WRITING CONFERENCES USING THE MICROCOMPUTER

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Some students coming to word processing for the first time are disappointed when the computer does not magically transform their writing. Having heard the virtues of word processing extolled by computer enthusiasts, many of these students hope that pushing a few buttons on the computer will help them better understand the mysterious process of revision. While such magic cannot be enacted, the computer is a powerful tool that an instructor can use to partially demystify writing and rewriting so that students can develop the craft of revising.

Over the last three years, I have found that one of the most productive ways to help students in my basic writing courses better understand how to use the word processor to improve their writing is to demonstrate during writing conferences the kinds of changes they could make in their papers with the aid of the computer. The strategies described were developed from observations of students helping students and of an analysis of the assistance students requested from me as well as my convictions about what might be most helpful to students.

As a result of these observations, I have revised my course to provide more conference time during the first three weeks of the semester. During the early weeks of the semester, we meet two hours per week as a full class to discuss broad writing concerns and texts intended to stimulate writing. One half of the class meets for one of two scheduled class hours in the computer room to work on their essays. Two hours conference time per week is provided. During the conference time and computer room hours, individual students and I sit at one of the Apple IIe computers

to discuss one specific issue of his/her essay for approximately 10 minutes. I read the essays before the conference to prepare for our discussion. The student is expected to revise his/her essay after the conference.

To open the dialogue in which students learn more about the actual demands of revision and about the potential of the computer to ease those demands, the first thing I do in the first writing conference is to acknowledge the student's intention by asking: "What are you trying to do in this paper?" Discovering and acknowledging the student's aim is important in conferences on the computer because it is extremely easy for an instructor to foster changes that reflect the instructor's idealized essay rather than the paper the student wanted to write. If the instructor demands that the student produce his/her idealized version of the essay, the student will probably be discouraged from trying further revision. To avoid usurping the students' authority over their texts, I depress the caps lock button and type their statements of what they are trying to say across the top of the essay as it appears on the monitor. The student and I then read through the first paragraph or so on the monitor to find cues that should suggest what the student is trying to do. When we find them, I use the code of the Apple Writer IIe to capitalize those words so that they stand out. If we do not find cues to the aim of the writer, I attempt to draw from the student language that would indicate his/her aim and his/her strategy for inserting these words into the essay. As what the student wanted to say and how s/he wants to say it becomes clearer, I ask the student to make tentative changes on the screen in upper case letters so these tentative changes stand out.

Subsequent paragraphs in the students' papers often do not have sufficient information for the reader to understand what they are trying to say. To show students how the computer can help them elaborate their ideas so that their paper does what they want it to do, I often scroll through their paper line by line and stop when I do not understand some idea. While the student is telling me what s/he meant to say, I depress the caps lock, the open bracket, and type my question. I then type the gist of the student's answer and close the bracket so that the writer can return later to that place in the text to complete the addition. In a second or third elaboration, the student types the additional sentences in upper case letters.

As with all changes we make on the screen during conference, these changes are saved onto the disk under a different file name from the student's file name so that the student's disk and paper copy remain unchanged. I also print for the student the version of his/her paper that includes our comments. By not changing the student's copy, or even making notes on that copy, I leave the final decision to carry out the revision to the student. After the conference, students usually make marginal notes on the printed copy of the text containing the conference notes to plan revisions. While these notes are often more elaborate than the comments embedded in the text, they are rarely the full revisions which they will usually make on screen.

Demonstrating to the writer what I do not understand and actually placing the start of a revision in the text help the student see that the computer makes additions physically easier than typing or handwriting because the word processor moves text to accommodate the new words. Printing a paper copy after each of these changes demonstrates that ideas and papers can grow through revision. Further, this specifically focused reader response helps the students acquire a stronger sense of audience. Because they have a stronger idea of their instructor as a reader and because they see how easy it is to add information, many of my students seem less apprehensive about producing three or four page papers.

In the second or third conference about the paper, I do a preliminary and tentative analysis of the writer's word choice similar to what Odell described in *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging* to suggest revision of sequence, focus, and physical context. Prior to the conference I read the essay to evaluate how effectively the student used these strategies to fulfill his/her aims. In conference the student and I use "Sensible Speller" to compile an alphabetized list of the words the student used and the number of times each word appeared. While only a guide intended to help us explore the relationship between his/her word choice and aim, this frequency count usually confirms my own evaluation of the essay. It also makes preliminary analysis easier and more graphic because it automatically isolates the linguistic cues necessary for Odell's approach. Discussions about word choice often occupy two or three ten-minute conferences.

For example, the word count supplied by "Sensible Speller" can help analyze the paper for what Odell called logical and temporal sequence. By comparing the list of linguistic cues indicating

sequence that Odell delineated with the list of unique words in the student's paper, I can graphically demonstrate how much sequence the writer used. If the student infrequently used words such as "then," "when," "next" or "because," "therefore," and "since," then I have a graphic case for more use and can explain to the writer how these words move the reader along either a logical or temporal path through the paper. To help students make changes for better sequence, I read through the paper to an instance where "and" might be replaced by a more appropriate signal for sequence, delete the "and" from the screen, and then ask the student to revise the sentence using a word from Odell's list. Either the student types or I then type the revision in all capital letters so that the student may easily return to that segment of the text. Most important, while demonstrating this idea I explain to the student the logic for the change being made.

For another example, "Sensible Speller" made it easy for me to help a student named Sam examine the focus of his developing essay. In a paper about his girlfriend's birthday party, Sam used "she," "her," or "Lisa" 39 times; "We" (referring to Lisa or Sam) 14 times; "I" 72 times. If Sam was writing about her party, then the proportion among these three references might be inappropriate. To help students with such concerns, I often work with them to find the appropriate word for the subject slot of their sentences.

Analyzing the list for cues to physical context also has proven especially useful because many of my students write papers about personal experiences that require them to tell the reader about the setting. If, after I have read a student's paper, I feel that it does not tell enough about place or objects in the setting, then I will ask the student to tell me a little about where the experience happened. As the student talks, I will try to note cues to context such as the name of a town or an object from a physical setting such as a tree or a house or a car. Where I think I need more specific information, I can ask for it. We then compare what the student said to the list of words from his writing. Usually on the basis of this comparison, we go back to the text to insert notes that will lead to further information about the physical context.

Usually in the fourth or fifth conference on the paper, students are ready to delete and reorganize some of their text to more clearly express their ideas. Doing so with pencil and paper is for some students a nearly overwhelming task because it requires that

they envision their paper in a different form from the handwritten version with erasures, crossouts, arrows, and insertions. Because the computer automatically reforms changes, the need for students to envision reorganization is significantly reduced.

Generally, I try to teach them an experimental, almost playful attitude toward reorganization so that they will try out a series of modifications to see how the paper actually reads. If, for example, a student and I think that the fourth paragraph should be before the third paragraph, I will show the student that by pushing a few keys the paragraph will be removed from its first position and placed in the trial location. We then read and discuss that section of the text to see if the change works. If so, we revise so that the passage reads smoothly; if not, we move the paragraphs back to their former positions. Sometimes, students will also need to try a different sentence order within a paragraph. By deleting a sentence into buffer memory, I can show the student how to remove a sentence from a place where it seems illogical. If another position in the paragraph makes more sense, I show the student how to move the cursor to the new position and insert the sentence from buffer memory to that place in the text. We can then read the revised paragraph on the screen or on paper to judge the effectiveness of the change and talk about further revision needed to make the change work.

In the fifth or sixth conference, the computer serves as a useful device to demystify the writing conventions of punctuation and sentence structure. The computer screen can be split horizontally to show two versions of the same text. One version can be modified while the other remains fixed. If a student has, for example, written a run-on sentence, the student and I will rewrite that sentence on the screen. While the original version remains fixed, the new version is literally reconstructed as the words move to accommodate the changes. My hope is that seeing new words appear and existing words move to accommodate changes will not only show the students how easy it is to rewrite but also help them better understand the way conventions work. When we are finished, we can compare the old version with the new to judge which reads better. If the new one reads better, we place it into the full text. If not, we continue to revise.

In the last conference on the paper, I teach the students how to use the spelling checker to identify spelling and typographical errors. Identifying possible errors alleviates some of the excessive

concern students often show for correct spelling and relieves me of the troublesome role of finding misspelled words. "Sensible Speller" quickly compiles a list of all the words in the student's text and compares it to *The Random House Dictionary*. Any words it does not find it tentatively labels as "suspect," which allows the student to identify nearly all the spelling and typographical errors of a paper. Ironically, while basic writers are extremely concerned about correctness, they frequently have great difficulty identifying errors because they seem to read their papers from the intended meaning rather than from the words they actually wrote. They, therefore, supply the correct arrangement of letters as they read. The spelling checker, however, isolates the misspelled word by highlighting it in a reversed color field (dark green letters on a light green screen). Such specific highlighting helps writers find typographical and spelling errors, an act which seems to give students a greater sense of control over their writing. Patterns of typographical errors and patterns of spelling errors emerge from the printed list of suspect words that the spelling checker will produce for each document. Students often consult this personalized list of frequently misspelled words while producing subsequent papers.

Once students have learned how to use the spelling checker, they often check the spelling of each draft of a paper. The possibility of easily and quickly checking the spelling might further foster revision for a richer network of meaning because both the instructor and student can focus on more substantive issues without ignoring important considerations of correct spelling.

After this series of conferences on the first paper, many students routinely employ the operations described. They talk to me for a few minutes about one specific change and then produce a revised draft of their paper in thirty or forty minutes. Students will also initiate later conferences about subsequent essays by asking me to use one of the strategies described above which I believe makes me more responsive to their aims because the request to help them find where they need to say more, for example, helps me focus on their concerns.

Using the micro computer in conferences has five advantages. First, students can see in specific terms how a skilled writer, their instructor, handles modification in their papers. Rather than having to talk in general terms with students about changes in their writing, an instructor can identify modifications that they might

not have seen and show them precisely how to make those changes in their paper.

Second, students learn that they can make otherwise difficult and time-consuming revisions easier and faster on the computer than in handwriting. Because the computer automatically reformats a text to accommodate changes, students are saved the physical demands of recopying their papers and the psychological strain of trying to envision changes before they are made.

Third, students learn that revision is often an experimental process in which the writer tries an idea and then judges its effectiveness. Because it appears less mystical, almost trial and error, they may be more likely to seek another student's suggestions.

Fourth, students learn to focus on one revision at a time rather than having to revise the entire paper before producing another draft which probably encourages revision. Making one revision per draft on the computer structures the time needed for revision into smaller units—less than an hour—which probably makes rewriting more manageable. Students trying to complete all revisions at the same time would probably require six or eight hours of work before they produced another draft. Many of my students, not willing to commit this length of time without seeing a new product, would probably narrow the scope of their rewriting to spelling and punctuation changes which could be completed in an hour or so. By focusing on one revision at a time, students often produce a new draft in less than an hour which seemingly gives them a greater sense of accomplishment than working for many days to produce another draft.

Fifth, the students' papers more fully embody their meaning and show greater control over conventions than I was accustomed to seeing before I introduced word processing into classes. Students who initially had difficulty producing two or three paragraphs are soon able to compose two or three pages that they are willing to revise five or six times until the paper is five or more pages long and exhibits significantly improved writing facility.

Teaching students to use the word processor in this way makes me more of a collaborator with students. Students seem to perceive me less as of a grader of their essays and more as someone with whom they work on a project. This change in roles and the work students produce as a result of writing and conferring with the aid of microcomputers has two implications for my teaching. Whether the students and I are looking at the essay on a com-

puter screen or on paper, I now tend to focus on only one or two aspects of the theme so that they can implement specific revisions within a manageable time and return with the paper to confer again. Doing so has helped both students and me better realize that even seemingly minor changes in a text often have major implications that must be given careful consideration. The need for three to six conferences on each paper and the need to consider carefully the ramifications of specific changes have caused me to rethink my teaching so that I provide more time for conferences on each paper by scheduling more individual conferences and by using class time for conferences. I also do not require as many individual papers as I had previously because students revise more fully and because they demand more conference time from me. By talking with me about their papers with the aid of a computer, students learn that word processing is not magic, but they also learn that writing is not so mysterious. Many realize that they are working far harder on papers than ever before because they have learned how to use a very powerful tool to improve their papers in ways they previously did not try.

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