

A CEA Forum Roundtable

Teaching Writing in a Digital Age: Addressing Issues of Access

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The way people write and communicate has changed both inside and outside the university, and because of this writing instructors are professionally responsible for addressing these changes in the classroom. Technologies have affected writing for thousands of years. From the invention of the printing press to the Internet, challenges to writing have come in many technological forms. However, in an age when more and more students are entering college plugged in, it is more difficult than ever to ignore this. As instructors of writing we expect our students to be familiar enough with technologies to submit typed essays; we use *You Tube* videos and podcasts to support our classroom activities; we teach our students how to research without having to ever step foot in the library. While some may argue that this is not a positive move, or that this is not where instruction of writing should go, the truth of the matter is we are in a digital age and must think about how these technological changes affect our students, our teaching, and ourselves.

If our goal as writing instructors is to prepare students to write inside and outside of the academy (Sidler, Morris, and Smith 2), then it seems only logical that our teaching accommodate the changes in where texts are produced, how texts are produced, and why texts are produced.

For many, this means the inclusion of new media or multimodal assignments in the writing classroom. This makes sense since digital texts are being produced and used increasingly. Just as we teach students to write in different genres and to different audiences, we must now acknowledge these new spaces. Of course, there continues to be resistance to such a change which surely cannot be summed up in a couple of pages, and neither can the refusal to incorporate technology or new media in the writing classroom be fairly covered here. However, discussing some of the potential issues, while acknowledging and addressing fears, can be beneficial. Blind acceptance to these changes is unwise; with this understanding, this article intends to explore the issues and responsibilities that need to be considered when a single class, group of classes, or entire department moves to teach writing with an eye toward digital spaces. Specifically addressing access, this article begins by briefly discussing how and why digital spaces are being incorporated into writing classrooms, raising questions about equality, looking at how certain institutions are modifying requirements to accommodate problems of access, and finally examining how “access” reaches beyond ability to use, but also includes multiple levels of support.

Question Equality

Equal access has been a point of contention for years, and it continues to be at the forefront of many discussions related to writing instruction. Access to tools has given certain individuals considerable advantages over others. Whether it’s access to computers, pens and paper, or even access to the money to study rather than work, educational access has never been equal and has always challenged students, teachers, and all learners. In the 1980s, when the computers and writing field began to emerge there was no doubt that access to technologies was very limited,

but in the nearly thirty years since it seems that these technologies are everywhere. Spending a Saturday afternoon downtown proves this as a man pulls out his laptop at a local coffee shop, slips on a headset with microphone, and has a videoconference while he drinks his grande soy latte. Meanwhile, across the street a woman waits for the bus and uses her phone to update her blog, while her daughter listens to an mp3 a friend sent in an email, and she tweets her reaction. Even on college campuses it's rare to see a student walking without earbuds in, a cell phone glued to her/his ears, or texting.

While these common images support the argument that access is becoming less and less of a problem, it's important to acknowledge that these examples can be misleading and in fact can lull us into a false sense of security. We cannot assume that all students come to our institution or even our classes with equal access, just as we cannot assume that each instructor, each department, or each university has equal access.

It is common today for instructors to agree that holding writing classes in a computer lab is ideal because the space allows students to work on writing, conduct research, and interact with others in ways that a traditional classroom cannot. Aside from the new media discussion, computers help students write in the manner expected in the academy (i.e., essays should be typed, double spaced, should follow MLA, APA, or another standard, etc.). Because of this, many writing classes are either held in computer labs or meet at various points throughout the semester in labs. Even so, as both Vanessa Cozza and Katherine Fredlund will explore further in their articles, most schools do not have enough lab space to consistently accommodate writing classes which means one of two things: either 1) a student whose class meets every day in a writing lab has more access to technology than the student whose class does not; or 2) all

students have limited access to labs because each writing class must share the same lab(s) which are often distributed between classes or are reservable on a first come-first serve basis. Both of these examples have benefits and flaws, and both do give all students some access—regardless of whether they own a computer themselves at home or in their dorms. However, even as recently as this year, there are still classes in the program I teach that meet in traditional classrooms with no computers, and one can assume that there are writing classes across the country at all levels that never meet in labs. Just as programs struggle to create equal access, so too do institutions, and while equal access may be ideal, it is still unrealistic to take it as a given.

Clearly there are institutions that can better accommodate the technology needs of their students, but many more institutions struggle to do so. Obvious constraints of funding and space play a major role in this situation, but because in most cases lab space is shared by all at the institution and not just writing classes, the writing instructor who teaches in a lab often feels fortunate to have that possibility, and the instructor who must request a lab for certain days throughout a semester likely feels the same way when she or he is able to secure times that work. However, the reverse can happen too. As the other articles in this roundtable suggest, because for so long labs have been scarce, many teachers have not had to adjust their classroom approach to incorporate computers and this has led to lab space being under utilized. The lack of access and equality among institutions has hindered not only students, but also instructors' pedagogical development around using the technology.

With these constraints in mind, it is important to question how an instructor or institution may teach composing in new spaces when many struggle just to acquire necessary lab space. Were multimodal assignments to be incorporated into a first-year writing program, the required

number of computer labs would likely be overwhelming. To assume that students would be able to produce these assignments on their own outside of class assumes a level of access among them that is likely unfair. In good conscience, can a teacher ask a student to be responsible for learning to execute programs that allow for textual creation in digital spaces on his or her own? Can we expect the same student to learn this using his or her personal computer or computer labs when we cannot always hold classes in labs? While most writing instructors feel comfortable asking their students to type essays either in or outside of the classroom, asking students to master or just become literate in additional software programs without direct instruction and hands-on experience has the potential to be disastrous for both students and instructors. Even for a class that does meet in a computer lab, most students will need to complete work outside of the assigned meeting time. This raises additional issues of access including what students are to do when they do not own a computer, or when they do own a computer but do not own the required programs. If there are labs on campus, do all of the labs have the correct software? Is there sufficient support for both students and instructors? These and other questions can make the logistics of digital text initiatives difficult, and can stall the process indefinitely. But, as previously suggested, the goal of this article is not to suggest that multimodal texts are not wise, important, or even possible. Instead, this article intends to provide examples from several institutions that have made changes and concludes by looking toward the necessary support once the technology is available.

Addressing Access

Higher education has always been a luxury that not everyone has been able to achieve, and while more people have access to continuing education, levels of access to the tools necessary to

succeed remains a hurdle. Some institutions are working to create equal footing for each student. Just as students are often required to prove that they have health insurance—either through the university, a parent, a spouse, or another private plan—and just as students are expected to purchase all required books for the classes they are registered for, more schools are moving to require students to come with personal computers. Aside from the discussion at hand, it is clear that a computer is important to a college education. From typing papers to conducting research, from checking grades online to emailing instructors, a computer, together with Internet access, is understood throughout the academy to be a worthy, but sometimes unrealistic, investment. It is much harder to succeed without certain tools, including books, paper, pens, and the computer. When students lack the necessary supplies they are at a disadvantage, and because of the role that computers play across disciplines, the computerless student struggles to meet the standards before even beginning the work of entering into professional conversations and academic discourse communities.

Surely many institutions accommodate students without computers by providing open computer labs, but with labs come other problems: noise, distraction, broken computers, and overcrowding. Institutions act in a student's best interest, and though other requirements, such as insurance and textbooks, work to guarantee all students begin their college careers with more equal opportunities for success, the fact that some students still enter the university without personal computers contravenes the other steps that schools are taking.

The University of Dayton of Ohio, Bentley College of Massachusetts, Northwest Missouri State University, and a growing number of other schools, require entering freshmen to have laptops when they arrive on campus (“Computer Initiative”; “Undergraduate”; “Northwest”). At

other institutions, students are required to purchase a laptop or computer for their degree. At Ball State all students entering in the education department are required to purchase an Apple laptop (“Apple”). Initiatives such as these guarantee that students will each have the same programs by either requiring all students to buy institution-specific laptops preloaded with specific programs, as in the case of UD, or by requiring all students purchase the same type of computer, as in the case of BSU.

Laptop initiatives, be they university wide or programmatic, are increasing in popularity. As Katherine Fredlund mentions in her contribution to this discussion, the institution that housed the laptop classroom has a first-year writing laptop initiative based only on who already has laptops. While more schools move to incorporate laptop initiatives across the disciplines, many more still have not. And it’s not surprising that laptop initiatives remain the exception. Even so, students who must have laptops or even computers when entering school make it possible to foresee a transition to widespread incorporations of digital text assignments in a writing program. If the instructor is guaranteed that each student has equal access to a machine, other issues, such as learning how to compose in electronic environments, can be focused on. These programs, while intriguing and a potential answer to problems of access, are difficult to promote across the board. Though price can be addressed by incorporating the price of the computer into tuition or forming a deal with a specific company or companies to provide a price reduction on laptops, the resistance remains strong, and perhaps for good reason. Requiring all students to have a computer is really the least of the concern. If an institution or program is able to ensure all students have equal access, then other issues arise, such as training, appropriate use of technology in the classroom, and support.

Accessing Support

While the implementation of laptop initiatives seems to be a first step towards addressing the problem of equal access, this clearly is not an easy one. Change takes time, planning, and resources that most institutions cannot afford to spare. Even once an agreement is reached on a laptop initiative there are additional concerns including technological support, institutional support, and most obviously financial support. While laptops may be an answer, access to machines is not the only problem. Even with institutions that can require students to buy laptops or provide enough labs across campus to fairly accommodate, all students face access issues when technology lets students or instructors down.

When dealing with a single class there appear to be two general options for how technology glitches can be addressed. The first, and perhaps the less ideal, is that instructors can be responsible for addressing problems on which they may or may not be experts. Blair and Hoy, in their 2006 *Computers and Composition* article about pedagogy and politics in online instruction, discuss how teaching online courses leads to much “invisible labor” (33). While their article focuses on the concept in context of a purely web-based course, it is still an important consideration for this discussion as well. Because invisible labor is often an oversight, pointing out the extra time that instructors put in creates an additional hurdle. Students who are unable to manipulate programs in the way they hope may use office hours more, and even with only twenty students, typical office hours may not be enough time to meet the needs of all students. Accessibility to an instructor becomes yet another issue for students and instructors.

This becomes an even greater concern when an entire department or program moves to incorporate technology in their classrooms. When an entire department enacts such a change the

invisible labor mentioned previously becomes exacerbated. While the “invisibility” of the labor may be more “visible” when all instructors are facing similar issues, the work may still be invisible to those who observe a class or conduct merit, tenure, or promotion reviews.

Instructors are working to not only teach their content, but they are also working to address the problems associated with technology: computers that freeze, programs that don’t work right, students who are unfamiliar with elements of the technology—and the list goes on.

When problems arise, if the instructor is not responsible for solving or addressing them, then it seems that another option would be university support. A technology-rich institution may offer a department or program for students as a location to support them during their course work. At Bowling Green State University in Ohio, students across campus can obtain help from the Student Technology Center which offers support to students as they work on various projects using technology that may be new to the students or that students may not have access to from their own computers. Many schools offer support for institutional computers, but even the most technology-rich institution faces the problem of being ill-equipped to deal with a large-scale laptop initiative or technology enhancement movement. When one class incorporates a multimodal assignment some centers, such as BGSU’s Student Technology Center, can deal with an additional twenty or thirty students throughout a semester. But, in the case of an entire first-year writing program incorporating new media assignments, support centers risk becoming overburdened and ultimately less successful.

Accessing support remains troubling, and perhaps the ideal solution would be for both instructors and programs like the Student Technology Center to be available and for both of these resources to work together to support students as they work. However, implementation of

such a luxury may be problematic because of limited resources, time, and energy. At the same time, this situation demonstrates that issues of access are in fact more complicated than just whether or not students have the technology. There is no easy answer for how to address this situation and those yet to come to light, but the first step is to acknowledge potential problems.

As institutions move to accommodate the inevitable changes to literacy and its spaces, it makes sense that access be at the forefront of the discussion. There is no doubt that inequality persists, and that accessibility is important for success. However, issues of access are clearly more complex. This topic could be expanded to include how wireless networks on college campuses can handle these changes; or how pedagogy must change across the university to accommodate the new technologies; how classroom design affects access, as evidenced here in Vanessa Cozza's and Katherine Fredlund's following contributions, or, as Bret Bowers suggests, how instructors can further challenge ideas of space in the classroom. Each of these, and other, issues deserves attention in the larger conversation about access. What is key to the discussion at hand is that access to equal technology is a multifaceted problem that must continue to be at the forefront of developments in multimodality, especially since as teachers of writing it is our intention to prepare students to succeed in a digital age.

Vanessa Cozza continues this discussion in her article titled "Reflecting on Teaching Experiences in the Lab: A Discussion Concerning Problems with Design" that focuses on design. She furthers the discussion raised here by examining how lab design can facilitate or complicate student learning and teacher pedagogy.