Electronic Writing: The Autobiography of a Collaborative Adventure

Message 6736 Chris Madigan (Chris, 2121) 10-26-86 7:10 PM

File ACTS-C

Jane:10-19 Chris:10-26

The tenor’s voice labored as Siegfried forged his sword from fragments of shattered steel. Wagnerian opera and black coffee—my favorite writing ritual.

Wrapping my long red bathrobe a bit tighter against the midnight chill of the sleeping house, I squinted at the monitor. Green letters flashed across the screen, scrolling upward. “Great! It’s here. He’s finally done with that section,” I whispered, still just a bit awed by a message from my electronic co-author:

Although few of the schools we have observed place computers directly in the classroom, studying Peggy Ryan’s setting showed us the potential of electronic writing tools. Another model setting is Anne Wright’s tutorial writing center described above.

[***Identify Anne by name above, then. I don’t know which lab was hers.***]

“Okay, you’re right,” I grumbled, sipping from yet another mug of coffee perched on a coaster near my keyboard, then chewing at a dried apricot. “Good—Now if you can just come up with a way to organize the stuff I threw into the part on ‘Evaluation.’”

We had thought it would be fun to write an article together. We’d watched several of our Teacher Consultants discover computers and start using them, not for spelling games, but for real writing. We’d worked together on a grant to weave computers into the fabric of our Writing Project. After four years of learning-by-doing, Gateway had developed an Institute that felt right, that used technology but kept the focus on writing. So when NCTE sent out a “Call for Papers” on teaching English teachers to use computers, we saw our chance. Chris and I had survived each other’s feedback as members of a response group—why not a collaborative essay on a topic we both knew well?

We rough-planned on a file folder during a lunch break at a conference, deciding to take turns writing sections of the article. Then we headed home to draft our respective pieces—

Message 23700 Chris Madigan (Chris, 2121) 9-21-86 9:18 PM

Dear Jane,

Okay, October 15 it is for the first deadline. But we need to revise our who-does-what list. Here’s a possibility. What do you think?

INTRO

GOAL

ACTIVITIES

ACTS-A-Teaching Teachers
ACTS-B-Supporting Change
ACTS-C-Research
ACTS-D-Dissemination

EVALUATION

EVAL-A-Methods
EVAL-B-Results

I figure we can each contribute info to the other, but we’d be responsible for first-drafting the sections I’ve marked. If that doesn’t set okay with you, let me know.
That was Chris—always organized, always fair. He had been my colleague, friend, and sometime mentor. I'd introduced him to the Writing Project and he'd introduced me to computers. He led Gateway's Summer Institute in 1985, then moved West to teach and start a Writing Project at the University of New Mexico. Our response group in St. Louis fizzled for a while after Chris left, and I thought our chances of collaborative writing would fizzle too.

But I didn't reckon on this modem. The FIPSE grant had given each of us one of these squatly silver cigar boxes that now linked our computers through a thousand miles of phone wires. I learned to slip the communications disk into Drive A, type the initial command, and watch, fascinated, as the words grew letter by letter across the screen, connecting us to the host computer in New Jersey. "Bee-bee-beep-bee-bee-beep" sang the touch tones, with no phone in sight, just red lights flashing in a row on the face of the modem.

For a few months, we both typed messages as members of a teleconference. A dozen computerphiles from architecture, genetics, music, and yes, writing were using the modem to talk about a common theme, "design," and its role in our seemingly disparate fields. (3) That teleconference became my new toy. There was camaraderie and stimulation, but no pressure to perform any immediate task. I found myself using it to unwind—when I finished my "real" academic writing, I'd log on to the teleconference and chat.

Then Chris and I ventured into riskier electronic territory: our collaborative essay. (4) Each of us would draft one of our assigned sections, date it ("Chris: 10-26"), and send it via modem for the other's response, also dated ("Jane: 11-01"). This process might then be repeated, with some pieces—like EVAL—flying across the phone wires a dozen times.

At first, we'd set off our comments with stars and brackets, being careful not to tamper with each other's text—

**Message 6730 Jane Flinn (Jane, 295) 11-01-86 12:37 AM

File ACTS-A

Chris:10-26 Jane:11-01**

The Institute runs approximately 4 weeks. Morning is class-time; afternoon is writing time. In the morning, participants share reactions to readings, discuss their students' and their own writing processes, hear presentations, do writing exercises, respond to each other's writing in pairs and small groups, see software demonstrations, discuss how to adapt all this to their classrooms, eat donuts, and drink gallons of coffee.

**[I like this. Whole paragraph gives me the flavor of the project. How about leading in with "A typical institute runs four weeks..."]**

In the afternoon, participants read and write in the computer lab. While half are drafting, revising, or printing at the computers, the other half is either kibitzing, reading... or conferring with teachers or peers on their drafts...

**[Someplace, Chris, I think you should mention the use of a large monitor hooked to a single computer for demonstrations of writing processes... It worked so well last summer that nearly all our teachers are badgering their schools to buy one]**

As the weeks went on and the files and revisions accumulated, we took more risks. Chris jokingly deflated one of my more pompous lines—

Gateway leaders sought to counter the computer-driven drill and practice programs while supporting computers as powerful writing tools. The Department of Education agreed and awarded GNP a grant exceeding $100,000.

**[I still say you applied for the grant just to avoid summer vacations]**

And I critiqued his connotations—

A student aide shepherds the Institute library, sets up hardware, and does clerical work. Teacher Consultants return to the Institute to share their classroom tips... 

**[Love 'shepherds,' don't like 'tips'-sounds patronizing.***]**

Sometimes I found myself responding not simply to the text but to the content. Here, for example, I replied to his description of a Gateway assignment by telling of my own paper:

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The first assignment—"Recreate . . . an experience you had (good or bad) with a machine"—takes a week, ventilates feelings about technology (usually cars), and mimics personal experience assignments participants often give their students.

[*Chris, I loved writing my machine paper—it dealt with learning to drive a shift car in Germany in 1966, an incident I've told orally dozens of times but never written down—twas a real help when I talked about Britton, "20 years of incubation."*]

Sometimes we "talked" our way through a section by messanging back and forth, freewriting interactively. The piece in which we tried to weave together ideas about formative and summative evaluation seemed to call for this kind of ongoing dialogue:

Message 11809 Chris Madigan (Chris, 2121) 11-8-86 11:15 PM

File EVAL

Chris:10:20 Jane:11-8 Chris:11-8

(I need to put the next section of EVAL into finished prose—Jane)

Conferencing, peer groups, journal responses, grading—especially this past summer, Anne and I got into a lot of comments-on-comments . . . and thought it was a big asset. That is, we had people quickwrite how they felt about peer response. . . . Two interns also skimmed Anne's and my first set of journal comments and commented about our comments. All of this relates in my mind to the writer's notion of "revision" and the programmer's notion of "recursion. . . ."

[***BINGO! I call it "debriefing. . . ." It's conscious monitoring of your process. Without it, teachers do NOT automatically recognize what they're going through as writers and (next step) therefore what their students go through and (next step) therefore what they as controllers of their students' environments can do.***]

Such dialogue allowed us to pull back and respond to a whole section, not just a turn of phrase or a point of fact:

[***Why did you not use the two-part METHODS/RESULTS organization for this EVAL? . . . I perceive competing organizations. . . . Maybe it's just "leftovers." How do you see this section, Jane?***]

Gradually, we let go of our carefully allocated pieces, to share ownership of the paper—

[**Chris, I finally see where my stuff on model school sites is going. It should be part of 'dissemination.' If it doesn't duplicate what you're writing for that section, use it there or plug in chunks.***]

Chris obliged by refocusing my transitions, and the section worked:

We have found that good programs in writing with computers spread by word of mouth and by imitation as much as by direct teaching. In the past four years, dozens of high schools in St. Louis . . . have established writing centers, most staffed or led by Gateway Teacher Consultants. . . . Such informal dissemination is consistent with NWP tradition. The Summer Institute builds commitment, and each generation . . . spreads the word to new people and new sites. Computers just make that spread of ideas more visible. . . .

Gradually we gained enough trust to break out of our brackets and to work directly on each other's text—deleting, moving, reshaping, but always sending the revision back for approval.

A couple of times one of us rewrote the other's piece, then felt dissatisfied with his or her own work:

P.S. Jane, I'm still having trouble with the EVAL. I'm cutting it down, but somehow it feels wrong. I can't pin it down. Either it repeats too much of what we've said before, or else it doesn't address what we say are our
goals, or it addresses them sideways. I'm not sure. I'll let you wrestle with that once I send the file.

(He tried giving me an outline for a new organization, but that felt wrong to me.)

A couple of times the original author started to bristle—

Chris, I thought in general your cutting worked fine. I did feel your In-service section (ACTS-A) could go to a list rather than paragraphs, but had little to quarrel with in the INTRO and Summer Institute parts. I really didn't feel good about dropping my GOALS section, even though I can see that you've tied the themes into the EVAL outline. The text you sent me is 8 single-spaced pages—5 from your first drafting, 3 from mine....

But most of the time, the exchange was genial. We'd accompany a draft with notes about our kids, gripes about our work schedules, or university gossip—

Jane, I'm starting to tire, but I want to push the home-stretch schedule. Lauren's got a soccer tournament next weekend, and I don't want to be stuck at the computer.

His complaint was interrupted by the arrival of my EVAL and ACTS-C.

Okay, we're cooking. Talk to you this afternoon. Chris.

The modem became a kind of therapist, ready to listen with a beep and a flash, bringing a friendly response more quickly than the mail and more cheaply than the phone. When Chris faced a bunch of disgruntled graduate students, he took out his frustration on the keyboard and I typed back with empathy. When I was exhausted, I had to share my distress—

Chris, I'm sorry I've been so slow. I think I'm getting too old for these all-nighters. Actually, I was late because Mark was home last week with stomach crud, I felt the same symptoms, so I went to bed Thursday instead of writing. By Friday I was back in gear, so as you know I tried the old opera and black coffee routine. Today I'm really feeling awful, and I have a meeting at 8 AM. Enough excuses, but I'm going to bed after this message and won't be home till after 5 PM tomorrow. Here's the best I could do with EVAL. Peace! Jane

Finally, we had a draft, pruned well within the official page limit. It explained our Summer Institute on teaching the writing process with computers, our follow-up workshops in the schools, our programs of teacher research and publication, and our approach to assessment. Chris dubbed the file, a composite of all our reworked sections, "BIGONE"—

Message 11967 Chris Madigan (Chris, 2121) 11-9-86 10:20 PM

KEYS: /BEHOLD/BIGONE/

BEHOLD! A 16 page—16, mind you, and doublespaced—draft of all the sections preceding EVAL. All of it's in ASCII, so translate for your computer. Triple asterisks mark info we've yet to supply. Let me know what you think.

(Coming just a few days after Halloween, I first read the title on the screen as "Begone"—seemed like a sort of ghoulish incantation—"Behold...Begone!")

By this time, we felt the text really belonged to both of us. This led to some unexpected quandaries with personal pronouns. Our text said, "The modem has provided a link between the Gateway site in Missouri led by Flinn and the site in New Mexico being developed by Madigan." I remarked—

Chris, I'm never sure how to handle references to oneself when two people are involved. I've used a lot of "we" forms, which sound fine, I think. But how to specify when just one of us is meant? Earlier you referred to "a former GWP instructor now in NM"—yet you are one of the co-authoring "we's." I thought of "GWP site in MO led by one of us and the site in NM being developed by the other," but think it's unnecessarily mysterious. Still, I don't like referring to myself in the third person. Any solutions???

We wound up with this:

The modem has also linked the two authors of this paper and helped keep Gateway in St. Louis in contact with the new site in Albuquerque. continued on next page
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Yet we retained our own identities as authors. If anything, the collaboration made us more aware of our separate composing processes, writing styles, and goals. After Chris made several attempts to reorganize EVAL, the section in which I’d tried to weave together some broad themes such as recursiveness and collaboration, I saw it. I wanted the returning leitmotifs of Wagnerian opera; Chris wanted the structured algorithms of Pascal programming. I wanted the right-brained leaps connecting theme to theme; Chris wanted the left-brained analyses of courses, organizations, and sequences.

We knew that these differences could help our paper speak to different audiences, and we didn’t want to homogenize our thinking. But it was clear now that I was the one who had to revise EVAL. I had conceived the leitmotifs and I would have to compose them into a text that worked. Chris could give feedback or edit the fine points, but we’d reached the limit of collaboration. With a sigh of resignation, I messaged Chris that my next attempt at EVAL would be—

much shorter, but still at least a bit Wagnerian.

And so at last the final piece fit.

Chris:10-20 Jane:11-8 Chris:11-8
Jane:11-9 Chris:11-9 Jane:11-13

Throughout our experience with computers and writing, we find a coherence based on recurring themes: the writing process, the computer process, the research process, the teaching process, the school change process. In working with “process” in all these forms, we find a pattern of successive approximation through two kinds of activities: collaboration and recursion.

During this project, which was itself both collaborative and recursive, we would often step back to reflect on what we were doing. Accustomed to tracing the composing process, each of us kept a file folder with every printout gathered at every stage in our dialogue—

Chris, this is fun! If we ever get this paper done, I’m going to use these files and write something about collaborative composing.

Bye for now, Jane

I remembered that plan the next summer when I assigned the first paper at the GWP Institute. My own “experience with a machine” would tell the story of this collaboration via modern.(5) As I read through the two-inch-thick folder that documented our four-month-long adventure, I grew still more fascinated with the joint authoring process.

In what mode had we been writing? The article itself was clearly explanatory—an academic discussion of GWP’s work with computers in Summer Institutes, in-service programs, teacher research, and evaluation. But what of the expressive text that infiltrated every file? The finished product was academic prose, but the computer had recorded a larger and more eclectic text-in-progress. Our electronic writing was both professional and intimate, both formal and informal, both distant and immediate.

In a face-to-face writing workshop, those same modes would have emerged. But the expressive would be oral—peer response, writer’s musings—and the explanatory text would be written. In our electronic writing workshop, we could not speak—yet we needed to—and the swift exchange of files through the modem enticed us to imagine a conversation at the keyboard. Walter Ong says that “The Writer’s Audience is Always a Fiction.”(6) Our typed-out talk was conceived for two quite different fictionalized audiences.

The expressive text was intended for the co-author alone. The writing is chatty, personal, often elliptical, with the compressed syntax and lack of elaboration we use among members of our own in-group. It is a style that communicates only because of the meanings shared between writer and audience. (Chris knew that I would understand his “who-does-what list,” a phrase that might sound cryptic to an anonymous reader.) Michael Spitzer, in “Writing Style in Computer Teleconferences,”(7) found this oddly conversational intimacy even among people who did not know one another offline. The computer seems to give writers just enough distance to feel safe. The comments are public but not published in any permanent way. They tempt us into the clever asides, the stage whispers, as we pursue our “official” conversation in the essay.

The explanatory text was intended for the co-author plus the unknown readers of an eventual book. The writing is formal, the sentences longer and more embedded, the meanings elaborated right down to the last footnote. It is a style polished to communicate with a diverse and distant audience with whom the writer cannot be sure of much shared territory.

Why did this feel so different from scrawling “interested-reader” comments on the texts of my colleagues in response groups? I think partly because the medium for response was so quick and so flexible. When I sent Chris a draft with comments, I often had an acknowledgment within the hour.
And I wasn’t restricted by the size of a margin. If my comments got rolling into a discovery draft, they didn’t get cramped into brevity or crowded onto a separate sheet of notebook paper. I could easily flow from conversation back to essay style, then later do a block move to insert the unexpected “good” stuff into the article.

Once we dropped the bracketed comments and started manipulating each other’s text on our own monitors, our responses inevitably grew more personal. I was not simply an interested reader commenting on a colleague’s work. I was an author commenting on text that was mine as much as his; I was an observer commenting on a process as I participated in it. I would assume my joint author’s role and play my part in the dialogue, then step back to watch the scene replay as I scrolled through the text, and then in my stage whisper tell the crew in the wings what I thought of the performance. Here was my favorite leitmotif—“comments-on-comments,” or as Chris called it, “debriefing.”

To a startling degree, this electronic essay made me conscious of how I write, how I think. It got me involved in the sort of Deweyian reflection on-the-process that to me is the key to real education. A learner tries something new, steps back, then suddenly recognizes how and why it worked. Eureka! Better still, the learner articulates that discovery, tells the story of that personal adventure in learning. That’s why I had to write this essay—to reflect on my experience with long-distance collaboration and to bring home a trophy from that adventure into unknown territory.


5. An earlier version of this article, written during the 1987 Summer Invitational Institute, appeared in the booklet All the Write Moves published informally by the Gateway Writing Project at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.


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Building a Literate Community

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prize. If students are to be convinced that they are meaning-makers and not just note-takers, they need a much more active role than they are given in many literature courses. And it is not simply a matter of lecturing less and providing more time for what is often euphemistically called “class discussion.” Students need something better than the Darwinian atmosphere of traditional classroom discussion, in which the most vocal and opinionated speakers prosper, if they are to become full participants. They need built-in occasions to listen to each other. They need to learn to negotiate meaning, to share responsibility for figuring things out, to take account of what other people say. One of the extraordinary by-products of talking about literature with other people is that we learn more about them as well as about the texts we study. The collaborative learning group is a place to do that, an opportunity to break the cycle of isolation and the intellectual free-market chaos that characterizes much of students’ learning lives. It offers a place to practice what Bruffee calls the “conversation of mankind.”

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