Resisting Technology: The Right Idea for All the Wrong Reasons

Mark Sample

"I never look at them." The professor sat back, satisfied. She suddenly leaned forward again, continuing, "Really, I never read them." We were talking about email, about teaching with technology, about my own goals as a student and as a teacher. "Whenever I see email from an undergraduate in my inbox, I automatically delete it." I was stunned. This seemed to be the equivalent of slamming your office door on a student's face. The professor elaborated, saying something about time and priorities, but I was no longer listening. I was thinking about my own perspective and how different it was from this professor's. She was a respected, tenured scholar in the humanities, and I was barely starting out as a graduate student, interviewing for a national fellowship. She had made it in academia, and I had not, or at least, not yet. She spoke with pragmatic authority while I fumbled for words to express my idealism, my respect for innovation, my conviction that it is not only the teachers who have important things to say and write.

I left the interview shaken, for again and again the panel of five professors opposite me had questioned what I took for granted: that technology can enliven teaching and more importantly, can enrich learning. I should be clear here: despite five years of thinking about the pedagogical implications of technology, first as a high school social studies teacher pioneering the use of the Web in the classroom in the early nineties and later as the Research Coordinator for the America Studies Crossroads Project, I am not one of those romantics who consider technology an easy fix or a panacea. I do not look easily ahead to the days of a computer at every desk in every classroom, when I can lean back and watch test scores rise; nor am I an ally of those overzealous administrators scrambling to maximize profits or keep pace with rival institutions in the race to be 'wired.' I understand that, if anything, technology in the classroom generates problems, rather than solves them. I understand that, if anything, technology complicates our teaching,

rather than simplifies it. Which is not necessarily a bad thing.

Most of the essays collected here, in fact, began as reflections about specific courses in which a new media component was introduced and produced both hoped-for and unexpected results. The reflections were developed into the following case studies as part of the Crossroads Faculty Research and Study Project, which began in the spring of 1997. The research project participants included two dozen faculty members from across the United States, from a wide range of institutions—from Ivy League to state university to community college. It was through an ongoing list-serv discussion among these participants that the core themes of this *Works and Days* volume began to develop. Alternately confronting some of the problems of teaching with technology and brainstorming about resources, techniques, and tactics, we began developing ideas that would eventually coalesce into a theoretical framework, that would ultimately guide deeper and more reflexive introspection about our teaching.

Mary McGuire's sentiments in "Wired in the Classroom" echo many of the same judgments about technology that were made that spring day during my interview—and which I have heard since in a variety of other situations, from both professors and students:

> Yes, I know there is more garbage than wisdom on the Web. Yes, I know it has become little more than commercialized voyeurism. Yes, I know that wires and tubes and anonymity are now replacing face to face human contact, and with regrettable consequences. Yes, I know that students are now able to plagiarize more easily than ever before. And, yes, I know that this technology is being viewed all too readily as the classroom of the future by institutions and administrations quite willing to envision a future without tenured faculty, with low overhead, and with a huge return on investment. (335-36)

This is a bleak picture, and one wonders why we should bother to concern ourselves with technology in the first place. But McGuire reaches the opposite conclusion, resounding: "But I also know that using web-based instructional technology in my courses has forced me to reconsider not only how I design a course, but how I implement it as well. I know that I have been forced to reconsider the location, source, and control of knowledge and its production" (336).

The key word here is *reconsider*. McGuire can no longer teach in the same way she used to teach, which, more than likely, merely modeled the way she herself was taught. Technology has forced McGuire's teaching to become more deliberate, provoking a critical self-reflection that is so often lacking as we prepare and teach our courses. The importance of this self-critical reflection, what Randall Bass calls "the scholarship of teaching," is the most important lesson I have learned during my time as Research Project Coordinator at Crossroads. I often wonder if the resistance I encountered during my fellowship interview was not so much resistance to technology, but resistance to the daunting task of looking critically at one's own teaching. To my astonishment, the interviewers had focused on what I had written in my personal statement about integrating new media into my teaching, when in fact very little of my statement dealt with teaching with technology. Yet the interview revolved, rather antagonistically, around just several sentences I wrote. I once took the interviewers' seemingly incommensurate response to be indicative of exactly how much anxiety and resistance exists regarding technology inside and outside the classroom. Judging from the reactions of these five professors, the few lines I wrote about teaching with technology must have appeared to be nothing less than heresy. But over a year later, having read through the following essays and the often painful learning experiences they document, I now recognize the underlying anxiety that filled the room during my interview—it was an anxiety rooted not in technology, but in teaching. It was an anxiety about reconsidering teaching, an anxiety over complicating our teaching, an anxiety about questioning traditional models of teaching and learning.

"Learning," writes John McClymer in his essay, "is recursive. You make several attempts, study the outcomes, make adjustments, examine those results, and so on. Often you wind up going back to some early step, one you thought you already knew inside and out, and start over" (2171). Our teaching should be just as recursive. That is, we should resist technology, but should do so with a purpose in mind—that purpose being to improve our teaching and our students'' learning. As technology use is mandated from above or fermenting from below, from students who have increasingly powerful resources and information at their disposal, we must remember to follow this model of recursivity, exemplified by the reflections that follow. Instead of expecting technology to provide perfect solutions, accelerating, as it were, the rate of success, perhaps we should look to technology to accelerate the rate of failure.

That is, we should hope that technology opens up opportunities for both teachers and students to fail, for them to get things wrong, which is the first step in recursive learning. To teach with technology is to court failure. But to court failure, when one practices the scholarship of teaching, is to begin learning how to teach more effectively. I find it necessary to remember this as I attempt to recuperate my anecdote about the professor who automatically deletes email from her students. Something as mundane as reconsidering whether to read student email is in fact the first step towards reconsidering one's own teaching. It may be difficult and frustrating, but it will also be a learning experience for both professor and student. Recursivity, reflexivity, reconsideration—these are the keys. Teaching with technology is never a 'done deal'—like all good teaching, it is always a process, always in a state of becoming. We do not and should not merely teach with technology; we must learn to teach with technology.