Computer Classrooms: Creativity Blocker or Writing Enhancer?

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If I had the choice between teaching a writing class in a sleek, well-furnished computer lab, or at the lakeshore, which would it be? Last year, on the last day of school, I listened to my writing students share their favorite piece of writing from the portfolios they had assembled during the spring trimester. Then I sat comfortably in the solitude of my lake cabin with the whir of my laptop computer broken only by the repetitive trill of a wren. The gap between the frantic pace of the school year and my cherished life in the outdoors had widened, but my mind continued to process the teaching experiences of that past year and seek answers to endless questions.

During that trimester, I had the opportunity to teach two writing classes in contrasting settings. One was in the computer lab, and the other, no, not at a lakeside (only a dream!) but in a traditional classroom. As I moved back and forth between the two classes, I conducted a very unscientific study. Then with the sounds of waves lapping at the lakeshore, I assembled the data scribbled in my lesson plan book, evaluated the experience as stored in my mind, and offer a little advice.

One of the activities I usually incorporate into a writing class is the daily journal. The purpose of the journal is to write spontaneously in a rushed and uncritical manner. I suggest a topic or write a thought-provoking quote at the board and tell the students that these are only suggestions and they can write about whatever is on their minds. I find that most students rely on the suggestions I give them, but some launch out on their own. Generally, these journals are not shared, but occasionally I warn students that they will be called on to read a particular entry or to read one of their own choosing. I also require that they expand a few of the journal entries into more polished pieces during the term. I mention this activity as an example of what worked better for me in a traditional classroom. It seems that in the computer classroom students are very task oriented and want to "get the job done." They come into the room, open up whatever file they are working on and start typing. Isn't this a teacher's dream? Yes and no. It is great to have students so focused on the task at hand, but I offer the unstructured journal as an example of what doesn't work well in a computer room because of the feeling that the end product is more important than the creative process.

In reflecting on the dilemma of lost creativity in the computer room, I realized that part of the problem was

with my own approach, and that it could be changed! When I walked into our computer room, I felt like a different person because I was not surrounded by blackboards where I could write my favorite quotations and journal suggestions. I missed the posters, pictures, plants, and CD player. Maybe it didn't matter to the students, but when the environment was less friendly, I was a little uncomfortable and the class was not as open as in a friendlier place. A computer room does not have to be a sterile environment. Care should be taken to soften the effect of the machines by adding a few human or natural elements for those teachers like me, and a few students who might like a picture or a plant or two.

Another challenge to the teacher of writing at the computer is the loss of interaction between students. In my traditional writing classes we sit in a circle so can all talk to each other eye to eye. I think it's important to share writing-in-progress. I remember a class over a year ago when one student had started a great story but was stuck halfway through. Suggestions from classmates in one of these sharing sessions propelled the writer into a story conclusion that the whole class was proud of because they had been part of the process. Teaching in the computer room, I found ways to adapt my methods to encourage interaction. Sometimes we squeezed into somewhat elliptical "circles" between the rows of computers so that we could talk to each other and read our works. My ideal would be to meet in a room large enough to have an area for gathering in a circle. If there is not enough room for chairs, the floor would do. Student-teacher interaction in

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How to Use Technology in Teaching Writing without Losing Creativity and Interaction

1. Tell students to do some of their creating away from the computer, at home, or wherever they feel comfortable. Then bring these ideas to the computer.
2. Try to make the computer room a little more "friendly" by using bulletin boards, posters, plants, mobiles.
3. Try to arrange space so that it is possible for students to gather in a circle to share their writing.
4. When giving instruction, persuade students to look at you and listen. No hands on the keyboard.
5. Challenge students who like to play around with fonts and graphics to "self-publish" their writing using desktop publishing techniques.
6. Encourage students to send their works to publishers. Writing at the computer is a perfect opportunity to compose cover letters and query letters to publishers.
7. Make use of the CD drive to play background music. You'll have to be autocratic about this one because their won't be agreement on the choice of music!
8. Take advantage of the fact that students will be much more focused when writing at the computer. You can require revision, polishing, and attention to detail.

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a computer classroom is not a problem since the teacher circulates and talks to each student regularly, a real advantage.

There also seems to be a class rapport problem to be dealt with in teaching writing at the computer. Students stare at the computer rather than the teacher (can you blame them?). Not that I miss being the center of attention, but there are times when I want to address the whole class, giving some instructions or tossing out ideas to stimulate writing. In my two writing classes--not exactly "control groups"--I gave many of the same assignments, used many of the same handouts presenting examples of writing from published writers, and offered many of the same ideas to stimulate their writing. I found that the computer students barely looked at the handouts, forgot many of the great ideas I had given them, and merely wanted to get on with the show--completing their sometimes uninspired pieces. Again, the problem of expediency, completing the project at the expense of thoughtfulness, searching for inspiration, looking for just the right word or image. Here again a more flexible room arrangement might have helped. At times, I insisted that students face me with "no hands on the keyboard" so I could give the necessary instructions, but it would be better to be able to move to another area where the teacher is not competing with the machine.

Some students love to tap away at the computer, others face the screen and immediately encounter a writer's block. I can remember two girls, in particular, who could write beautifully with pen on paper, but spent many fruitless days in the computer writing class. I always told them, as well as the whole class, to do their thinking, brainstorming, and preliminary writing at home or wherever they felt inspired.

They could not depend on being inspired by a cold machine. This is extremely important for some students and inconsequential for others. In fact, many students write much better at the computer for some obvious reasons: they are very focused, they can rely on spell-check, they enjoy playing around with fonts, graphics, and spacing.

Meanwhile, back in the traditional writing room, there were some activities that I just wasn't able to bring into the computer room. Like illustrating a poem with charcoal and chalk on colored construction paper--not for keyboards! Or walking over to the art department to look at original student photos or artwork and writing about them (maybe with individual laptop computers this idea might work some day). And what about the last week of school when we sneaked out of our traditional classroom to write in the sunshine after a record cold winter. Somehow I didn't feel I could sneak out of my computer classroom. After all, the computer room was reserved for us and we needed to be very businesslike. But now, after processing the experience of teaching the two writing classes, I feel it is possible to take advantage of technology while holding onto those aspects of art, nature, and human interaction that help us create. Yes, and even write at the lake with a laptop computer! I think it's time to enjoy the scenery!
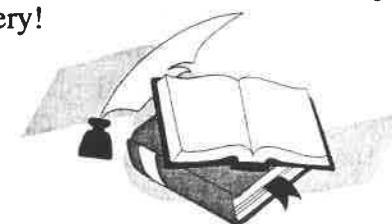
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