



Clashing Technologies: The Legacy of 19th-Century Writing Instruction Meets the 21st-Century Writing Classroom

by Mike Palmquist, Colorado State University^[1]

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"As we've come to understand writing instruction in the past few decades, writing is something that is discussed, critiqued, analyzed, and read during writing classes. It is not, however, something that is *done*" (Palmquist, Kiefer, Hartvigsen, and Godlew, 1998, p. xxx).

I've taken the liberty of quoting my own work to start this talk, not because I'm enamored with my own prose, but because it sets up a central concern that my colleagues and I have about the way writing is taught in colleges and universities. Writing, as we all know, is something we do – an activity, a process. In fact most of us, if asked, would say that we teach writing using a "process approach."

Yet, in most writing classrooms, the primary activity is not writing *per se*, but rather the discussion of writing. You know the drill: as a teachers, we create a writing assignment, introduce it during class, ask students if they have any questions, and send them off to work on the assignment. When students return to class with a draft of the assignment, we might discuss it as a class or perhaps put the students through a peer review session. But only rarely do we ask our students to actually write during class.

As a discipline, we've used this approach to writing for so long that it has become difficult to think of writing instruction in any other way.^[2] Or perhaps I should say that it *used* to be difficult to think about it in any other way. As it turns out, new instructional tools made possible through information technology have provided us with incentives to rethink the writing classroom. The result has been new approaches to writing instruction, some using computers as central parts of the classroom setting and others using computer networks to extend the traditional classroom. In this talk, I'd like to talk about how writing teachers are taking advantage of information technologies to support the teaching and learning that takes place in their courses.

I'll cover three main areas during my talk. First, I'll discuss the results of a year-long study that my colleagues and I undertook in the mid 1990s. The Transitions Study followed four teachers and 173 students in eight classrooms for two semesters. The primary goal of the study was to try to understand differences between traditional and computer-supported writing classrooms. Second, I'll discuss the growing importance of Web-based instructional resources and course management systems. Finally, I'll discuss some emerging technologies, in particular Web/database integration tools, that make possible a new range of teaching and learning possibilities, extending our classrooms and, more important, our imaginations.