Can We Really Afford to Ignore Affordances?

A Call for Change

in the Digital Composition Classroom

A Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Report

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Introduction:

My husband has recently acquired the car of his dreams—a 1929 Model A Ford pick-up truck—much like the one he had had in high school in the fifties. Behind his purchase, I suspect, were a number of impulses: the desire to return to the wild and free world of his teens; the thrill of driving a vehicle so close to the original prototype that changed the world; and perhaps most obviously, the delight in its classic simplicity. As he jokes with me, "It's a simple car for simple people."

He has a point—at least in the car department. My surprise on sitting in the front seat for the first time was overwhelming. There's almost nothing on the dashboard. There's a tachometer, fuel gage, steering wheel, and a choke--and that's it! To drive this truck you needed to know how to drive a standard shift and then steer (and you certainly didn't need a license). However, if truth were told, driving the ancient truck offered me, twenty-first century driver that I am, a challenge—to forget every improvement in car design for the last 90 years, including windshield wipers! When I tried to put the car in motion, I couldn't move out of the driveway because I had overlooked the one black button that I know, only now, to be a necessity for movement: the choke.

Ford's early designers placed the car's few working parts where the driver could easily access them. I could perceive all its functions, with the halting exception of the choke, and that oversight had me stalled in the driveway for a half hour.

The world of cars has dramatically changed since 1929, to state the obvious, and the way we operate the vehicle is dramatically more complex. You can still drive the new car with the simplicity of the old Ford if you know how to turn the key and step on the brake, but to *really* drive it and all its complexity, you need a fifty-nine page manual. As cars grew in sophistication, designers counted on the users' increasing eagerness to know how to use them, either by trial-by-error or a manual. There were compelling reasons for them to make the effort to learn. Pride, confidence, and safety all lay behind the human will to understand a system's **perceived** capabilities.

I would like to use my husband's Ford as a starting place to talk about the relationship between a machine and its user, and, more specifically, a word processor and a writer.

In my academic life, I have owned the primitive Ford truck of computers, an IBM personal computer weighing at least 15 pounds, and taught writing on the even more primitive Bank Street Writer. Now our college offers computer labs with sleek, fast, and complex computers--and I teach on these as well. I don't have to tell you that the potential for controlling the writing environment has increased dramatically in the last ten years. However, many teachers of writing accept that their students are able to use the word processor with at least as much efficiency as they. Naturally, they take a passive approach to the actual processing when their class is in a computer lab producing a paper. Many of us are actively discussing producing text, stimulating ideas and process, but NOT interfering with the machine and its use in any significant way. Microsoft Word 2003, the software on our fast machines seems more than adequate—we help the fledgling user and leave the rest to their established skills.

This passive stance is natural, given that we are word and idea smiths, not technology experts. However, this stance, I believe, may be a mistake. I have changed my own practice in the digital classroom and actually **interfere** with their established composing process to alert students to changes they need to make in the software defaults. For a number of years, I have required students to control a number of major factors that affect the production of academic writing. Students learn deliberate behaviors designed to increase their writing fluency, length, accuracy, and power. This report tries to give theoretical support to my pedagogical choices.

Although the word processor was initially introduced as a "revolutionary" tool to improve writing quality and quantity, it has been, in general, a *passive* companion, under-utilized by professors teaching and assigning academic writing to be produced in a computer laboratory. Students use Microsoft Word (2003) with little more sophistication than they did in sixth grade. In Model A Ford terms, they know how to use the clutch, speed, and even the choke—but they're driving a Lexus.

__Disclaimer:__ The implications and discussion that follows might be of interest for composition instructors of all classes, but for the teachers of on-line courses, or classes taught without a computer lab component, my suggestions will probably look irrelevant to the success of their own students. However, there are ways to effect some of these changes even for those students—especially for those challenged by composition and all its complexities.

Theoretical Basis: To look again at the relationship between user and machine

Cognitive researchers use the term "cognitive dissonance" to define that moment when a learner discovers that they need to learn to change behavior in response to a challenge in the environment. Instructors are the major means of offering both cognitive dissonance, and the behavior to resolve it.

For a number of years, I've been concerned with factors that affect the production of academic writing. I wean them from old habits. I control the composing process from inception to final draft. With just a few exceptions, students compose at the keyboard. They change font size and default settings as they learn deliberate behaviors designed to increase their writing fluency, accuracy, and power.

Once I began to see improvements in the quality of their writing, I wanted to share my new "best practices' with my colleagues, but was met with little enthusiasm. The community college English teachers with a five-course load fight for survival-- not change. Then I sought outside research to find fellow practitioners. I was pleased to find Matthewman and Triggs conclude that there is a powerful distinction between the processes we advocate and current practices—at least in Great Britain where their research is supported by the University of Bristol.

In the following figure from their research for "The National Curriculum and Literacy" (133), they make the distinction between a "staged" and "organic" model of writing when using technology to create texts:

STAGED	ORGANIC
National Curriculum and Literacy strategy model for teaching the writing process	**Pupils' model when using technology to make texts**
Plan, draft, edit, revise, proofread, and present	Concern for the visual design of the text from the start Integration of language, typography, graphics and structural design features throughout to make meaning

As the illustration suggests, The National Curriculum and Literacy Model (for Britain) separates the writing process into distinct stages. The "staged" model separates these stages as relatively distinct. Many of us who teach process writing on this side of the Atlantic fall quite easily into separating these stages when we create our own lesson plans: Reading, discussion, brainstorming, writing the draft, peer review, and then revising into a final product are stages and terminology we use.

However, the use of technology, Matthewman and Triggs emphasize, implies an organic view of the writing process, not a staged one. "Graphics, language and structural design become prominent components of the creative process, once you consider the visual design of the texts' inception." ***Making meaning is intimately linked to the visual design from the start.***

This SoTL project has given me time to seek out other writing teachers who were asking the same questions—or had, perhaps, even answered them.

In Great Britain, Guy Merchant is involved in an on-going literacy project for young writers. He theorizes about changes that have taken place in the technological world in communication. He uses the term "different affordances of page and screen" as a way to define the multiplicity of possibilities that technology offers the writer. Is this word "affordance" just more jargon or an indication of significant new understanding of the complex process of writing.

What is an affordance? Should I know what an affordance is?

Here is where my ignorance caused a classic "cognitive dissonance," and I had to resolve the clash.

Affordances and affordance landscape

The term *affordance* is used in the fields of perceptual psychology, cognitive psychology, environmental psychology, industrial design, human-computer interaction, interaction design and artificial intelligence (Wikipedia). The psychologist James J. Gibson defined it as referring to all "action possibilities latent in the environment, objectively measurable, and independent of the individual's ability to recognize those possibilities."

Sit with me once again in the cab of 1929 Ford truck. Displayed in front of us is an "affordance landscape." Each fixture has its own purpose that affords us control over some aspect of its operation. Even the choke, which I didn't even perceive in my first attempt to drive it, is considered an affordance, but

a *latent affordance*, as I did not perceive it. An affordance in our composition students' digital environment, for example, would be a mouse, the crucial tool giving one access to the manipulation of the software—or, in other words, it **affords access to the screen,** accessing and manipulating the text.

The **affordance landscape** is the term given to the general framework of the environment that contains the affordances. For the Dell computer I'm working on, the affordance landscape includes the software and the interface for the user, including the chair, monitor, and keyboard and mouse.

In creating this new language for elearning, Gibson emphasizes that there is an intimate relationship between technology and new communicative practices and suggests that, because literacy is radically changed by new practices, we need to re-draw "*the literacy maps of schooling.*"

Affordances, Elearning, and Literacy: new language and practice for learning

In "**Metacognition, Distributed Cognition Visual Design,**" appearing in **Cognition, Education and Communication Technology** (2004) David Kirsch uses the term "elearning" which acknowledges that there is a new digital environment that many of us have not consciously analyzed to restructure our teaching practices. He emphasizes that: "the elearning environment, like other environments of human activity, is a complex constellation of resources that must be managed by agents as they work toward their goals and objectives" (3).

He identifies the notion of "active vision." In this sense, visual perception is active, interactive, and so actually involves an integration of motor and visual systems. In this view, our ocular muscles, our neck, head, and body are part of the retinal control system that "governs our reading of a simple text in the elearning environment" (4). Kirsch says, "Designers try to reduce the complexity of choice as perceived by a user, by shaping visible properties. They attempt to simplify the perception of options a user sees when choosing what to do next. They shape the "*affordance landscape*." Thinking and working environments are not separate entities. He continues, "All too often thinking and working are dissociated," when they should be organically integrated. He emphasizes that active vision can change the digital affordance *landscape* and help redraw the design of new curricula. What would we see if we used "active vision"? What would this "redrawing" mean for writing in the digital classroom? What are effective strategies for improving student writing?

Instructor behavior in the digital classroom:

First, a new vision would mean that writing teachers are playing a more active role in the digital English classroom. Not only would they establish parameters for the writing assignment, but for the actual production of the text, as well. Ideally, in the digital classroom, writing teachers are ***not*** behind a computer at the head of the class correcting papers or counseling individual students with hard copy in front of them, but actively working to give students strategies for fulfilling the assignment, increasing their students awareness of strategies they can master to improve their skills, strategies rooted in the dramatic increase in the *affordance landscape* of our changing digital world.

Teaching strategies to improve skills for greater literacy in the digital world:

Ingrid Fontanini makes the distinction between reading skills and strategies in her article, **"Reading Theories and Some Implications for the Processing of Linear Texts and Hypertexts."** She identifies skills as being automatic cognitive processes executed unconsciously by the readers. Skills are not taught; readers automatically acquire them after a certain amount of exposure to texts, and they may vary from reader to reader**.** Strategies, on the other hand, are "conscious and purposeful abilities" and are part of the readers' "procedural knowledge and enable readers to work with the cognitive demands of a text. Variables, such as size of screen, polarity, font, stimulus size, number of colors, may directly influence processing" (178).

 I was particularly excited to see Fontanini discussing what I had concluded after many years in the digital classroom as instructor and writer. There are deliberate procedures to teach, and processing variables that we can alter in this classroom. Recognizing these variables, actively controlling for them, and changing practice because of them are sound pedagogical choices for teachers of academic writing.

Student behavior in the digital writing classroom:

Fontanini's distinction between skills and strategies becomes clearer if we look at the typical student working in a digital classroom. With rare exceptions, students can now respond to a writing prompt, write a 300-600 word essay with paragraphs and spell check, and print it—with ease at every stage of production. They feel in control of the production, which increases their self-confidence in the worth of

the final product (Stan and Collins 230). However, I would say that their confidence is misplaced. Many have adequate *skills* for text production, but few have *strategies* for substantive revising to improve their writing.

I'm reminded here of a student in a composition 1 class a few semesters ago who was asked to take a required diagnostic test at the beginning of the composition class. He had already passed the entrance diagnostic (by handwriting) and been placed in an ENG 101 class. We were in a computer lab where, if students had processing skills, they were encouraged to use the word processor. He assured me that he had the skills, no problem. At the end of the hour, with total assurance, he handed in an essay of 150 words in 14 font, caps locked, with no paragraph formatting. When I asked if he wanted to include paragraphs, he said he didn't know how to create them, but assured me that I'd find it "an essay worth reading." He couldn't have been more self-assured—or wrong.

This student, although an extreme example, was not unusual. In general, students have considerable confidence in their computer skills. **Of the 36 freshman writers** in my fall study answering the question, "How would you rate your processing skills?", only three answered *weak*, twenty-three **good** and ten **excellent.** Obviously, in these two classes, confidence ran high, and for these young, primarily native students, it was natural: almost without exception, they had grown up with computers. However, despite their confidence, not one student used strategies other than the automatic spell check to develop their diagnostic essay. All essays were handed in with no changes in the visual default: 12 font, Times New Roman, and single-spaced. Their papers appeared polished, but they were underdeveloped and under polished, in general, to say nothing of being difficult to read in single spacing.

To be interested in learning new skills and strategies, students must understand that their command of the digital landscape is weaker than they suspect. There have been a number of studies (Stan and Collins, included) giving evidence of students' false confidence in their command of the computer skills and strategies. Promoted especially by the professional appearance of the final, visual printed product, students assume their work is better than it is. On average, students spend less than ten minutes to use any strategies to improve their essays (231).

A 2004 study at the University of Bristol came to a similar conclusion: the appearance of the printed product masks its underlying weaknesses. In an article in "Computers and Education"

(Matthewman and Triggs) a team from the Graduate School of Education at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom released "Obsessive compulsive font disorder: the challenge of supporting pupils writing with the computer." They analyzed a group of young adults' use of a variety of fonts and sizes to write an analysis of a novel. They concluded that students' obsession with font style and size hid from them their real weaknesses. The visual excitement of letting the words tie in organically with the message overwhelmed all other considerations of text production. The study concludes that, "Given the diversity of writing products when teaching the writing process, teachers are often still working with the traditional staged print-based model where the visual is treated *solely* as an aspect of final presentation rather than as an integral part of composition" (133). Most instructors don't control the text production, thus leaving students to become obsessed with its appearance, at the risk of sacrificing meaning.

Students aren't always aware that however effective the polished product is in masking errors from them, it doesn't fool their writing instructors. We see these weaknesses quickly and resignedly. We can ask a hundred times, "Did you run the spell check and grammar before handing this in?" and get the same answer, 'Yes, and it said that the spell check is complete." The product just "looks" so deceptively good. Of course, these errors in grammar, syntax, and thinking could be a boon to the red pen crowd, but most writing teachers today understand the futility of that exercise. It doesn't improve student writing. No wonder we despair of ever finding ways to *really* change student writing habits.

Implications for the composition teacher in a digital landscape:

Writing teachers must be active players in the digital English classroom. Not only should they establish parameters for the writing assignments, but for the actual production of the text, as well. In the case of the "obsessive font disorder," font changes should be considered only after the meaning, shape, and language have been developed and finalized.

The instructor in a digital classroom has to take responsibility for knowing how to best use the technology to promote new behavior in their students. This sense of responsibility is crucial if we want to level the playing field for our students. We need to have command over the software we use. If we look at Microsoft WORD 2003 software, for instance, we need to understand a number of design elements and

default modes installed at the factory that are not necessarily helpful for students creating and editing texts. We need to understand and base instruction on this new awareness. (This will be explained in more detail under methodology.)

In a paper presented at the 2000 MLA Annual Convention, Michael D. Levi in "Literature at the Human-Computer Seam" emphasizes the differences between the "perceptual and cognitive differences between the written word captured in ink on papers and the same words captured in binary units." He elaborates on the perceptual differences, the sensory experiences of the user that "the user may or may not be consciously aware of." He identifies "ergonomic considerations, where there is a powerful difference in the writing world in the computer age, including: the distance between the reading material and the reader; the angle of the reading material relative to the reader's head and body; the angle of the reading material on the reader's retina; the curvature of the computer screen; the image distortion in the screen's corners; and the posture of the reader."

He observes, what perhaps is obvious but easily forgotten, that "once ink is put down on paper it remains static. A computer screen, by contrast, can change. The reader can often adjust formatting…scrolling text…a computer page can do away with the concept of a page altogether. Line by line vertical scrolling is common" Levi).

Technological affordances should inform our teaching practices. There should be a difference in teaching in the digital classroom: the writing teacher is *not* behind a computer at the head of the class correcting papers or counseling individual students with hard copy in front of them. The writing instructor is actively working to give students strategies for fulfilling the assignment, increasing their knowledge of the opportunities for improvement afforded by the computers they work on. The word processor is a dramatically helpful aid in the writing process—but only if we *actively* see the design affordances in the digital landscape, and *actively* take the responsibility to teach them to our students.

The chasm between ideal and present practice is discussed in detail in Rex Hartson's 2003 article "Cognitive, physical, sensory, and functional affordances in interaction design" in the September-October issue of the Journal of Behavior and Information Technology. Hartson discusses the distinction between "real affordances" and "perceived affordances," emphasizing the need for greater clarity and purpose when talking about interaction between machine and user (319). Just because someone has "added an

affordance" to the interaction design, that in itself says nothing about usability. We need to explain and teach strategies to make these affordances usable.

In an observational study of practice in nine high school English classrooms, "the word-processors were not well used." They found that on the occasions in which word-processing was used, it was mainly for presentational purposes, for individualized "writing up" activities and for on-screen punctuation and spelling practice (Mumtaz as qtd. in Merchant 22). Perhaps 2002 dates this finding, but I fear it doesn't. Beyond rudimentary strategies, I've heard of no instructors who actively work to teach more advanced strategies.

But I'm not a computer applications instructor!

Currently, there are 2 potential instructors to teach our students how to use these strategies: the Information Technology instructors, especially Computer Applications, and the ENG 101 teacher; but only one of these will **repeat a**nd **reinforce** these strategies to the point where they become learned behavior. The ENG 101 instructor, by default, is in the best position to effect change.

Note: Our own community college:

Unless our Writing Center has changed its policy, it teaches No instruction on the PC, and will accept only hard copy for discussion. (Of course, there are exceptions, but they are, well, exceptions.) Our lab is staffed by excellent and effective writing tutors, and they improve student writing, but the ultimate goal, to give students the ability to take knowledgeable control over their own writing process, is not being served. Even here, the most effective design would be to help writers at all stages of the process. Of course, the Writing Center would be quite right to counter my criticism with the reality that the Writing Center has neither enough computers nor tutors to teach these skills. Yes, my suggestions may seem impractical at this time; however, that should not dissuade us from changing the status quo. (See recommendations for change for more specific recommendations.)

What major awareness has the potential to change practices in the digital writing class?

Our community college technology software offers, primarily, Microsoft Word. Currently, all computers with WORD 2003 are programmed *at the factory* with default settings that *exclude* a number of

vital editing tools our students can learn to use to their benefit: As it is currently set, the default activates spelling and grammar, but not style. (See explanation that follows.)

Why change the default? Are there affordances we are missing?

Composition teachers are not usually software gurus. Many of us don't see ourselves as communication technology teachers. We accept the software defaults and their limitations because, quite simply, we see no real reason for change. This as a technological issue, not ours. Many of us don't see ourselves as communication technology teachers. We accept the defaults and its limitations because, quite simply, we see no real reason for change.

South African educator Laura Czerniewicz argues in the journal ***Computers and Learning*** (2003) that "simply providing teachers in classrooms with computers is insufficient to change teaching practice" (8). She argues that teachers need to see "what the affordances of the new media forms are." For many community college instructors, especially composition instructors, *seeing affordances* is not part of their job description, in part, because "despite the rhetoric that computers would change the nature of the teaching and learning enterprise, the daily activities of the average classroom have not changed much (8).

What would change look like? Any computer applications instructor may find the following suggestions limited, especially as so many of them successfully teach students how to use WORD software in their classes; however, they are not teaching composition and there lies the difference.

The e-learning writing classroom: strategies for greater student fluency, coherence, and correctness:

Whether students are producing text during lab class time or at home, I've asked them to alter a number of their software settings and their environment.

- ***Actively alter their physical environment for ideal word processing***. Since they are working in a public space, they need to make some individual decisions. Look again at Michael Levi's "ergonomic considerations" enumerated in his address at the MLA conference in 2006: "There is a powerful difference in the writing world, including the distance between the reading material and the reader, the angle of the reading material relative to the reader's head and body, the angle of the reading material on the reader's retina, the curvature of the computer screen, image distortion in the screen's corners, and the posture of the reader."

1. **Environmental affordances to design for**:

   a. **Place:** Seating: **where** is ideal? Are they easily distracted? Do they need to sit separate from friends, doorways, and instructor's desk? Have visual limitations? Do they need to avoid reflections from the windows?

   b. **Physical set-up:** addressing of the computer space selected (chair, screen, height, position of keyboard)

2. **Changing font size: Software settings to consider changing** from the default setting sent from the factory. Changing the software settings: *Default settings, or affordances, installed at the factory that we use automatically, unless taught otherwise in the PC classroom using WORD 2003 or later: Times New Roman, 12 font, at 100 % resolution*

These defaults are not unreasonable stylistic decisions by Microsoft: 12 font is the size that most closely resembles the old type-writer size, and Times New Roman is one of the most readable font styles. However, as I attempt to demonstrate in the following excerpt, given in two different font styles and sizes, there are measurable improvements in the amount of text and its readability on the screen:

If you choose to test my conclusion, ideally, you would have to compose your own text on the screen in 10 font/ Times New Roman , double spacing, , **and** adjust to it. Then alter your text to the default mode, Times New Roman, 12, double-spacing. However, for the sake of our discussion, I've included as a point of comparison, an excerpt of my own writing from my application to participate in this SoTL project on the following page for easy comparison.

Sample 1: Times New Roman, Book Antiqua, 12 font, justified margins

If my hunches and anecdotal evidence are right, I believe that I have some valuable recommendations for changes in how we use the word processor in composition classrooms. Although I have changed my own policies and practices to reflect these "hunches," this opportunity would allow me the time and opportunity to research current scholarship in composition to see what other educators and teachers are doing in their composition classrooms. I would like to establish a firm scholastic basis for "my hunches," recognizing, however, that they may be limited or even misguided.

Sample 2 : Times New Roman, font size 10

If my hunches and anecdotal evidence are right, I believe that I have some valuable recommendations for changes in how we use the word processor in composition classrooms. Although I have changed my own policies and practices to reflect these "hunches," this opportunity would allow me the time and opportunity to research current scholarship in composition to see what other educators and teachers are doing in their composition classrooms. I would like to establish a firm scholastic basis for "my hunches," recognizing, however, that they may be limited or even misguided.

> **Note:** I don't know how effective this above example is for you, reader, at this point. The contrast might just convince you to *keep* the default font size. However, look again at how much of the text you are able to see on one screen and how easily read a second or third time, as one might do when composing. The recursive action is faster.

<u>Reading theory and composing on screen:</u>

Times New Roman font style will seem the norm. However the size may give you pause if you are used to teaching composition or reading student papers in any field. However, once your eyes adjust to 10 font sizing, you can see that the actual processing is considerably faster, accounting for adjustment time. Consider that human reading appears to be performed as a series of word recognition steps with saccades between them. In normal reading, humans do not actually "read" every word, but rather scan many words, filling in many words by what would logically appear there in context. This is possible because human languages show certain predictable patterns. Ease of readability will necessarily affect the rate at which a reader can scan other writers' texts.

In a study from "Usability News" of April 2002, "A Comparison of Popular Online Fonts: Which Size and Type is Best?" the authors concluded that Times New Roman was read significantly faster than most other popular fonts. However, they also concluded that 10 point was read more slowly than 12. I found this result interesting, but limited for my purposes, because it did not mimic the essay writer's reading demands. First, by using unfamiliar text as opposed to using reader –produced text, the speed advantage becomes irrelevant. Secondly, the study didn't clarify which margin justification they were using. If it was right justified the text looks prettier, but the reading is tougher because of the varying number of spaces between words. Thirdly, the crucial factor of line spacing which determines the amount of white space on the page was not considered a factor (the more contrast, the easier to read).

Changing Font style: **Times New Roman** or another font designed for the digital screen?

There are a number of new font designs that look attractive on screen and in print, often recommended by use by Web designers. There are options, but is Times New Roman still the best option? Web guru Daniel Will-Harris recommends using Georgia and Verdana over Times New Roman in one of his on-line lessons. However, in a clear case of font-style confusion, his own web site, "The Best Faces for the Screen," uses 10 font in Times New Roman, neither Georgia or Verdana that he had recommended.. Times New Roman has my vote—and perhaps Will-Harris'-- as well as Microsoft's (obviously as it **is** the default style), because it can "improve the appearance of text at small sizes and low resolutions (Outing and Ruel).

<u>Rationale for default changes:</u>

My experience as a reader of student writing for 30 years is that, unless students are learning limited, the more they can see of their text at a time, the better--especially when we consider the recursive quality of writing. If we consider writing as a recursive act, where the language leads, and the writer continues to follow where it leads, writers who are able to *see* "the leading language" more quickly and in greater quantity, are enabled to write more coherently. Controlling for font style and size, in order to see as much as possible of an easily readable text in production, can minimize scrolling, emphasizing the organic nature of the composing process. The smaller font can improve fluency as readers and writers are "willing to make the effort to adjust their reading style to overcome whatever strain might be associated with the use of smaller font sizes" (Outing and Ruel).

Can this change in dimension affect the overall quality of student writing? I believe it can. However, students won't use the remarkably different strategies offered by the new technology, unless they are taught how to use them. Sometimes students use such large sizes that they fool themselves into thinking that they've written an essay. Students often use font styles that require the readers, including themselves, to decode the words before making meaning—only Wingdings seems exempt from "obsessive compulsive font disorder." Less decipherable fonts automatically limit student fluency in rereading for meaning—for the recursive process in general that occurs during the composing process.

Both the earnest student working to capacity , as well as the lackluster student who aims primarily for only the number of pages required, and everyone in between, could benefit from seeing as much of their text in production without breaking to another page, and without taking too long before short term memory overload occurs

When students and fellow instructors voice reservations about using Times New Roman in 10 font, perhaps they are unaware that the Web and almost any respectable newspaper and magazine with a reading level of over 9th grade, uses even smaller font sizes than WORD's Times New Roman 10. Web designers traditionally use Times New Roman 8. I realized this only when I went to paste the above

reference by Outing and Ruel and discovered that the screen image was even smaller than my 10 Font Times New Roman, despite the menu reading 10 Times New Roman. I had to look even further to the left on the menu bar to find that Normal **(Web)** is different from Normal size text.

Why not change the font default?

To explain this resistance to change of font size, perhaps many of us want the screen and hard copy images to look like they both came from a typewriter—perhaps it's just a "paper" convention. Nevertheless, once this the new affordance becomes the norm, we can take advantage of its superior potential. Outing and Ruel seem to agree: "An interesting point -- brought out in our testing … is that readers seem willing to make the effort to adjust their reading style to overcome whatever strain might be associated with use of smaller font sizes. With larger font size and especially larger headlines, people seem to be **less** likely to "work hard" in viewing content" (32).

Controlling for font style and size in order to see as much as possible of an easily readable text in production, can minimize scrolling, allow writers to see more of their text both in production and editing. These tools offer a dynamic catalyst to the organic composing process.

Note: Writers should also be encouraged to work with the VIEW option as part of the revision process. Using the "reading pane" allows you to see how pages and text fit together, using the" full screen" takes all tables out of view, allowing a clean reading of the draft. This is an excellent way to read for meaning without the temptation to edit immediately.

CHANGING OTHER OPTIONS: From Default to No Fault

What are the potential affordances or options for students seeking to edit their essays? If one accesses *Microsoft Office Online* for a list of options, the results are impressive. I've copied and pasted them from their online Help

Grammar options include the following, listed here briefly. (Please see a complete version of Microsoft Office Word's Help Online on the Internet.) I modified the original formatting for easier reading and access.) **Style** is also included afterward. Please compare the lists.

Please note that the *DEFAULT SETTING for WORD* is **"Grammar Only." "Style" is NOT checked.** The number of editing tools students **never** have access to should take the unknowing composition teacher by surprise.

Grammar Options

The following are grammar and writing style options you can set in the Grammar Settings dialog box

⊞ **Capitalization**   ⊞ **Fragments and Run-ons**: ⊞ **Misused words**: ⊞ **Negation**   Use of multiple negatives. ⊞ **Noun phrases**   ⊞ **Possessives and plurals**: ⊞ **Punctuation:** ⊞ **Questions**: ⊞ **Relative clauses**: ⊞ **Subject-verb agreement**: ⊞ **Verb phrases**: .

Style Options

⊞ **Clichés:** . ⊞ **Contractions**: ⊞ **Fragment — stylistic suggestions**: F ⊞ **Gender-specific words**: ⊞ **Hyphenated and compound words**: ⊞ **Misused words — stylistic suggestions**: ⊞ **Numbers**: ⊞ **Passive sentences**:. ⊞ **Possessives and plurals — stylistic suggestions**: " ⊞ **Punctuation — stylistic suggestions**: U ⊞ **Relative clauses — stylistic suggestions**: ⊞ **Sentence length (more than sixty words)**: ⊞ **Sentence structure**: ⊞ **Sentences beginning with "And," "But," and "Hopefully"**: ⊞ **Successive nouns (more than three)**: ⊞ **Successive prepositional phrases (more than three)**: ⊞ **Unclear phrasing**: ⊞ **Use of first person**: ⊞ **Verb phrases — stylistic suggestions**: ⊞ **Wordiness**: ⊞ **Words in split infinitives (more than one)**:

Looking at this full list of options is the only way to illustrate how many of the editing tools our students never use. Mind you, I am not naïve enough to argue that having these tools at hand is a panacea for the grammatically challenged. However, a hundred wavy green lines can communicate that something just might be amiss. Usually, the checker provides useful ways to change sentence structure and offers a brief grammatical explanation for the problem. Among other useful actions, it flags run-on sentences, fragments, clichés—and the "unclear phrasing" catches any number of problems.

These options can control the dialogue between the "tools" of composition and the written product at each point in the writing process, not just in the final editing and polishing. Using the WORD Grammar & Style options requires students to "look again" with the necessary tools. It requires that students review the text for clarification, elaboration, and audience, as well as surface errors.

How the grammar and style checker work:

Microsoft's instructions for using this grammar and style checker are obviously accurate, but in my experience, limited. They say: *The grammar checker is a "natural language" grammar checker that flags possible problems by performing a comprehensive analysis of the text. The grammar checker may not look for all types of problems; it's designed to focus on those that are most typical or frequent.* You ask, what is missing?

My own editing experiences have revealed that the system works through distinct layers of language, moving from the surface errors (the obvious misspelled words, typos, missing periods and sentences) to the deeper language issues of style, fragments, run-ons, etc… What does this mean in terms of editing?

- If students have typing issues and leave uneven spacing around punctuation, as in the following example, the scanner is **unable** to scan and thus catch **any** problems in the sentences: *I knew that now was the moment I had waited for . He looked at me as if I was finally relieved of my obligations..*
    - [In this example, unless the student had changed the default setting at the top of the Grammar & Style screen to "**Spaces required between sentences**" from "don't check" to 1 or 2, the scanner is powerless. The grammar check wouldn't respond to this problem—or any others.]
    - [To help weak keyboarders, you can diagnose the typical error and use the REPLACE function to insert or delete spaces to correct the problem all at once, instead of manually correcting every sentence.]

- You have to have patience! Just when you think that a sentence has been completely corrected, the scanner will return for underlying issues of meaning. It will correct spelling and then return to parse again.

- If students tell the scanner to IGNORE a problem, it will no longer find similar errors. I advise my students to **NEVER IGNORE**, not even **ignore once**, unless they have a clear idea of what the problem actually is.

- Students should select [**add to dictionary]** when they have unique language that they want to accept— otherwise the scanner will be prevented from moving to other levels of operation.

- If writers have not changed the default settings before beginning, they will have to change the settings, then click "Recheck the document." When the dialogue box warns, *This option resets the spellchecker so that WORD will recheck words & grammar you previously checked and chose to ignore. Do you want to continue?* Writers often panic and check **NO** instead of **YES**, thus ending the grammar and style session prematurely.

The Study

Preamble

I have spent a considerable amount of this report sharing the theoretical research supporting my pedagogical decisions in the digital classroom. I sought new language, new insight and new classroom practices to give legitimacy to what were my former "hunches" controlling my classroom decisions. This was the basis of my SoTL project.

However, unlike my impressive SoTL colleagues and scholars, Richard Lizotte, who used mathematics and logarithms or Sandra Devellis who compared her learning community's sense of community with pre and post questionnaires and control group comparison, I found myself looking for other markers of learning. Like earlier SoTL scholars teaching composition, Stephen Mathis (12) and Ginger Hurajt (24), I concluded that the multiple and complex demands of composition complicate assessment to the point of frustration—even despair.

We have many respected researchers who would agree. David Foster in The Journal of Advanced Composition suggests that comparison groups or case studies cannot be "really decontextualized sufficiently to allow empirical research" (147). Foster questions whether we can indeed evaluate composition that "most complex, unpredictable, and ambiguous of human activities… by a method which inherently seeks to regularize and codify the subject matter." The complexity of the composing process does not lend itself to algorithms or easy dissection. Robert Connors has suggested that pseudo-scientific inquiry can lead to "scientistic [sic] fallacies" (as qtd. in Foster 147). The researcher's "idealized self-image of cumulative, multi-methodological progress…becomes harder and harder to maintain" in view of the oversimplifying and reductive impact of much empirical research upon the obdurate complexities of composition" (North as qtd. in Foster).

I appreciate North's term, "obdurate complexities of composition" and believe it to be useful language to categorize the challenge of undertaking research in a composition classroom. As one who has struggled with the complexity of factors affecting student learning in the English classroom, I would love to prove all with an algorithm.

Means of Assessment

The collection and examination of student performance took place over a two-semester period and included four classes of ENG 101. My analysis includes all students who completed the course, including those who failed (those who did not hand in an acceptable research paper to meet department standards. To this information, I applied two types of assessment, both direct and indirect.

This distinction between direct and indirect is discussed in considerable detail in Linda Suski's text Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide (95-99). Suski, formerly director of the assessment forum and the American Association for Higher Education, defines these assessments:

Direct Assessment:

The direct assessment in my study included: Student reflections on their values, attitudes, and beliefs. This self-evaluation is powerful, especially if what they've learned can affect their sense of themselves as writers. Asking the question, "Do you see yourself as a writer?" can be a telling moment for a writing teacher, as Stephen Mathis found (13-17). We want to see an attitudinal change, and see it carry over to other academic endeavors. If they see themselves as writers, then they feel in some control of the process and its multiple demands. Although I did not use Stephen's exact phrasing, my pre- and post- questions ask if they approach the writing process differently after the course, and if they feel more confident about their abilities.

Indirect Assessment:

o   Student ratings of their knowledge and skills and reflections on what they have learned over the course of the program
o   Student participation rates in faculty research, publications, and conference presentations
o   Honors, awards, and scholarships earned by students and alumni

I have used both direct and indirect assessment, despite the complexity of the process being evaluated. Stephen Mathis emphasizes our propensity to search for the dramatic moment in student transformation: "After all, I am well aware of our culture's desire to continue producing story after story of a person's miraculous transformation as the result of a "significant event." He frames these experiences as "significant, personal…and covered with discrete glory, the hallelujah class or moment." I admit to looking for that as well. There were a few big eureka moments in these 2 classes this fall semester, but many more "discrete," but significant changes. Let me elaborate.

Methods

      Methods: Pre and post questionnaire administered to 2 classes/ 2 semesters

      The first semester sample gave usable information, but not as much as I needed about student behavior in the elearning environment. The second semester sample told me more about the changes in strategies these students had acquired—a crucial factor to validate my research.

Fall Semester Participants

      Fall semester subjects: 36 Composition 1 students (1 out of 4 students had taken a basic writing course the previous semester, which included a computer lab as half its meeting time). All students had passed an entrance exam (a handwritten essay, given 60 minutes to complete, and read by 3 English instructors at the college, unless they had been enrolled in our Basic Writing course where they were given an exit exam (2 hours) on WORD 2003.

      First day of class questionnaire: I asked students to fill out a personal profile, asking them to evaluate their skills and writing history.

1. *Have you taken a college writing course before on this or any other college campus? Explain, please*.
   Discussion: There were 30 new freshman students without previous history. One student had flunked out of St. Anselm (Unfortunately, failed my course as well, despite his impressive skills and ability); 1 student had taken ENG 101 3 times already at our college and failed each course because of its research paper requirement; 1 had taken it once before and failed; 1 failed composition at UNH and another student at U Lowell.

2. *Do you like to write?*
   Discussion: The answers ranged from I'm passionate about writing to a simple one-word answer: NO. There were an unusual number of writers, however, who answered this question in variations of the affirmative. Only 5 said they did not like to write. I did not ask the more telling question, "Do you see yourself as a writer?" and regret that I didn't.

3. *What one paper-writing experience stands out in your mind today? (Minimum of 5 lines!)*
   Discussion: Almost all students came up with a specific writing project. Those who graduated from Amesbury High School often refer to their senior project. Those who've taken Basic Writing at our college usually identify a personal essay describing someone they admire (a part of the course curriculum). Often, students will choose one paper that they did unexpectedly well on, or a rare honor, or an essay they worked hard on. Many go back to elementary school to identify a shining moment when their writing boosted their self-esteem.

4. *How would you label your word-processing skills? Weak? Good? Excellent? Explain your label, please.*

Discussion: Of the 36 responses, 3 thought their skills were weak; 23 good; 10 excellent This is an impressive number of confident students. What I observed, however, was that they all accepted the software settings on the default mode, never questioning or altering their environment. They might have moved a keyboard closer, but that was all.

5. *What do you hope to get out of this class besides a passing grade?*

Discussion: Besides the predictable answer, "I hope to become a better writer" (11 responses) (by which I interpreted that they hoped to get better grades, as well as make the process easier); one hoped for "better flow"; one for better "grammar structure"; another to make it easier to write at another college; one spoke about gaining "greater flow"; another about wanting to gain enough confidence so that it doesn't bother him to write; another "to expand his level of writing a good paper; another to be able to write a good paper about anything "fictional or factional."   Two of these students wanted to become professional writers.

Note: The students in these fall semester classes were, as I've come to expect over the years at our community college, younger with more confidence than those in the spring semester. They are more likely to be fresh out of high school, eager to prove themselves if they haven't done so in their earlier education. Also, in the fall, new students with weaker skills are usually taking a Basic Writing Course. In general, their attitude is very positive (their first semester in college) and forward thinking. Their study habits, initially, are good. They produce drafts when asked, and are willing to share their writing with their peers. They are good readers: Of the 36 students **20 were tested out of College Reading.**

They were not all native speakers: 1 African, and 4 first generation, bi-lingual students with grammar, syntax, and computing skills not equal to their intellectual skills-- nor their ambitions.

Procedures:

We met 3 times a week, two in a regular classroom, one in a PC lab with WORD 2003 installed on recently purchased machines. The lab design was typical with machines in two horseshoe rows. One printer easily handled the printing demands of the class. There were adjustable, swivel chairs, a keyboard with at least one foot of cord play, and a mouse—some of which had a middle wheel for ease of scrolling through a document, but which many students didn't use.

Observations:

For the first class meeting and "diagnostic" writing assignment (50-minute class), I observed the following:

Default settings: Standard defaults (see previous discussion) Times New Roman 12 font, single-spacing. I observed, but didn't test for those who might have changed any defaults. In general, students changed only the line spacing after the second line when they realized they had a hard time reading it on the screen. Initially they revised on-screen, printed out a draft—and 4 or 5 copy read the draft, the others didn't.

At the second class meeting in the computer lab, I introduced new defaults and paper requirements. They were to work and print in Times New Roman, 10 font, in one and one-half spacing, and change the grammar setting to *style and grammar*. (One student couldn't see the screen at that size with ease, so she was exempted—at least in the production of her text).

Students changed their default settings at home. I gave them post-it reminders to place on their computer screens to remind them of these changes. Of course, once they had made the changes to *style and grammar*, they remained the default setting—a key ingredient to long-term change. Obviously, I couldn't police this request in any way, and a few of them admitted in the post questionnaire, that they changed the settings for me only after they had worked on 12 at home.

Assignments were begun in the computer lab, under my supervision. This was important for 2 reasons:

1. To reinforce their use of the affordances I had introduced, enforcing the use of font size was the major problem. (Unlike their home environment where the initial change remained the default, the PC's on campus returned automatically to the Microsoft 12 dingle-spacing defaults once turned off.)

2. To deter plagiarism: Increasingly this has become a problem at all colleges. I watch their work in process—it has to be theirs. This is not initially a serious issue until later in the course when we leave personal writing behind and move to academic assignments, including the research paper. (I've had them complete 2 research essays—one a mini practice, and then a "serious" research paper. If students fail the course in the last few weeks it is often because they hand in obviously plagiarized papers and refuse to start again under scrutiny. They then take one of two actions:

they belligerently (or tearfully, or whiningly) affirm its authenticity, which they can NEVER prove, or they drop out and enroll the next semester in a course taught by a less suspicious instructor.)

Writing Process Procedures:

Assignments: Students worked to develop a portfolio of written work, including 7 essays: the first a diagnostic they did not have to revise; then moving up the ladder of abstraction from personal writing, (beginning with an autobiographical narrative and a description); then through exemplification, comparison/contrast; and finally to argument and research. As mentioned above, they completed 2 research essays.

Process: All papers went through the following process, not atypical for a process writing class: reading of sample essays, student discussion, essay assigned, draft begun in computer lab, finished draft due the Monday of the next week.

This draft was given a process grade in my grade book (the equivalent of a quiz—there were 20 quiz grades at the end of the semester), but students didn't see it, unless they asked. They read drafts aloud in a friendly workshop environment—at least those who wanted feedback and/or were secure about their skills. [Note: At the beginning of the semester, participation was limited and predictable—generally, better writers were less hesitant. However, even those students who didn't participate reported that just listening to someone else's paper was instructive for revising their own essays. Eventually, almost all students participated—although they could take a pass if they wanted to without penalty.]

At the end of class, students could hand in their drafts for my feedback (usually global, except for a possible comment about our needing to work together in the computer lab on how to use the grammar and style strategies proficiently). I refrain from editing a student paper, although I read drafts as many as three times. One student complained, "I think that when we pass in papers, that you could make more spelling and grammar corrections, instead of too many suggestions."

Informal student responses: A few students found the process tedious to the extreme, but these were rare cases. In general, students breathed a sigh of relief that they "had another chance" and then another, and another. An essay grade did not appear on their papers until they felt it completed, handed in with all drafts, and after discussing the rubric for grading. (Each essay had a distinctive rubric reflecting the unique demands of the assignment.)

Results:

Number of Respondents: 22

When I designed the questionnaire, "Writing Survey," (Appendix B) I made certain to administer it in the computer lab during our final class. In my directions, I assured them that "their information will have no affect on their grade for the paper or the course." Indeed, they were not read until after I handed in grades for the semester. Students were given as much time, as they needed, but no specific instructions beyond including detail and honesty.

Nonetheless, I understand that given the nature of the situation, (end of semester, last request of a "nice" teacher) the results are hardly scientific. As we had built community and individual bonds in the three months we had worked together, predictably, their answers were positive for the most part. They did see many improvements in their abilities and confidence. What, however, is most telling in these responses is the thoroughness and correctness of their answers.

I would like to append all 36 answers so you could see the obvious strategies they used. Only the best writer in the class rushed her response and wrote in 12 font single spacing—and I don't understand why. Everyone else obviously changed the font, spacing, and grammar and style. Their responses are grammatically impressive—even adverbial and introductory clauses, for the most part, are punctuated correctly. I would make these available if someone were interested in looking at them, but let me offer, instead, a cross-section of their answers on first length and fluency:

Summary: Students reported that their essays are considerably longer, having to type in 10 font and reach a two-page minimum. These answers include answers to the first two questions about "format" (which a number of students interpreted as "process" unfortunately, so many students did not address font size in particular as a part of their new process, but for those who did, I offer their comments:

Font size:

- 'Yes, I type in 10 font as opposed to 12 and that actually helps me feel more confident, because I think that I am writing a longer paper. If my paper is longer, I feel as if it's better."
- "Now when I am writing I used ten font because it looks more professional."
- "Due to this course I can now only find myself using the 10 font. I find myself planning my essays ahead of writing them."
- "I try to use 10 size font, but I hate getting closer to the screen to read and keep up so I use both. I used 12 size font while I type and then I resize it. It also depends on how much I need to type whether it is an essay or not. I guess it's just a habit using 12 font."
- "I still double space and will probably use 12 fonts after this class unless advised not to."
- "I usually like to write in 12 font just because I like that it is bigger and more visible."
- At first, I was intimidated by the letter size, but I find that I actually prefer writing in 10 size font."

- "I used to write in 12 font, but now I write in 10 font."
- "Yes, my changed behaviors are typing in 10 font and using grammar and style."
- "Earlier on in the semester I was used to writing my papers in font 12. Since I used font 10, I write all the other essay papers in my other courses that is Psychology and Western Civilization 2 in font 10. This means that I have to change it for the other professors who only want the work done in font 12. The use of font 10 is very effective as all the details and explanations one has to offer for a certain paper are all included as there is more space to type on." (This was not a native speaker.)

Paper Length and Fluency

- "I have to an incredible extent increased the length of my essays to where I can't believe that I could or have written as much as I have."
- "Yes, over the time of this class my essays have increased in length."
- "I used to struggle to write two pages, now I can write more and talk about more. I learned so many techniques that help you increase you paper lengths."
- "The length of my papers necessarily didn't increase. I am more able to tell my story with the same amount of words just stated in a better way."
- "On average, I have increased the length of my papers by providing more information, which I thought, was highly important."
- "On average, I have now increased the length of my essays to three or four pages compared to before when I used to only write two or one page essays. I have learned how to come up with more ideas and details."
- "At first I was intimidated by the smaller letter size, but I find that I actually prefer writing in 10-size font. I have probably increased the length of my essays since the year began, but that all depends on the subject matter."
- "I have definitely increased the length of my essays. I have never been able to write four to five pages, but on average, but I have added at least a page to each essay I have written this year."
- "I have increased the length of my papers. Before taking this course, an average paper to me was a page and a half in 12 font. Now an average paper turns out to be three pages long."
- "The only reason my papers may be shorter or longer is based on my interest in the topics, unfortunately."
- "I believe that now my essays are much longer and hold much more information than before. I give more explanations and more examples in my essays. I also believe that the structure of my essays is much more complete than when I began."
- "Overall the length of my essays has not changed. "
- "I have increased the lengths of my essays as now I can use detailed expressions and explanations."

Questions 3 and 4: process and revising

The answers to these questions were quite varied, from revising completely as they composed (3 students) to revising only after they'd finished the draft. But, for the most part, student talked about the number of drafts they essays underwent, structural changes, improving a title, adding a more effective introduction or conclusion, but none of them confused revising with editing. Perhaps because the grammar and style functions are working as the draft is being composed that they categorize it differently, considering it more a part of the composing process, and not a final step, they see so many more errors as they proceed-- and correct as they progress, accordingly. Perhaps they no longer see process as a stepping back and "editing" since they've done that already. Revising becomes identified and used for what it really is—an actual "reseeing" of their essay.

Question 5: Have you handed any papers in for another class this semester. What was the result? Did it surprise you?

Nine students of the 22 had written a paper for another class. In general, these 9 students recorded significant surprise at the high grades they had received:

- "I had to write a few papers for my class, however, to my surprise they did not have to be that long in length; maybe just a page and a half. In addition, when he corrected the paper he just looked over to see if you had accurate information. My results on those papers ended up being either B=s or A's. I was surprised to see that I did that good on those papers. However, I could have done well because he did not have the critique needed."
- "I actually handed in 2 pages …and believed I would have to re-write it and wound up getting a B on it. I was actually completely surprised."
- "In my ….class I passed in a mid-term exam paper regarding a pluralist model of structure in America. My teacher seemed very pleased with the originality and upfront writing approach. I received an "A" for my mid-term exam. This course helped the writing process of that paper because I had the experience of writing well developed essays with a strong tone."
- "I have handed in summaries of articles and wrote my opinion on each topic. I feel that my writing skills are somewhat improved because I was surprised by the grades and I feel as if I told the story precisely."
- "I handed in one paper for one other class this semester. The class I passed it in for was history and it was a research paper. I didn't have high hope for it because I'm not a big history person and it's not my type of class. In the end, I ended up with a grade I couldn't cry about. The grade I ended up getting was a b+."
- "The only other class that I really had to write anything for was my business class and the first paper I did not get a great mark. He advised me to check my grammar and spelling more carefully

just as you did after I got back one of my first papers. Then my second paper for business, my grade was a lot better for the reason that I did not have red all over my paper showing where I did this wrong and messed up here and with this better structured paper came a good grade on it...even though I might still have some mistakes on my paper. I am doing better with it then I have in the past, especially with the style and grammar technique you showed us."

- "I have handed in two papers for two separate classes this semester. One was for my psychology class and the other was from my world civilization class. My results were pretty good in retrospect. I got an 85 on my psychology paper, and I haven't gotten the other back yet, but I expect to do well."

- "I handed just one other paper for another class. The result was 10 points out of the maximum 10 points. I was not surprised by the grade because the paper was very simple and didn't require that much information."

- "My results for writing papers in 2 other courses have been stunning and they have really surprised me. I have not gotten less than an 85 in all of them and I even got a couple of 100 points in some of them."

- One student wrote, "No, I haven't had to write any papers for any other classes. THANK THE LORD!"

Questions 6: "Please be as complete as you can remember—think back to specific comments on papers. (Possibilities: Were they about structure, idea, and/or mechanics? Can you be specific?)

The responses to this question varied impressively—enough to curb my self-satisfaction. Many made reference to my continued request to: "add more detail"; "make it longer"; "be more specific"; "mainly on structure"; to "usually about thesis sentence." These answers would seem to reveal a writing teacher seeking elaboration from her students. However, at least 3 of the respondents shared the view of this fourth student who commented: "Thinking back to my papers I think that the comments were mostly based on mechanics and grammatical mistakes."

One student commented, "Usually, the comments I received on my papers had to do with being more formal and straight forward, rather than trying to write the next Hunter S. Thompson book."

Question 7: Do you see any changed behaviors or attitudes that might give some insight into what you've learned from this course? Can you identify one paper that illustrates these changes?

Almost without exception, the results were predictably positive. They knew that ALL teachers want to see changed behaviors— and after 15 weeks in the classroom, they knew what would please me. However, the key for me was to see if there was greater confidence combined with **deliberate** strategies for improved writing. I saw little discussion of specific strategies besides "writing more and more drafts" and general statements, revealing a circular logic we observe everyday : "I find now knowing how to write

good papers I feel more confident in what I am writing, and it is more enjoyable because I feel more confident."

So, inevitably time and repetition have made them more confident writers, and with that confidence comes the sense that they are "better" writers. A sampling of their responses follows:

- "I would most definitely have to say that I have made more of an effort to revise my papers even if I already believe that they are literary gold. The process of revising may be boring or tiresome, but it makes for more of an enjoyable and readable paper."

- "I used to use just spelling, but now I use spelling and grammar. I've just become more relaxed writing than I used to because of how you have explained that to write and what is really looked for in a paper."

- "Now I am starting to like to write. I feel it is a way for my [sic] to express how I am feeling inside and it also is helping my coop with the stress in my life. I feel that I am not so unpleasant to be with any more because I am writing to express how I am feeling. Which is helpful to me and my family."

- "I have notice that I'm not as laid back anymore and I don't moan when I have to write a paper."

- "No, I haven't seen any change in behavior or attitude results that might give some insight into what I have learned. I'm always trying to improve my body paragraphs to develop a stronger/longer paper, but for some reason I just can't improve my body paragraphs."

- "I have learned that the more thorough revisions you make for a paper the less the number of mistakes you make and the more points you [omitted] after it has been marked."

- "Over the past few months I have been able to form and create my essays with much more flow and ease then [sic] I had before. "

- "Before, I really used [sic] to get hung up on topics, meaning that if I didn't find it interesting I would more or less just scrap the whole thing. To have a bad attitude from the outset will do nothing but ruin your paper. If you come into a paper with a feeling of anger and distain [sic] then your paper will go as follows."

- "I learned that sometimes I need to let my guard down so that other people can help me with constructive criticism."

- "One of the biggest changes that I had to adjust to this year had to write my paper so many times repeatedly. In high school, I would usually pass one paper in and that would be it. I never had you keep rewriting a paper and to me this was a very strange way to do a paper and I am still having trouble adjusting to it. Another change I had to adapt to be writing [sic] far more then I use used to. I would usually only do a couple pages in twelve font and as soon as I entered your class, it was bumped up to three. This would not have been that hard if I could do it in 12 font but instead we were switched down to ten font and the challenged doubled."

- "I am feeling more positive on how my papers tern [sic] out recently. As time went on in the semester I was much happier with my work. One paper I am proud of is a paper that is not yet

graded or finished and it looks great so far. My research paper is going to be one of my best papers because I have taken much time and put a lot of effort into completing it. I think it will end up being my best paper."

- "Before I took this course, I could not write a paper that was assigned easily. That quickly changed because the pieces assigned in this course allowed me to put my heart into my work." (Note: the curriculum, as I said, request different rhetorical modes for each essay, but the topic was always the student's choice, unless it would lead them to an impossible challenge). "Over the course of this course, I was able to change my outlook to that if I can write one paper that's assigned, I can write anything."

Indirect Results: The Writing Awards

The indirect results rest on the one forum for publicly rewarding superior student writing, The Writing Awards, where students in both Composition 1 and 2 vie for top prizes and recognition. Instructors in ENG 101 and ENG !02 classes can submit what they consider noteworthy student writing for this competition, where, in a blind reading, 3 instructors rate the submissions. There is no limit to how many students you can recommend, and, indeed a few of us usually recommend more than most.

In ENG 101, the total submission numbers could be quite high, as we have over two thousand students who enroll in these courses, and many sections.

This Fall Semester 2006 saw just 25 student papers entered into the competition. Of those 25, I chose to submit five essays from the two classes, profiled above. 1 student won the top prize (The Arnold Award) and 2 students won scholarship awards as runners up. When you consider potential competition, I consider this an indication that **good writing is becoming better,** under the changed demands in my curriculum.

The spring semester before this study began, but with students writing under the same conditions, I submitted 10 competitors. 8 students received scholarship rewards after department judging. (Note: I was not a judge for any of the Awards in these three semesters.)

Spring Semester 2007

Subjects: Again 2 classes of composition. This semester, however, me met 2 times a week, once in the standard classroom and once in the same lab as last semester. Conditions were no different, but the amount of time allotted to working in the lab had increased.

Unlike the fall semester selection of able recent high school graduates, this selection held far more variety in age, attitude, and skill. One of the students was physically challenged by a stroke late in life, had returned to college, but was unable to use the computer at all. A greater number of these second-semester students had taken our Basic Writing Course the previous semester, so had the advantage of feeling comfortable in our labs, but the disadvantage of possibly weaker skills to begin with. 3 of these students had failed the previous semester of ENG 101.

Typically, I see greater variety and extremes of performance in the spring semester. This spring semester was no different.

- 7 were dropped for non-participation: We met mid-day, and I had a number of students who had to drop the course because of numerous absences. Two single mothers had young children at home and became overwhelmed by multiple obligations.
- 4 had BW first semester
- 2 had already failed composition 1 in the fall
- 8 were new enrollees

Of the 37 students who began the course, 21 completed it (including those who had failed the course finally for failure to hand in a research paper); 2 failed from plagiarism; 3 failed to hand in final folders for a grade (indicating that they failed to complete the research paper); and 7 were dropped for non-participation early in the semester.

Means of Assessment

Number of Respondents: **21 students in 2 classes (Only those who completed the course were considered—even if they failed it.)**

Procedures: On our first day in the computer classroom, students wrote a diagnostic essay, asking them to describe someone who has made a difference in their lives. After essays were completed and handed in, students took a Writing Survey, asking a number of questions about the process they had just undergone (see Appendix A). Generally, the questions asked about their conscious word-processing

choices, whether they changed their physical environment or the computer and monitor settings. I also sought to ascertain if they gave conscious consideration to the actual composing and revising processes. Did they revise as they composed, during, or after, or did they revise on hardcopy?

Results of pre-questionnaire "Writing Survey":

Of the 21 who completed the course (and thus made up the study subjects), 15 changed the spacing to double-spacing, 3 adjusted seating and keyboard, but only 2 changed their environment significantly, changing font style and spacing and choosing a reading view to review their essays on the screen.

In general, students gave evidence of having process writing in their background, either immediately in Basic Writing or in high school. All but four said they "revise both on the screen and after" in their rough draft. All but 3 had a revising process, varying from "revising only as they compose" to "using a peer editor", "to only editing the print out. The requisite vocabulary seemed well in evidence. Even the student I later found plagiarizing both research papers said, "I write the paper, read it over, have it peer edited. Then I change what isn't working with the paper to the best of my ability." (In her post questionnaire "Writing Survey", she claims to "do one draft and make it my final draft. I do this because I wrote the paper how I felt it should have been written, and I don't really like to change my style of writing.")

Most students have made their peace with the composition process: "I do both revise after a couple sentences then after revise all over."

Of the 31 students, 10 gave evidence of learning to write 5 paragraph essays (intro, 3 body paragraphs, conclusion) or aiming for one-and-a half to two pages of text (in Times New Roman, 12 font, double-spaced.

The second page of the student survey asked about past writing experiences and their strengths as writers of "academic essays." The answers were rushed, perhaps because they were tired from writing a diagnostic essay and filling out the first page of questions. However, what they did answer showed a general awareness that academic writing requires, among other things, "quotes," "details," "correct grammar," "good punctuation," "imagination," "organization," "a good conclusions" and a "thesis." One

student mentioned that he was good at "comparing and contrasting things." Yet another said that, "I think that my writing is one of my weakness [sic]"   There you have it.

Discussion: this pre-questionnaire gave evidence that students assume a great deal about their environment. They use basic word-processing skills, but change **no affordances**—They accommodate the landscape only to survive.

The questionnaire also gives some evidence that for many of them, their writing process, even though they had just completed an essay in class, lacked conscious awareness of strategies to improve it.

 Direct Assessment: Student reflections on their values, attitudes, and beliefs.
The students who soldiered through the complete semester, not unexpectedly, evidenced some sense of progress:

- "I think that I have increased the length of my essays. "

- "The length of my essays has increased as a result of changing font size when I am writing…I open the full screen of the word processing program that I am using and always work in 10 size font."

- "Overall I have increased my length of my essays that I write. I always want to add in more material that is needed. I am always looking for ways to expand each paragraph and make my point clear."

- "My essays haven't gotten longer, but before, I was more into padding to get to a teacher exactly what they wanted as far as length. I have the talent of being able to fill in the blanks with words and make it still look like an intelligent paper. For this class, I was filling the spaces with actual ideas, which was something of a foreign practice to me previously."

- "I don't believe that they [papers] have gotten any longer, but I do believe that they can contain more relevant points and be more concise than last semester's work for example."

- "On average I believe that my essays have not increased by a significant length but I feel that the contents have been filled with more detailed writing."

- "I have written papers before for classes that had to have quotes from sources. I haven't done it for a while and this class was a nice refresher on how to go about doing something like that and

what format it is supposed to be in. I also like working in the size 10 font and 1.5 spacing. I don't know if it is because I have spent time using it or what, but it seems to help me write and keeps me from having to scroll up and down a page looking for something that I had written before in the same paper."

- "One of the skills that I have learned was, increasing the length of my papers. I now write in ten font instead of twelve font. I see it as, the smaller the font, the more words I need to fill up the whole paper. Thanks to ten font, instead of writing a page and a half, I am now writing three to five pages."

- "I always want to make it longer than it actually turns out so I am trying to find a way where I can do that but not make it too wordy. "

- There was an exception to evidence of a change in attitude. This was a student who chose to "write" all her papers at home because she was "blocked" in class (and furtively played solitaire when I wasn't near). At the last class, she handed in a cribbed and dismal research paper on a subject I hadn't seen and without any sources to back it up." Before she knew she had failed the course, she said, "I have not changed my overall style. I have not done this because I like how I write, and I get it done."

Indirect Assessment: Again, the Writing Awards provided a means to measure student success by external measures. Again, the same rules applied this semester as in all semesters, although there were a smaller number of ENG 101 students during the second semester. Again, I did not judge the winners.

I nominated 8 students out of a total of 21 students who completed the two courses. One student received the Elizabeth Arnold Award, 4 received 2nd and 3rd placement. This success is, I hope, some indication by indirect assessment that these students blossomed under these new conditions.

<u>Conclusion</u>

To be a teacher:

   When I was doing doctoral research in the mid l980's Janet Emig was a powerful, articulate voice who insisted that researchers look at more than the written page. They needed to look at the writer's intellectual processes, and consider the *cognitive and visual* demands of composition writing.   When Stephen Mathis in a SoTL discussion, suggested I look at the essay, "Hand, Eye, Brain: Some Basics in the Writing Process," I took his good advice and found myself rereading my treasured yellow Photostatted copies from 1986. Her words were as provocative today as they were twenty years ago:

> How does the eye participate in the process of written composing? If the process can be characterized as having three stages—prewriting, writing, and revising –the eye seems to make at least one contribution during each stage: it presents experience to the brain, it coordinates hand [keyboarding] and brain during the literal physical act of writing, and, finally, revision, when we rescan and review what we have written. (63)

   In today's digital environment, we can control so much of the input the eye perceives. What would Janet Emig say about the enormous potential to control what the eye can see? Can font size and white space between sentences and lines facilitate the recursive process increasing reading speed, and global revising? Can this advantage for the student be an advantage for teachers as well? Could this help them see that the red-pen onerous correction of first drafts is a waste of both their time and the students'? Most instructors of English are, by natural selection, efficient language processors and few of our kind could complain about the font size of <u>The New York Times </u>(10 font or less) without appearing feeble or querulous.

   To be an instructor in a composition class that requires word-processing, we need to develop enough facility with the program and its tools so we can improve the conditions for student composing. As composition instructors and word processor users, our background, experience, and skills on the computer are as varied as our knowledge. But how effective it would be for our students, if all of us saw our mission in that classroom with one vision: not just wordsmiths and critical thinkers, but as tool givers.

To be a tool giver:

   When Stephen Mathis wonders if "what they've learned transfers (or doesn't) to other writing situations they are faced with after they leave my composition class" (1), he is not alone. Try as we might to change student behavior, unless that ideal behavior is reinforced in other classes by other instructors, we will continue to feel frustrated.

- To be a learner in a composition class, at a computer station, means you need to develop enough facility with the program and its tools so they ease the composing process. How do we make it possible? Recommend that instructors of composition know them well enough to teach them. To encourage students to use these tools, we need to know how to use them ourselves.

- ▪ Teach them how to use them. Require that they use them. Require that significant progress on a composition be made that day, there in the composition classroom, if it is to be given course credit

Some Implications for Northern Essex Community College

Keeping in mind that we have increasing public and state interest in mandating improvements in literacy, we can incorporate some strategies for change. Perhaps these strategies could move the college toward a basic level of standards when we ask our students to hand in "writing".

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1. Most important: Change Computer Defaults **Technicians servicing the school computers should be asked to reprogram all computers on campus to default NOT to Grammar Only but to GRAMMAR & STYLE.** This one, seemingly mild change, could revolutionize student behavior if they produce papers on campus computers. It will force instructors to pay attention to these tools they may never have used before.

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2. Create a Second Writing Center: We need a designated computer lab with all-day computer access for students needing support *WHILE PRODUCING* a writing assignment. The lab should have **at least** one permanent writing tutor with a Master's Degree in English/composition, who has control over the tools and strategies available to students. Even if it were staffed just 3 days a week, it would be a badly-needed resource for students and teachers campus-wide.

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3. Offer a "workshop on technology and pedagogy" as a free, elective, online, mini-course for faculty and student, alike, available on the college website.

Such a course might be very useful for new faculty and students—and might be incorporated into the new "College Preparedness" curriculum. Increase faculty awareness of potential strategies campus-wide at the beginning of each semester. With faculty increasingly being adjunct, we need to make this information available on-line or at faculty meetings. ***Perhaps all faculty could include this information in their syllabi, thus solidifying this information.*** Can we all be guardians at the gate?

I was impressed by a workshop developed by Kristin B. Gerdy of Brigham Young University: "Workshop on Technology and Pedagogy: Teaching the Digital Age Law Student. (see http://www.aals.olrg/am2004/technology/microsoftwork.html). The curriculum is designed to

improve "efficiency and quality" for a particular population. Could we offer something similar on our website?

4. Plagiarism workshop: Do faculty know just how easy it is to cheat? My eyes have been opened this past year to strategies I had never dreamed existed. After this experience, it seemed the only option was to accept papers only if I've seen them underway in the classroom.

- Perhaps some of my colleagues could be more aware of the prevalence of this problem. There has been a dramatic increase in opportunities in just the past five years—not many of us have been students handing in papers during these changes. There are ways to try to avoid it. Although not all faculty can dedicate the energy or subject time to enforce honesty, perhaps they, just as I, could use a primer on cheating. .

- Keep a record, available only to instructors, if possible, of students who are caught plagiarizing in composition courses. Many of us do not immediately fail or drop cheating students, but encourage them to take the honest route-- figuring that this is, in itself, impressive punishment. Because of our actions, plagiarizing students are not necessarily failed or expelled for cheating, as the college handbook might threaten. Nonetheless, more often than not, these students, ultimately, drop our course because they realize they need to find an easier route through the requirement.

Note: Actually, I fear that this suggestion of "a record" is ungainly if not illegal. I failed or dropped 4 out 36 original students my second semester because I knew for various reasons (primarily because it wasn't begun or produced under my eye in lab time) that the work was not theirs. I suspect that this large (and perhaps tragic) percentage is not unusual in other courses. In fact, it may be even a larger problem than in our composition classrooms. Cheating is a problem not just with weaker students or language-challenged individuals, but also with students who possess excellent skills but weaker moral fiber. Part of the answer to Stephen's questions about why don't students repeat successful learned behavior might be that honest writing takes too much energy and time, and they have neither.

Consider the students who failed my course: 4 of the 6 students I failed the second semester, or who, themselves, chose to disappear, handed in work that was polished sophisticated and obviously plagiarized. When I looked back into their records, 2 of them had failed ENG 101 1 at least once in the past. Were they caught cheating there as well?

Students who've failed often find other means of passing: taking an on-line course with a significant other, or choosing a new adjunct faculty member to compromise. These individuals are sometimes the most aggressive and belligerent students in the class. I suspect that if adjuncts were posed the question, "Can you identify particular behaviors of students who have disrupted your class or made you lose sleep at night?" they would offer interesting and useful answers. You might see the following behaviors I've seen in my own classes:

- Aggressive public challenges to your grading policies and curriculum demands. It is difficult to win a public battle with a student. Even if you're the victor, you lose.
- Immediate threats in the classroom or hallway to talk to your supervisor
- Acting on spoken or unspoken threats and actually lodging a complaint with the supervisor BEFORE you're aware that anything is amiss. If the administrator is a "the customer is always right" believer, you are compromised before you even discuss the situation.

As I write these last words, I realize that I may seem to be moving off track. What does plagiarism have to do with teaching composition and worrying about software affordances? A great deal, it seems to me.

How important is it that students learn to write and do their own writing? Not very if the behaviors aren't rewarded outside of the composition class, especially if administrators don't support instructors attempts to establish classroom rules.

If both administration and students see us as just one unfortunate hurdle in the run for a degree, we fail before we begin. Unfortunately, the strict hardliners aren't user friendly in the increasingly politicized, adjunct world of our community college. Students need to learn, and instructors, adjuncts or otherwise, need to teach.

 At least in the composition classroom, we can lay the foundation for good writing habits used across campus. Yes, we can afford to look again at affordances. We should. We must.

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Appendix A

Writing Survey
Dear students: I am requesting your help in filling out the following survey, which seeks information about how you approach and carry-through a writing assignment. This information will have no affect on your grade for the paper or the course-- Only my appreciation for your participation.

Directions: Please answer the following questions with specific reference to the educational autobiography assignment, which you started in class on Monday, perhaps you will need to generalize from your predictable repeated behavior at home). Honesty is the only thing that will make this survey helpful.

1.   When you now just came in to work on a new essay, did you adjust your seat or keyboard before you began to compose? Explain:

2.   Once you have a blank document on the screen, do you adjust any of the default options (font, font size, toolbox, print color, spacing, margins, grammar or spell checker, etc…)? Please explain:

3.   Have any of your teachers in the past requested a specific format for you to WORK in before handing in a paper. (Please explain)

4.   On average, how long are your papers usually? How many words? Pages? (Specify spacing and margins, please, as best you can)

5.   Do you revise as you compose? Or do you revise after you feel your rough draft is complete for the moment? Try to explain your revising process, if you have one.

6. Remembering past writing experiences (in high school or another college), what major feedback can you remember from your instructors? Please be as complete as you can remember—think back to specific comments on papers. (Possibilities: Were they about structure, idea, or/and mechanics? Can you be specific?)

7. What do you think makes an effective academic writer? Or, what do you look for when you think you've completed a successful essay for an instructor?

8. As a writer of academic essays (not journal writing or personal writing), what do you consider your major strength/s?

9. As a writer of academic essays, what do you consider your major weakness/s?

10. What specific goals do you have for yourself in this course? (Ignore grading and the fact that it is a required course, if you can. Answer as if you had **freely chosen** this course for your own edification and self-improvement.)

Appendix B

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;">

<u>Writing Survey</u>
Dear students: I am requesting your help once again in filling out the following survey, which seeks information about how you approach and carry-through a writing assignment after one semester in this course. This information will have no affect on your grade for the paper or the course-- Only my appreciation for your participation.

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Directions: Write on computer, please, in as much specific detail as you can. Honesty is the only thing that will make this survey helpful.

1. Changes in format: Do you change anything about the way you prepare a paper for a class? That is, since this course began, do you approach the writing process differently? Please explain in as much detail as possible.

2. On average, have you increased the length of your essays?

3. What do you generally try to improve on when you revise a paper?

4. Do you revise as you compose? Or do you revise after you feel your rough draft is complete for the moment? Try to explain your revising process, if you have one, using one specific paper.

5. Have you handed in any papers for another class this semester? What was the result? Did it surprise you?

6. Please be as complete as you can remember—think back to specific comments on papers. (Possibilities: were they about structure, idea, or/and mechanics? Can you be specific?)

7. Do you see any changed behaviors or attitudes results that might give some insight into what you've learned from this course? Can you identify one paper that illustrates these changes?