HOW EIGHT TEACHERS LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE WORD PROCESSING!

LAST SUMMER Professor Gordon Pratl of New York University, a national authority on the process approach to writing, gave a course to high school teachers on composing with a word processor. This was a paradox, because less than a year before, Dr. Pratl himself had been a stranger to computers, and a nervous stranger at that!

But he conquered his fears, and went on to explore the impact of word processing on the writing process. In this work, he is showing the same innovative thinking that he previously brought to the National Writing Project, and he is directing graduate students in further research on this new subject.

This year, Dr. Pratl (rhymes with cradle) became VOICE’s consultant for “The Computer Connection,” our regular composition feature. To help teachers who may not feel ready to write or teach with word processors, we asked Dr. Pratl to tell VOICE users the story of his 1983 adventure with English teachers into the brave new world of computer composing.

IF YOU’RE LIKE ME, you’re skeptical of the current computer takeover, especially when it comes to writing. How on earth can a machine actually “process words”?

Besides, you’ve already established your trusty writing habits, and a fancy electronic typewriter is as high-tech as you care to go. If a younger generation yearns for Apples and Altars, that’s their problem.

Of course, you admit to yourself, there’s another reason for your aversion to thinking machines: “I’m such a klutz with all that electronic gadgetry!”

Me too. I remember all those times I avoided showing films or slides to my students, because without fail the film frizzled or the projector refused to project.

With such excuses, it wasn’t hard for me to avoid the inevitable. Yet a feeling kept nagging at me that I wasn’t being fair to my students. “What if all those claims for word processing are true?” I asked myself. “Suppose a word processor can actually help those poor students who face that crippling roadblock—fear of error?”

So, uncharacteristically, I leapt in.

SURPRISE! I not only coped, I got hooked. I became a computer junkie! If I had to write and my computer was down, I went into computer panic — my palms sweated and my stomach cranked like a knot. The whole operation of processing words seemed so natural, I wondered why I’d nourished such a phobia before I took the plunge.

I soon developed all the irritating habits of the fanatical convert, baring my friends and colleagues with sermons about the virtues of composing by computer, and how it would change their lives if only they too would believe.

FROM LEARNER TO TEACHER
BUT EARLY LAST SUMMER I faced a very down-to-earth problem, far different from the evangelism I’d been practicing. I signed up to teach a summer course on composing with a word processor! In a matter of four short days, I was pledged to help other teachers overcome their anxieties and cross over into this brave new world of technology.

From my own experience, however, two principles seemed clear:

► We had to wade right in and do it. I would only be kidding myself if I delayed engaging the keyboard, and gave high-sounding lectures on technology and writing.

► We had to perform a real writing task. Only this would demonstrate the true value of a computer. We would avoid “dummy runs,” and we wouldn’t simply proceed through someone else’s ordered set of learning instructions.

With these points in mind, I brought together eight teachers for four two-hour sessions in word processing. Our hardware consisted of an assortment of Apples, both II’s and IIc’s; our software, the solid and straightforward Bank Street Writer. When it comes to word processing, I claim anyone can be up on the Bank Street Writer in 15 minutes, and I haven’t been proved wrong yet.

Later, teachers doing their own writing will doubtless want to graduate from Bank Street Writer to more sophisticated programs like Wordstar, the program I use regularly at school. But BSW at least makes the point that teachers can actually write on the computer, and it even has some nice features, like printing multiple copies, that Wordstar doesn’t.

At the start, all eight teachers in my course were enthusiastic—but cautious. We proceeded rapidly through such basics as how to “boot” the machines, how to enter and delete text, how to move the cursor, and how to work interactively with Bank Street’s friendly “menu.” Then I put the teachers right to work on the first assignment:

Compose a poem exclusively with the Bank Street Writer. You may choose a particular form such as a limerick, a haiku, or a sonnet.

When you’re finished, REFLECT BACK ON YOUR WRITING BEHAVIOR.

What changes did the word processor introduce into your writing?

How did you get your ideas?

How did you get your sentences down?

How and why did you revise, if you did?

What relationships between reading, thinking, and transcribing did you exhibit?

What proofreading and correction did you do?

I had previously given the teachers the same assignment using their normal composing processes to serve as a basis for comparison.

As you can see, I wanted my teacher-writers to create their own writing immediately and examine it. As a result, when we began to discuss the uses of word processing in the classroom, their comments reflected this first-hand experience, and made for enthusiasm, real sharing, and deeper learning.

HOW THEY REACTED
I FOUND THAT both the writing and the class discussion made all the points I could hope to make if I’d been lecturing to the group on the virtues of word processing. They expressed vividly both their fears and triumphs, and they immediately connected these with the struggles of their own students to get the “right” words on the page.

Arthur’s poem, with all its factious archaisms, gets to the spirit of our collective writing energy:

For me, ’tis crucial as I ’gin to write
To see my words roll out before my eyes.
And this my Apple II, Le Monitor,
Allows an easeful flow, to my surprise.

For when I search my inmost fevered brain
To find fit language to convey my thought,
The keys, responding to this deepest strain,
Translate my mind’s intention nigh unsought!

If thus Divine aid comes to mortal man
In shape of that once damned accursed fruit.
As all folk die through tasting Apple I.
So all shall live by testing Apple II!

What joy, to see my words upon the screen
As if by magic touch, and no ink spent.
I feel myself a fount — no ill-timed spleen.
Comes forth to cut off my creative bent.

(Continued on preceding page)
Other teachers observed that working on the computer might be a way of getting students involved in otherwise boring tasks. “Imagine my students all using this wonderful machine to play with! The act of writing would become a joyous activity. Just think—no more messy, illegible handwriting! And look at the fun I’m having with this topic, which ordinarily might even be boring. Why, kids would love the ease of creating, being able to erase what they don’t like. It’s like those magic wands we used to play with as kids.”

“Just now, I managed to do something I couldn’t have done on a regular typewriter: I erased an unwanted letter and a space at the same time! Whee! Here I go again, to wipe out another space. Got it! And no one except you and me is the wiser.”

After four days of lively activity, I thought I’d sold my quota of “infamous little machines,” as one teacher called them at the start. But there was a much deeper set of attitudes to contend with. Despite the pleasure of our eight hours together, many would return to their old writing habits—if only because they were a lot cheaper than investing in a computer.

Besides, the not so irrational fear of being dominated by the machine persisted, as Suzanne expressed it in her poem at the first session:

**LA MACHINA**

Machines are not to be trusted.  
I prefer composing the old way.  
Can it remember what I say  
When it knows that I don’t like it?  
I cannot expect to succeed.  
This fear of typing does not leave.  
But I need its tugging at my sleeve  
Although I do not like it.  
Fragility needs protection.  
No stroking here for me. Hence.  
Disconfirming my confidence,  
I refuse to ever like it!

Suzanne was my test case. I finally knew our active and task-centered four days on word processing had been successful when Suzanne at last made her peace with all the patient computers, just before we separated to get on with the other pleasures of the summer:

**FRIENDS AT LAST**

Hostility abated.  
Curiosity sated.  
We’re friends.  
Friendship accepted.  
Construct confirmed.  
Menu: Compose!

If we could give all teachers such an active opportunity to work through their feelings about computers, we might find real changes building in the teaching of composition—for the emphasis would have to shift from error to fluency and joy.

Once the machine is comfortably in your hands, you finally discover that life is too short to have it any other way.