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Notes to Teachers about Technology

WHEN TECHNOLOGY GOES BAD

What to do when the computer classroom lets you down.

I have a confession to make: as much as I love technology, as often as I use computers, I still sometimes *dread* taking my class to the computer classroom. It's not that I don't know what to do when we're in there; I mean, lots of the activities I use in my regular classroom are easily adapted to the electronic environment. No, it's not that. You see, I'm scared. I'm scared things won't work, printers won't print, the Web will be down, the screen sharing software will freeze, the logins won't login, and suddenly 22 eager faces will be looking at *me* for the answers. And let me tell you, as good as I am with computers, I don't have all the answers.

But I still believe in using the computer classroom. I love being in a new space (it seems to enliven the class). I love giving my students practice with technological literacy. And I love what happens when it all *works*. So I've started coming up with back up plans, just in case nothing works. It hasn't erased my dread, but it sure has eased it.

My basic strategy is to always have what we've been discussing in class in mind. That way, I can turn any technological disaster into a pedagogical triumph by keeping the class on task while showing my students that what we discuss in that little box of a classroom reverberates out into the real world. Since I'm teaching 101 this semester, I thought I would share my emergency back up plans with everyone. Once you get a sense of how it works, I suspect you'll find ways to adapt it to your own class.

This semester I started with Boyarin, so if things crashed in the lab I would have quickly turned it into a discussion about portable landscapes: what is the portable landscape of our class? How can we recreate our class community in this new (and suddenly seemingly hostile) environment? I taught Gould next, which provided a perfect back up plan: what kind of evolution do computers seem to be following? Bill Gates *et. al.* would have us believe that things are getting better and better with each new software release, but is that the case? What are the narratives we've been told about the evolution of computers, and what is the reality? My third essay is Stille, and that quotation about the "themepark of failed technology" is all I need to turn the class around if needed.

Lots of other essays from *The New Humanities Reader* lend themselves to pedagogical discussions in a buggy computer classroom: Abram and Western reliance on technology, Drucker and the pitfalls of a knowledge society, Gladwell and the power of context, Henderson and the dangers of electronic democracy, Petroski and the role of failure in engineering, and more.

What's most important to me in all this is to remember a few basic tenets that diffuse my fear while in the computer classroom:

1. I'm the teacher, not the technician.

It's not my role to run around unjamming jammed disks or reconfiguring the printer's IP address, and I shouldn't feel that it is. If something goes wrong, I'll help if I can. But if I can't, I'll make do as best I can while filling out the support request form or contacting Russell Clarke. I make it clear to my students, too, that I am not the techie, just someone who uses technology. In that sense I share with them the little things I've learned the hard way, like save your work *frequently*.

2. My regular classroom sees failure, too.

It's not just the computer classroom—things fail all the time in my regular classroom. I have groups that don't stay on task, I have exercises that don't get results, and I've even had essay questions that turn out to be disasters. Yet I don't let any of that stop me from trying group work, inventing new exercises, or thinking up new questions. I've come to trust in my skills as a teacher, and what I try to remember is that those skills are valid no matter what classroom I'm in.

Let me let you all in on a secret: the computer classrooms are always underused. Sure, during some periods it seems like you can't make a reservation to save your life, but the overall data shows that those computer classrooms are empty all too often. I'm not sure what keeps people away. I do know that for a long time my own fears did. I don't let that stop me any more, and I hope it's not what's stopping you.

—Barclay