Chapter I

Forty Years with Computer Technology: A Personal Remembrance of Things Past

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Abstract

Technology and society are inevitably intertwined. As a result, changes in one affect the other, often in new and unexpected ways. This chapter examines how computing technology and online communication technologies have changed teaching practices in higher education. This chapter provides a first-person account of how computers and online media have changed the ways in which teachers and students approach materials.

Introduction

If three years is a generation in computer development, my experiences with computer-assisted teaching and research span almost 13 generations. Of course, the possibility of computer-assisted writing and professional communication in

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college was only science fiction then. Still, during the first seven generations, technology frightened academia that believed any technological intrusion would tarnish its self-proclaimed humanist facade; the last six, this same academia, sometime reluctantly and seldom enthusiastically, was forced to tolerate its proclaimed enemy and to explore how it could be accommodated without loss of face. This chapter is one person’s experiences during these 13 generations. What I have learned is simple:

- Most prefer to live in ruts; they resist change.
- To grow, some must explore the unknown; they must resist the resisters.
- Usually, resistance is frustrating and can be stifling; it is easier to stay in the rut.

Living in a rut is boring.

**1960s and 1970s – The Time Before Time**

In the 1950s and early 1960s, most established faculty members in English departments accepted C.P. Snow’s concept of two cultures. They believed that most, if not all, of the problems of their world stemmed from a breakdown of communication between the sciences and the humanities, and they fervently held that the responsibility for this breakdown lay with the scientists who lacked a proper humanistic education. Science and technology could not begin to teach the essential truths of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton. After all, hadn’t they recently released the atomic age along with the Cold War? Only humanists could pass on the best thoughts of the best men of the best ages.

Throughout the ’60s, I proudly used a large, noisy Rheinmetall desktop typewriter that seemed to me the latest in technology, though probably made before WW2. I found the machine in a grimey pawnshop, and spent more having it cleaned and repaired than its original price. It was what any English student needed, and I became the envy of my friends. Unlike other office manuals, I could set multiple tabs accessible by tab keys, access a number of non-standard glyphs including clear diacriticals, format mathematical equations, and type on a sensitive keyboard that reacted to my slightest touch so I could type five clean carbons. In a way quite foreign to my experiences with computers, I personalized the machine as if it were an automobile or a friend; after all, “he” saw me through
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