



Faculty Forum

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A Short History of Technology

While reading the *New Yorker* the other day, I noticed the following advertisement for the Omas fountain pen: "Omas: The Epitome of Fine Writing Instruments, Synonymous with Excellence and Elegance, Official Writing Instrument of the 2003 New Yorker Festival."

At the end of a frustrating day with viruses, worms, and patches, this ad reminded me of my first brush with technology in school: the Shaefer fountain pen. In grammar school, eons before computers and the Internet both simplified and complicated my life, the nuns ruled with rules and rulers, demerits and God, and we Catholic school children sat straight-backed in our seats, feet flat on the floor, with half-pint bottles of navy-blue ink, ready to start the day. By 6th grade, ink cartridges had replaced the messy inkwells and bottles, and by high school, ballpoint pens, previously considered for Protestants only, were permitted. I went to public school for the first time in my junior year and took typing, not an option at St. John's, but the most useful course in my high school curriculum. At least, I still use it today.

In college, I typed papers on a portable Royal typewriter, often in duplicate or triplicate, through messy carbon paper, lifting each layer to make corrections. Later, "white out" made my life simpler and I dispensed with the carbons; instead, I covered up mistakes with the miracle substance. Futuristic electric typewriters, with correct-tape--way too expensive to own--foretold an increasingly convenient and efficient world. During my early years as a public school teacher, I learned about the new world of educational technology--teaching machines designed for film strips, programmed lessons, instructional videos, and the like. These devices were bad; yet, it was said that they were going to replace human teachers.

I came to WCU in 1989, at the dawning of the age of a PC on every desk and easy access to the Internet. At the time, no one in my department knew how to use computers for anything but rudimentary word processing. Over the next five years, we became adept at and dependent on these technological marvels. No longer did the secretary type tests, duplicate purple copies or enter grades by hand. And the past 10 years have seen a virtual technology explosion. Suddenly, a new, updated computer was available every other year. Power-Point reared its ugly head and some faculty, trying valiantly to keep up with technology, formatted all their class lectures as Power-Point presentations. Pretty soon, textbooks came with ready-made Power-Point. Faculty web pages started to surface. Course software became readily available, and I actually set up all my courses on Blackboard.com (before they started charging and WCU decided to use WebCT instead). I downloaded full-text articles, inadvertently conspiring with my students to quit using the library. And, of course, I used email. I used email to contact students, friends and the faculty next-door. And many of my colleagues jumped right into distance learning. Approaching the new millennium, WCU was dubbed the Most Wired Small Campus by Yahoo, adopting the "high touch, high tech" slogan, and every first year student was required to have a PC. Billboards in Raleigh now portray WCU as a university high in academics and technology.

This summer, with much trepidation, I decided to put a course on WebCT. Well, I should clarify: Linda Venturo skillfully walked me through putting a course on WebCT. And walked with me all summer. It was what is called a "web-enhanced" course. I was definitely not ready to try a totally web-based course. As this semester got underway, I was surprised by the sheer number of technology problems I encountered, and I sometimes wonder if it's worth all the effort.

Scenario #1: My students have to demonstrate technology competence, so I figured it was high time for me to be a good role model. I decided to rejuvenate my web page and Laura Chapman sat patiently with me for hours in my office and later talked me through questions on the phone. After spending hours setting up web and course pages, I got to my 5:00 class in Asheville, ready to project. It turned out that although my room was wired, it did not have a projector. The projector could not be installed until a theft-proof cage and lock were installed. But Nick, the graduate student, was immediately at my service with a portable cart. He plugged in all the wires, and I was ready to roll, again. I eagerly clicked on my web page. The computer message said: *Page not found*. I had some students click on their webpages which appeared instantly. I somewhat frantically called Laura, from my cell phone, and asked, "Where's my web page?" Since I always have a Plan B, (an old public school teacher trick) I taught my class with chalk that night. The next day I found out that the "VMS system" (whatever that means) was down. Laura came back and helped me put my webpages on the "PAWS system." It will take hours to change all my links over to PAWS, so right now my webpage is a two-system hybrid.

Scenario # 2: I tried to send my freshman seminar some links on research about small schools. I clicked on Cybercat Pipeline, composed a message and sent it to my class. It would not go. I wasted an hour trying to send the links, only to find out, once again, that the system was down. I finally linked it to my paws webpage but forgot to tell my students about my new webpage address. And, in class the next day, half of them reminded me that their WCU email accounts had not yet started to function.

Scenario #3: I planned to show a video documentary to my freshman seminar, but the TV in my classroom is only 19 inches wide, too small for the students in the back of the room. I scouted all the classrooms on the hall, and confiscated the biggest one. After untangling and plugging the wires in, I found that it played only video disks. I had to start the hunt all over, but, luckily, I had started the search 15 minutes before class began and found one not being used.

These are just a few of the technology frustrations I've had this semester. I know the ITS department has been overwhelmed with 5000+ service calls, and the viruses, worms, crashes and glitches are not unique to WCU. Every time I've had a problem, the technology faculty have been remarkably pleasant, very competent, and always helpful. I think it would behoove us all, though, to start early, always have a Plan B, and remember that technology is no substitute for pedagogy; unlike chalk, technology is unreliable.

I love the computer and technological conveniences--when they work. On some days, though, I'd just like to go back to fountain pens, talking to people face-to-face, and mechanical clocks. But then I look at the clocks in Killian and see that it's 9:45 on the first floor, 11:15 on the second, and 10:30 on the third.

Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, Educational Leadership & Foundations

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