Computer Literacy in the "Real World"

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The 14 studies collected here should appeal to a range of educators including college technical writing teachers, high school teachers interested in vo-tech issues, and college prep English teachers fretting about the amount of computer literacy to balance against traditional activities. While the articles examine workplaces exclusively (such as Southwestern Bell), many of the findings relate to academic concerns we teachers encounter, from the enormous time and money costs of computer use to theoretical issues about the transforming nature of computer writing. The research focus of this volume is valuable because each article provides a succinct summary of current research findings on a topic.

In addition to the four-part structure of the book, each article's introductory abstract expedites quick reference to topics of particular interest. The first section reports some of the successes and problems of workplace electronic writing: e-mail informality or formality ("distancing"), technological incompatibilities resulting from piecemeal hardware purchases, and tensions between software designers and users, among others. Any teacher in the computer racket recognizes those problems.

The second section, "Electronic Challenges to Traditional Notions of Writers and Writing," explicitly raises an issue that is probably the most pervasive, unstated theme of the entire collection: the fundamental tension between workplace needs for control and efficiency and academic commitments to experimentation and freedom. Quoting an earlier study, the authors of "After Automation: Hypertext and Corporate Structures" agree that "early uses of technological innovations are essentially conservative because their capacity to create social disequilibrium is intuitively recognized amidst declarations of progress and enthusiasm for the new" (122). Five other articles throughout the book address a similar concern. For example, in his conclusion to "Networking Technology in the Classroom: Whose Interests Are We Serving?", Craig Hansen warns

> As we plan to integrate computers and computer networks into our writing classrooms, we need to keep in mind that they are designed to play a role in supporting the organizational hierarchy, that the "bottom line" for their use is reduced costs from increased worker productivity and control. These goals are antithetical to those of the writing classroom. (212)

One can of course argue that school is inherently revolutionary vis a vis the workplace. And yet at the same time, the whole structure of school—with its schedules and deadlines—already serves corporate America's need for well-trained workers. The authors of these articles, however, provide a useful caveat to those whose commitment to computer literacy is in part predicated on its workplace role. Both teachers and students need to recognize these kinds of conflicts more self-consciously.

Part three considers some "academy-workplace" interfaces, including reports on the value of school-business internships and of extensive classroom business communication simulations. The writers confirm for us all the touted benefits of electronic writing: increased collaboration, the needs for creative approaches and flexibility, the interdisciplinary opportunities, the "decentering of teacher-based hegemony," (203) and the challenges to contemporary rhetorical theories of writing and the teaching of writing" (xvii). Two articls provide writers especially with useful information. David Farkas and Steven Poltrock review a variety of current online editing and mark-up software, and Tharon Howard tries to sort out the convolutions of "Who 'Owns' Electronic Texts?"

While all writers in this collection are college employed, I still found much material relevant for the computer issues my high school colleagues and I face. School changes, like those in the workplace based on new technology, "demand time, curiosity, and the opportunity to explore the capacity of existing equipment well beyond its daily use" (15). As I discover every day in the computer labs with my 9th or 10th graders, "the greater the technology in an office, the more costly and painful is the process of learning how to use the technology, the more likely there are to be problems, and the more specialized the troubleshooting expertise needed" (82). Finally, I agree with Powell Henderson's conclusion to his ethnographic study of the computer and "official forms" morass at the White Sands Missile Range's Directorate of Information (that is a work-place!): "As long as these paper forms exist, the old paradigm will exist" (74). Our graduates will have to operate in paradigm-changing work spaces. We best start coping ourselves. Electronic Literacies in the Workplace provides a useful introduction.

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