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Computers and Composition 1983–2002: What we have hoped for

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Abstract

I review the first 20 years of *Computers and Composition*, looking particularly at the expressed hopes for the potential of change in the emergence of new writing-classroom technologies. Hopes in the early issues of the journal focused on technology's presumed potential for improved writing, teaching, and learning in the composition classroom; a later and recurrent hope was that by embracing technology, composition teachers would improve their status in the academy. Authors in recent issues looked less *at* the technology and much more *through* the technology, toward a more egalitarian and just society. I attempt, in this review, to locate these hopes in the context of professional and national cultures.

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Hope springs eternal in the human breast;

Man never is, but always to be, blest. (Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle I)

The shape of the near future indicates that the facilities of design rather than those of critique will be essential for equitable participation in social, economic, and cultural life. (Gunter Kress, 1997, p. 79)

1. Introduction

One way of looking at a field is to see what it hopes for, what visions of a possible future it sees and strives to realize. Physicists, for example, look toward a deeper and more elegant understanding of natural laws; linguists hope for a universal grammar and a full understanding of the origins and character of language; agronomists work toward a world without hunger; evolutionary biologists hope to understand the history of life on earth; medical researchers

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look toward the end of disease. So what is it that we, in the field of computers and writing, have hoped for? The pages of *Computers and Composition*, which I would argue is the journal in which we have chiefly defined ourselves, give us good opportunity to discover and track these hopes because this journal began at the moment when microcomputers first became readily available to writing teachers. Before this moment, computers were to most of us distant and/or dangerous. But with the advent of the microcomputer, we began to domesticate this technology on a large scale, bringing it into our classrooms and our professional discourse.

I'll argue in this article that in the pages of *Computers and Composition*, we have been critics, but we have been planners and designers too, working for change in the spaces presented to us by technological change. In preparing to write this piece, I read through 20 years of *Computers and Composition*. As I was doing this, I was reading, as usual, other professional journals in English—*College Composition and Communication*, *College English*, *Research in the Teaching of English*—and when I left “our” pages and read in other journals I was struck by the difference. In *Computers and Composition*, we are generally upbeat, optimistic, enthusiastic, and forward-looking—more so than we are in other journals. Our hopefulness is refreshing and positive. I'd not want us to be anything other than what we have been and what we are. In the pages of this journal when a hope is dashed, as it often is by our research, we do not lose hope, but transform it: If this application of new technologies doesn't help, then this other one will; if it doesn't seem to work for this student population, then we should try it with this other student population; if technology doesn't improve this aspect of a writer's work, then we should try it on another aspect of the writer's work.

I can account for some of the forces that have made us hopeful. First, we are participants in the discourses of technology, which carry with them the assumptions that technology is good and that it will bring good. We have not always and uncritically accepted these assumptions. For example, in the pages of this journal, [Ellen Barton \(1990\)](#) referred to this larger positive and often uncritical discourse as “the dominant discourse of technology,” noting that it “largely accepts existing social roles and relationships” and “accepts a passive role for individuals, who are regarded as benefiting from technology” (pp. 132–134). [Cynthia Selfe \(1999\)](#) traced the ways in which this discourse was appropriated and reproduced by politicians and educators in the 1990s, reaching into the grain of everyday life, into the capillaries of the body politic. So it is not at all to our discredit that, as I show in the following pages, we were not able to stand entirely outside of this discourse.

Second, we are teachers, and teachers are by profession—or should be—hopeful. Students embody society's hope for continuance and change, and as teachers we are the agents of society's hopes. So it is entirely fitting that, as writing teachers, we hope for computers' beneficial effects on students as writers. We are part, too, of American culture and its hope for simple solutions to complex problems. It is possible, also, that we have felt in our bones the force of an argument voiced by [Gunther Kress \(1997\)](#): that in a time of rapid change, the impulse to design should lead the impulse to critique. In the pages of this journal we have most often taken on the work of design, looking for ways in which we might shape technology to our own ends.

In accounting for the optimistic and positive tone of our journal, the cultural cross-currents I've referred to are important. But at least as important as these cultural forces has been the agency of particular people at particular times. As a community we reflect the values of our

leaders (they'd hate to be called this, but they are and have been)—three generous, energetic, and hopeful teacher–scholars: Kate Kiefer, Cynthia Selfe, and Gail Hawisher. These remarkable teacher–scholars have drawn to their work others who share the same generosity, energy, and optimism. This group, call it a *de facto* (and partially *de jure*) editorial board, has shaped the journal and the community, infusing both with temperament, enthusiasm, and vision.

Before I launch into this overview, I need to locate myself and say a word about pronouns and representation. I'm a person who has been given, and is again being given, generous space in the journal about which I am writing. The editors published an article of mine in November 1984, and I have been present off and on in the journal's pages ever since. I am also a member of the journal's editorial board. Clearly I have taken [Kate Kiefer and Cynthia Selfe \(1983\)](#) up on their letter from the editors invitation in the second issue of the journal: "We are asking that you make this YOUR newsletter" (p. 1). I feel very much part of the journal and its community, and I am therefore drawn to the first-person plural pronoun "we." I am drawn not only by membership, but by stance: I'm offering here a critique of the journal that I've been part of, and I want to include myself in the critique. I don't want to appear to stand outside, when I have been so deeply and energetically implicated in the subject I consider in the following pages.

So I will often use the first-person plural "we" here, because it's partly true: I am part of the journal. To the extent that the journal has been good or bad, successful or not successful, I'm part of it. I also recognize that when I use "we" I run risks: of representing others as they'd not want to be represented; of suggesting that the journal is a closed, exclusive entity; and of imposing my values on the work of others. So I have tried to be careful in my use of "we," but I apologize, in advance, to any who may feel that I have appropriated and/or misrepresented their views or their work.

That said, I will begin with a look at two early and persistent hopes: that computers would eliminate the "drudgery" of writing and of teaching writing and that the computer used as a word processor would improve student writing. I will then move to a third and concurrent hope: that through the adoption and application of technology, we would improve our marginal situation as writing teachers. Finally, I will suggest that in the past few years we have generally looked less *at* and more *through* technology (see [Haas, 1996](#); [Lanham, 1993](#)), looking toward a better, more egalitarian, more peaceful world, a quiet revolution that we hope to bring to pass through our teaching—with technology, to be sure, but chiefly through our teaching.

2. Computers, technology, and "drudgery"

A hope often articulated in the early volumes of *Computers and Composition* was that computers would somehow eliminate what the authors defined as drudgery, both for student writers and writing teachers. The perpetual hope for technology is that it will release us from what we deem to be the boring aspects of our work and enable us to do something better with the time that we will have saved. [Shoshona Zuboff \(1988\)](#) chronicled this hope as it was expressed by both managers and workers at pulp mills and at insurance offices as computers came into these workplaces in the 1980s. It should not be a surprise to find this aspect of the discourse of technology echoed in the early pages of this journal. What is interesting to watch in our pages, however, is what the authors have considered to be drudgery. When someone categorizes an

activity as drudgery, that act of classification confers low status on the activity. Drudgery is work that we wish would go away, work that we wish we could be freed from so that we might get on to other, more satisfying, more useful work. In the world of magazines such as *Popular Science* and *Popular Mechanics*, and in the world of the television infomercial, the machine—whether dishwasher, lawn mower, vacuum cleaner, slicer-dicer, or rug shampooer—relieves the drudgery of yard work or household chores, low-status work that we would, if we could, delegate to a machine.

We understand the drudgery of writing to be copy-editing, revising, and retyping. In the second issue of *Computers and Composition*, Michael N. Milone (1984) argued that word processing “contains features that minimize the drudgery associated with composing” (pp. 6–7). Craig Waddell (1985) was more enthusiastic a year later, telling us that “word processing takes so much of the drudgery out of editing, revising, and retyping that writing teachers do a disservice to their students if they fail to acquaint them with at least one of these programs” (p. 61). Two years later, Sherry Burgus Little (1987) noted that “single-stroke entry frees students from the drudgery of retyping the whole paper” (p. 106) and in the same issue Thea Van der Geest (1987) predicted that “mechanics, like correct spelling, can be expected to become less important as machines learn to do these tasks” (p. 31). Almost a decade later, Tony Dierckins (1994) echoed his forebears in saying that “microcomputers can take over ‘drudge work’ of storing information, correcting spelling, recopying, and reformatting. By letting the computer handle these tasks. . . writers free themselves for thinking” (p. 163).

Responding to student writing, at least here, is the drudgery of teaching. Jack Jobst (1984) hoped that “someday computers may grade our students’ essays and reports, but until then they can assist human graders in this onerous task” (p. 5). Muriel Harris and Madelon Cheek (1984) told us that WRITERS’ WORKBENCH “assists the teacher with some of the tedious editing and proofreading tasks, thereby giving the teacher more time to consider larger rhetorical questions of organization, structure, clarity, and so on” (p. 3). Barbara Bergmann Davis (1984) described a faculty-training program in computers and writing and noted that “computers will never replace teachers; they may, however, replace some of the mechanical work of the teacher (and the writer!), freeing both for the more creative aspects of teaching and writing” (p. 8). Some of this “mechanical work” was seen to be writing comments on student papers. Robert Lucking (1985) reminded us that writing comments was a “time-consuming task” (p. 6), and advocated keeping a file of canned comments to be used and re-used as appropriate. Six years later, Gordon Thomas and Dene Kay Thomas (1991) advocated adapting style-analysis programs to automate teacher comments, noting that “when used intelligently, such programs can be used to make the comments so that instructors can concentrate on more important aspects of the writing” (p. 29).

In 1992, Emil Roy took this hope to its logical conclusion and suggested that the teacher-as-reader was irrelevant. He argued that a good style-checker could “replace impressionistic human evaluations of placement tests with automatic, reliable, and inexpensive ratings. . . no role for human discretion or error” (p. 72). Here the *onerous task*, the drudgery, has become a piece of our work that computers do better than we can: “no role for human discretion or error.” The computer threatened to take over not drudgery, but a major part of what we consider our special province, our means toward larger ends: reading and evaluating student writing. Roy’s argument was indirectly answered in the next volume by William Wresch (1993) who, although he didn’t cite Roy and may not have read his piece, argued that computer-reading

of student writing is best used to give students feedback and information about their writing, not for grading. Roy's argument was answered directly three years later by [Brian Huot \(1996\)](#), who argued that computer-based assessment was a return to the positivist paradigm, something he hoped we'd left behind years ago. "The computer as reliever of the drudgery of teaching of writing locates the teacher as rule giver and corrector of student writing" (p. 236) he asserted and speculated that the advent of the computer presented us with the potential for complex and flexible kinds of assessment more suited to then-contemporary writing pedagogies.

It is significant—even diagnostic—that computer scoring of student writing has not been addressed more prominently in the pages of *Computers and Composition*. This topic has received a great deal of attention from the press and from academic administrators (e.g., [McCullum, 1998](#)) and its dangers have been outlined in the pages of the *Journal of Basic Writing* ([Fitzgerald, 1994](#)) and *College English* ([Herrington & Moran, 2001](#)), but not prominently here—although we know that today Electronic Testing Service (ETS) and other commercial enterprises are actively marketing computer-scoring programs to colleges and universities. This illustrates a side-effect of our hopefulness, our optimistic take on the potentials of emerging technologies: Instead of massaging problems, we look for and develop what we feel to be positive applications of technology. To invoke [Kress \(1997\)](#) again, in the pages of this journal we privilege design and its orientation toward the future; we engage in critique as well, with its orientation to the past, but we prefer to devote our energies to guiding technology toward the good.

3. Computers and writing quality

A second early hope was that computer-based writing had the potential to produce global improvement in the quality of student writing. The mechanism by which technology would improve writing quality was not clear, but the hope was strong—fueled, in my case and in others, by an early and positive experience with a microcomputer-turned-word-processor. I will let [Thomas Brownell \(1984\)](#) speak for me and for many others: "Word processors do make it possible to write more in less time, and do make us better writers" (p. 3). Later Brownell elaborated the claim: "Where writers fully understand the potential of word processing and enjoy the benefits of working with a trouble-free, well-designed system, the results will include not only increased productivity, but more important, clearer, more readable writing" (p. 5). This hope for improvement-by-technology was initially so strong that, as [Carole McAllister \(1985\)](#) found, teachers gave higher scores to student papers they thought had been composed using a word processor. Clearly, the perception that a paper had been composed on a word processor positively affected their judgment of the paper's quality.

As McAllister demonstrated, not every contributor to the journal accepted the connection between technology and improved writing. As [Elizabeth Sommers and James Collins \(1985\)](#) reminded us, there was no proof that technology improved student writing. [Deborah Holdstein and Tim Redman \(1985\)](#) found that "some software used for word-processing can actually hinder the writing/rewriting processes" (p. 43). In their article they speculated

that the notion that computers are the wave of the future has been so drummed into students' heads that they continue to repeat platitudes about the value of their computer experience even while writing of the many problems and difficulties they encountered. Our students' responses

indicate a significant danger zone; we must build in ways of sorting out this form of computer piety from varieties of methods that actually work for an individual student. (p. 53)

But Holdstein and Redmond's caution appeared in the same issue with [Wayne Moore's \(1985\)](#) "Word Processing in First-Year Comp," in which Moore asserted that "beginning writers stand to gain the most from the use of word processing" (p. 55). In what is in retrospect a heart-wrenching note, Moore told us that "Even Javier, the student unfamiliar with the keyboard, learned that there was a more effective way to write; he is enrolled in typing this semester, and I see him practicing on the Epsoms daily" (p. 60).

As [Holdstein and Redman \(1985\)](#) warned us, students—as well as their teachers—were too hopeful about the potential of word-processing to improve their writing. Indeed there seems to have been a feedback loop here, or what some engineers would call a "self-stoking cycle": Teacher hope produced student hope, which in its turn confirmed and strengthened teacher hope. In the second year of *Computers and Composition*, [Lorie Roth \(1984\)](#) reported that students were not only enthusiastic about word processing, but that they were also "eager to proselytize" (p. 11). Roth was echoed in same issue by [Samila S. Nickell \(1984\)](#), who found that "the dimension of the students' writing most affected was their attitude" (p. 14). In an unabashed puff piece for PC-WRITE, [Waddell \(1985\)](#) quoted one student: "Rhetoric and Writing became my most interesting course when PC-WRITE was introduced. The word-processing program has made my writing easier, more enjoyable, and better than ever before" (p. 80). Two years later, [Little \(1987\)](#) reported,

my students write, in the computer logs that they keep, the common reactions of learning to compose on the computer: "It's fun, challenging, like a puzzle. It's better than a typewriter, faster, easier to edit." They report that they write more, revise and edit more. . . they produce more accurate material. (p. 106)

Adult professional writers were apparently just as hopeful as first-year writing students: [Stephen A. Bernhardt and Bruce C. Appleby \(1985\)](#) surveyed professional writers and found that all respondents gave "easy editing" as a reason for using the computer and most mentioned that word-processing "saves composing time," "improves correctness," and "improves organization." Half of the respondents thought that using the computer "improves ideas"; just under half felt that the computer "improves style." Bernhardt and Appleby concluded that "writers use the machine because they believe the written product will be better in terms of ideas, organization, correctness, and style" (p. 33).

The hope for global improvement of writing should have come to its natural end with two articles, one by [Carolyn Dowling \(1994\)](#) and another by [Richard Collier and Clifford Werier \(1995\)](#). After interviewing professional writers, Dowling suggested that although computers make writing easier, they might be making it worse. There might be, she hypothesized, a close connection between *difficulty* and *quality*: remove the one and you remove the other. Collier and Werier provided a full and useful review of the literature on word-processing and writing improvement as a prelude to their study, which was of computer-writers forced to compose by hand. Their conclusion is powerful: "Good writers are good writers, no matter how they write—their processes and their products are only minimally tied to the mode of text production, no matter what they say or feel about computers or about writing by hand" (p. 56). Yet three years later [Bernard Susser \(1998\)](#) argued that the reason computers were not having an

effect on writing quality was that student writers were not making use of the full capabilities of contemporary word-processing programs. The effects of computers on writers was tested again in this same year by Patrick J. Slattery and Rosemary Kowalski (1998), and in 2000 by Susanmarie Harrington, Mark D. Shermis, and Angela L. Rollins. Slattery and Kowalski found that first-year writers expanded their writing processes when they wrote with computers, while juniors and seniors tended to collapse the steps of their writing process when they wrote with computers. Harrington and colleagues found no difference between computer-mediated and pen-and-paper-mediated student writing. This particular hope—that computers would somehow make a difference in student writing—has been one that “springs eternal.”

4. Other applications, other writers

As it became clear that computers did not improve writing quality generally, contributors to the journal anticipated the advice of Joel Nydahl (1991), who asked us to “take a much closer and more careful look at the electronic pen” (p. 34). In taking this “closer and more careful look” we disaggregated the broad terms “computers,” “writers,” and “writing,” into their elements. So “computers” became “word-processing” and “online discussion” (Peyton, 1990), “speech-synthesis” (Berry, 1989), “hypertext” (DiPardo & DiPardo, 1990; Douglas, 1989), and electronic outlining (Price, 1997); “writers” became “basic writers” (Etchison, 1989), ESL writers (Phinney, 1991), EFL writers (Susser, 1993), “novice writers” (Kozma, 1991), learning-disabled writers (Malachowski, 1987), or “experienced word-processing students” (Markel, 1994); and “writing” became “revising” (Marx, 1989; Reynolds & Bonk, 1996), “invention” (Schwartz, Fitzpatrick, & Huot, 1994), and so on. By dividing our three initial terms we generated hundreds of possible hopes: for example, that word-processing software would help basic writers with revision (Crafton, 1996), that style-checkers would stimulate writers-in-general to do more revising, that networking would facilitate ESL writers’ learning (Braine, 1997), that hypertext would stimulate invention, that hypermedia would help students in synthesis writing (Palumbo & Prater, 1993), or that composing in hypertext would help students see the need for structure (Fischer, 1996).

Articles that take this direction generally begin with a review of the literature that rehearses the profession’s initial global hopes and the subsequent shattering of these hopes. They then go on to say that this literature, gloomy as it might seem, has not covered everything, has not looked at this particular context, or this particular application, or this particular population, and therefore—the argument goes—there is still room for hope. Often the study being reported on does not support this new hope, but the article almost always closes with the opening of another possibility, a newer hope. A good example of this pattern is an article by Alexander Friedlander and Mike Markel (1990), in which they began with a thorough review of previous work on word-processing, revising, and writing quality, and then staked their claim on new territory: “there have been no published studies that examine the effect of the Macintosh on writing processes” (p. 70). They discovered, in hindsight predictably, that “the Macintosh by itself does not significantly improve the quality of student writing” (p. 75). But the authors voiced the next hope, one that their research had not tested: that “training in word processing as well as in writing may be the necessary factor in improving writing skills” (p. 77).

I will follow just one of these hopeful threads here: the strong and persistent hope that computers would specifically advantage basic writers. I need to say that this is a hope I have shared, and one we have built into our writing program at the University of Massachusetts, where basic writing courses are taught exclusively in computer-equipped classrooms. Joan Garcia Kotker (1984) was the first to articulate this hope in the pages of *Computers and Composition*, arguing that computers were particularly good for basic writers because they solved handwriting problems, and gave writers distance and objectivity on their work. Kotker concluded that “the computer has proven to be a real advantage to the Writing Lab at Bellevue Community College—our only regret is that we don’t have more of them” (p. 7). Goran Moberg (1987), writing from another community college, observed “increased motivation” as the cause of basic writers’ “increased writing volume and increased revising” (p. 47). Craig Etchison (1989) found that basic writers wrote longer pieces on the computer. Writing in 1991, Pamela Gay reviewed 18 earlier studies of basic writers, found these studies confusing and excessively hopeful, yet concluded that

the use of the computer as a tool in an interactive learning environment could help basic writers speed up the learning process and move them to the point of liberation where they can take over their own learning and reverse their pattern of failure. (p. 77)

In 1995, Glenda Conway found that computers interfered with basic writers’ work: Computers “played a key role in circumventing collaboration by forming barriers. . . between group members.” The computer was also “used more often for ‘non-writing’ than for ‘writing’” (p. 92). A year later, Robert E. Crafton (1996) delivered what seems to be the final blow to this hope. Crafton found that basic writers were disadvantaged by computer environments: “Computers may distract students from the task at hand or even prevent them from developing a fuller appreciation of the complexities of the act of written communication” (p. 323). He recalled earlier beliefs that computers relieve “drudgery,” but argued that far from being a “labor-saving device,” the computer “actually complicates matters. . . computers may shortcut the body of experiences a student needs to develop writing skills” (p. 323). And yet as I write this, here at the University of Massachusetts our basic writing course is still taught in computer-assisted classrooms. We still believe—we hope—that the computer will advantage these disadvantaged writers. And there is a piece of me that thinks that this hope has a positive effect on the teaching and learning that take place in these classrooms.

5. The hope for improved professional status

In the pages of *Computers and Composition*, we have often expressed the hope that through our quick grasp of technology’s potential, we and the community of composition teachers will become established, more secure in our research, scholarship, tenure, and promotion. I do not at all mean to suggest that in this hope we are in any way extraordinary or shameful. We are simply human. As a profession, we have lived on the margins of the academy. Within English departments, we have struggled for power and respect with our colleagues in literary studies. So it is not surprising that some of us have seen technology as a way to move up within the structures we inhabit. The “we” I employ here includes this writer—as I noted in these pages in

1990, I helped bring computers into our writing program at the University of Massachusetts with radically mixed motives: I wanted to help our writers and teachers, but I also sought political advantage, hoping that in this way the writing program would “create common ground with well-funded and prestigious units such as Computer Science departments” and that as a program we might “steal a march on our parent English Departments” (p. 65). Those who argue against technology also speak to their own interests. [Sven Birkerts \(1994\)](#) argued against technology and argued instead for the continuation of the privileged lifestyle he wanted to maintain for himself and, presumably, the students he taught (at Mount Holyoke and at Bennington, both small, expensive, private colleges). My colleagues in the teaching of literature argue in their scholarly journals for the importance, even primacy, of what they do, and thereby for their own promotion and tenure. So I chronicle this hope without meaning to suggest that as a community we in the computers and writing community are any better or worse than any other group with access to print. We argue our case as forcefully because we have a difficult case to argue, situated as we often are on the margins of the academy.

The founding editors of *Computers and Composition* expressed this hope that computers would enhance our status in their introduction to the first issue when they asked, “can we use computers to solve some of the perennial problems associated with composition programs—staffing, financial support, faculty work-loads, class size, training for graduate students and paraprofessionals?” ([Kiefer & Selfe, 1983](#), p. 1). In the same letter, Kiefer and Selfe voiced the hope that “the spread of word-processing” might “encourage faculty outside of English departments to help their students become better writers”—and that there might be a “role of the composition teacher in helping colleagues teach writing” (p. 1). Three years later, [Thomas Barker \(1986\)](#) saw a new role for English teachers, who “bring a special expertise in rhetoric and economy to the design of screens and online documentation” (p. 65). Barker saw the English teacher as software designer with new professional agency: “Perhaps we all have much to gain from realizing our new found power to shape the instructional setting and to define our role in it” (p. 65).

As technology advanced we continued to see new roles and new routes to power for ourselves. Among the new roles we defined were choosing writing software ([LeBlanc, 1992](#)) and hoping that we might be able to teach our colleagues in English, or in other departments, a thing or two about pedagogical applications of technology. [Madeleine Sorapure, Pamela Inglesby, and George Yatchisin argued in 1998](#) that what had once been the librarian’s province was now ours: We were the new teachers of information literacy. Several scholars argued that our special knowledge of rhetoric would keep us in the game, ringing changes on [Richard Lanham’s \(1993\)](#) assertion that new, bi-stable electronic-text environments opened new fields for rhetoric. [Marcy L. Bauman \(1999\)](#) found that the Internet was presenting us with new genres, and that “as purveyors of rhetorical education in the academy, it is our job to discern what these new genres are, what they do, and how to use them” (p. 279). [Patricia Sullivan \(2001\)](#) voiced the hope that our skills as rhetoricians position us to contribute to theories of web design. [Chris Werry \(2002\)](#) saw a place for our special expertise in the rhetorics of online education. Our hope for professional advancement has been driven by our sense that we are, in [Lisa Gerrard’s \(1990\)](#) words, “triply stigmatized: as computerphiles, as teachers, and as compositionists” (p. 9). Gerrard’s description of our low professional status is echoed and repeated in the pages of the journal (e.g., [Romano, 1993](#), p. 7).

As for the actual—and by actual, I mean material—pages of the journal, we have all taken pride in the increasingly professional look of the journal, as it has grown from a mimeographed newsletter to a bound quarto to its present format; from a North American to a more international publication; from tri-quarterly to quarterly. In the [November 1988](#) letter from the editors, Hawisher and Selfe wrote,

No longer is *Computers and Composition* a printed, “letter-quality” newsletter to be dug out from the bottom of a stack of flashier, laser-produced documents. Beginning in August of 1985, Cindy and Kate published our first “small journal” issue with a handsome beige and black format that carried the familiar C&C logo. Now, not only were we professional, but we looked the part as well. Two years ago, with the publication of the November 1986 issue, we had another facelift and began in appearance to rival the more established CCC. (p. 5)

In [November 1991](#), the editors announced still another upgrade, from a stapled to a glued, “perfect” binding, and wrote “we’re aiming for the big leagues!” (p. 5). And in November of 1994 the journal moved to its present format, now in its material aspect comparable to other major journals. The new format coincided with a new definition: As the editors announced, *Computers and Composition* was now an international journal “dedicated to bringing together. . . a world-wide community of teachers, scholars, and technology users” (Hawisher & Selfe, 1994, p. 1). A year later, [Lisa Gerrard \(1995\)](#) reviewed the evolution of the Computers & Writing conference and felt able to say that “we’re not clinging to the margins any more” (p. 289). For the computers and composition community, the journal had become something we could all be proud of, both a symbol and a cause of our professional status.

6. Computers and critical pedagogy: The current hope

By 1996–1997 (volumes 13 and 14), our hopes for the simple efficacy of technology for teachers and for writers had faded substantially. They had not disappeared, for, as I noted above, right through the millennium authors continued to test their hopes for the potential of technology to improve writers, writing, and teaching. But [James Kalmbach’s \(1996\)](#) article, “From Liquid Paper to Typewriters,” was a sobering reminder that 70 years ago teachers and students had been as enthusiastic about the introduction of typewriters into the classroom as we had been about the introduction of computers into our classrooms. I can’t say that 1996 and 1997 marked a sudden break with our early hopes, for, as I noted above, many writers in the journal’s early years had urged us to be more cautious in our expectations, as had still more in the 1990s. Yet the 1996–1997 issues seem a kind of watershed; before these issues, hopes for improved writing and the teaching of writing through technology predominated; after these volumes, we increasingly saw the computer as potentially, or inherently, supportive of critical pedagogy and, through this pedagogy, of a new and more just society.

I see in this move toward critical pedagogy our profession’s reaction to the policies of the Reagan–Bush years and to the continuing national shift toward conservative, even reactionary, policies and values. In the world of *Computers and Composition*, I trace the beginnings of this move to the important and substantial letter from the editors in the 1990 special issue highlighting papers from the Fifth Annual Computers & Writing Conference, in which [Gail](#)

Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe told us that we really were critical teachers, although we had chosen to present ourselves as objective researchers. In a complicated rhetorical move, they told us that we were on the “right side,” that we were admirable people who believe the right things, and that our work

has at its heart the political motives of the rhetoric of technology, but it is disguised in the objective rhetoric of research or observation. . . . Often these pieces never acknowledge their central political disagreements with the current educational system or talk in terms of using technology to effect educational reform. (pp. 8–9)

The hope here was that we as a community, gathered together around technology, could effect educational reform. It was not yet clear what lines that reform would follow—except that the anti-examples the editors gave included using networks to propagate skill/drill programs and using networks for surveillance. The letter was addressed to friends and colleagues, members of the community that the journal helped create, and the letter asked the community to re-perceive itself. The editors wanted to encourage and champion, and they wanted to change the community’s direction.

This new emphasis on critical practice was articulated in the letter from the guest editors that opened a special issue on computers and diversity in 1997: Margaret Barber, Laura Sullivan, and Janice Walker argued that “the technologized classroom is one crucial locus of attempts to define new pedagogies in the face of radical structural changes in the academy” (p. 163) and voiced the hope “that technologized classrooms can be both sites of resistance and sites for furthering knowledge and understanding in a multicultural world” (p. 165). The guest editors grounded their hope on the assumption that technology “makes possible a learning environment no longer confined to a geographic region, time period, or demographic mix, thus allowing teachers and students from different backgrounds to work together” (p. 163).

Despite the fact that they were working within the frame of a critical pedagogy, contributors to the journal have often shown an uncritical hope for technology’s agency in furthering pedagogical and political ends. In 1999, James Ray Watkins, for example, argued that hypertext authoring “is uniquely suited to explore the possibilities of *cultural hybridity*, and can create a common ground in and through which writers of diverse backgrounds and interests might discover and negotiate differences in learning styles, aesthetic tastes, and ideas” (p. 383). Unvoiced is a range of other possibilities: for instance, that hypertext authoring can produce virtual storefronts or manuals for operating weapons of destruction. Randall Woodland (1999) described cyberspace as a place where lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) “people have many resources that allow them to gain information, ask questions, explore their identity, and discern the shape of larger communities, while also maintaining a safe level of disclosure” (p. 75). Only in his last two paragraphs did he introduce the fact that the opportunity he had been describing was not available to most people in the world. Generally, however, we have become more careful and circumspect in our hoping. Pamela Takayoshi, Emily Huot, and Meghan Huot (1999) were clearly aware, for example, that the online world is potentially dangerous and certainly a male province, even as they argued that women should make parts of the Web their own. Rebecca Rickly (1999) was careful to distance herself from the early hope that computer-mediated communication environments would be more egalitarian, even as she argued that they can be more democratic. In 2001, Kate Eichhorn noted that online environments

clearly enabled hate speech. John Killoran (2002) demonstrated the power of corporate web sites as models, even as he argued that through web-rings and web-logs “citizens’ creativity may continue to smolder” (p. 32). His hope was that “the Web, more so than its mass media predecessors like television, may . . . foster a more democratically progressive society” (p. 35).

The most complex and thorough argument for the possible match between computers, composition, and critical pedagogy has been made in these pages by Donna LeCourt (1998), who cited a list of contributors to *Computers and Composition* and then noted that their work, in its focus on “the politics of pedagogy and online discourse—and how both might be negotiated such that difference can be valued and oppressive power relations transformed” (p. 275), shares the goals of critical pedagogy. LeCourt maintained that “through hypertext and discussion groups, writing technologies begin the critical reflection necessary to critical literacy’s ultimate goal: socially transformative action” (p. 284). Her hope: that “by extending critical literacy’s project to include student interrogations of the writing space, technology offers a way to provide students with the means to critique how their textual practice participates in ideological reproduction” (p. 292). LeCourt was clear, however, that technology will not do this on its own. If we *choose* to do so, we can use technology in our writing classrooms to produce ideological change, to value difference, and to transform oppressive power relations.

7. Conclusion

Hindsight is too easy. In hindsight, some of the hopes voiced in the early years of this journal seem naïve. Did we really believe that stylecheckers would foster student attention to grammar? That word-processing programs would eliminate the drudgery of writing? That online discussions would invite the marginalized? That computers would bring power to writing teachers? These hopes, however extreme they may now seem, became in their time powerful agents for good. I now read these antique hopes as the sign and cause of some very good and inspired teaching. Behind each of these research projects is a teacher, or a team of teachers, working closely with student writers and reflecting on their practice. This has been the most powerful local effect of the journal at my home institution. The conversations my colleagues and I have had with members of the *Computers and Composition* community and the possibility of publication in the journal have kept us reflectively at our teaching and our research. At the University of Massachusetts, our computer classrooms are still a place where teachers and writers meet to talk about writing, about teaching, and about teaching with computers. We run seminars on designing web pages on using tables, databases, and spreadsheets; and on adding graphic dimensions to our understandings of what writing might be—all in the context of teaching writing with technology. So if many of the hopes that I’ve catalogued here have turned out to be ultimately “fond” hopes, they have still given us the energy to pursue our inquiries, from the earliest research on the effects of word-processing to the latest scholarship focused on questions of access and equity.

As I try to set these hopes in an appropriate perspective, I’m reminded of James Britton’s (1970) almost-conclusion to *Language and Learning*, written in the middle of the anti-Vietnam war protests and, in England, a powerful and often violent youth movement. Coming characteristically to the defense of the upcoming generation, Britton asked us “finally to admit that,

among the injustices and extravagances of the young people's revolution, demands are being made that represent fragments of the world we have always wanted" (pp. 269–270). I'd offer a contemporary paraphrase of Britton's words: In our writing and research in this journal we've often made and tried to support extravagant claims for technology's value and potential. But driving this writing and this research has been our vision of a better society, the image of a world we have always wanted. *Computers and Composition* has given us a place where we describe, share, and critique these images, and by doing so bring them closer to reality.

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