Why 2K Is OK

BY JULIA TUCKER-LLOYD

Sarah’s name kept appearing on my attendance sheet—but no Sarah. At first, I thought this was an administrative error, a case where a student moved and forgot to notify the school as she appeared to be a “no show” in all of her classes. Her counselor phoned the last number she had on record for Sarah only to find out that the line had been disconnected. After some sleuthing, we determined the cause. Sarah’s family had fled to a rural cabin they had purchased in order to survive the Armageddon they felt was surely heading our way due to the crash in technology, and thus our world as we know it, when the year changed to 2000.

Although I don’t even have groceries enough for this week in my cabinets, much less the first part of the millennium, strangely I can connect to Sarah’s story. In essence, she and her family are running away and hiding from technology. From my perspective as a classroom teacher, I can definitely say, “been there, done that.” In the beginning of my teaching career, managing an overhead projector was high-tech enough for me. Sarah and her family are trying to forge a new private world, sans technology, in the woods where I suppose, like Thorea, they want to live more simply. Like Sarah, at one time I chose to live more simply in my classroom, but like Thorea, I emerged from that retreat only by degrees until technology became an integral part of my classroom world.

The classroom in which I teach is different from the classroom in which I sat as a student. I have a TV and VCR, a computer and a lab full of computers down the hall. But that’s just furniture, props until you use them for a purpose. Today’s agenda shows that we will move between the Ian McKellen version of Macbeth and the Polanski version, text in hand, to discuss different directorial decisions that were made and how they influence our interpretation of the text. Before the students leave, they will check their grade sheet against my electronic grade book. They will write a response to what we analyzed today and over half of them will be typed upon submission; it makes revision easier they say. Unlike Sarah, I cannot run away from technology’s influence in my classroom world. Unlike Sarah, I do not even want to do so anymore.

That is not to say, however, that I do not worry about the impact that technology continues to have on my classroom. The classroom in which I teach is very different from the classroom in which I sat as a student. Sometimes, I am made arrogant by that concept. Other times, I am scared. Marilyn Ferguson articulated this best in a text about writing and technology when she said: “It’s not so much that we are afraid of change, or so in love with the old ways, but it’s that place in between trapezes. It’s Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There’s nothing to hold on to.” I am that Linus when I grapple with questions raised by researchers about the effects technology may have on our students, our world, and our literacy. In the following paragraphs, I examine some of these questions through the lens of my own classroom experience. Christina Haas’s book, Writing and Technology: Studies in the Materiality of Literacy, reviews these questions, and several others.

Many of my colleagues would argue that the more graphic and visual a text-representation is, the more “dumbed down” it is. I can’t say I feel the same anymore. Bernhart.) Yes, as evidenced by the very way that I structured this response. I immediately launched into bullets without ever being told when and how to do this. My students do the same, successfully. As the texts they read change, due to the increasing visual ease of bullets, underlining, bold face, etc., they absorb these changes as I do.

■ Does a change in technology lead to a change in the structure of text? (see The Shape of a Text, S.A.

■ Will computer technology replace the printed book? (See Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing, J.D. Bolter.) No! I’m an English teacher and I refuse to believe this is the case, despite the fact that most of my students chose to go on-line to read Macbeth passages this evening rather than drag their anthologies home. They even gave me the best web-sites to do this. But I like the printed book, the act of having it in my hand without fear of crashing. I’ve never had a book suddenly lock up and not let me read anymore.

■ Are information technologies making us stupid? (See IBM Talking Heads and Our Classrooms, F.T. Boyle.) They can if we choose to let them. For example, if I let my students cite web sources for research, although the finding of the information is easier, the processing and analyzing of it isn’t necessarily easier. I have to help them figure out what a good web-site is and a bad one and how to critically analyze their information. And, I have to do that as I learn the skill myself.

■ Do electronic texts change reading, writing and the professing of literature? (See Reading Hypertext: Order and Coherence in a New Medium, R.A. Lanham.) My students communicated furiously via email and chat rooms, all of which seems to build fluency in similar ways to how my classroom uses peer journals. Granted, I think the majority of my students are not readers of books, but I see a growing number of them consume print via the Internet. The more they read and the more they write, the better they become at each. If this is their tool of choice, then I can cheer, because at least they’ve chosen a tool for literacy as opposed to not engaging at all.

■ Are hypertexts different from traditional forms of text? Are they a new medium of thought? (See Reading Hypertext: Order and Coherence in a New Medium, J.M. Slatin.) Now this is one that most frequently sparks debate among my colleagues. Somewhere along the way, and I’ve forgotten where, I’ve learned to express this in terms of the “USA TODAY vs. Washington Post” discussion. The Post is more textual; USA TODAY is more graphic and visual in nature. Many of my colleagues would argue that the more graphic and visual a text-representation is, the more “dumbed down” it is. I can’t say I feel the same anymore. I’ve seen my students design a newspaper or design a web-page and use painstaking analytical reasoning and critical thinking to represent their ideas—giving it more time and attention than they would a textual representation. Does that mean I want to chuck the whole writing idea and let symbolic representation drive their writing exclusively? Of course not. But is there room for a broader perspective of writing that includes both forms and explores the connections between them? Yes.

In short, I’m looking to my class for answers to some tough questions about technology and writing, even more than I’ve outlined here. At the VATE conference last year, Dr. Jeffrey Wilhelm (author of the popular You Gotta Be The Book) said a couple of things that shape my thinking. He said, “The question, ‘What is your technology program?’ doesn’t mean ‘What hardware and software do you have?’” Your technology program is about how you use your technology as tool for learning. The most poignant statement Dr. Wilhelm made that day was this, though: “Procedures of knowing/ways of knowing stay the same: ask, find, develop, analyze, organize, design, present and refine.”

Hey, Sarah! Come on back to class, now. It’s just me, Linus, hanging out and waiting for my blanket to get out of the dryer. I know it’s there. The classroom in which I teach is different from the classrooms in which I sat, but from this teacher’s perspective, Y2K is okay—really.