16 Computers Interact with Writers and Tutors

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I have observed something unique in the relationship between tutors and writers in our writing center. Tutors and writers, all of whom are high school students in grades 9–12, have varying social, educational, and ethnic backgrounds; yet when they are working together in front of the computer, all differences vanish and a new relationship develops. As Dawn, a tutor explains, "Once you are able to put aside all the unimportant stuff and learn to trust one another, then I don't think background really matters."[1] Another tutor comments, "I think variety [in backgrounds] is very important because you not only give to someone what you have experienced and what you know, but you also get from them a new viewpoint or a new perspective, a different opinion, a new idea." Students see the computer acting as a third party or as neutral ground that encourages collaboration, provides immediate feedback and ease in revision, invites more writing, opens a dialogue between writer and tutor, acts as a learning device, and allows writers to take pride in their work. If the computer does, in fact, interact with writer and tutor in these ways, what more could we as writing center directors want? By looking at some examples of each of these kinds of interaction, perhaps we can learn how to encourage more of what is already happening between writer, tutor, and computer.

The experience of working with a writer at the computer is an unusual one. Terry, a gregarious honors student and tutor, describes the difference when working with a writer at the computer:

> There's a big difference because when it's [the writing is] on the screen, . . . you're both looking at it. . . . You can both look for errors and not feel that it's the student's paper because you are both looking to fix the printout on the screen. . . . It's a third party. . . . When you have a class look for grammatical errors, it's

much easier to do than if it's someone else's writing or something
that's not close to you. The screen sort of gives you some distance.

He is right. Dave, a writer who also has become a tutor, says that,
when writers see their work on the monitor, they get the idea that "I
didn't do it, you didn't do it, the computer did it. And the computer
can't talk back to you, so you can attack it!" The monitor becomes
neutral ground where writer and tutor can work on a clean copy that
they can both read. Even the writers are aware of the difference as
Jay, a writer with minimum basic skills, comments, "I was able to see
clearly what I was writing and I could benefit from the help of others."

Collaboration has become the key word as students share work on
the monitor, share problems with writing, collaborate on revision and
ideas from prewriting to final drafts. After working together with tutor
Dave, Rob says, "Dave and I could see the work on the screen; we
could see what was going on; we could see where to change punc-
tuation, where to change words if any needed to be changed, and you
know that's a lot better than writing on paper." Tutor Michele admits
that "helping others with their writing skills [on the computer] has
helped me to look at my papers critically." One of our frequent visitors
for two years has been Walter, a dysgraphic student.[2] When Walter
has asked him how to spell words, Dave encourages Walter to "just
type it out on the computer and see if it looks right" before going to
the dictionary. Dave believes that on the computer "you say the words
and spell them out in your mind, and you'll see it on the screen and
you also hear yourself saying it. So it really helped him [Walter] spell
words better."

Collaboration is just one way in which the computer has helped
Walter. As our tutor Dawn reported, the immediate feedback which
Walter received by seeing his work appear in neat form on the monitor
"gave him that lift that he often needed to be positive about his
writing . . . and it gave him a feeling that he belonged, that he wasn't
different from other students." Walter is not alone; Rob, a creative
writing major, describes how the computer "just makes it [my writing]
right there where you can see it. You can see what's going on and
sometimes that's better than when you're writing—you can see every-
thing you've written already up on the screen." Not only do writers
see their work immediately, with and without mistakes, but they know
how easy it is to improve what they have written. Terry explains,
"What the computer helps do is go from what you might bring out
of tutoring as a good or strong paper to a really good paper, you know,
changing a B to a B+ or a B+ to an A−, adding that little difference
there." Some people, however, just come to the writing center when

they have to write a formal paper. Jessica, for instance, admits that the main reason she uses the computer is that " it's so much easier than the typewriter." Others indicate that the ease of revision "makes you more willing to change things around knowing that you don't have to waste paper, you don't have to erase, and it's fun."

With the encouragement of the tutor, writers tend to do more writing on the computers. Last year a writer remarked, "I've written over twenty long poems since using the computer. Without it, I probably would have written only three. Every time I sit in front of the computer, I somehow manage to work out and write down at least a rough idea that otherwise might be lost in my questionable memory." Dawn senses that you don't have the classroom atmosphere of writing at a desk when you are sitting at the computer, "so the writer who oftentimes can't think of anything to write may come up with some great ideas at the computer." Another tutor believes that "students write more when they can write on the computer, and they save it all together so they don't have to worry about a paper being lost or ripped or anything like that." Those of us who have lost files on the computer may not consider those losses significant, but one of our tutors thinks a writer's loss of a file is important because "I've done the same thing, and it's shared pain!"

Once the tutor and writer can share an experience at the computer, the dialogue begins. Tutors have made me aware of a technique I refer to as the "computer ploy." Writers use the excuse of not knowing how to do something on the computer; then the tutor discovers that "the questions were really about writing and not about the computer." Another tutor found that "they [the writers] will want to underline, but before they do that they want to know what you think or how this reads, so they usually have another motive behind their question." Some tutors enjoy the opportunity of getting to know a writer by working at the computer. For instance, one admits that he does "weird things" at the computer because "it's very easy to get to know someone when you're working at the computer." That dialogue frequently focuses on developing the writing through questioning. Dawn describes how she is able to get information out of the writer by looking at the monitor and the writing. While they sit eye to eye at the monitor, she asks the writers how they feel about the assignment and if they have any idea about what they want to say. Then the computer seems to act as a catalyst for opening the dialogue necessary for an effective tutor-writer relationship.

Invariably a tutor must play the role of instructor. Our tutors are trained to be readers/listeners. The computer serves as a learning

device that both the writer and tutor profit from in this interaction. Dana, a senior, explains that when she put something on the monitor "I would ask them [the tutors] if they would help me construct the sentence better or add a different word that would sound better." Although many teachers would suggest that Dana refer to a thesaurus or grammar book instead, the computer becomes the means by which Dana and the tutor may question grammatical structure or word choice; they may, in fact, look in a thesaurus or grammar book for reinforcement, and they will probably remember what they have learned! This experience also teaches the tutor to apply the lessons learned. One tutor notes, "As a peer tutor, I get to see how others write, observe what they've done right and wrong. I then use this [knowledge] to better my own writing."

Finally, one of the most important, unexpected benefits of the interaction between the writer and tutor working at the computer is the pride writers develop in their efforts. Some of our brightest days have been the ones in which advanced placement students and basic skills students alike have successfully completed a piece of writing and printed a neat, legible copy to share. Several of the tutors and I remember the first time our dysgraphic student wrote and printed out something. One recalls, "He was so proud of himself and so proud of his work that . . . [the computer] really made a difference!"

Does the computer make a difference in the interaction between writer and tutor? Yes, but I would be lying if I said that my opinion hasn't been influenced significantly by the interaction of the peer tutors who act as readers/listeners. In any writing center, the director depends on an outstanding team of trained tutors who create the kind of atmosphere in which writers grow, share, collaborate, and enjoy writing. If the computer adds another element to that atmosphere, then why not use it to its full potential as part of the interaction between writer and tutor.

Notes

1. The interviews were taped January 22–23, 1986, and February 26, 1986, in the writing center at Red Bank Regional High School.

2. *The Dictionary of Reading and Learning Disabilities Terms* defines dysgraphia as the "inability to perform the required motor tasks for handwriting and, thus, the power to express ideas by writing."