

Final Report for “Teaching Writing in a Digital Age: Technology Fellows for the University Writing Program” (PI: David Fleming, University Writing Program)

Statement of Project’s Original Objectives and Strategies : The Technology Fellows Program was designed to meet two intersecting objectives: (1) enhance first-year students’ writing instruction by addressing the new challenges and opportunities offered by writing with technology, and (2) help graduate student Teaching Associates (TOs) in the University Writing Program use new writing spaces and media more effectively in their teaching.

The first objective was to help first-year writing instruction respond to recent changes in the nature of writing and the spaces offered for it. Research highlights the possibilities electronic technologies (wikis, discussion forums, file sharing, e-mail, and blogs) provide for supporting students’ responses to each others’ drafts, collaborative writing projects, and extending students’ discussions of course readings and analyses. Probably most importantly, electronic technologies provide a venue for students to write in a social atmosphere where their writing is constantly read and responded to by class members as well as the teacher. More recently, writing research has focused on how electronic communication venues (web pages, PowerPoint, blogs, etc.) are altering our assumptions about writing by introducing new genres, opportunities for reaching public audiences, and expanding the circulation of texts beyond a single publication venue. At the forefront of such discussions are the challenges posed by new media, specifically the ways the use of visuals, audio, and video are being used in conjunction with print text.

The second objective provided a way of meeting the first. Staffed almost entirely by approximately 90 Teaching Associates (TOs) in the humanities, training in technology must begin anew almost every year as the staff changes by 30-40% annually, making sustainable changes difficult. The project sought to address both the lack of technological expertise and instructors’ hesitance to learn and apply new technologies by providing a venue to develop new applications of technology from the “ground up,” under the presumption that technological innovation that comes from the TOs themselves will find more acceptance by other TOs as well as emerge from classroom practice rather than only theory or research.

The original strategy for meeting these goals was through a seminar/workshop format for six TOs (technology fellows) who might then become resources for the rest of the Writing Program staff.

Activities: Fellows attended a year-long seminar on the application of instructional technologies to writing pedagogy, proposed and designed a specific classroom application of such technologies, implemented them in a College Writing or Basic Writing course, and assessed the results of their project on student learning. After meeting bi-monthly for a two hour seminar where participants shared responses to the research/scholarship on writing pedagogy and technology, each fellow completed a four-page curriculum proposal at the end of fall semester that then directed the training and work with different technologies in the spring semester. During this more hands-on part of the seminar, fellows developed support materials collectively for individual assignments and technology training, shared the results of different class strategies, and helped each other make necessary pedagogical changes to more effectively reach each teacher’s project goals. Additionally, each teacher presented weekly her ongoing assessment of her project, primarily through sharing the results of student work as well as student reflections on what they had learned from each unit. Such assessment discussions frequently

resulted in revision of goals for future units as well as suggestions about alterations to such assignments in future semesters.

The fellows also collaborated on making their work public in several ways: a poster presentation at the UMass Instructional Technology Conference, a workshop for other writing teachers in the program, and a display of student work at the Writing Program's annual Celebration of Writing. Through these collaborative projects, the fellows refined their goals, articulated strong connections between their work and the Writing Program's core curriculum, and helped inspire other teachers/students to try similar forms of writing.

Deliverables: As planned for in the original grant, all materials the fellows produced over the year are in the process of being made available to other Writing Program teachers through a shared teacher database. Such materials ranged from simple handouts for students on how to use different technologies (e.g. creating a hyperlink, use of Photoshop) that other teachers can easily use directly in their classrooms to complete unit plans for each fellows' project with commentary on what revisions the teacher would now make. As a result, the Writing Program teaching staff will now have access to curriculum materials for incorporating visuals into research papers, writing with PowerPoint and MovieMaker, facilitating peer response on the U Drive, creating hyperlinked student e-zines and more. The Fellows also "delivered" in less tangible ways by presenting a workshop for other teachers, visiting course director groups to talk with all teachers to offer themselves as a resource, and gaining permission to share student work in multiple venues. Next year, the Director of the Writing Program (Prof. Fleming) and one of this year's fellows will also offer a series of workshops on using Spark and will highlight technology fellows' projects at the opening staff meeting for all TOs.

Probably the most significant deliverable, however, is that the Fellows Program was deemed to be so successful by the Writing Program staff that it will continue next year with funding provided by the program. The next group of Fellows will be led by two Fellows from this year's group, providing the continuity of technology training and production of course materials that the original grant was meant to address. The Writing Program is also seeking permanent funding for this project through the UMass development office.

Assessment: The Program was successful in meeting both its goals. First, in terms of teacher development, each fellow self-reported that they never would have had the knowledge to design their projects or taken the risk of altering their teaching practices so radically without the training, support, and knowledge base of the larger group. In fact, the best evidence of the success of the project for the TOs was that they took it upon themselves to propose the outreach to other teachers beyond the one workshop included in the grant, spent collective office hours working with other TOs interested in doing similar projects, and wrote up their own arguments to the Director and met with the larger staff to persuade the program to continue funding for the Fellows project. Further, the bank of materials currently being put online by the Writing Program's new technology coordinator (herself a fellow from this year) will begin to provide the kinds of materials necessary to disseminate practical teaching knowledge about the ways digital technologies can both enhance and support our first-year writing curriculum.

Student learning was also significantly impacted as we saw evidence of many of the purported gains the research claims for using digital technologies in the writing classroom: a heightened awareness of how audience affects the form and content of a text; a consideration of the role of publication and circulation in how one might produce a text (through e-zines and

publishing student work); enhanced critical reading and writing skills of visual and digital texts; a much greater awareness of the influence of genre (particularly the multiple modes of digital and alphabetic texts available for writing); improved research skills; an understanding of how digital texts are produced and what new affordances they offer writers; and finally, much more investment in writing processes due to the multiple opportunities provided for response and feedback. While each course did not seek to meet all of these goals, the five projects overall included 2-3 of each and found that their goals were successfully met through both their students' final products and their reflections/evaluations on the process of producing these texts.

Such claims of success are based on both the ongoing assessment of individual projects by the teachers during their workshop where they used student feedback to adapt and revise their materials and lessons, and an assessment report by each fellow completed at the end of the project which responded to the following:

- 1) What were your major goals in your technology fellows' project?
- 2) How well would you say each goal was accomplished?
- 3) On what basis are you making your assessments in #2? (i.e. What evidence can you provide of students' meeting goals?)
- 4) In what ways did your technology fellows' project enhance student learning in Englwrit 111 or 112? What did you see as the key differences between this semester and previous ones in either what students learned or how they learned it?
- 5) What improvements (if any) did you see in student writing (i.e. final products) as a result of your technology fellows' project?
- 6) What would you do differently if you were to teach this project again?
- 7) Any other comments/reflections?

Each fellow was also asked to provide examples of student work to support their claims in this assessment. Included in such samples were student reflections written during the process of producing digital texts, student responses to specific assessment questions designed by the teacher, students' group publications in the form of e-zines, and individual student papers/digital projects. Although we cannot share this large body of work, a few quotes from students' reflections give a strong sense of how students described the effect of their instruction:

Audience Awareness: "I think the biggest difference between my original paper and the movie maker version of it is in the communicative purpose. In my essay, I use points, facts, and arguments to support my point. In the movie, I didn't think the audience would want to watch an entire movie that was purely text rolling across a screen for 5 minutes straight. So, to make it more interesting, I instead tried to use images to appeal to the audience's emotions about 9/11 rather than to their sense of logic and reasoning."

Genre Awareness: "Using Moviemaker, I was able to create pathos in my work. I feel that it is easier for my audiences to experience this through use of different images and hearing music rather than reading essays, especially if the composer is working under time constraints. I am hoping that the pictures I used were extreme and exaggerated enough to evoke disgust at times, and also realization at others. Also, using individual slides in Moviemaker enabled me to create logos by singling-out and emphasizing my main points and statistics. I designed the ending slides to leave the viewer with an idea to mill over and ultimately agree with. The fact that I omitted my personal experiences from this show did nothing to create ethos, but I did use scientific, published sources for my statistics, which should help establish my credibility."

Critical Literacy Skills: (written by a student as if he were writing to someone thinking about taking the course as part of a final reflection) "The college writing class 112H focused a lot

on writing as it pertained to technology and I think this is where you will learn the most in the course. Through the course you will learn how the juxtaposition of certain hyperlinks can alter the meaning of a text. Also, you will learn the difference between how people read a hard copy versus an electronic copy. My definition of technology has changed through this course to encompass text on the computer and setting up websites, but before I would have simply not made the connection between writing and the internet. My hope is that through this class that you will learn to look at writing in a new light with respect to internet text. I know that I judge writing now more critically and with a greater range of scrutiny.”

Visual Literacy: “Messages can be communicated through pictures as well, and in that sense they do serve as a form of writing. In today’s society where pictures are everywhere, it is important to be aware of the hidden agendas that corporate America is pushing on us and also to understand how we can effectively communicate our own true selves through image.”

Circulation and Writing Processes: “As a writer I am more open to sharing my work with others. At first I was a little hesitant about having my work on Spark and having others revise my work. I also didn't like how my exploratory writing was open to all of Spark when I thought it was a personal reflection on the topic. I realized later that I benefited greatly from the revision process as a whole. My peer review groups helped me explain my thoughts out loud to others, which helped me sort out my words and made my essay easier to understand for others. I began to feel more comfortable with people reading my work and used it to my advantage to speak my mind. Also, some people became more familiar with my work and helped me point out mistakes that I make on a regular basis. My essays were stronger and clearer to understand by the end of the year. I spend more time revising my essays knowing that my work will be read by classmates rather than just the teacher. I am more comfortable sharing my beliefs and my work with others and it isn't as intimidating anymore.”

Issues and further questions: Many of the projects raised such intriguing research questions about the relationship between alphabetic and digital texts--specifically how instruction in one enhances the other--that the Technology Fellows have decided to pursue these further on their own time. Based on the materials collected this year, the Fellows (with Prof. LeCourt) plan to submit a conference proposal for the 2009 Computers and Writing conference.

Disposition of funds: The grant amount we received was \$8238. Funds were used precisely as requested (see below) with one exception. The grant allowed for six fellows to receive a stipend of \$500 a piece. We began with six fellows but one did not continue in the Writing Program spring semester so was only paid \$250. The remaining balance of \$250 was used to purchase a book for each fellow (Cynthia Selfe’s *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*) and materials and travel for the IT conference.

Assistant Director Stipend:	\$5,240
Technology Fellow Stipends:	\$2,750
Materials and travel:	<u>\$ 248</u>
TOTAL:	\$8238