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### Statement on Technology and Pedagogy

Over the past six years, I have taught a variety of courses at the University of Texas at Austin and at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. I enjoy experimenting with different media as they become available, and my pedagogy employs the Internet, blogs, instant-chat, wikis, and other innovations as tools to help us accomplish specific rhetorical goals. My experiences using technology in the classroom have taught me several important lessons.

“Less is more.” The inclusion of a few selected applications or strategies goes a long way toward serving specific rhetorical purposes and helping students adapt to, rather than be intimidated by, the technology. I aim to help students develop confidence with the new equipment by introducing it in small segments related to other course activities. For example, when we prepare to do peer review, I first ask them to read the instructions for “commenting” in Microsoft Word for homework. In class I then walk them through the instructions, how to save the documents with appropriate naming conventions, and how to view the comments themselves.

“Back-up your work.” I confess; I used to be a techno-phobe. I remember sneaking hand-written drafts into my ninth-grade English class just so I could avoid being forced to compose on the computer screen itself. I couldn’t even type then, and my brain seemed to go as blank as the screen when I was asked to write in class. I took my first multi-media design class a decade ago, and even then the thought of learning so many technological commands made me nervous. I was afraid I would muck up the hard-won designs I had created, or worse yet, I would accidentally lose the whole project in a saving snafu. Consequently, I empathize with my students who are initially fearful of the technology. Since it took me years to learn how to be more comfortable and patient with the process of hands-on learning, I try to make the transition easier for them by requiring them to save early and often.

“Have a plan B (and C).” After losing my personal hard-drive twice and walking into a technology classroom that was experiencing “technical difficulties” more times than I count, I have learned the importance of back-up not just for one’s work, but also teaching in the technology classroom. As I often tell my students, if you expect something to go wrong, you can be satisfied in having your expectations fulfilled when it does, and pleasantly surprised if it doesn’t—a double win situation. When I have planned lessons that depend upon the technology, I always come in with a set of photocopied questions or highlighted passages that can be used to spark class discussion in the event that the technology fails us. Whether it’s small scale (as in the VCR does not function), or larger scale (the server is down and we cannot access the drafts we intended to peer review), I try to stay calm, crack a joke or two, and transition to the alternate activity planned for the day. In this way, I model that technology failures are not disastrous as long as one is prepared for them (i.e., by retaining back-up copies of all one’s work and making sure there is second way to accomplish the same goal—using hard copies for peer review).

“Be flexible and open to experiment, play, and change.” Technology can be a lot of fun and necessitates a willingness to be open to learning new things all the time. Software and hardware are constantly evolving, and each year brings new releases and more to learn. Since I’m a slow learner of technology myself, I often find that my students often know more than I do about specific applications or tools. As I allow them to take the lead in teaching me and the other students how to work smarter rather than harder, our use of technology underscores how collaborative learning operates and how valuable student contributions really are. My flexibility allows me to switch gears in the middle of class to follow a discussion thread students’ have begun, and also to adjust deadlines and course assignments to enable students to learn the most from them.

Since my courses use technology to further course goals, it is not surprising that the lessons I have learned from my experimentation with it are equally applicable to the traditional classroom. Whether I’m teaching in a computer-classroom or outside on the lawn, I try to implement these lessons. Whenever I am willing to follow a class on the path it chooses rather than forcing a lesson plan upon them, I find that our discussions are more interesting, students are more engaged, and we all challenge each other to learn a little bit more.