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Wordprocessing and the Teaching of Composition

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The use of microcomputers as wordprocessors has the potential to greatly improve the teaching of composition. The use of this new technology in conjunction with the current knowledge on the teaching of the writing process should provide for the most effective instruction that has ever been available. Although there is this great promise, it is not assured just by the existence of the technology. The thoughtful integration of this technology with sound, teacher-derived instruction in the writing process will be required if the potential is going to be reached.

There are a number of ways this technology is going to positively influence the teaching of composition. Perhaps one of the most important and obvious things it is going to do for the student writer is to remove the mechanical barriers that often impede writing. For example, the inability to produce legible handwriting often discourages students from doing much writing. This problem can be completely eliminated through the use of wordprocessing. Once students gain some competence in using the keyboard, they can quickly learn to produce clean, professional-looking text. A wordprocessor is much more forgiving than a typewriter. Typing errors can be instantly corrected, missing words inserted, and extra words deleted. The students can quickly and easily make corrections and revisions as they create the draft of a paper. The ease with which these changes can be made throughout the composing process allows the writer to focus on the creative aspects of writing rather than having to worry constantly about a typographical error or a misspelled word.

This ease in revision will also allow writers to use a much more natural approach as they create their early drafts of a paper. Traditionally, students have been instructed to prepare an outline before they write a paper. Those who actually did write an outline before writing the paper based it on their initial knowledge of the topic. As they thought about their topic, learned more about it, and prepared an early draft, they often found that the paper went in a direction they had never anticipated. Before the final draft of the paper could be submitted, the outline had to be revised to reflect the actual content of paper. (Those of us who were really committed to efficiency always wrote the outline after the paper to insure that there was absolute agreement.)

The reason that our papers didn't match our initial outlines is that writing is a process of discovery, discovering what we know and think about a topic. An outline may be a useful guide, but if it has to be followed absolutely, it is an inhibiting element.

Wordprocessing encourages the discovery process, because it eliminates drudgery that is traditionally associated with revision. It allows the student to easily make major revisions. Sentences and/or whole paragraphs can be quickly moved from one place to another in the paper. Unwanted material can be deleted and new material inserted at any point. And all of this can be done without the drudgery of retyping the entire paper.

With some of the easy-to-use wordprocessing programs, such as **Bank Street Writer**, wordprocessing can be introduced in the early elementary grades. Students with only a hunt-and-peck approach to the keyboard will be able to produce professional-looking text. Its instructional value and utility to the student will extend from grade school to graduate school.

In addition to the correction and revision capabilities of wordprocessing programs, other types of microcomputer software are available that will further aid student writers. There are a number of programs currently on the market to check spelling. These programs help in spotting both spelling and typographical errors. Although there are some who worry that this automated approach may erode a student's ability to spell, I would argue the opposite is going to be true. Students will now be better able to find their spelling errors and see the correct spelling. In addition, there are some spell-check programs designed for the educational market that will tell students which words they commonly misspell.

Additionally, there is software currently available that can perform modest proofreading functions. They can, for example, spot double punctation, double words, open quotes, trite phrases, and other common errors. These programs are still quite rudimentary, as they are limited to scanning only those errors that they have in memory; they cannot determine whether or not a sentence or paragraph makes sense. However, they can be of value to the student writer in finding and correcting errors. They remove some of the drudgery and allow the student to focus on the more important task of producing clear, understandable text.

With this technology removing many of the problems that have traditionally been found in student compositions, instruction can be focused on more important aspects of the writing process. Teachers will

no longer have to be burdened with spelling and other proofreading problems. Instruction can be directed to important issues like the use of logic, evidence, the cohesiveness of the text, demonstration of a sense of audience, and all those other elements that determine whether or not a text is truly readable.

The success of this technology in improving writing instruction will be dependent on our skill as writing instructors to use it intelligently. The capacities of the new technology will have to be tied to new ideas in the teaching of the writing process. The research of Donald Graves, James Moffett, James Britton, Janet Emig, Ken Macrorie and many others on how to best teach the writing process at various levels has to be integrated into classroom instruction. We have this wonderful technology to use in writing instruction; it will be up to us to utilize it to its fullest instructional potential.

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Monday 7:30 - 9:00 p.m. . . . . Dr. Sam Sebesta

Tuesday 1:30 - 2:45 p.m. . . . . Betsy Byars, Newbery Award Author of SUMMER OF THE SWANS

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