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ABSTRACT

A college teacher of both freshman English and English as a Second Language (ESL) recounts the addition of computer networking to her ESL classroom and its effects on student attitudes and performance. When computerized instruction and networking capabilities, already used in freshman composition, were added to the ESL class, a variety of expected and unanticipated changes in classroom communication and student attitudes were evident: appreciation of the trust associated with access to computers; increased student pride in work products; optimism about learning computer use; improved communication between students by overcoming pronunciation and comprehension difficulties; a cooperative atmosphere for learning from errors; and comparatively better learning processes in later classes. In addition, the positioning of the teacher's computer in the middle of the classroom established her position as an interactive collaborator. It is concluded that the networked computers helped create a better learning environment for these students. (MSE)

Unexpected Rewards of a Networked ESL Community

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Session B.22 EMPATHY, ETHNICITY, AND THE ELECTRONIC CLASSROOM

UNEXPECTED REWARDS OF A NETWORKED ESL COMMUNITY: OR THE CONFESSIONS OF A CONVERT TO THE LINKED-COMPUTER CLASSROOM

[The following are my presentation notes]

I'd like to start by giving you some background. I've been teaching English and ESL at San Diego Mesa College, a college of 24,000 students, for about 6 years.. Soon after joining the faculty, I started teaching English freshman composition, English 101, in a computer-linked classroom; the advantages were obvious: practically all processes connected to the creation of compositions, such as revision, peer review, formatting, etc., were smoother and easier to attain. Students were able to produce better work, while enjoying the process more.

At the same time, I was teaching an ESL class in a traditional classroom. It wasn't long before I decided that my ESL class, a course that is 3 levels below Freshman English 101, might also profit by being in a computerized environment. After that first pilot semester, there was no turning back. What occurred exceeded any academic expectations I had; but, more intriguingly, it turned out that there were unexpected psychological rewards: in short, computerization meant increased personalization and a sense of community stronger than any I'd ever felt in an ESL class.

Let me give you a brief description of the physical set-up of the classroom [draw chart here]; you will note that my computer is in the middle of the classroom. From this instructor's computer, I can access or "peek" at any monitor in the classroom; that is, the contents of the student's screen will appear on mine. Moreover, if I choose, I can then "broadcast" that screen to all the other screens in the room. Such a setup can be considered a Local Area Network (LAN) or called a computer-linked classroom. Also, there are two laser printers in the room to which every computer has access. So far as the computer hardware and software is concerned, there are no audio-cards, fancy graphics, or specialized ESL programs--just WordPerfect.

In the schedule, under the course listing, a simple declaration appears:"this class uses computers." However, more than half of the students who choose to enroll in my English 9, have never used computers. Many, surprised to see computers in the class when they enter the room that first evening (the class meets for a total of 6 hours, two evenings a week), have apparently not read the schedule. So, what are their initial reactions, as written in a first-day questionnaire that asks them how they feel about computers? Most are what one would expect: expressions of excitement on the one hand and nervousness on the other.

But some reactions were unanticipated: expressions of gratitude that the school would trust them to use these IBM computers, expressions of pride that their work would look professional because it would be printed, and optimism that this class would not only teach them English, but also serve as a bridge into the technoworld outside the classroom.

I'd like to add here that because I currently teach at night, a large percentage of my students are not recent high-school graduates, but older students. They are often former professionals (doctors, teachers, engineers) who, as adults, are struggling to learn this new language in a new country. Often, in this process, because of their level of English proficiency, they find themselves patronized and treated in a condescending manner. The very presence of the computer speaks volumes: the silent message is that the learning environment is an adult and professional one. In this classroom you will not be treated as children.

I give a brief orientation--lasting an evening or two--on how to use the computer, how to log on, input their student number, and how to manipulate the simpler aspects of the WordPerfect 5.2 that is already installed. I have written, for the students, a handout that details which keys do what, how to save files, print, etc. Consistently, there have always been a few students who are computer users and they are quick to volunteer their help to other students. If there are major problems, the computer lab next door has technicians who are ready to help us--it's part of their job description. So, from the first, as the community is joined in learning to operate the computer a camaraderie develops that is indifferent to the various native languages or to English fluency: the burning question is "Do you know how to save this file?"

After that first week of orientation, as we progress in our writing and our computer expertise, other beneficial effects of the computer are evident. Let me detail some:

My students are from various countries--I have anywhere from 4 to 12 countries represented in a class of 20 to 25 students. Some students have accents that are difficult for the other students to understand. In a traditional classroom, I remember students who, responding to something on the blackboard, would tremulously read their own version, only to hear another student say, "I can't understand her!"

Or I would have students who, after laboriously and time-consumingly writing their homework on the board, would have to hear other students say "I can't read her writing!" Many of these students are from cultures that have encouraged a traditional diffidence. To overcome this tendency enough to stand in front of a classroom, spot-lit as it were, is difficult enough. Or to speak out. To have to deal with attention directed to one's handwriting or accent, even before the substance of the actual assignment is dealt with, can be a daunting prospect.

In our classroom, the students have their homework--let's say it's a sentence combining exercise--on the screen in front of them. They also have a printout of their work as well. I flash to Computer 23 on the "Peek Menu," bring the contents of its screen up on my screen and broadcast it to all the other monitors. There is discussion about the homework that is now in front of each student. They are able to easily compare that version to their own on their printout. No one is standing in that exposed position in front of the class; no one is struggling to read handwriting. During the discussion, suggestions are made and, sometimes, effected on the screen in front of them as I or the student acts on the suggestion. Another student says, "Oh, look at mine, number 14, and tell me what you think of this!" Computer 14's version is now there for everyone to see. She's made a mistake in one

of her sentences and is laughing about it, as someone says, "Oh, I did that too. Look at mine, look at mine!" The students are quick to volunteer their work, to take chances, to share mistakes. Do they feel safer, less exposed, sitting behind their computer? It would seem so.

And because they can so quickly and easily read other students' work, other meta-lessons are learned as well. When they can see, so graphically as we flash from computer screen to computer screen, that they are not alone in making a particular mistake--everyone has left out the article!--they begin to understand at an unarticulated level that their own mistakes are not such invidious indications, but a natural occurrence for anyone trying to learn this difficult language. "Why look, even Irma, who speaks so well, has made the same mistake!" And so they become a community of learners, each at a different level in different aspects of learning English, but all progressing at their own rate. Next week they will be saying, "Oh, you didn't use the passive here! I missed that also last week, but look at mine now."

If all this sounds as if a hostile competitive atmosphere would develop, I can only assure you that it doesn't; rather, cooperation is the dominant mood. The spirit is one of good-naturedness as the students take pride in not only their continuing progress, but in that of their classmates as well. The ones who are doing better are eager to share, via the net, their version. The ones who are not doing as well are equally eager to share their latest work. Often, the poorer English students are more proficient in computer usage and can be found, as I first enter the classroom, instructing the older, more diligent, students in the vagaries of software manipulation..

Also important is that the ease with which we hop from screen to screen, looking at all versions, seems to teach, as all my preaching in the traditional classroom, did not, that in most cases there are many ways to be right. There is no ONE right version. In a blackboard classroom, it would take so long to look, communally, at many versions of a sentence-combining exercise that we often have to settle for just one or two versions of each sentence (in a 15 sentence exercise) on the board. Other versions, when encouraged, may be voiced diffidently from the student's seat. Now, the visual impact of quickly skipping through 23 slightly different versions of one sentence speaks more loudly than any voice: yes, there are many ways to be right.

And of course, the entire gestalt of the class underscores another tenet that we preach: writing is a process that naturally includes revision and feedback. And, in a linked classroom, the first simple steps of revision are painless ones, taken in a community of well-wishers. Students, on their own, start to include different versions of a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph--asking, in effect, which works best? And the feedback becomes more sophisticated as the term wears on. Students stop speaking about which version is "correct," and start to explain why they prefer version A to version B. Formerly shy students have no qualms about saying, "But look how I did it. Don't you think that my version really shows how angry he was?" Again, discussion ensues. Even if others agree that a particular version is better, they wonder why it works. An ongoing process-oriented writing workshop, a writing community, is born every time the computers are linked.

A graduate student aide that I had last semester had two additional and interesting observations: first, she believed that the positioning of my computer, in the middle of the classroom,

established me as an "interactive collaborator" rather than as "an unapproachable bestower of correctness." Certainly, I felt in our computer interactions that we were functioning as a coach and a team; perhaps that translates into "interactive collaborator." Secondly, she observed, while helping at-risk ESL students in a tutoring lab, that there was a marked difference in those who came from a computerized classroom (two out of nine classes). "They more easily grasped new concepts and ways to revise, and were less discouraged by errors pointed out and less threatened by the enormity of learning an entire new language and culture." She added that they were more likely to come for tutoring and to display an ease in interactive learning.

So, is there any downside to the rosy picture that I paint? Definitely. I would like to change the physical configuration of the room. There are times, when we are speaking and not using computers, that I want to press a button so that all the bulky monitors that block my students' faces would sink into the desk out of sight. I long to be speaking to a semicircle of students instead of ones in rigid rows. Also, when the computer decides to go down in the midst of an exciting exchange, it is frustrating, even though the neighboring lab techs quickly fix the problem. And there are always the one or two students who seem to struggle so with the computer that I am sure for them it is an obstacle, rather than an aide. (Although they invariably tell me that they still like to use it!) I've learned the hard way that some classes, and students, need more orientation than others to get to a computer-comfort zone. And there are times I happily use the big white chalkboard in front of the class, because I just want the impact of large, marker-generated printing, But, that all said, would I go back to my old classroom? Never.

I believe that students, especially those from different cultures, learn best when they feel they are in a safe and comfortable environment. From everything that I see, networked computers have been a tool in the creation of such an environment in our classroom. And then, free of the space and time constraints of people slowly writing on the blackboard, our work is done more efficiently: we accomplish more, at a deeper level, in less time. It would be difficult, with so many variables, for me to "prove" the effectiveness of a linked computer network and I am not trying to do that. What I offer is a narrative that may encourage others to try a similar experiment, to create a computer-linked classroom community. Thank you.