From a High-Tech to a Low-Tech Writing Classroom

You Can’t Go Home Again

CHARLES MORAN

I was a teacher resisting the old technology, which, to me, was new. It required, therefore, a new pedagogy. I brought to this environment my “old” pedagogy, which I now needed to understand.

In the spring semester of 1996, for the first time in almost a decade, I taught our first-year writing course, College Writing, in a traditional classroom—that is to say, a classroom with chairs and tables, a blackboard and chalk, a classroom without 22 computers and a print station. I’d taught College Writing in traditional classrooms from 1982 through 1986; then in 1986 we set up our computer-equipped classrooms, and for the next eight years I taught this course in our new facility. Working closely together during this time, my colleagues Marcia Curtis, Paul LeBlanc, Nick Carbone, Margaret Daisley, Liz Klem, and I tried to understand how we might best teach writing in this computer-equipped environment. We developed and tested a range of techniques, often writing about our work (see Carbone, Daisley, Federenko, McComas, Moran, Ostermiller, & Vanden Akker, 1993; Curtis & Moran, 1992; Klem & Moran, 1991; LeBlanc & Moran, 1989). Then a break: I went on sabbatical, another colleague filled my place in the computer classrooms, and the writing program director and I agreed that when I returned from sabbatical in the spring of 1996 I’d teach College Writing in a traditional classroom. I approached this semester with excitement and interest, thinking that this was a fine chance to do a comparative study of my perceptions of the difference between teaching first-year writing in two different environments.

I anticipated the joy of face-to-face communication in a small room with eager students. My teaching semester in the traditional classroom was a good one, by most standards, but I often found myself uncomfortable, irritable, even occasionally angry at my teaching situation, deprived of computers and forced to change the way I taught. My students seemed to me to be uncomfortable too, less engaged with one another, and less self-directed than they had been in the computer-equipped classrooms.

In the pages that follow, I will try to understand my discomfort at finding myself in a traditional classroom—what was to me a new and different teaching place. To move toward this understanding, I will excerpt from my teaching logs and from my students’ evaluations of my teaching and their learning. My methods are those of the autoethnographer, as described by Linda Brodkey (1996, 28 and 172). The result represents my experience as a teacher in the
"contact zone" between the technology of the nineteenth-century classroom and the evolving technology of the twenty-first-century classroom.

I am not the usual autoethnographer, as defined by Brodky (1996, 172), who, drawing from Mary Louise Pratt (1992), sees the autoethnographer as writing from the margins, a marginalized or colonized person who undertakes to represent the self "in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms" (Pratt, 7). I am light-years from the margins—a professor of English comfortable in tenure. When I began this study, I would have said that I was entirely comfortable. After writing this piece, however, I find myself able to empathize with—indeed make common cause with—writing teachers, usually poorly paid teaching assistants or part-time lecturers who are asked/forced to adapt to computer-equipped classrooms. Of course, I was "going back" and not "forward," and I had agreed to the change, but the discomfort I felt in my "new" classroom helps me appreciate the discomfort I have seen in others as they were asked or forced to change, to move from a traditional classroom to a computer-equipped teaching environment. Between 1986 and 1996, as a teacher of College Writing, I had apparently made a gradual transition from traditional to computer classroom. My teaching goals and strategies had changed, at least in part in response to the environment of the computer-equipped classroom. Apparently, the transition was more radical than I had realized. The change was substantial and the effect expensive, certainly for this teacher and almost certainly for the students, whose learning is at least in part a function of the teacher's comfort with, and engagement in, his teaching.

**Back to the Blackboard**

This from my teaching log of January 30, 1996, my first day as a teacher of College Writing in a traditional classroom. This log entry was written as my students wrote. In this entry, I seem to be trying to like my new environment, but with only intermittent success.

*It's day 1... and people are writing. It's just the same! Though I'm experiencing a bit of writer's cramp, and the day is moving along fast.*

*I'm sitting close to students as I write— I hear sniffles, pens & pencils on paper, smell students—there's no white-noise—hum—of cooling fans and air-conditioners... So this is a more physical relationship— and people are in radically different poses, too—one writing on a pad supported by a crossed leg, another with a white baseball cap, big hands touching the paper, another sitting straight up, keeping the words at a distance.*

*I'm not solving any lab-problems, either. No word-processor problems... I've not had to identify (student) software experts here either—and there's been no pairing to learn the system.*

*Most of all, there's less room here—less visual space, students crowded close to one another, less cubic footage. In the labs I could walk around freely, or stop at a station and type like mad. In the lab, too, I could enter the system's virtual space and travel there. Here there's virtual space too, but it's cerebral, inaccessible [to me]. I miss my walks through physical and virtual space. Cramped. No room.*

I continue on, ambivalent, pleased and irritated:

*I have to bring in lots of paper, which they'll take away with them, lose. I'll have to do more copies—I don't have the control I did have—papers can get lost—have the feeling that I'll be less well-organized here than I was there. Maybe more responding to writing? But I do feel closer to these people—despite the lousy chalkboard—this close writing together is really quite extraordinary.*

On day two I continue to be ambivalent about my new teaching environment. I note the wonderful silence ("There are sounds of people reading!"), and I note, and therefore must have felt discomfort at, the students' physical proximity: "Someone across the table from me—that's 12 inches!—asks Jack for a piece of paper." I enjoy the new variety in my visual field: "I notice that I'm reading handwriting. Randi's paper is in blue ink with green-ink notes on it. In my group there's black ink, blue ink, my long yellow pad, the green letter-writing assignment, the ivory syllabus, the deep-yellow no-show form... spiral notebooks, legal pads, 3-ring binders. Variety!" And I note that all this is "in my very small space!"

I begin, on this second day, to worry about the fact that my students either have to take their writing with them or leave it with me. This really shakes me.

*I'm troubled, and so may the students be—I won't be able to see these pieces at all until they are due next Thursday. Online, I'll have their drafts in digital form—now they take their writing away. No copy service can help them here—we'd burn up the machine. And I can't make them bring in copies, or can I? Maybe it's just as well—why not
have them be their own editors, and me the final reader/evaluator. Maybe the technology is pushing my pedagogy here—I won't be able to see all the writing.

I begin to resent, too, the amount of new work I seem to have to do. For instance, I've had to go all the way to my office to get to my computer to put together a writing exercise for the class, print multiple copies on blue paper, and cut the pages in half to distribute to the class. I wrote, "All this cutting and copying is time- and resource-consuming!"

I resent the grade book I have to construct for myself and my need to discover a new way of organizing the course. I wonder: should I purchase a three-ring binder? And an ominous note: I begin to feel that as a teacher I have to become more active, because I'm feeling that not much is happening.

"I'm thinking that the class is pretty quiet—not sure how to bring them together in groups. Maybe—the problem may be that I've taken on too much direction here? I'm feeling very directive, disciplinarian, standard. "Read the damned assignment sheet!"

What's going on?

In the third week, I note, "I'm starting to like this!" What I like, again in retrospect ominously, is this:

I ask them to write spelling words they have trouble with; they do so; they speak them, I collect them on the blackboard. We joke back and forth—I am a bad speller too. I'm drawing on all my experience here—as a writer. And I'm at the board, all (most) looking at me. I'm the entertainer! I could not have done any of these things in the computer lab. I'm the teacher. It feels like fun. I have no idea how good or useful this is to the students.

The Semester's Mixed Results

I wish that I could say that I learned and adapted as the semester progressed, but my teaching logs say otherwise. At the end of the semester, I am still bothered by the fact that students are taking their work away with them. I am still bothered by the amount of copying I have to do. And in my notes taken during the last class, I'm clearly troubled, not only by the strategies unavailable to me in this traditional classroom, but also by the possibility that I've not taught particularly well. In this last class of the semester, students are working away individually at their portfolio reviews, due before the end of class. I have brought their portfolios into class in the file crate that I've resorted to. And I've brought in extra portfolio review forms, two staplers, a staple puller, lined pads of paper: 40 pounds of stuff, at least.

As they work, I write this:

Today, again, the copy-problem: they take their portfolio reviews with them, so I won't see them before the final conference. Another glitch, I put on the board the goals I've had for them in this class: to have them become independent writers, use other writers' tools, get lots of practice. I tell them that I'll be available for references when they graduate. But my lips get dry—this is forced! They work away, but it does not feel good... a sad end to a bad semester. Or was it? I can't wait to see the evaluations—some of them may be OK. But I'm guessing that they're not—that the semester has been a bust.

Well, it wasn't a bust, but it was not what I had hoped for. My doubts about my effectiveness as a teacher were echoed by the students in their anonymous, end-of-semester teacher/course evaluations. These are administered and collected by a student, returned to the writing program office, and
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not available to the instructor until well after the end of the semester. Students know this and are therefore quite candid in their responses.

I read through these evaluations at the end of the summer. There seemed a real difference between these teacher-course evaluations and those of the students I had taught in computer classrooms. Let me be clear: this class was not a disaster. On the op-scan program questionnaires, 10 out of 19 respondents said that this class had been either “the most valuable” or “the second most valuable” course they had taken at the university, not bad for a class that is required and becomes a “common experience” like dining-commons food. But when I taught in the computer classroom, students responded much more positively to the teacher/course evaluations. Typically, 75 to 80 percent of the students in these classes have ranked the course “most” or “second most valuable.” From this year’s students’ essay responses, I received disturbing confirmation that our teaching and learning had not gone smoothly.

It seemed clear that the students felt, as I had, that we as a class had not “bonded”; that there was something wrong with the human communication in the room. Somehow I had moved into the center of the class, assuming more authority than I have recently been accustomed to having, and therefore giving the students less. One student wrote, “My instructor includes everyone and tries to encourage them to speak.” She also wrote, “My instructor might open the class more and encourage discussion between students instead of doing all the talking and directing.” Another said, “Lectures seem to be a little too boring.”

Lectures? Did I lecture? Well, yes, there was the blackboard and chalk. I must have done more of this than I realized: using, as I do in the computer classroom, the available technology—in this case, blackboard and chalk.

Reactions to class format were really mixed. One student wrote, “Charlie makes the whole class revolve on class activities.” Another wrote, “Class time was kind of long.” One student complained that I was not “fair” in my comments on the writing—a first, for me. And the same student wanted more comments, noting that “a great deal of my papers had no responses on them.” This is my normal practice: to comment on mid-process drafts and not on final drafts.

Somehow, in this traditional classroom, my practice was not entirely well received. In the students’ responses there was, too, more than the usual discomfort at my practice of not grading individual essays.

If I had to put all of this together, and I guess I do, I’d say this: in the traditional classroom, my students and I felt that the focus of the class was on their relationship to me, the teacher, not on their relationship to one another—despite the fact that I had created reading and responding groups. In contrast, in the computer-equipped classrooms the students and I felt that the focus was on the task and on groups assigned to complete the task. In the new-to-me traditional classroom, this is what students see me as doing best: “Prof. Moran treats students with a lot of respect and talks to them like real people. His comments are always constructive and usually very helpful”; and “He is very well prepared for the class and can generate ideas for us as writers.” That’s fine, but I note their focus on my ideas, not theirs. “He listens when we speak and is very interested in our writing.” And, perhaps most telling, some students wanted more one-to-one conference time: “I would like to see more conference time to review my writing. I feel peer evaluation helps, but I feel more comfortable with the professor reading my work and offering advice”; and “He runs the class very well in every way (lectures, conferences).” I’d swear on a stack of bibles that I did not lecture! But I must have, or seemed to.

Resisting the Old Technology

When I set out on this voyage, I intended to look for the differences between teaching in a traditional classroom and in a computer-equipped classroom. I found these differences, it should be clear, from my teaching journal excerpts. What I found and entirely did not expect, however, was the degree to which, as a teacher, I refused to adapt to my new environment. I began the semester complaining, and I never stopped. I did make a conscious effort to enjoy what was new to me in the traditional classroom: the variety, the closeness, the sounds and silences. But I was not able in one semester to adapt. Despite what I know about teaching, and despite my reflection upon what was happening, I continued to try to do in the traditional classroom what I’d done for the past eight years in the computer classrooms. And I couldn’t. Once I found these strategies ineffective, I tried to return to strategies that had been successful in traditional classrooms in my 30 years of teaching B.C. (before computers). There was the blackboard, there was the chalk. So I used them! But because these strategies were old and perhaps misremembered, and because I didn’t entirely believe in them, and because the kind of constructivist classroom I had come to think of as “good” was not supported by these strategies, they didn’t feel right either. I was a teacher resisting the old technology, which, to me, was new. It required, therefore, a new pedagogy that I was unable to develop in one semester. I brought to this environment my “old” pedagogy, which I now needed to understand.
In our years of teaching College Writing in computer-equipped classrooms, we had gradually developed a pedagogy that "worked" in this environment. We had begun with stand-alone computers, had moved to a networked computer environment, and now looked forward to fiber-optic Web access. As our environment evolved, our pedagogy did as well. With the advent of networking, our computer-equipped classrooms had become for me and many others "constructivist" classrooms, spaces in which students work, usually in groups, on tasks: responding to others' writing, editing and publishing bi- or tri-weekly class anthologies, working with community organizations on writing tasks defined by these organizations, and reviewing and organizing their own writing portfolios. In these classrooms the teacher is responsible for structuring the students' writing activities, but generally the teacher is not in the center of these activities. During class, the teacher chiefily circulates, helping student teams accomplish the tasks that have been assigned. By and large, in these classrooms students go about their work independently. They do not steadily look to the teacher for direction.

This constructivist pedagogy evolved in part as a response to the environment of the computer-equipped writing classrooms. One of the salient aspects of a computer classroom is that we have available to us two agendas for teaching and learning: writing and computers. If we let them, students can be the computer experts. They then meet over the computers and become, therefore, more able to meet over their writing. In our computer-equipped classrooms, many of us start the semester by having students teach one another aspects of computer use, which we know they are usually more adept at than we are (Carbone, 1993). In the area of computer expertise, students become teachers, and, this teacher at least, a student. We, students and teacher, meet over computers, and therefore potentially over writing, as something like equals. In this classroom, teacher and students are accustomed from day one to helping one another, to working together, in pairs or small groups—to find a lost file, to solve a printing problem, to solve a writing problem. The alternative to this distribution of authority is the assumption by the teacher of the dual roles of computer expert and writing expert. This simply doesn't work, as teachers new to the computer classroom find out each semester. If the teacher sets out to be the computer expert, then she spends her class time dealing with students' computer problems, which effectively take her out of what should be our principal work: orchestrating and improving our students' writing.

What has seemed to us to be the inherently social nature of our computer classrooms has encouraged teachers in these classrooms to move towards a social-constructivist, task-based curriculum. I am not entirely sure why this is the case, but, as an autoethnographer, I am permitted to speculate. The classroom filled with computers looks to me not like a classroom but like a workplace—in the worst case, an insurance office. Students are at their desks, uniform. In my return to the traditional classroom, I noted variety of prose, of paper, of ink color. In the computer classroom there is still variety—colors of clothing, style of dress. But all students are typically facing their computer screens, seemingly paying attention. This looks like a workplace. The computers, too, are powerful work tools, asking to be used. With desktop publishing capability, why not publish our own anthologies? And if so, shouldn't we create anthology publishing teams, trying to put one wizard computer person in each group for the fancy stuff? The color-printed covers and innovative page layout? With Web access, why not generate group projects that involve research? Or ask a group to put together a guide to the Internet?

Teachers who have taught College Writing successfully in traditional classrooms—and I have to include my pre-1986 self in this group—have evolved strategies for helping the students relate to one another, as well as to the teacher, in this setting. In my return to the traditional classroom, I'd forgotten, or declined to use, these strategies. Instead, in my teaching logs I recorded a feeling of loss, even a low-level anger at the fact that I could not in this new environment use the strategies that we'd developed in the computer classrooms, e.g., establishing students as software experts and advisors, encouraging those who know something to share that knowledge with others. Should I teach College Writing again in a traditional classroom, I will spend much more time developing groups, creating community. In the computer classroom, community just seems to happen. Of course it does not—we make it happen—but after a decade in the computer classroom, my strategies for community-building in that environment have become second nature, tacit, transparent to me.
In addition to the inherently constructivist bias of our computer classrooms is a second, related characteristic: in the computer classroom we have infinite and cheap copying. Through the miraculous compression made possible by the microchip, all class writing—theirs and mine—is potentially available to all. Our writing—all of it—can simultaneously be on our class network, on my computers at home and in my office, and on the students’ computers in their dormitory rooms. I’d become used to this: at any time I was able to read through the rough or mid-process drafts, or the short writings my students were working on, and was able to easily review all my comments on their writing. Students were able to read one another’s writing and my writing back to them on our chat program and in our class folders where all our writing is stored. Outside of the computer classrooms, multiple copies are not always possible in the same way. In the traditional classroom, writing is private, not public. When a student turns in a piece of writing to me, she loses it. It’s not hers any longer. When she takes her writing with her, it is lost to me. That’s different, and it’s OK. And it’s not what I’m used to.

A corollary to this is that in the computer classroom, writing is relatively public. This became clear to me recently, when (yes, I have returned to the computer classroom!) a teacher new to the system, noting that students’ writing and our comments on that writing were online and available to all, said, “Do you mean that they can read all these? How do they feel about that?” To her, writing was private. She’d just written something, and now we could all read what she had written! Given my years in the computer classroom, I knew that my writing—e.g., my comments on students’ writing—was semi-public, and so I was writing to be read by the author and by anyone else who had our class password. Why should I have private correspondence with students, after all? That’s different, and it’s OK. And it’s what I’m used to.

The Space We Enjoy

A third salient characteristic of the computer classroom is that in this environment we have more space per person than in our traditional classrooms. This is in part a function of our particular history. In 1986 we took over two huge rooms that had been language labs, rooms with lots of equipment in them, yet carried on the university’s books as having a capacity of 20 students. The space we enjoy in these computer classrooms is a function, too, of the actual floor space that computers now require. A room that would hold 24 students in a traditional layout has space for at most fifteen computer stations. The space we enjoy is a function, too, of the talismanic effect computers have on administrators. The argument seems to go like this:

“Computers don’t sweat. They can’t therefore regulate their body temperatures. They need good places to function in: air-conditioned space, with good lighting, antistatic carpets, and lots of room to move about, should the computers choose to move about. People, on the other hand….” You know the rest.

This extra room permits teacher and students to get up, move from place to place, buzz around on our castered chairs—a form of in-class locomotion that has not yet sufficiently been studied, I think, by our discipline! Every semester there are a number of students in my classes who have marginal, or not so marginal, attention deficit disorder. These people need to get up and move. And so do I! The computer classrooms make this movement possible and nondisruptive. The space, too, permits us to easily form workgroups at sufficient distance from one another to make the groups seem autonomous. In the traditional classroom I missed this space, and I did not develop ways of making our new physical closeness a virtue rather than a liability.

This physical space is related to something that, drawing on Foucault’s (1997) Discipline and Punish, I’ll call “gaze” (171–77, 195). In a writing classroom, who is looking at whom and for what purposes? In computer classrooms, students are looking at their screens. To me, they seem to be working. I can look at them as the I-hope-gentle supervisor. To get students to look at me I have to act, sometimes almost violently, and I do this as little as I can, because I don’t want to interrupt students’ writing without good reason. I am accustomed, in computer classrooms, to watching, but not being watched.

In contrast, teachers new to our computer classrooms often find the fact that students are not looking at them to be profoundly disturbing. To become themselves the center of their students’ attention, they often break their students away from the computers, pulling them into a circle as far from the infernal machines as they can get. There, they attempt to engage students in full-class, offline discussions.

In my return to the traditional classroom, I found the students’ gaze disturbing. When I was being looked at by 22 sets of eyes, this seemed a call to act—apparently, all too often, a call to lecture at the blackboard. When students were looking out the window, they seemed off task; when they were looking at one another, they seemed to me to be off task; when they were looking at me, they made me feel off task. I had become used to the computer classroom, in which, like an insurance office, each worker
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is at her keyboard, eyes fixed on the screen. In this setting, everyone is working, apparently; I, the teacher, am released. I am not at the center of the class, fully responsible for its progress. I am, rather, in and of the class, a roving editor, helper, checking in with the writers, or teams of writers, as they work. The responsibility for what is happening in the class is mine, of course, but I am discernible through my effect, not through the centrality of my voice and person. I am the “clockmaker” god of the Age of Reason, not speaking in the whirlwind but visible in the creation.

Computers Make a Difference

This has been the story of a teacher who resisted his new teaching environment and has since arranged his return to the old. In much of the writing we’ve done in our field, we’ve felt, explicitly or implicitly, that teachers who resisted emerging technologies were somehow deficient: Luddites, humanists, technophobes. When we’re gentle about this, we speak of what Palmquist, Kiefer, Hartvigsen, and Godlew (1998) called “teacher reluctance.” When we’re less gentle, we speak of resistance. In the popular imagination, and in the language of educational reform, this is presented as a teacher problem, to be solved by administrative force, teacher training, or time.

This self-study argues that the presence of computers in a writing classroom does make a difference, that technologies are not transparent, and that the change in moving from a traditional classroom to a computer classroom (or back!) is substantial and, in this case, for the teacher and his students, expensive. In 1992, Elizabeth Klem and I studied teachers working for the first time in computer classrooms in what we termed “A Strange LAND.” We saw these teachers’ pedagogies in unproductive conflict with their new environment—teaching against

the classroom, not with it—and argued that “even if a writing program can provide the necessary training and support, it is unlikely that it can expect radical and rapid change in the way teachers teach.” To this finding my self-study says, “Amen.”

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