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## THE TRIANGLE OF ORGANIZED LABOR, WRITING INSTRUCTION, AND EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY

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Chris Anson's 1999 *College English* article "Distant Voices: Teaching and Writing in a Culture of Technology" (61.3: 261-280) concentrates on the ways new technologies, especially technologies of distance education, could undermine the quality of writing instruction. He is specifically concerned that "new technologies introduced with the overriding goal of creating economic efficiencies and generating increased revenues may lead to even greater exploitation in the area of writing instruction" (263). In the triangle that is formed by distance education technology, good writing instruction, and faculty labor conditions, Anson suggests that the potentially negative effects of distance education on writing instruction and labor conditions can be controlled by a critical assessment of the ways each technology is used. I argue, however, that deciding on the labor conditions under which we will use distance education is a better way to support good teaching than making "decisions about the worth of each [technological] innovation" (Anson 275).

Anson defines the essential methods and foundational assumptions of good writing instruction:

...that students learn well by reading and writing with each other, responding to each other's drafts, negotiating revisions, discussing ideas, sharing perspectives, and finding some level of trust as collaborators in their mutual development. (269)

Because "[t]eaching in such contexts is interpersonal and interactive," this kind of writing instruction necessitates "small class size and a positive relationship between the teacher and the student" (269). Anson acknowledges that educational technology certainly can and has been effectively integrated into high-quality, interactive writing instruction; he only feels an "ideological clash" when "the prospect of fully interactive, technologically advanced distance learning conflicts with our most principled educational theories" (273).

Faced with this conflict, Anson exhorts us not to "let the [communications and information] revolution sweep over us. We need to guide it," he says, "resisting its economic allure in cases where it weakens the principles of our teaching" (275). He assures writing teachers that the processes of technology "will not threaten us as long as we, as educators, make decisions about [...] ways to put it to good use, or about reasons why it should be rejected out of hand" (275-6).

But can assessing the worth of a technological innovation assure good teaching? In my own experience teaching writing through distance education—specifically, a web-based course using interactive e-mail—I was not able to sustain the kind of personal interaction and feeling of collaboration I usually experience in

the classroom. Although I spent many hours working on the course, I felt my teaching was not as effective at a distance as it was on campus. But there are many other teachers who successfully use these same distance education technologies to create a truly interactive and collaborative experience. As this example suggests, decisions about the worth of a particular technological innovation are too broad to be useful. On the other hand, decisions about each particular use of a technology for writing instruction are too local and specific to provide a general principle for resistance in the face of a sweeping revolution.

Anson thinks that the "key to sustaining our pedagogical advances in the teaching of writing [...] will be to take control of these technologies, using them in effective ways and not, in the urge for ever-cheaper instruction, substituting them for those contexts and methods that we hold to be essential for learning to write" (263). But this argument suggests that if it can be shown that a particular technology is being used in ways that enable students to read, write, revise, share, discuss and collaborate together in a group small enough for a teacher to interact with the students on a personal level, then that use of the technology meets the criteria of effective writing instruction, no matter how cheaply the instruction may be bought.

Anson's main concern when it comes to cheap labor is that "part-time telecommuters supplied with the necessary equipment, could become the primary providers of instruction to many students" (274). However, the technology that allows telecommuting isn't the problem here. Anson knows the possibility that a university might staff its writing courses with part-time telecommuters "is directly linked to employment practices at hundreds of colleges and universities, where large numbers of service professionals, a majority of them women, are hired into low-paid, non-tenurable positions with poor (or no) benefits" (275). If good writing instruction depends on the quality of faculty interaction, which in turn depends on the material conditions under which teachers work, then it is the low pay and the lack of job security that are the problem. Yes, distance education technologies could be used to further exploit this situation, but they could also come as a great relief to a part-time teacher who can exchange "freeway-flying" for tele-commuting, perhaps spending more time writing to students than driving between institutions.

Assessing the technology and deciding how to use it for good teaching won't necessarily improve existing labor conditions, but articulating acceptable labor conditions for using distance education can directly support good teaching by protecting the interactive nature of writing classes and supporting teachers. An example of how this can happen is the distance education article in the *Agreement Between Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties and State System of Higher Education* (the full text of which is available at [www.apscuf.com](http://www.apscuf.com)). APSCUF negotiates with the State System to specify working conditions, including pay, benefits, and procedures for tenure and promotion, for faculty at the 14 state-owned Universities which began as Normal Schools or Teacher's Colleges.

Our contract protects tenure-track faculty positions by limiting the use of part-time and adjunct labor, while graduate students are prohibited from teaching at all but the one PhD granting institution in the System. As a result, first-year writing is taught almost exclusively by tenured or tenure-track English department faculty. Composition is typically half of a 4/4 teaching load, which usually includes general education literature as well as English major courses. As the Director of Composition, I have one non-instructional assignment, resulting in a 3/3 load with administrative responsibilities. In my department, my colleagues—almost every one tenured or tenure-track—normally teach 120 to 130 students each semester.

APSCUF first introduced language about distance education technology in their 1990 contract negotiations. From July 1990 through June 1996, our contract included a provision covering "long distance education" using such technologies as satellite link-ups, cable TV, and computers. The contract stipulates that the purpose of distance education was "to enrich and to increase" curriculum offerings, not to "reduce, eliminate or consolidate faculty positions" (Article VII:H.2). Our local union president explained that these provisions were initiated by faculty who were interested in promoting distance

education, but who wanted labor safeguards in place first. In 1990, the contract couldn't have predicted or assessed the many technological innovations to come in the next six years, but it did set the precedent of defining labor conditions for using distance education technology.

In the 1996 contract, Distance Education warranted an entire article to itself, Article 42. Distance education is defined not by a specific technology but as "mediated communication/ instruction between faculty member(s) and student(s) other than when faculty member(s) and student(s) are physically present in the same classroom. This linkage with technology allows real time or delayed interaction using voice, video, data and/or text" (42:A.1.a). Examples of such technologies, including satellite transmission, e-mail and CD-ROM are listed, but the article is intended "to cover distance education by other technologies as they develop" (42:A.1.a). Instead of focusing on specific technologies, the contract specifies criteria for approving distance education courses, including use of a qualified instructor, "suitable technology as a substitute for the traditional classroom," and "suitable opportunity for interaction between instructor and student" (42:B.2). The Article precludes the prospect of part-time telecommuters teaching distance education courses by defining the instructor of record as "the faculty member(s) who has the task of grading students and otherwise supervising the offering" of a course, and stipulating that "in no event shall a person who is not a faculty member be the instructor of record" (42:A.5). The Article further guarantees that "teaching through distance education technology shall be voluntary" (42:C.1).

During our contract negotiations in 1999, the distance education article nearly brought us to the brink of a strike. We'd started the academic year without a contract, the previous one having expired in June. At our University's opening meeting in August, our local union president had warned faculty to save three months' salary in case of a strike. Negotiations had dragged on through September, and in October, the union called for a strike authorization vote, which was supported by an overwhelming majority of the membership. In the week that followed, we prepared for a strike, signing up for shifts on the picket line and setting up alternate e-mail accounts in case we were denied access to the university computer system. Faculty were advised to delete course materials from our office computers and to take our gradebooks home to make it more difficult for a replacement to teach our courses.

I went home on October 19, 1999, not sure if I'd be back on campus the next day or not, not sure if I'd get my next paycheck or not. No wonder I cried with relief the next morning in my kitchen when I heard on the radio it was all over. After settling a difficult health insurance issue, our union had held out over a proposed restructuring of the faculty pay scale that would have disadvantaged newer hires, finally agreeing to a compromise. The other article settled on that very last day of negotiations covered labor conditions for faculty teaching through distance education.

The 1999 distance education article closely followed the 1996 agreement, but with some notable additions. A Preamble was added that directly addresses one of the concerns Anson raises. He fears that in distance education, "there is no doubt that the physical isolation of each individual from the others creates an entirely different order of interaction" (269). The Preamble states, "The parties agree that the method of classroom instruction with the faculty member and the traditional residential and commuter students in the same room provides the best opportunity for a quality educational experience. Distance education is not intended to diminish that experience" (42:A.2). Anson also reminds us that "The quality of faculty interaction with students is a product of our work—our training, the material conditions at our universities, [and] how much support we get for developing our teaching" (273). The 1999 contract directly addresses these labor issues, stipulating that "Prior to teaching a distance education course, a faculty member shall be afforded the opportunity for appropriate training in distance education instruction or the use of a technology" (42:C.2) and that the "University shall assure the availability of technical support personnel and materials" (42:D.1).

Anson claims that "The standards of work defined by the Conference on College Composition and Communication have not anticipated a new vision of writing instruction involving low-paid reader-

responders, tutorial assistants' for CD-ROM courses taken virtually by independent study, or coordinators at interactive television sites where students from many campuses link to a single site requiring only one master professor" (274). The 1999 APSCUF contract does, however, define precisely these standards, and it was these provisions that were the last to be resolved. Under the terms of the contract, faculty members teaching distance education courses receive their base pay in addition to \$100.00 for each remote site, \$500.00 for up to 10 students at the remote site and \$40.00 for each additional student, but that individual web site users are not considered remote sites (42:I.2). Should a faculty member be "requested by management to record a course without a class present" the faculty member receives the same workload hours as if the class was there (42:I.4), and if the course is reused "by someone other than the originating faculty member, he or she "shall be compensated \$40.00 per student" (42:I.5). Finally, faculty who develop a distance education course receive a "distance education preparation payment of \$2,000.00" (42:I.6) which is renewable every three years.

By reiterating our commitment to interactive teaching, and by specifying the labor conditions under which we will use distance education technologies, our faculty contract protects the working conditions and educational contexts compositionists value for teaching writing. Rather than making "decisions about the worth of each [technological] innovation" (Anson 275), our contract resists the economic lure of the information revolution by defending the worth of our labor. In turn, the conditions set forth in our contract need to be defended in every round of negotiations, and ultimately this means taking the risk of withholding our labor, refusing to work under conditions that undermine good teaching.

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