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# A Review of *Literacy and Computers: The Complications of Teaching and Learning with Technology*

*Bob Whipple*

**Cynthia J. Selfe and Susan Hilligoss, eds. *Literacy and Computers: The Complications of Teaching and Learning with Technology.* New York: MLA, 1994.**

The Fall/Winter 1987 issue of *The Writing Center Journal* was a special issue entitled "Computers, Computers, Computers." It provides us, in 1994, an important look back at our perceptions of literacy and computers. In it are, among other articles, Fred Kemp's essay on computer-aided heuristics; Jeanne Luchte's bibliographical essay on computer programs in writing centers; Pamela Farrell's article on the relationship of peer tutor, writer, and computer; and not one, but *two* reviews of the WANDAH writing and checking program. While the articles are critically focused, still throughout the issue runs a strong sense of optimism that technology is indeed important and valuable in teaching students to write.

It's extremely interesting to look at this seven-year-old artifact in light of more recent statements on the use of computers in the teaching of writing. Cindy Selfe and Susan Hilligoss's new book provides a look at the implications of technologically-infused teaching. In many ways, it's an entirely different ball game, and Selfe and Hilligoss's book tells us just how different and complex it is.

For example, in the 1987 special issue, much of the space was devoted to critical discussions of programs that checked grammar and usage (WANDAH), assisted in prewriting (Composition Strategy, Topoi) and revision (Homer), and performed other heuristic functions (Writer's Helper,



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Seen). The overall tone was that using computers would indeed be a "good thing," that computers would assist students to become better and more efficient writers. It's pretty clear—or it was in 1987—that computers were considered a valuable resource tool.

A look into Selfe and Hilligoss's book provides a more complicated view of technology's utility in teaching writing seven years later ("complications" is a particularly apt word for the book's subtitle). The book is divided into four parts: Changing the Contexts of Literacy Instruction, Extending Literacy Through Computer Networks, Expanding the Definitions of Computer-Based Literacy, and Broadening our Views of Literacy and Computers. Each section tells of the complicating forces working within and through computer technology. In the first section, the authors explore just what happens when we put computers in classrooms. Ellen L. Barton's essay, "Interpreting the Discourses of Technology," points out that in addition to the "dominant discourse" of technological pedagogy, which assumes a positive outlook toward technology's place in education and life, there is an antidominant discourse as well, one not so sanguine about the wonders technology will bring us (56). Gail Hawisher, in "Blinding Insights: Classification Schemes and Software for Literacy Instruction," reminds us that the software we select reflects the philosophies of writing instruction we hold (38). Clearly, we're moving to a far more critical view of our involvement with technology. From WANDAH, we've gone to hypertext; from heuristics, we've entered social models and networked writing.

The second section treats computer networks as more than simply sites for interaction operating under the assumption that interaction is necessarily good. Betsy A. Bowen reminds us in "Telecommunications Networks: Expanding the Contexts for Literacy" that "as we examine telecommunications projects in schools, we should ask ourselves what kind of 'collective vision' [they] embody..." (127). In "Literacy, Collaboration, and Technology: New Connections and Challenges," Janis Forman defines *computer-supported literacy* as "a complex set of competencies—the ability to work in groups effectively, to learn collaboratively, to create a high-quality written product, and to make intelligent choices and uses of technology that assist in collaborative composing" (132). And Gary Graves and Carl Haller, in "The Effect of Secondary School Structures and Traditions on Computer-Supported Literacy," provide cautionary tales from two computer-supported programs.

The third section looks at the ways that new media, particularly hypertext, have affected and will affect literacy, what hypertext can and cannot do, and the epistemological implications of those abilities. Johndan Johnson-Eilola, in "Reading and Writing in Hypertext: Vertigo and Euphoria," discusses how hypertext changes how we look at such things as *reader* and *writer* (196). Stuart Moulthrop and Nancy Kaplan discuss how "this

new medium is fundamentally at odds with the aims and purposes of conventional literary education" (236). David N. Dobrin, in "Hype and Hypertext," asserts that ". . . the enthusiasm for text analysis programs turned out to be dreadfully wrong, for reasons clearly evident at the time. If the enthusiasm for hypertext is misplaced, it would be well to say so" (305).

The final section asks us to cast our gaze wider regarding computers and writing. In "Writing the Technology that Writes Us: Research on Literacy and the Shape of Technology," Christina Haas and Christine M. Neuwirth discuss the implications of three assumptions—that "technology is transparent," that "technology is all powerful," and that "computers are not our job" (321-325). Selfe and Hilligoss conclude the volume with suggestions for how to study literacy with computers.

Selfe and Hilligoss provide an important service by assembling essays that look behind our easy assumptions about what computers do (or what we think they can do). With few exceptions, this is not a how-to book. Those books exist by the dozens, and they are important. The how-to in this book, though, is the how-to of ideas and implications. What does X mean to certain types of students? If we use Y, how will it affect their thinking? Is Z politically charged? Gendered? Is ABC a new way of writing? As such, these essays embrace many different areas of cognition, learning, and literacy—more specifically electronic literacy.

To date no monolithic imperative has yet emerged regarding what writing centers should do with their computers. Unlike the computerized classroom—where we are often given to believe that there *must* be collaboration, or that there *ought* to be distance learning, or that the boundaries between text and media *should* be blurred—writing centers have a bit more freedom, perhaps, to reflect. But writing centers need to be aware of what is in this book. Many writing centers use computers, but it's not yet obvious *how* writing centers use computers. Collectively, writing centers are all over the technological map. Some farsighted visionaries make use of on-line writing labs (OWLs). Others use MUDs and MOOs (object-oriented cyberspaces wherein users interact textually with each other), listservs, and e-mail to meet student clients. And then there are the rest of us, who have a few computers in the room—some word processing, some drill and skill software, maybe a style checker—and that's about it. It's this latter group that will especially benefit from the wisdom Selfe and Hilligoss have collected. If there is any one thing this book teaches, it is that we cannot simply use computers—in classrooms or in writing centers—without sharply scrutinizing the implications of their use.

With complexity comes the need for reexamination. Dave Healy, at the 1994 Midwest Writing Centers Association Conference, stated, semiseriously, that no one who runs an OWL really knows what she/he is doing yet, and that it behooves us to *ask* what we (or they) are doing. Margaret Mitchell, at the

same conference, asked whether the OWL can supplant the writing center. Such questions—about the implications of our choices regarding technology, about what we are doing and why are we doing it—are at the heart of Selfe and Hilligoss's book. When these concerns, and this book, are placed beside the special issue of *WCJ* of seven years ago, it's apparent that a radical priority shift has occurred.

The final message of this book, then, is that computers are a more complex force within literacy studies (at the forefront of which we can certainly place writing centers) than we are likely to realize without an inward-seeking critical gaze. This gaze, the book implies, is necessary for all of us as we join the transformation of our field by technology.

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