INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

The Paperless Composition: Computer-Assisted Writing

The instructional challenges created by students who have poor writing skills are further intensified and complicated by increasing demands to modify curriculum for distance education. Paperless computer-assisted writing provides a viable strategy for helping students attain necessary writing skills and answers the question of what to do about the submission of papers in a distance education mode. It enables students to write under optimal conditions, to learn the process with minimal instruction, and to access the courses through distance education.

Paperless computer-assisted writing gives students the opportunity to analyze and edit their compositions with comparative ease, thanks to user-friendly software. With the paperless approach, the student has the opportunity to e-mail questions to the professor if writing is done outside of class. The turnaround time for pre-evaluation input from the professor and evaluation for grading purposes is minimized significantly. Rather than being returned during class time, the compositions are instantaneously received and returned upon the completion of the writing and grading processes.

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At Miami-Dade Community College, the professor accesses the composition by going into WordPerfect, clicking on the Yellow File Folder, clicking on the appropriate drive and directory, followed by the file which is to receive attention. Commentary is inserted between the lines of student writing, differentiated from student writing in bold type, underlining, italics, or color. The composition is e-mailed to the student, and the file is saved onto a disk for future reference.

There are several advantages to using this strategy. Revisions can be made quickly and easily. Upon receiving the graded composition, the student determines the nature of the errors and makes the corrections by inserting the revised material beneath the appropriate comments in the text. If the student is unsure as to the nature of the error or about the means of correcting it, it is a simple matter to e-mail questions to the professor. The revision is then e-mailed to the professor for final approval. Sometimes more than one revision is neces-

sary even when help is available during the revision process. The process remains the same but is enhanced by the fact that revisions can be transmitted rapidly, making it possible to obtain student papers that are more accurate in their final form than would have been possible with other methods.

Paperless composition offers the opportunity to capitalize on the individualization of instruction. Professors, regardless of writing strategy, have always included individualized comments on student papers. With the paperless composition, the remarks are handily typed into the text. Messages regarding the performance of the student on the e-mailed assignment are also included in the message box on the e-mail screen. A swift response is important.

Paperless composition creates major difficulties for students bent on cheating. Cheating is minimized as writing is done in the computer classroom or laboratory. Students check into the designated writing facility by computer, using Lab Passports, and leave their driver's license with lab personnel. There are no disks, no papers (other than pre-approved materials that may accompany the student to the computer lab or classroom), no unsupervised writing, and no opportunity to have surrogate writers. With the paperless method, there is no hard copy, thereby eliminating any possibility for substitution of pre-written compositions.

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The paperless method is a necessary adjunct to the formulation of a distance delivery system. The unwieldiness of transmitting compositions via mail delivery is a major deterrent to any sophisticated distance education program. The mails are frequently slow and delivery uncertain; control of author integrity is difficult. With access to centers identified for the purpose of writing and transmitting student assignments, control can be maintained over authorship, and submission of materials can be effected instantly.

In addition, the environmental impact of sacrificing trees to paperwork cannot be discounted. Paperless writing is "one small step" to preserving our leafy heritage.

Finally, the paperless composition offers solutions to

some of the most pressing and distressing problems confronting professors who are responsible for teaching clear, logical, and honest writing. This is a real alternative to the age-old scenario of writing and evaluating college compositions: confining students to classrooms to control cheating; giving them license to write outside the classroom where cheating is easy and rampant; condemning students to the inescapable delays created by the return of hard copy after evaluation and revisions; and limiting the numbers of writing assignments to accommodate the time available for numerous paper-

shuffling steps! The establishment of an ongoing dialogue by e-mail between the student and the professor adds a human dimension to the writing process that can best be achieved with the paperless strategy.

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Communicating in Signs

The library faculty at Midlands Technical College (MTC) has turned its attention to a small, but important group of students—the deaf and hearing impaired. Often, there are no visible clues that identify these students. However, through outside sources such as church groups, deaf associations, and library contacts, we have been able to recognize some of these students on sight.

The college provides interpreters for classroom situations and programs, but many of these students use the library on their own time. Moreover, the number of deaf and hearing impaired students on campus is increasing, and the library faculty wanted to provide improved library service. One librarian who had received training in sign language offered to present a basic introduction for the library faculty and staff. A site and time were selected to accommodate the maximum number of library personnel. The class met for one hour each week for six weeks; the director of the library, four librarians, two library technical assistants, and one office systems technology faculty member enrolled.

The course included a brief history of American Sign Language, learning the manual alphabet, fingerspelling and signing techniques, and a 75-word sign vocabulary. Practice exercises were designed to reinforce the learning process. Some of these practice sets included letter combinations such as ab, ut, ie; double letter drills; and numerous words.

We took signs from ASL and syntax from our familiar sentence structure. The words, numbers, and concepts selected were appropriate for an academic library environment. For example, the vocabulary included signs for such words as library, bookstore, dictionary, deaf, borrow, go, come, thank you, Bible, telephone, and college. Through a combination of fingerspelling and signing, the members of the class could make short statements and ask questions such as "Here is a dictionary" and "May I help you?"

The library purchased a CD on sign language and a videotape to enhance and reinforce the learning that occurred in the class sessions. These sessions have enabled some of the library staff to communicate with our deaf and hearing impaired users, and some staff have expressed an interest in continuing their study of sign language.

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