DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 037 CS 210 143

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TITLE Teaching Strategies for Introducing Word Processing into the Writing Class.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (75th, Philadelphia, PA, November 22-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Style; *Computer Assisted Instruction; Course Content; Developmental Stages; Higher Education; Instructional Effectiveness; Secondary Education; Student Needs; Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods; *Word Processing; Writing Difficulties; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; *Writing Research

ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study of a writing class learning to use the computer as a writing tool indicated that learning word processing while learning how to write was a highly stressful experience for some students, and that a word processing course taught by writing teachers who attend to the special needs of writers should be available separate from the composition course. If a separate course cannot be implemented, writing teachers might teach word processing and writing in the same course, but not at the same time. However, as the findings of the study suggest, the ideal course for students must do more than separate the early phases of word processing from composition. Teachers must become sensitive to the compatibility of their teaching style with the learning styles of their students, and modify their techniques accordingly, providing a structure loose enough for students who benefit from autonomy, yet tight enough for those who prefer to work within explicit guidelines. The ideal class should encourage collaborative activities during the word processing and composition phases of the course, have no more than 20 students, and have a ratio of two students per computer at first, then one student per computer once the focus of the course shifts from acquiring the basic word processing skills to independent writing. (HTH)

Teaching Strategies for Introducing Word Processing into the Writing Class

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NCTE Conference, 22-27 November 1985
Teaching Strategies for Introducing Word Processing
Into the Writing Class
Session Title: Computers in the Classroom: An Update

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One of the growing controversies concerning the use of computers as writing tools centers around the teaching of word-processing skills. Should the writing teacher instruct students in word processing at the same time instruction is given in writing? Taking this approach frequently means that the teacher gives students some initial guidance in word processing, but then leaves them to pick up the rest on their own. Some students end up only using the computer as a glorified typewriter, to key in existing material, rather than tapping its potential as a powerful tool for composition and revision. Is there a need for a more extensive, systematic approach in word-processing instruction? If so, should it be done before the writing instruction, perhaps even taught in a separate course? I would like to address these concerns in my talk today. I will also propose some concrete pedagogical strategies for the writing teacher to consider.

Two years ago I conducted a year-long, ethnographic study of a writing class learning to use the computer as a writing tool. I wanted to find out about the compatibility of teaching writing as process while introducing students to word processing in my high school classroom. One thing I discovered was that learning how to word processing while learning how to write was a highly stressful experience for some of my students. I also discovered that using

the computer did not minimize the socioeconomic divisions in society that the school mirrors. Rather than minimizing the social and educational differences by providing all students with an opportunity to learn at their own rate as I had hoped, the process of learning to write on the computer, at least for some students, intensified these differences. As a result of this study, I discovered the importance of considering the relationship between learning and teaching styles. These findings, the findings from other studies, and my on-going experiences teaching writing and word procesing to students--more recently to university rather than high school students--have encouraged me to reformulate my ideas on the relationship between word-processing instruction and writing.

I now believe that one way of successfully reaching various types of learners is to separate the teaching of word processing from the teaching of writing in the early stages of word-processing instruction. Such an approach clarifies for the teacher and the students what the central purpose of the teaching/learning activities are. This clarity may be lacking in a course that attempts to do both at the same time. Such a division reduces the overload experienced by some students as they write, when they haven't arrived at a level of competency in operating the word-processing program. Writing is difficult enough for many students without adding the complications of half-understood word-processing procedures. Such a division encourages the development of pedagogical strategies and tasks necessary to teach word-processing skills, rather than relegating such an important activity to ad hoc or post facto measures.

At the core of this suggestion is the notion that the skills of word processing should become somewhat automatic before too much composing is expected of students. Then the writer is free to concentrate on composing, itself a complex mental process. Just as the novice pianist plays simple tunes until greater dexterity and familiarity with the piano is acquired, the novice at word processing should begin by manipulating small pieces of text that are inconsequential to her--pieces that she herself has not written--at least until she achieves a minimum of comfort and competence with the program's procedures. Much like a course in personal typing, this course would emphasize word-processing skills needed by a writer, rather than a secretary. A word-processing class for writers would not use the same syllabus nor even the same word-processing program as one for secretaries, since the needs of each group are quite distinct.

Programs for business are not always compatible with the writing process. Designed for people who copy documents, they are not necessarily good for writers composing directly at the keyboard. Automatic mechanisms that interfere with composing force the writer to interrupt himself--perhaps as he struggles to capture the essence of a still-forming thought--and deal with mechanical matters such as where to hyphenate a word. This seriously disrupts the writer's formation and flow of ideas. While sometimes the user can disable these devices to prevent them from intruding, it is obviously preferable for writers to use programs free from such obstacles. Writers need software that attends to their special needs, that permits, for example, the automatic formatting and placement of footnotes, the splitting of

the screen so that two parts of the same document can be worked on side by side, and the windowing of one document into another for simultaneous access to both.

Writers also need to be taught the commands essential to composing and revising at the keyboard, particularly those for deleting, inserting, and moving text around. They need to learn how to manipulate files; how to format compositions, poems, and term papers; and how to print out their papers. Without courses emphasizing the writer's special needs much of the power of word processing may remain untapped by the writer.

This course should be taught by the English rather than the business department. A writing teacher is more likely to serve the writer's needs than a business teacher. The process of updating software, even replacing hardware, may be complicated if the teaching is in the hands of another department. New and improved versions of software and hardware quickly outdate previous ones, yet change is complicated by the lack of standardization and incompatiblity between programs and equipment. Expecting business teachers to meet the shifting needs of English teachers is unrealistic.

If a separate course cannot be implemented, the writing teacher might teach word processing and writing in the same course, but not at the same time, at least not in the early phases of the class. This separation should improve the quality of word-processing instruction and it would encourage students to use the most common commands and procedures until they felt a degree of confidence before creating their own texts. This should minimize students' anxiety about losing their writing.

However, as the findings from my study suggest, the ideal course for students must do more than separate the early phases of word processing from composition. Teachers should become sensitive to the social dynamics in their classrooms and to the compatibility of their teaching style with the learning styles of their students. When there is a lack of fit, the students' ability to learn may suffer. In my class some students appeared to be more comfortable with a teaching structure external to themselves, with the course rules and expectations explicitly delineated. Yet, there were others who responded more positively to greater self-direction and freedom. They learned well and were happier when they were allowed more autonomy. They benefited from the freedom to initiate their own learning activities and to complete them at their own speed. The teacher's dilemma is to create a course that satisfies the range of these needs.

To make meaningful changes, the teacher must first evaluate her teaching practices. Is she one who likes a highly structured course or a loosely structured one, does she use primarily external writing motivation (e.g. tests, grades, and so forth) or internal motivation (e.g. encouraging students to write for self, peers, etc.), and is her approach essentially teacher-dominated or student-centered?

After the teacher gets some perspective on her own teaching style (no doubt related to her own preferences as a learner), she needs to discover those of her students and then attempt to modify her techniques accordingly. This may sound impossible for the busy classroom teacher to do, especially if the students in the class--as mine did--represent a range of styles. Yet it may

not be. Rather than attempting to change her teaching style to accommodate each learner's preference, the teacher needs to provide a structure loose enough for students who benefit from autonomy, yet tight enough for those who prefer to work within explicit guidelines. In addition, rather than changing her style completely to suit her students, the teacher may create transitional activities designed to help students gradually adjust to her teaching style. Although introducing change is always unpredictable, such a course might allow a greater number of students to succeed.

My study suggests that some students in my class might have benefited from more structure than I provided, both in the word processing and in the writing instruction. However, word processing is not a linear activity learned through doing a sequential series of discrete tasks. Learning how to word process, like learning other complex computer skills such as programming, requires a good deal of user exploration and interaction with the program. Students must be willing to learn through trial and error. I believe that one of the most important things we have to teach our writers is that mastery of a word-processing program requires a willingness to interact, to explore, and to experiment with it. Students need to learn, and teachers have to communicate, that there is no such thing as a mistake, that computer learning entails error and that almost anything that goes awry can be fixed.

It might appear that this need for students to learn through trial and error precludes the use of structured activities in the classroom. However, both types of activities are helpful. In an

effort to show how to integrate the theoretical aspects of my findings into the day-to-day world of my teaching practices, I will describe how I would teach a similar course now. I am assuming I would be teaching a combined course in word processing and writing to high school students, keeping the two separate during the early stages of word processing.

A class size from 14 to 20 students would be ideal. Large enough to permit students to work in groups and learn from each other, it would be small enough for students to receive individual help regularly from me. A ratio of two students per computer would be fine, at least in the beginning. Once the focus of the course shifted from acquiring the basic word-processing skills to independent writing, it would be better to have one student per computer.

I would actively foster collaborative activities in my class, requiring students to work in pairs while learning the basics of word processing and encouraging students to freely assist each other. Assuming I needed to give grades, I would also grade these collaborative activities. Student pairs would work through a learning packet of word-processing activities at their own pace but meet periodic deadlines. The tasks would be stored in electronic files copied on to students' disks as well as activities on paper for the student to key in. Only one activity for each section would be required, since all activities within a section would be designed to teach the same group of skills. Students, of course, would be able to do more if they wanted practice. Those who worked quickly would be encouraged to design their own learning exercises using skills they had acquired. I

would do demonstrations and help students having problems.

No original writing would be expected at first, but students who wanted to perform the required word-processing skills on their own writing, could do so. Activities would start with short, simple, mechanical tasks. A first activity might consist of the student booting in a disk, calling up a file, changing something within it and saving it. The student might have to change all of the first letters of each sentence in a paragraph from lower case to capitals, for example. Other activities could require a student to do a search to eliminate a redundant word, to find and replace a misspelled word, to move sentences in a paragraph into a new order, or to move paragraphs into a different sequence to make a text read more coherently. The nature and sequence of activities would be based on the particular word-processing program, since some things that are relatively simple to do in one program are more complex in another.

Some of these tasks would require the input of original text, for example, a cloze exercise consisting of a paragraph with periodic blanks to be filled in. Although some tasks would be more language-focused and less mechanistic, the goal would still be learning the appropriate word-processing strategies; the quality of the student's contribution in terms of language would not be evaluated. Original writing could be encouraged by asking students to compose two silly sentences, respond to a series of humorous questions, complete a series of half-written metaphors, and so forth. Gradually more complex word-processing skills would be required. For some students this phase of the course might only take two or three weeks while for others it might take

longer.

Once the emphasis of the course shifted to writing, I would continue to encourage students to work collaboratively. I would structure assignments loosely and set deadlines. A student selection of revised pieces would be evaluated for the semester grade. As in the word-processing phase, I would strive to create sufficient structure to guide students in working productively while allowing enough freedom to motivate those who prefer greater autonomy. Some assignments would permit students to select their topic from within prescribed boundaries, for example, to write a review of an event, work of art, or production; other assignments would be more narrowly focused while providing for a choice among several options.

If there were, for example, 15 units in a learning packet (e.g. poetry, a character description, a persuasive essay, a review, etc.) students might be required to do a total of 12 projects, 10 selected from the 15 sections in the packet, and two of their own creation. Those who had difficulty coming up with writing ideas of their own could complete twelve projects from the packet. Although there would be regular deadlines, the students could hand in assignments in any order they chose. Special permission could be negotiated for students engaged in long or cooperative projects, such as long stories or novellas, to have them count as two or more assignments. In this manner, I would hope to provide sufficient direction for those students who especially require structure, while at the same time encouraging self-direction in students who benefit from freedom.

As educators we have a responsiblity to examine our teaching

practices and assumptions in order to help students successfully meet the challenges of this new era. As writing teachers using computers we have a responsibility not to compound students' writing anxieties with computer fears. Systematically introducing word-processing skills promises to assist a greater number of students learn how to incorporate the full power of the computer into their writing processes, with the expectation that they may thereby development into more skillful writers.