Chapter 16

A Historical Overview of Writing and Technology: Seeking the Right Instructional Tools for the Job

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the history of writing and technology and offers an overview of the integration of advances in the use of technology in the writing classroom. The author has framed this overview by highlighting the importance of selecting the most appropriate tool for any instructional task. Grounded in the belief that writing is a key skill for students to master for success in the classroom and, more importantly, beyond the classroom, this chapter is designed to open a theoretical and practical dialogue between readers and this book about how to best theorize and enact meaningful writing instruction in the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

As we forge deeper into the 21st century, the number of computers, iPads, and tablets being used in classrooms continues to grow at an exponential rate (Angrist & Lavy, 2002; Klieger, Ben-Hur, & Bar-Yossef, 2010). In 1983, schools typically had one computer for every nine students. By 2002, states like South Dakota began reporting student to computer ratios of 2:1 (Goldberg, Russell, & Cook, 2003). Over the last decade, educators have seen initiatives that are placing a computer, tablet, or iPad in the hands of every student as early as kindergarten to address trends and mandates (Dunleavy, Dextert, & Heinecket, 2007; Norris & Soloway, 2011) requiring teachers to integrate information and communication technologies into the curriculum (Hutchinson, Beschorner, & Schmidt-Crawford, 2012; Quillen, 2011). Harmon and Brown (2013) noted that the overwhelming majority of educational iPad applications written in 2011 were for preschool children. The increased access to and integration of technology in writing instruction at all grade levels has made it possible for teachers to use technology to enhance writing instruction in myriad ways. However, as any
good craftsman knows, the use of a new tool does not necessarily guarantee that the products being created will improve.

New tools must be employed thoughtfully if they are going to be used to their fullest potential. With that in mind, it is important that writing teachers take some time to evaluate the tools we choose to employ as we engage in our craft: the craft of teaching writing. Carefully considering the advances in technology over the last thirty years since computers have evolved from being a classroom novelty to a classroom staple can help ensure that we are using the instructional tools available to us in the most effective ways possible. The key question is not which tools are best; instead, we should be attempting to discern which tools are likely to be most beneficial for each specific writing task (Benko, 2012; Jacobs, 2013). It is important to begin any study of digital writing instruction by carefully considering our goals as writing teachers. We must begin by asking ourselves what we value most about writing instruction—whether we are using digital or traditional tools to teach our students to compose and communicate.

The shift from an industrial to an information society (Leu & Kinzer, 2000) that has been hastened by burgeoning technologies makes it more important than ever before that students develop effective collaboration and communications skills. As literacy demands increase in the 21st century, it is vital that all students are provided with opportunities to learn to communicate effectively through writing (Gallagher, 2006). However, enabling students to learn to simply communicate in an increasingly technological world is not enough. Writing can be a transformative experience that makes it possible to communicate and process experience in unique ways. As Hillocks (2007) argued, “writing provides ways of dealing with experiences that are not available without writing” (p. 2). Learning to write makes it possible for individuals to slow down and take some time to process their experiences. Hillocks’ work can serve as a touchstone—a guidepost on a writing teacher’s journey towards providing authentic, engaging instruction. His views on why it is important to teach writing offer insight into why it is crucial to be careful about the choices we make as we craft arguments for what matters in the field of writing instruction. We must remain cognizant of the reality that we are offering students more than a discrete skill. Writing can and should be viewed as a unique tool that students can use as they explore their experiences in the world. In a fast-paced world where it is easier to consume than it is to create—easier to react than reflect and grow—it can be easy to forget that we are all trying to make sense of the world around us. Writing is an essential skill for students to master for success in the classroom and beyond and we must consistently attend to the importance of the world beyond the classroom as we are thinking about how to best theorize and enact writing instruction.

Standards era (Marshall, 2009) educational policies that privilege high-stakes test performance over personal growth (Stewart, 2012), make it easy to forget that one of our most important jobs as educators is to create writing opportunities that help students “devise their sense of self and become better writers at the same time” (Fecho, 2011, p. 4). The constraints of high-stakes tests make writing instruction focused on writing that functions as a means of learning and meaning making increasingly rare (Applebee & Langer, 2011). It is vital that writing teachers everywhere make a concerted effort to seek out tools that will help their students grow as writers and as individuals who must make sense of the world. The students currently sitting in our classrooms will be required to write more than any previous generation. In spite of this reality, writing instruction is, all too often, given short shrift as decisions are made about where to spend instructional time in the literacy classroom, which is why the National Commission on Writing has called writing the forgotten R (Grabill, 2012). Technology and digital writing tools can enhance the instruction being provided...