers can check this unit out to use in their classrooms. They, or a student, can type on the computer, and the rest of the class can read what is being written on the large monitor. I find group composing using these components to be an effective way of teaching a new skill or technique. I save what each class composes, print it, and have copies made for each student.

Using Computers in Other Ways

Another way we use computers is to encourage students to enter writing contests. The Lab staff keeps all the information we receive about writing contests on file and publicizes them through the daily bulletin. We have found the computer to be very helpful in preparing student entries for the contests. Producing an error-free paper is such a tedious job on the typewriter, but with our Apple IIe and letter-quality printer (ours is an NEC Spinwriter), students can turn out beautiful papers to submit to contests. The ease of producing an error-free paper encourages students to enter more contests. The computer capabilities also enable the students to tailor a paper for a particular contest and then to revise the same paper to make it suitable for another contest. We believe that the encouragement and assistance students receive from the Writing Lab staff have much to do with the tremendous increase in interest in writing contests in our school, but the computer has probably played an equally important role.

The word processing capability of the Writing Lab computers also makes it possible for us to boost the egos of our student writers by "publishing" their writing. Each year our Writing Club, sponsored by the Writing Lab staff, produces a literary magazine. We encourage all students to submit entries for it, and we use every piece, provided it is revised to the satisfaction of the student staff and advisors. We can produce the writing of eighty to one hundred students because we type the work on the computers in the Writing Lab. We could not afford to produce a magazine that required a typographer, but since we do all of our own typing and layout, the cost of having the book reproduced on the district's offset press is not prohibitive. We are able to sell the books for \$1.00 or \$1.50 and still break even. The magazine is a great motivator for student writing at Hazelwood West.

Using Computers for Keeping Records

The first year the Writing Labs opened we bought *PFS: File* and *PFS: Sortwork and Report* to use for keeping records. At that time, we did not know how secure the Labs would be in the school budget and planning, and we believed that keeping accurate records of the use of the Lab would help us if we were ever called upon to justify our existence. The PFS programs have enabled us to assemble all kinds of information to put into reports at the end of each semester. For example, we gave our chairman a forty-one-page printout at the end of the 1985-86 school year, containing the following information:

- 1) Total hours spent with individual students
- 2) Total hours spent with whole class groups
- 3) Number of students entering writing contests
- 4) A list of teachers, by department, who referred students to the Lab, number of students each referred, and number of hours the Writing Lab staff spent with each teacher's students
- 5) A list of courses from which students had been referred
- 6) Total hours spent with remedial students
- 7) Total hours spent with students who came for enrichment
- 8) Total hours spent with students on a developmental level
- 9) Total hours spent helping students with contests
- 10) An alphabetical list of every student who had come to the lab during the semester, who referred each one, and the number of hours each student spent in the Lab
- 11) A list, by grade level, of students who had been referred to the Lab

Obviously, we would never be able to compile all the information for these reports without a data base system for recording, updating, and sorting. The teacher assistant in the Lab spends approximately two hours a week updating the records on *PFS: File* and approximately three hours at the end of the semester using *PFS: Sortwork and Report* to prepare the printouts.

Designing the Physical Layout of a Lab and Choosing Equipment

Having taught Gateway Writing Project courses on using computers to teach writing in three different settings, I have learned that the physical layout of the computer lab is important. At Hazelwood West, my

co-instructor and I were allowed to design our own quarters when we outgrew the tiny space where we started. For the Apple Lab, we have a room approximately thirty-by-sixty feet. We bought computer tables that have two shelves. The lower shelf holds the CPU and has space for students' materials. The top shelf is half as wide as the bottom one and holds the monitor, disk drive and printer. We have one printer for each two machines, which are connected to the printer through a "black box."

The computer tables are arranged back-to-back around the perimeter of the room, and in the center are tables and chairs for students who may need to leave the computers temporarily to peer edit, confer with a teacher, or do other pen-and-paper work. We also have a long, rectangular table in the center of the room which holds ten plastic disk containers. The disks and the containers are color-coded so that students do not have to search through all ten to find the disks they used previously; they have only to remember the container they used and look for their disks in the appropriate one. On this same table, we keep a sign-in/sign-out sheet and reference materials: thesauruses, style books, and dictionaries. We have found this setting works very well. If we could design a new one today, I can't think of any changes we would make.

The Writing Lab staffs were not consulted about what brands of hardware to buy, but, fortunately, whoever did the choosing made a wise decision in buying Apple IIe's. We are very well satisfied with them. At present, we have ten machines with 64k and fifteen with 128k. They serve our needs adequately. Most of our printers are Epsoms—some MX, some FX, some LX. In addition, we have one letter-quality NEC Spinwriter. The other two high schools in the district have Imagewriters instead of Epsoms. Again, although we had no input, we are satisfied with the printers we have.

When the Lab opened, the *Applewriter* word processing program had been purchased, perhaps as part of the package when our first computer was bought, and we started using it. Although we had few complaints about it, during the first year the other instructor and I spent some time looking at other word processing programs to see if we could find one we liked better. We never did. After three years' experience, we still think that, of the programs available for the IIe, *Applewriter* is the best for high school use. A student can be using it with five minutes' instruction, and it has all the capabilities we need for the papers our students write.

Conclusion

Computers are not essential for tutoring students, but the word processing capability computers offer not only motivates students but, judging from our experience, also increases their fluency, encourages them to revise,

and improves their attitudes toward writing. Computers also offer unique ways for teachers to provide writing instruction. At Hazelwood West, our computers are in use all day, every day. One student told a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporter, “The Writing Lab has revolutionized our school.” A major part of that revolution has been the use of computers for writing.

Anne Wright, English teacher and Writing Lab instructor in Hazelwood, Missouri, serves as co-director for the Gateway Area Writing Project. She has published numerous articles and has made several presentations at local, state, and regional conferences concerning both writing centers and teaching writing with computers.