

The University and its Relationship to Teaching Writing with Technology

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Greetings from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, where a central part of our mission is to anticipate and create model classrooms and pedagogies that might inspire universities around the world as they reinvent themselves in the face of technological innovation. We have been particularly inspired by our colleague, Professor Richard Miller, who is at the forefront of research and practice on how digital technologies have come to bear on the future of education. In his article, “The Coming Apocalypse,” Miller (2010) explains that the “paradigm shift” occurring in higher education, once based solely on the scholarly production of copyrighted print documents, confronts the realm of resources and information open to us on the Web. He writes:

The paradigm shift in the nature of human communication has not altered the nature of thought; it has, however, transformed what it means to teach in ways that have yet to be generally recognized or understood. What will it mean to teach when Internet access is truly ubiquitous? When everyone is equipped with a handheld convergence device that provides immediate access to everything stored on the Web? When the open-course movement succeeds in putting together free, online curricula for all areas of the undergraduate curriculum, taught by the best teachers of our time? When Google finishes scanning every book ever printed and the results are available to the curious the world over 24/7?... [F]or anyone interested in literacy, the making of meaning, the movement across time of our hardwired drive to narrate, this is anything but an apocalyptic moment. It is a time that invites invention, creativity, improvisation, and experimentation. (Miller, 2010: 149)

The scholarship chosen for this special issue of *Writing & Pedagogy* responds to these aspects of the current paradigm shift on which Miller

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reflects. For a large number of educators, the familiar practices of meaningful composition are synonymous with writing essays, taking cumulative exams, and maybe also presenting an organized PowerPoint slideshow. But multimodal or new media projects, like Wordpress websites that include not only student-generated text and blogging, but also a weave of pictures and hyperlinks, are not yet traditional examples what of an acceptable composition project might look like. For those of us who are teachers, the anxiety that has been brought on by the seemingly endless procession of technological developments over the past decade has prompted many teachers, students, administrators, parents, and cultural historians to wonder what we might be losing as education is moved into an unfamiliar discursive space. In order to understand how these changes are going to impact the nature of education, we must first have a realistic understanding of how the presence of technology has changed the ways that we think and live. While there are those who understand the ongoing parade of technological advancements that have given shape to the digital era in which we now find ourselves, it is important to be realistic about what technology can and cannot do.

Educators are finding themselves in a massive moment of transition, one that promises to change the form and function of education. This prospect is something that none of us is accustomed to. The shifts in technology, and the resulting effects on society and specifically on teaching and learning, that have occurred in the previous decade and are still occurring now are essentially unparalleled to any event or movement in preceding eras. To be more specific, thanks to the explosion of the Internet and the digital technologies that have accompanied that explosion, students are coming to school with a different sense of what knowledge is and how it can be acquired. Previously, knowledge was something that needed to be sought out. Teachers were the conveyors (or perhaps *guardians* might be a more accurate term here) of knowledge, who exchanged their knowledge for the students' time and energy. The location of that exchange was the classroom, and the terms of that exchange were assignments, tests, presentations, and papers. As students participated in this exchange, they were presented with factual information, as well as different methods of evaluating and engaging with the information which they were studying. This model, familiar to us all, is patterned after the form in which knowledge was stored – printed pages that were organized and collected into books, articles, handouts, etc. This framework has been forever altered by the incredible amount of information and the numerous possibilities for communication that the Internet has provided.

In this issue, readers will find an array of essays that argue for and against the benefits of teaching with technology, beginning with **Aimee Pozorski's**

Featured Essay, “Podcast Paralysis: Inventing the University in the 21st Century,” which confronts and explores how to manage the unexpected results teachers encounter in a generation that they assume will know how to use the “social” technology they attempt to apply to academic purposes. Pozorski challenges the idea that university students want to learn writing using their iPods and iPads; perhaps they need a break from the social use of technology as they embark upon building learning experiences in an academic setting. Pozorski also warns that financial inequity means that remote access to the Internet is not, as yet, ubiquitous. So, how does financial privilege work, one might ask, when blogging becomes a common academic practice?

In the first **Research Matters** article of the issue, “Writing with Laptops: A Quasi-Experimental Study,” **Penelope Collins, Jin Kyoung Hwang, Binbin Zheng, and Mark Warschauer** test the results of investment in one-to-one laptop programs taking place in an increasing number of schools. Their study, which was carried out in districts where there were high levels of poverty, found that the introduction of laptops in early education classrooms led students, including those for whom English is a second or additional language, to write longer, more complex, and better structured essays than a control group of students who did not have access to classroom laptops. It seems obvious that technological features such as word processors, spellcheckers, grammar checkers, dictionaries, built-in thesaurus options, and general feedback on text structure provide tools that aid the success of student writing products, assuming students learn the decision skills to make appropriate use of those tools. By extension, all schools, including universities – especially in a progressive, internationalized university structure – should provide laptops to all incoming students so that they can reap the same benefits that the students in the laptop study will have gained from computer access early on in their writing practices. Yet not all school districts can fund this technology at the primary, secondary, or postsecondary levels, thus raising issues of “have’s” and “have-not’s” in terms of access to technology in education. Beyond the message that teaching writing with technology, from early on, is beneficial in the various types of writing and language tools it provides, access to laptops is valuable for students to learn how to share their work with each other via the Internet, thus making the writing process less solitary and so also perhaps less prone to unnecessary anxieties.

Following this logic, as **A. Fiona Pearson** and **Scott P. Ellis** argue in “Pseudonymous Writing and Improved Course Engagement,” blogging as an academic practice helps to create a community of writers because pseudonymous writing might eliminate a hidden class-consciousness within the blogosphere. Pearson and Ellis find that a course which utilizes

a blog helps students to write better and boundlessly because it can offer anonymity as a “safe space” to express themselves. Blogging, they claim, also makes participation in the university active rather than passive; in other words, students are not waiting for the instructor to explain a reading but instead are relying upon peer discussion and inserting their voices into that discussion as a means of working with difficult texts.

While the prospect of anonymous blogging still does not solve problems of remote access for financially stressed students, in the first **Reflections on Practice** article of the issue, “Tired of Tech: Avoiding Tool Fatigue in the Classroom,” **Brian Croxall** explains best classroom practices that make using blogging and other tech-writing tools possible for students and teachers unfamiliar with the newer developments of a re-invented university, assuming that the technology he discusses will be available to all people studying at a university – still using the university as a “home base” and thus leveling the financial playing field. He stresses that too much technology can cause what he calls “tool fatigue” and discusses the fact that the use of technology must be accompanied by an explanation about why technology is important as part of the writing process. Perhaps ideally, these ideas should enter into debates about exclusively online writing courses; teaching writing with technology does not necessarily mean that classroom meetings and person-to-person connections have lost their importance. In a classroom setting, Croxall’s ideas about developing grading criteria for online work, about grading online work quickly, and about allowing revision to take place online potentially make the technology more useful and more personal in the sense that when students’ work is public, they take their revision process more seriously. Moreover, students may be inspired to share more personally relevant new knowledge because online work is not just submitted to a teacher, but usually shared with peers.

While some reject the use of technology in the writing classroom for the very reason that it makes instruction less personal, both supporters and detractors of teaching with technology recognize that there is a human vulnerability to technology that has both positive and negative effects. As Sherry Turkle characterizes in her book, *Alone Together* (Turkle, 2012: 1):

Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other.... We discovered the network – the world of connectivity – to be uniquely suited to the overworked and overscheduled life it makes possible. And now we look to the network to defend us against loneliness even as we use it to control the intensity of our connections.

While a student might hide aspects of the self through an online persona or avatar, the student could manage, as an online learner, to connect the self to others through threaded discussions, which is the focus of Sarbani

Sen Vengadasalam's "A Learner-Centered Pedagogy to Facilitate and Grade Online Discussions in Writing Courses." In an era when students are overworked as they take on full-time jobs to pay for their simultaneous education, and when universities are trying to cut costs through hybrid classes and moocs, the online network may be the only viable tool for connection. Vengadasalam illustrates how to manage the teaching of writing in an online medium, specifically, how to develop, respond to, and assess students' networked discussions of course topics efficiently and productively. She makes the case that teaching writing with technology requires "a different kind of teacher" – one who knows how to organize and mentor from a cyber classroom. This is a teacher who is, arguably, even more present than a traditional instructor, given the drastic changes in the rules of time, space, and place in the Digital Age.

Like Vengadasalam, when **Cheryl E. Ball** shares her classroom practices for online peer review of webtexts in her essay, "Adapting Editorial Peer Review of Webtexts for Classroom Use," she presents a reflection on the practice of peer review – in which one student evaluates a fellow student's text so as to offer ideas toward bettering a peer's work while simultaneously learning how to apply suggestions for revision to one's own work – as applied to webtexts, that is, digitally produced and accessible works. This kind of online student work has a greater possible impact, not only on its potentially wider audience but also on each student's learning process, considering that webtexts "show and tell" quite publicly. Students using technology as a learning tool for writing are more active in assessing their own work, especially when it comes to elements like innovation and creativity in form and content, conceptual precision and depth, and rigor of scholarship. Hence, the university faces the challenge of incorporating in its assessment practices ways to evaluate the effort required in taking risks in Web composition and writing for the "e-sphere." In my view, Ball's review of the future of scholarly multimedia suggests that reinventing composition with digital products as the outcome will always be under debate even beyond the undergraduate classroom. As Miller (2010) attests in "The Coming Apocalypse," the experimentation involved in teaching writing with technology requires teachers and students to confront the very notion of why universities should use the Web to reach wider audiences in order to keep the very exchange of learning alive through webtexts. Thus, while technology closes the doors to certain aspects of convention and may, for the time being, seem beyond the financial reach of some students, it opens doors for other types of students.

As the population of students learning to write in English changes, **Jonathan Benda's** experience as an EFL teacher of Chinese students in Taiwan confirms that place matters in the Digital Age. An aspect of

technological advancement has meant reinventing the teaching of English in universities in different countries, where adjustments to space and place combine to create new thinking about the relationship between national cultures and technology. In “Google Translate in the EFL Classroom: Taboo or Teaching Tool?” Benda suggests that universities must reconsider students’ resources and how best to incorporate the available tools such as translation software into learning strategies rather than abolishing them or punishing students for using them. Benda shows how using inaccurate mechanized translation can be fruitfully employed as part of the student revision process. Technology enables him to create a “translinguaging space” that mitigates cultural boundaries and allows students to work from their own Chinese language in developing their English writing. Benda’s article raises the point that if teaching writing with technology might produce a learning biased toward students with the financial resources to afford specific technologies, teaching writing with technology at the same time discourages the bias that privileges writing in English. Thus, ideas about the negative effects of translating a student’s ideas from her/his original language might need to change in the tech-age university. Benda’s article further raises the general issue of how translation tools might reinvent the university in an age of globalization.

Yet another new technology, voice recognition software, may have the potential to mitigate physical – and physiological – boundaries of writing. “Taming the Dragon: Effective Use of Dragon Naturally Speaking Speech Recognition Software as an Avenue to Universal Access,” by **James Altman**, outlines the benefits of writing without a keyboard. Altman offers personal experience with speech recognition software as an alternative to keyboard technology that is particularly useful for writers with motor disabilities. Altman argues that writing through a microphone is also freeing for anyone with a passion for writing, regardless of her/his fine motor skills, and he describes what it takes to become a skilled program user in ways that challenge the program’s detractors. The physical requirements for writing change in a computer context when speech recognition software is used by students and also by teachers who need a faster and more fluid way to comment on student papers.

Christopher John Hill, in “Apple Dictation Software: A Voice Solution for Writers Whose Hands Need a Rest,” broadens Altman’s lens by considering further advantages and disadvantages of dictation software, particularly Apple’s Dictation program. Hill cites the fact that some such programs require Internet access and also that they need to be trained on specific words and accents of English. Hill gives examples from his own experience of what it means to voice-write in English when one’s accent is not one of those on which the software has already been trained and

of the difficulties of speaking carefully and slowly enough for words to be correctly understood while in the flow of thinking and writing. Given that Hill's motivation for this article stems from his own repetitive strain injury associated with extensive computer use in writing, an intriguing implication of his discussion is that, as humans vulnerable to the traditions which technology has created, our keyboard addiction keeps students and teachers tethered to their machines in offices and computer labs – and increasingly also to portable laptops, notebooks, and other digital devices wherever we go – instead of allowing them to escape the insularity of the writing process. This addiction may ultimately therefore not only interfere with the physical act of writing, as is happening for an increasing number of people suffering physiological problems associated with keyboard writing, but also inhibit innovation and creativity in writing and lower the general quality of a writer's life.

In our **From the eSphere** piece, entitled “Teaching the New Paradigm: Social Media Inside and Outside the Classroom,” **William Magrino** and **Peter Sorrell** offer their groundbreaking approach to using social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, inside and outside the classroom. Most importantly, Magrino and Sorrell highlight the ways that technology makes writing as a team possible – a skill that translates into the world of business beyond the university. The university is no longer an ivory tower in the 21st century, when students think of education as the key to successful employment at graduation. In Magrino and Sorrell's highly visual essay, we see numerous examples of student work that comes directly out of a Business and Technical writing course at Rutgers University that teaches professionalization through writing with technology.

In the **New Books** section, **Kate Cowan** reviews Suzanne M. Miller and Mary B. McVee's volume, *Multimodal Composing in Classrooms: Learning and Teaching for the Digital World*. Cowan highlights the importance of this anthology as it reveals a debunking of “myths” and a recognition that multimodal composition is the reality for the millennial generation and also for teachers who will need to participate in transforming the social spaces of composition in their classrooms and beyond. In a second New Books contribution, **Erin R. Anderson** reviews Jason Palmeri's *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*, which, Anderson suggests, reminds readers of multimodal composition's connections to the past. Anderson applauds Palmeri's project of exposing traditions related to teaching writing with technology, with the hope that this may demonstrate inclusivity rather than elitism in the approach to technology of these digital times.

Ultimately, this issue of *Writing & Pedagogy* dares teachers and writers to try out new ways of thinking about teaching and writing with technology.

After all, the very nature of pedagogy is that we educators must experiment with all of the new knowledge available to us. Expect to feel an inspiration to try what you have learned about in this issue without the pressure to get it right the first time. If one point above all else is salient here, it is that in the university of the 21st century, the quickened pace that Nicholas Carr alludes to in his famous essay, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” (Carr, 2008), has created a situation in which we teachers must learn along with our students. The best teachers need to be not masters of content but masters of problem solving. Teaching writing with technology, as I hope you will be persuaded in the following pages, elucidates problems that the most seasoned teacher may never have known to exist.

About the Author

Miriam Jaffe-Foger holds a Ph.D. in American Literature and a certification in teaching writing from Rutgers University. She worked as Assistant Director of the Writing Program at Rutgers and now serves as Director of Writing for the Rutgers Doctorate in Social Work program. She is currently at work on a Master’s degree in Social Work at Rutgers. Her most recent publications and manuscript in progress examine the work of Philip Roth and Saul Bellow, and she is also developing a textbook of writing case studies that make connections between the humanities and the sciences.

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