My Laptop Ambivalence
Some Speed Bumps on the High-Tech Road to Writing

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With all of the complexities that laptops have created, I have a difficult time assessing whether they have been a positive tool for students in the writing process. There have been encouraging results accompanied with a wild assortment of hang-ups.

“This will be a three-minute fast write, and the topic is on the board. Try to avoid stopping. Just write whatever comes to your mind.”

No one responds. All I hear is “Tap tap tap, click, click.”

Strolling among the desks, performing my usual teacher monitoring, I glance over shoulders to view ideas in development. Several students are plunging in, immersed in their thoughts, keyboarding at a pace professionals would admire. But not everyone is caught up in the heat of the moment. One student is stalled. He stares at a blank screen. Then, tentatively, he types in an idea. The computer reacts rapidly, scoring red and green lines under a statement it deems grammatically incorrect.

Frustrated, the student sighs, hits the backspace key firmly, and removes the line from the screen.

“Don’t worry about the AutoText, just get some ideas down for now,” I tell him. But I’m too late. The boy has been slowed to a standstill by technological speed bumps. According to the computer, the student’s writing is incorrect. If the boy had been writing with pen and pencil, he would not have been impeded by this insulting invalidation.

This incident is fairly typical of the exchanges between human and machine that I encounter in my seventh-grade English classroom. In the fall of 1999, a gift from a benefactor enabled all sixty-four of my students to be involved in a one-year experimental laptop pilot program. Each 12- and 13-year-old student was issued his or her own laptop to use at home and school. Since that time, I have made it my special interest to study how the presence of laptops has affected my students’ writing process.

Having taught English with computer lab support for several years, I was excited about the prospect of students keeping journals and portfolios on the laptops. I was enthused about the possibilities of conveniently emailing my students and easily distributing materials via my teacher Web site. Above all, I was very happy to have all students on a word processing
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system that was compatible with the school's, since transferring files had been one of my biggest headaches in previous years. I had, of course, anticipated some technological hang-ups. I was surprised, however, by countless other challenges. Having laptops in the English classroom has truly been a mixed bag. My ambivalence applies to laptop use at all steps of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing. I write this account in the hope that other educators will benefit from my experience.

Prewriting

I have made use of laptops during the prewriting process in several ways. Students have maintained computerized writing journals for generating ideas. In their journals, they write stream-of-consciousness paragraphs and create bulleted lists, outlines, and tables.

Here's how I evaluated this process in one journal entry:

Prewriting is only moderately successful. Some students go straight to it, but others waste time opening documents and playing with formatting. It seems like I should let computers be optional here, as they definitely slow some people down.

The problem is that when some students use a laptop, writing takes a back seat. Some students are able to fly across the keyboard, but others type slowly and are stalled by the technical functions of the spellchecker and autoformat. In the old pencil and paper days, students were able to sketch pictures to illustrate notes and ideas. Now words are their only option. And my favorite prewriting technique, clustering, has become a formatting nuisance, even for the most computer savvy students.

Laptops also change the atmosphere of the prewriting stage. I used to open the windows and play soft music to get my writers “in the mood.” Now, I find myself closing the shades to avoid the distracting sun glare on the laptop screens or urging students to quiet down after an overly emotional computer “crash” throws the class into a mild uproar. In the old days, a student might disrupt the class with typical seventh-grade horseplay. Now, at the beginning of every prewriting session, I cross my fingers hoping that the machines will run smoothly and that a low battery’s “Beep! Beep! Beep!” will not drain our concentration.

My students, however, do not share my ambivalence with regard to prewriting on the laptops. Ninety-five percent of them consistently choose to use the laptops for prewriting when given the option. Many like cutting and pasting their ideas into a document instead of transferring everything by hand. They enjoy the fact that they don’t have to erase an entire sheet of paper; deletions are now cleaner and tidier, with none of the unsightly erasures and scrawlings of the old days. Students are also able to keep all of their prewriting in the same place; they no longer have to shuffle through a disorganized batch of papers.

Drafting

“Well my goodness, that doesn't look at all like your autobiography draft. Isn't that Britney Spears's Web site?” The entrapped student rapidly clicks his mouse. Britney Spears is obliterated by a document entitled “My Swimming Career.”

Laptops can be a terrific aid in the drafting process. It is wonderful to have documents on the computer so they can be manipulated easily. My experience, however, is the same as many of my colleagues who report that students can be challenged by the distractions of the Internet, CD-ROMs, and AOL Instant Messenger. One parent reported that he had received email messages at work from his child when he was supposed to be in biology. During study hall, the librarians found students contacting their friends in other classes on AOL. Even when AOL is disabled and disciplinary guidelines are established, diligent computer users are tough to supervise in a classroom setting. It is always tricky for teachers to ensure that students stay focused. Adding laptops to the classroom causes teachers to be on their toes more than ever.

When students are able to maintain self-discipline, this stage of the writing process can become very efficient. Students have access to my feedback more quickly than with paper, and they can complete rewrites more easily. They can also pop off their drafts via email to me and their peers for revision comments. If they are collaborating on a group project, they can email their writing to partners and easily cut and paste new and revised contributions into their final product. Lastly, being able to neatly store the document onto an organized desktop has made for few “lost” assignments.

Revision

“Revise it? But it looks really good. I did a spell check!”

I commonly receive this comment when I ask whether a student has revised an assignment.

Of course, many students have always come to the revision process kicking and screaming, but some of my laptop students seem particularly resistant. Although I teach revision and regularly engage students in revision exercises, I find that many make minimal changes from a draft to a final
product. Prior to laptops, I was assured that students had at least one revision opportunity. They either had to recopy a paper by hand to make it a final draft, or they had to transfer their handwritten notes to the computer. Even when students were not actively trying to revise, these steps often improved content and rectified clarity issues. My laptop students look at their neat papers prepared in professional Times 12-point font and think that they have finished products.

But there is also an upside to this process: I can tell when a student hasn’t made any changes. An electronic tracking feature enables me to compare the draft and the final product, tracing exactly what changes have been made. I can also insert specific comments on the so-called final draft and zip it back to the student. If the student has questions about my comments, he or she can email me and get a fairly speedy response. Furthermore, these methods enable students to actually read my comments. I believe I am not the only teacher in the world whose handwritten scribbles in the margins of papers have sometimes caused confusion.

Lastly, there is an advantage to using laptops for peer-response exercises. The ease of editing inspires students to make very specific comments on their classmates’ papers. After a peer-response session, the editors will email the paper with comments back to the writer and to me. It is very helpful for me to open the document, see what changes a student suggests, and track them against the changes that have actually been made to the final product.

**Editing**

“Miss C,” beckons a 12-year-old, “what does *passive voice* mean?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” I state confidently, “The computer isn’t really correct on that one.”

“Yeah,” pipes in another student, “I’m always writing in the passive voice according to the computer. It doesn’t matter.”

“The computer is wrong?” replies the first questioner.

“Well, yes, pretty much, for now,” I reply, tentatively.

For seventh graders, passive voice isn’t way up there on my list of grievous grammatical faux pas.

I suppose that this query could have sparked a “teachable moment.” However, if I stopped to explain every grammatical comment that the computer makes, I would spend little time teaching the intended subject matter of the class.

The main difficulty with editing on laptops is that students put too much trust in the computer and tend to assume it is right. After they complete spelling and grammar checks electronically, they often refrain from proofreading visually. As a consequence, I regularly find bizarre errors below the competency level of my students. For instance, grammar and spelling checkers cannot find misused homophones (their, they’re, there). They also cannot correct formatting errors or spellings of unusual names and places. Lasty, the computer cannot account for missing pages—those that don’t make it out of the printer when it’s jammed or out of paper. I have received many papers with missing pages, because students expect their computers and printers to perform perfectly.

However, if students combine the computer’s grammar and spelling checkers with visual proofreading, they can make rapid and significant progress. Many of my students have had strong issues with spelling, punctuation, and subject-verb agreement. In handwritten documents, their ideas do not receive full justice because they are masked by grammatical errors. The computer helps these students recognize their errors and enables them to become more independent, as they do not need adults to help them proofread their writing.

**Publishing**

Journal entry: April 27, 2000

I was absolutely perved and annoyed with technology today. I mean, my gosh, it has lured us into dependence and then all of a sudden it drops you off of a cliff and there is nothing you can do!

For the past three weeks, I have been working on a project with the kids in my class. The project requires students to be able to email fluently, look at comments through Word, get stuff off of the Internet, and print. And wouldn’t you know it? The server is down. No one seems to be able to fix it, although everyone is exerting his or her best efforts on it. With no network, it seems that there is no way for us to communicate with the outside world; a vital step for our success.

“Okay,” I say to the kids, “we can still send email to each other.” So, all week, the project is narrowed to an in-school scope. I communicate the change to students, and they respond with only mild frustration.

But then, the cords and the connections in the classroom become dysfunctional. I cannot email students their comments, and they cannot revise their work. Hours and hours I spent commenting on those papers, and how earnestly I want this project to be finished. Therefore, my frustration is at its peak. How can I brainstorm to solve this one? Disks—I search frantically for more disks. What happened to the 30-some disks that I had at
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the beginning of the year? They are all gone!
“Wait class, we’ll have to pause and do
another non-technology lesson while I set my
subconscious to figuring out a solution by the
time class ends in 20 minutes.”

Ugh, what a day. This is a publishing
nightmare. I’m continuing my love/hate
relationship with this aggravating tool.

This anecdote reveals the worst of it. Right
when students and teacher are ready for the
long-awaited finale of publishing, technical
bumbling stands in the way. Although the
frequency of this sort of scenario is
decreasing, it continues to be an issue eight
months into the laptop pilot program.

Printing and emailing fumbles cause a
myriad of problems during the publishing
process. While there were occasional prob-
lems publishing in the old pencil and paper
days, there were never as many glitches as
there are currently in the age of laptops.

However, technological frustrations aside, I
have been genuinely pleased with the way
writing looks when it is finally presented.

When work is published, it is with the
professionalism of young executives. The
students easily use newspaper, letter, and
resume templates. They create Web pages,
sidebars, presentations, and graphic designs.
The publishing that occurs in my seventh-
grade English classroom makes the poster
projects and dioramas of yesteryear look
embarrassingly amateurish.

Closing Thoughts

“Why Jane, how did you manage to get your
document done on time? You’ve been sick for
the last week,” I asked, surprised and
pleased.

“Well, I looked up the homework on your
Web site and was able to find a copy of the
reading online. I wrote to a couple of other
students on Instant Messenger to get the
essay question and was able to draft the
paper on time. I hope this is what you
wanted. I didn’t want to get behind.”

Wow. We are in a new era. This 12-year-old
student is not alone in her ability to use
technology as a tool to solve problems. For
the motivated student, laptops provide
opportunities that did not exist previously
in education.

But with all of the complexities that laptops
have created in my classroom, I have a
difficult time assessing whether they have in
fact been a positive tool for students in the
writing process. There have been encour-
ging results accompanied with a wild
assortment of hang-ups. Yet, if I were asked
whether I would deny my sixty-four
students the opportunity to have laptops for
another year, I would earnestly respond “no.”
With all of the havoc that computers create
for the writing process, it is fundamental
that students understand how to use them.

Most colleges and jobs require strong
computer skills. We are doing our students a
disservice if we do not train them to utilize
technology as an important learning tool.

I reflect back to my years of teaching
without laptops. It used to be that I would
take my students to a computer lab once or
twice a week for technology training. Most
times, there would be students who could
not finish their assignments in the given
time. They did not have the time to search
the Internet and download information,
create neatly formatted Web pages, or utilize
the technology to its full potential. They also
could not finish or make adjustments to
their assignments at home. With my laptop
students, there is no pressure to complete
projects during school time, as they can take
their computers home to add finishing
touches.

Presently, the computer skills of most of my
laptop students have surpassed many of the
adult professionals in the school. Cutting,
pasting, searching, and note-taking are
natural activities for them. Students find no
mystique in using the computer, while many
of my adult comrades are intimidated by
technology.

Yet, I must ask, has the content of student
writing improved with the use of laptops in
the classroom? I answer with a very
subjective “no.” My seventh-grade students
continue to write at the seventh-grade level.
Occasionally, their use of a thesaurus has
helped to elevate word choices, but in
general, the conceptual level of ideas has not
changed. At the same time, I can also assert
that content has not been negatively
affected. Students have made their way
through the seventh-grade English curricu-
num and have learned a host of new technol-
ogy skills to boot.

The benefits are certainly in balance with
the costs when using laptops in the English
classroom. I feel optimistic that many of the
difficulties encountered during our
transition to laptops this year are simply
part of the learning curve. Certainly, we have
entered a new age where students have “the
world at their fingertips.”

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