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TEACHING WITH COMPUTERS

As a writing instructor, I am required to lead students through the writing process and the correct use of computer word-processing programs. Teachers who teach with computers must take the responsibility of showing students how to navigate the software.

My experience teaching in computer labs convinces me that students only know:

- how to surf the Internet
- how to find games
- how to find MySpace and Facebook.

This assumes, of course, that they can get logged in. At Oklahoma State University-Okmulgee, students are given a student ID/email/userid/password to log onto campus computers. Without their userid and correct password, they are locked out. It is amazing how many have problems with both.

In my composition classes, students are required to use MLA format for their essays. I show students how to set up the format by using my laptop and projector, leaving nothing to chance. Students need to learn how to save a file properly, retrieve it later, and make backup copies to the network drive that is furnished with their userid. If they lose their jump drive, they still have a backup copy of their work.

Students should learn about incompatible programs. Microsoft manufactures Word, NotePad, and Works, and the just-released Word 2007, which cannot be opened by Word 2003, unless saved properly. Other problems occur when students use Works at home. Saved properly, students can travel between Works and Word. Improperly saved, the file will work only on the computer where it was created, which is generally at the student's home.

As instructor, I must figure out what students might have done to prevent them from opening a file—most times an impossible task because I was not sitting next to them when they created or saved it. When students question the word-processing software compatibility, I generally tell them that a Mustang carburetor will not fit on a Thunderbird—even though they are both Ford products. Students begin to see the importance of paying attention to the program they are using and how they are saving their work.

And then, to complicate matters even more, I am struggling to learn how to navigate the new 2007, right along with my students. In addition, default settings on 2007 are somewhat different from 2003, so students must learn how to re-create the default settings we have been using in 2003 for MLA essay format.

Teaching with computers requires patience and understanding. The network administrator once told me: "Computers are just stupid boxes, and it is up to the operator to make them function properly." That is where the teacher's role really begins—teaching students how to navigate the software required for the class.

I accept these incompatibilities and minor aggravations as part of my job. Computers are an indispensable writing tool I accepted long ago. I do not accept the stereotype that the current generation of college students is computer-savvy and able to use all programs. They should be *taught* how to use word-processing software and expected to use it frequently.

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TEXAS HISTORY CLASS GOES AIRBORNE

"I'm afraid to throw it," Stephanie said. "It might crash." Stephanie was already on her knees to minimize the impact of a potentially errant glider. I encouraged her to continue: "Just push it firmly, nose tilted slightly down, and it will fly. You did a good job building it. If it crashes, it's what we call 'measurable outcomes.'"

Stephanie is one of nine students who opted to build 30-inch wingspan replicas of the World War II CG-4 "Waco" glider to fulfill the term project assignment. Full-scale Wacos had a 90-foot wingspan. Towed behind twin-engine transports, each Waco carried 13 fully equipped combat troops into battle. Allied command ordered several mass glider assaults, the most famous being Sicily, D-Day, and the 1944 attempt to vault the Rhine River through Holland in the ill-fated operation known as Market Garden.

Glider operations were risky. Of the 850 gliders that landed in Normandy on D-Day, 25 American and 34 British pilots were killed. The mayor of St. Louis was killed during an army exhibition; the wing fell off when a fitting (made by a coffin company) broke.

In addition to building the models, students wrote papers. As we cut balsa and snipped tissue paper, we explored aspects of the army's glider program: "Who built Waco gliders?" "What kind of man wanted to become a glider pilot?" "What lessons did Allied commanders learn from the 1943 glider assault fiasco in Sicily?" The joy of the hobby relaxed students. Together we detoured around research dead-ends, crafted subtopics, and wrote trial paragraphs. The enriched time-on-task amplified students' ability to ask and answer questions.

I visited the National Glider Museum in Lubbock, Texas. My dad, a skilled modeler, acted as project consultant. To ensure high enrollment, I advertised the course, showcasing the glider-building option in particular, and attracted local press coverage.

Builders convened for at least two hours every week. I framed the master model. If I glued rib W-1 or bulkhead F-2 into position, students did the same. Students also referred to a model my dad had built. The gliders took 40 hours to complete.

The moment of truth came when the paint dried and it was time to go airborne. Aeronautical engineering came into play. Models must be aligned and balanced more perfectly than the real thing because there is no pilot trimming the glider as it flies. After locating center gravity and adding ballast, we test-flew over carpet on our knees.

Then we ambled to the student center and staged a contest. The hard tile floor added a tone of seriousness. Mistakes would be as costly now as flying through flak or hitting minefields the Germans laid in landing zones.

Students competed as teams. For authenticity I organized them into glider divisions named after units of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions of WWII. The longest flight reached 51 feet, achieving a glide ratio of 10 to 1—meaning that for every 10 feet the glider flew, it dropped one foot. That is good flying. The glider with the lowest total distance flown in three attempts got a firecracker. We called that fate "accountability."

Teacher-led modeling enhanced my relationship with students. I came to know them more intimately. Stephanie was joining the navy. Clinton had a mom with cancer. Josh wanted to major in history. Revisiting the world of students and moving at their cadence reminded me of my own college life.

Also, the smell of glue and dope let me experience anew the catalyst of my own passion for history. It was as a boy building Fokker D-VII's and Mustangs that the gates of history opened. Touching our own past through students and modeling stalls burnout.

The project beefed up some résumés. Two of my new military historians won a prize. They artfully presented their work on the glider project in a student forum known on campus as "Communicating Across the Curriculum." One of the gliders was on display. The appeal of their presentation lay in that little model, a tactile artifact of World War II and the daring it took to win.

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