

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 8 / NUMBER 1 • SEPTEMBER 2003



Paperless Courses: Of Utility and Responsibility

Selma Moss-Ward

English

True confessions: in the past six years I've taught eighteen writing courses, and not marked a single paper. That's because my students' essays are sent to me as Microsoft Word files attached to emails.

The benefits of reading students' writing and commenting on it on a computer screen are profound. I offer my *modus operandi* to demonstrate how the Eudora and Word programs have transformed my teaching and organization.

First day of class: After giving an overview of the course, I hand out an information sheet (the *only* sheet of paper I distribute!) that includes my email address, a list of required texts, and instructions for using Tracking, a utility of Microsoft Word. Then I pass around an email-address sign-up sheet. I tell students that if they want to practice using the Tracking system by sending me test documents, to do so any time before the first assignment is due.

After class I go to my computer, make a bulk email address list for the class, and email all of the students the course syllabus as an attached file.

Rest of the semester: Outside of class and individual conferences, I communicate with my students by email. I send them course materials, articles and websites of interest, announcements of relevant events, reminders of what will happen in class and assignment due dates, and of course I return their essays, by Eudora attachment, with detailed comments. As the students' work comes to me (submission deadlines specified by date and time), I create a computer folder for each person, with many subfolders. The subfolders are divided by category of assignment and sometimes the month in which the assignment is due. Here's an example from my Creative Nonfiction (CNF) course:

Jane Doe (Jane's personal folder containing all her subfolders)

- **Brief Essays** (subfolder containing nine assignments)
- **Longer Pieces** (subfolder containing three assignments and various drafts of the assignments)
- **Edits** (subfolder containing Jane's editing of her classmates' workshop pieces filed in subfolders for February, March, April, and May)
- **Portfolios** (subfolders marked Midterm and Final).

The benefits of this system are pedagogical and organizational. For example, the folders' contents allow me a developmental view of Jane's work through the semester, and when Jane comes to my office, having forgotten the essay we'd planned to discuss, I've got it on my computer. And, when I prepare to comment on a revision of an essay, I open the earlier draft and review my initial comments before starting the next round. There are sixteen student folders like Jane's in my CNF folder under the rubric of **Student Work**. The CNF folder also contains my class plans filed by date, sign-up sheets for conferences, a schedule of workshop presentations (two per student), a grade sheet, and miscellaneous documents that I've found on the Web.

Ok, the skeptics are thinking, so she's Little Professor Organized with a fancy filing system. So what? And what the heck is this Tracking and what does she mean by jargon like "utility"?

First, it's a truth universally acknowledged that many academics aren't orderly types. I'm not naming names, though I'll admit that by October my desk resembles the English department's recycling bin, despite my best intentions in September. The advantage of the computer folder system is that it organizes one's work easily, clearly, and with no chocolate mess. By going to the Finder→File→New Folder (for Macs) or Start→Explore→Select→My Documents→File→New Folder (for PCs), it's simple to create a folder (named for your course) and another folder within it, ad infinitum, like nesting boxes. And...you never lose anything! (To dispel the fear of computer crash-and-burn cherished by so many technophobes, I'll note that the solution is to back up one's work on a CD or zip drive. Your department's computer coordinator (DCC) can help you with this.)

Second, Tracking is a miracle utility—a term I will shortly define—in terms of efficiency, visual clarity, and level of text penetration. Open a Word document. Find the heading marked "Tools" on the menu, click to open, then click on Track

Changes→Highlight Changes. The utility called Tracking has been activated. (A utility is an embedded function of a software program. The more familiar Spell-Check is another kind of embedded function.) Now place your cursor anywhere and start writing. Your exegesis appears in one color (selected by you, by clicking the Options button on the Track Changes command screen), and strike-outs in a different color, also of your choice. When you're done, save the document.

So, you write your sentence-level or general comments on a student's essay using Tracking, and return it to the student. Then the student may choose to make suggested changes by going to the Tracking menu and clicking on Accept or Reject Changes.

The procedure is much easier than driving a car or operating a microwave, and safer. But it is impressively powerful. One reason: typing, for many, is faster and less tiring than handwriting. Also, it's easier to say more when typing because it keeps pace better with one's thoughts than when one writes longhand, and has the added bonus of legibility. Another reason: students *love* getting the depth of attention possible when writer's cramp does not hamper professorial annotations. Thus a conversation between professor and student emerges—the professor dialogues with the student, saying (inferentially, through her attentive comments), I'm engaged with your ideas, here are my responses to the way you're thinking—and then the ball goes back to the student's court when the essay is returned.

Not all courses allow the multiple revisions integral to a writing course. Nonetheless, across the disciplines professorial comments tend to be pithy (to say the least), and that an instructor has done *more* than put check-marks in the margins to denote points of agreement, and written "Good solid work!" at the end, sends a distinctive, validating message commensurate with the student's own effort.

Colleagues, I'll never go back to paper. That would be like renouncing my car for a horse and buggy. To move from point A to point B to point A (student to teacher to student) this modus operandi is palpably superior to any prior assignment-collection system. Apart from the stated benefits of Tracking, Folders, and Eudora for organization and deep editing, the combination of programs works for my purposes more effectively than a mega-organizer like WebCT, a program that provides too many options for my taste, although it may be useful for large lecture courses. Ultimately the preferred technology reflects the instructor's pedagogical and organizational needs, and tolerance of software complexity. But the novices and

intermediates among us are well served by the easy-to-operate programs I've discussed. And not a single tree has been sacrificed in the process.