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## The evolution of the Computers and Writing Conference, the second decade

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### Abstract

This article, written for the twentieth anniversary of the Computers and Writing Conference, is the sequel to “The Evolution of the Computers and Writing Conference” (*Computers and Composition*, 12(3), November, 1995). The earlier article analyzed many of the intellectual concerns, values, and language expressed in presentations at the Computers and Writing Conference from 1982 to 1994. This article does the same for the second ten conferences, 1995–2004. Throughout the second decade, we have developed a new comfort with computers, expanded our idea of “writing” beyond the traditional essay, and gained a respected place in the academy. Computers and writing has become an institution. At the same time, we sometimes worry about losing control over our teaching and can feel overwhelmed by the size of the task we undertake. Many of our values have stayed the same; however, we are optimistic about the place of technology in our work and in the culture at large, we love to experiment, and we routinely weave ideas from other disciplines and other areas of our lives into our computers and writing research.

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### 1. Prologue

In 1994, at the 10th anniversary of the Computers and Writing Conference, I described the trends I saw developing through the conference’s history, and I promised myself that at the 20th conference, I’d do the sequel to that talk—computers and writing, the next ten years.<sup>1</sup> This article is an expanded version of that presentation.

Before I discuss the conference itself, I’d like to tell you how I ended up in computers and writing. When I started graduate school in 1969, I had never seen a computer. My first encounter with digital information occurred in 1971 when I punched Hollerith (IBM) cards

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the sequel to “The Evolution of the Computers and Writing Conference,” (1995) *Computers and Composition*, 12(3).

with the research I was doing for a history professor. I submitted the cards to a human and the next day received output in the form of wide, green-striped tractor feed paper. I had no idea how the cards transformed themselves into printouts and I didn't really care. I was just making a living while conducting the rest of my life, which at the time consisted of graduate school and working in the anti-war and feminist movements. Computers were the last things on my mind.

But by the time I began writing my dissertation in 1975, academic jobs had largely disappeared. I had been told that people with a foreign language background made good programmers, so I decided to do two things: finish my degree in comparative literature and then look for a job in the computer industry. By the late 1970s, I was learning what I could about binary arithmetic and COBOL but writing my dissertation by hand on a yellow pad. Every night I typed it up on a typewriter and each morning cut it up with scissors, threw the rejected pieces in the trash, and reorganized the remaining parts with Scotch tape.

I finished my Ph.D. in 1979 and expected to leave academia. But in 1980, I was hired by UCLA to help develop their new writing program and specifically to design a technology-enriched curriculum. Because this was a temporary position,<sup>2</sup> I took courses in data processing and the languages PL/1 and Pascal—still preparing for my departure from academe. But just in case I ended up staying there, I wrote my first academic article based on my dissertation, “Romantic Heroines in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Feminist View” (Gerrard, 1984). I wrote “Romantic Heroines” on a yellow pad, but I typed it on my department's dedicated word processor, a computer that did only one thing, word processing (the brand name was NBI, which stood for “nothing but initials”), and stored it on an 8-inch floppy disk—single-sided, single-density, 128 bytes. The NBI had been purchased for the clerical staff, but faculty were permitted to use it after 5:00 p.m. and on weekends. It was counter-intuitive, persnickety, and prone to failure, and I loved it—this was my first computers and writing experience.

Meanwhile, I was teaching with computers for the first time. In 1980, computers and writing meant figuring out what you could do with a mainframe computer. I had my students type their papers on remote terminals connected to a mainframe, an IBM 3033. Students used a text editor, Wylbur (named after one of the Wright brothers; there was a companion product, Orville), which was designed for inputting code—that is, it was written for programmers, not writers, and it was not meant to be a word processor. Students would run a separate program (Script) to format the paper and another program to print it, and with luck, their printouts appeared in a bin across campus in the Math Sciences building a few hours later—or in some cases, never. All the pages were attached to each other accordion style, and students had to separate them and tear off the strips that had attached the paper to the printer's tractor feed.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1980, faculty in the Writing Programs were hired for one-year positions that could be renewed annually to a maximum of four years. Over the years, the terms of appointment have changed several times so that several of us, hired for a year or two in 1980, are still teaching in the program. Currently, our positions are governed by a union contract: All Writing Programs faculty are hired as lecturers for one-year positions that can be renewed yearly for six years; in the sixth year, they can apply for a “continuing appointment” that is still temporary but continues as long as their performance is evaluated as “excellent” and the university believes it has “programmatic need” for their work.

This method was not as awful as it sounds, but it did leave a lot to be desired.<sup>3</sup> So, in 1982, I worked with a team to design software specifically for student writers called WANDAH<sup>4</sup> (Von Blum & Cohen, 1984). And in October 1982, my co-developers on WANDAH went to a conference on computers and writing at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

By 1982, there had already been a few conferences on computers and writing, mostly for K-12, so it would be inaccurate to say that the Minneapolis meeting was literally the first computers and writing conference. But it was the first in what became a series organized and attended by many of the same participants. The first conference, small and informal, had no program and a flexible agenda. The organizers, Lillian Bridwell and Donald Ross, had invited ten to twelve faculty software developers from English departments around the country to talk about their work. A year and a half later, in April 1984, the University of Minnesota hosted a follow-up meeting with about two hundred and fifty participants that became the first *full-scale* conference and the model for all those that followed it.<sup>5</sup> Its program was six pages long. The 1984 conference was the first one I attended.

Since then, I've attended every Computers and Writing, and relying partly on notes I took at each conference and mostly on the printed programs, I've isolated some of the issues that have concerned us as a group during the second decade.

## 2. The conference, 1994–2004

### 2.1. Expanding concept of “computers and writing”

Over the past decade we have enlarged our definition of “writing”. In the early 1980s, we defined computers and writing as one of two practices: students’ use of computers (by which we meant word processors, invention aids, and style checkers) to write conventional academic essays, or researchers’ use of computers to track keystrokes as a way to study students’ composing processes. In both cases, the *writing* we were talking about was a traditional essay, a typed document with paragraphs and margins that made its final appearance as black text on white paper.

Though we still call those artifacts “writing,” we’ve also embraced other creations as writing: PowerPoint presentations, blogs, iMovies, zines, and MOO rooms, among other documents. While our colleagues at home may wonder what any of these efforts have to do with thesis statements and semicolons, we are comfortable assigning multimedia essays and spending class time teaching students how to create them. And we rarely question the legitimacy of this work as rhetorical training or the end products as writing.

<sup>3</sup> The Wylbur experiments were cumbersome by today’s standards, but students, used to pen, paper, and type-writer, were generally enthusiastic (Gerrard, 1982, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> At the time word processors were designed for secretaries rather than students and required users to remember a wide range of unmemorable commands. WANDAH combined a writer-friendly word processor with a suite of invention and revising tools. It ran on an IBM PC with 256K and two floppy drives.

<sup>5</sup> The Computers and Writing Conference has met every year since 1984, except for a two-year hiatus, 1987–1989.

This has not always been the case. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, we experimented with having students write their papers as hypertexts, using software such as StorySpace and HyperCard.<sup>6</sup> But some of us worried whether these were valid writing assignments. Did arranging their ideas in links really teach students about organization? Did designing a document that could be read in multiple ways teach students that meaning-making is a negotiation between writer and reader? (This was the heyday of reader response theory.) Was a hypertext a suitable substitute for a thesis-driven essay? We hoped the answer to these questions was “yes,” but we weren’t sure.

By the mid-90s, many of us began assigning Web pages in lieu of a paper. And we still worried if we were doing the right thing. Did creating a web page teach students to choose the right style for their audience? Did it teach them to understand visual materials as rhetoric? Or were students just having a good time uploading pictures of themselves and their friends with no carryover into their academic writing?

If we’re still worrying about those things, we’re not telling anyone here. We *assume* that when students build MOO rooms and Web pages they are creating rhetorical documents that are just as important to their development as rhetors as traditional essays. We have expanded the meaning of “writing” to include webbed as well as linear formats, materials beyond paper, pictures in addition to words, media that move and mutate as well as those that sit still and stay the same. This statement may sound like a truism to this audience, but such a notion of writing was inconceivable in 1982 and pretty radical in 1992. And in many English departments, it’s still a revolutionary idea.

## 2.2. *Fear of losing control*

I don’t mean to suggest, though, that we don’t worry about what we’re doing. We do. We always have. I noted ten years ago that fear of losing control was a consistent theme at our conference. It still is, but it takes a different form.

In the 1980s we worried that computers would take over our students’ writing, that students would lose control over their work, that invention aids would determine where their imaginations would go, and that style analyzers would automate revision. We had presentations such as “Word processing and thought control: The fearful side of technology” (Jobst, 1984) and this one, “The lure of the cursor, the fear of the byte” (Bullock, 1984). In 1984, we weren’t all that far from Hal the Computer.

Then in the early 1990s, we stopped worrying that computers would manipulate our students’ writing. Instead, we were concerned about how students would manipulate the technology, that they would abuse it by sending sexist, racist, or homophobic email or by distributing unauthorized text. And we had presentations like these: “The social consequences of virtual reality as a contact zone” (Downing, 1993), “Obscenity in the lab” (Cogdill, 1994), and “Ethics and writing with computers: Does technology control your classroom?” (Lopez, 1993).

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<sup>6</sup> StorySpace, developed by Jay Bolter, Michael Joyce, and John Smith and published by Eastgate Systems (1991), was initially designed for writing fiction that could be altered by the reader. HyperCard was developed by Bill Atkinson and published by Apple Computer in 1987.

We still worry about control, but the focus has shifted again. We know that computers won't write students' papers for them, and our students are for the most part well socialized in networked places, so we seem to worry less about antisocial behavior. But now we worry about two other forms of losing control.

One is that our institutions will control our computer-based teaching. In the 1980s, our institutions weren't all that interested in our computer experiments. As long as students weren't complaining and we weren't costing too much money, they left us alone. In fact, a persistent theme in that period was how to get our faculty colleagues interested in computers, and our administrators to take us seriously.

Well, our wish came partly true: Our administrators are now very interested in computer-based education and are spending lots of money on it. In 1997, a panel reminded us that the "price of technology" (Ruszkiewicz) is "not virtual money" (Searle). So now, visible and expensive, we worry that our schools will interfere with what we do; that they will foist poorly planned distance-learning courses on us or stick us with course management software we don't respect; that we'll be forced to use rigid online grading schemes, automated assessment programs, intrusive plagiarism software, or an entire canned curriculum; that a pedagogy once infused with individual personality will be replaced by a slick package in which "the course author is not the only instructor" (Rodrigues, 2001).

And we fear another kind of loss of control: being overwhelmed. In addition to worrying that our courses will be controlled by administrative fiat or ill-conceived software, we are also concerned about being overwhelmed by the size of the task we have undertaken. I see this concern in the language of many of the presentation titles—language that suggests being out of control, even chaos. We find ourselves "foiled again" (Snyder, 2001); tackling "mountains of papers" (Stockwell, 2002); getting "hurricane warnings" (Selfe, 1999); experiencing "the shock of hypermedia" (Doolen & Shear, 1995); "poised on the edge of chaos" (Cross, Fuglevik, & Walker, 1997); and asking ourselves "who's in charge here?" (Arca & Starer, 1997).

This fear of being overwhelmed comes from several sources. First of all, computers and writing has always been risky. We never know if the pedagogy will work; we can't even be sure the computers will work. The risk has been part of the fun and adventure, but it's also a cause of anxiety. The lab I teach in has sometimes been meticulously maintained and other times painfully neglected, and though I walk into the room with a detailed lesson plan, I'm never sure if I'm going to use it.

Furthermore, technology changes so quickly it has all of us scrambling to update our skills and apologizing for being behind. A new cyberspace course? We polish our Web designing, MOO building, and PowerPoint skills, and we try to catch up on our cyberspace reading. It's true that all teaching and research requires us to update what we know, but no field in the humanities changes as quickly as ours. So we ask ourselves to continually learn new kinds of software—software that gets increasingly powerful—and to know it well enough to teach it to students while still keeping up with trends in rhetoric and composition and any other fields we work in—women's studies, queer studies, ethnic studies, linguistics, literature. If our lab is refurbished, we adjust to a new operating system, a new version of Blackboard, and the quirks that go with wonderful—but increasingly complex—equipment. And when our labs are not well maintained and technical support is unreliable, we're on our own. All this change and uncertainty is exciting, but it is demanding. And it never ends.

If our material conditions have become more complex, so too have the political issues we grapple with. In the first decade, we wrote about who owns faculty developed software, how to fund a lab, issues of unequal access, creating safe online spaces for marginalized students, and how to get tenure with publications in computers and writing. These are significant issues, and most of them are still with us. But we have new ones, too, among them open source, unauthorized downloading, Web porn, relationships with corporate vendors, licensing agreements, labor practices, and distance education. In hard economic times, we worry if our institutions will be able to support our work or continue to see us as valuable to their mission. We know “we’re not a cheap date anymore” (Faigley, 1997) and wonder, “will you still love me tomorrow?” (Holdstein, 1996).

I see this feeling of being overwhelmed in the dire language of many of the presentation titles: speakers tell “bloodchilling tales” (Fischer, McAlpin, Archibald, Nolan, & Arms, 1996) of “electronic pros(ex)ecution” (Grigar, Haynes, Homevik, Barber, & Galin, 1996), “toxic classrooms” (Ghiaciuc, 2001), “Armageddon” (Kemp, 1998), “the death of [...] wizards” (Dorwick, 1998), and “disasters of unparalleled magnitude” (Dickson, 2000). They tell us that “fools rush in” (Dickson, 2002) and warn us to “beware the blog” (Duncan, 2001). They caution us, “lifeguards not on duty: enter at your own risk” (Loehr, 2001), that “you can run but you can’t hide” (Schneidhenhelm, Bowie, & Kowert, 1996), and they worry that we’re “caught in a cross current” (Allen, 2004) and “dancing with the devil” (Crane, 2004). For one speaker, the computers and writing experience was “building the monster” (Hoffman, 2002); for others it was a “cyber Scylla and cyber Charybdis” (Adams & Schonberg, 2001), and for another, the “invasion of the bodysnatchers revisited” (Monroe, 1995). This is the imagery of horror movies.

### 2.3. *Optimism*

But if we’re sometimes overwhelmed, we also love the excitement of being on what we repeatedly call a “frontier,” and here nothing has changed since 1982. Ten years ago, I noticed that our language over the first decade had been consistently saturated with optimism—we were crossing borders, widening horizons, breaking frames, “riding the beast.” And today as then, the presentation titles show this same exhilaration: We are “unlocking the promise” (Patterson, 2003); getting “wired, turned on, and tuned in” (Carroll et al., 1996); “constructing paradise” (Lantry, 1998); teaching “deeply, madly, electronically” (panel title, 1996); and experiencing “religious fervor [in] HTML editing environments” (Dorwick, 1997).

As in the first decade, this passionate optimism is often couched in the language of moving forward: One speaker tells us that “These boots were made for walkin’” (Walker, 2000); others that “we’re off to see the wizard” (Kemp, Lang, & Rickly, 2000) and “we’re not in Kansas anymore” (Austin, 2001). We’re “cruisin’ the virtual mall” (Allen, 1996), consulting “highway signs and road maps” (Browning, 1996), and “blazing trails up the digital divide” (panel title, 2001).

And we’re also using the language of play. We’re having fun. One speaker spoke of “doom, Myst, and dark forces” (Hatch, 1997); others described javascript as an “erector set for composition instruction” (Newmiller, 1997), compared chat to a card game in which participants decided “when to hold ‘em and when to fold ‘em” (Austin, 2003), or wrapped the presenta-



tion title in a baseball metaphor—“the pitch, the project in a project, and the playing field” (Kirkpatrick, 2003). In 1999, probably inspired by the conference site—the Rapid City conference was across the street from a Toys R Us—our town hall meetings were titled “computers R us?” and “we R computers?” Other speakers find in the computers and writing experience “the pixilization of meaning” (Susser, 1996), “flights of fancy” (Shear, 1996), a game of “what if?” (Bennion, 1996), or simply, “playing around” (Barber, 2003).

#### 2.4. *A new comfort with computers and writing*

This co-existence of fearful with optimistic/playful language suggests a new comfort with computers and writing—as if we are more secure about this field and feel freer to express doubt than we did before. Whatever our personal disasters in the classroom, the field is not going away. So when we write “strange days indeed” (Branscomb, 1997) or “help, my students are killing each other!” (Stevens, 1996), we know our moments of doubt and despair won’t discredit the entire enterprise. We no longer have to justify computers and writing.

This is the case, even though every conference program is riddled with ambivalence, we hear of “weaving and fraying” (Walter, Cogdill, & Kilborn, 2004); “rhetorical dislocation” (LeCourt, 1997); “dreams and rude awakenings” (Coffield, 1997); and “magic and misery” (panel title, 1997). The attitude can be resigned—“accidents will happen” (Carbone, 1997); tentative, “are we ready for this?—yes; do we know what we’re doing—not quite” (Carbone, 2001); cautious, “I don’t know about this” (Bates, 1997); or doubtful, “So where is the power in getting to the point?” (Hawkins, 2004). By describing our disasters as well as our moments of glory, this community shows that even when computers derail rather than enrich our teaching, we still believe in the value of technology. Otherwise, we wouldn’t bother coming to the conference and sharing our sad tale.

The ability to tolerate failures and express ambivalence suggests a comfortable relationship with computers and writing and a shift from the earliest years when computers were still alien forces. We often couch this familiarity in domestic imagery, imagery that did not exist in the 1980s. We use homey metaphors:

- from the *kitchen*, “Mix 1 part process, 1 part computer feedback, mix vigorously: bon appetit” (Warden & Yi-chien, 1997);
- from the *nursery*, “weaned away from print” (Kilbourn, 1995); “taking those first steps” (Papier, 1998);
- from the *bedroom*, “composition courses, Internet research and web publishing: Strange bedfellows or a marriage made in heaven?” (Ericsson, 1996);
- from the *farm*, “a homestead on the Web” (Crawford, 1997);
- from the *neighborhood*, “morphing onto a TechnoWonk without scaring the neighbors (Maid et al., 1997).

And familiar allusions:

- to *weddings*, “something old something new” (panel title, 2000);
- to domestic *crafts*, “origami, batik: folding resistance, and techneluddism” (Love, 1996), “connecting the quilts” (Reiss, 1998), “a hyperquilt of women’s voices” (Hawisher, 1999),

- “the fiber and fabric of instruction” (D’agostino, 1997), “weaving a web without getting stuck in the strands” (Eyman, 1996);
- to *nursery rhymes*, “leave them alone and they will come home” (Gingiss & Kemp, 1995);
  - to *fairy tales* “sheep in wolves’ clothing” (Killoran, 2001), “who’s afraid of the big, bad web?” (Gresham, 2001);
  - to familiar *homilies*: “Invention as the mother of necessity” (panel title, 1998), “What’s good for the goose is (not necessarily) good for the gander” (Rickly, 1995), “teaching old dogs new tricks” (Thompson, 1998), “by our bootstraps” (Essid, 2002), “you can lead the horse to water but you can’t make it drink” (panel title, 2004).

In addition to domestic language, we have an increase in images from nature and language that suggests that computers, like nature, are intrinsic to our lives. In the first decade, imagery from nature was sparse. In the second, we describe our work as “watering the wildflowers” (Lasarenko, 2000), developing an “ecology of understanding” (Rose, 2002), “weathering changes in the work climate” (panel title, 2001), and “plowing the fields of cyberspace” (Ghiaciuc, 2000). We compare computers and writing to “fertile ground” (Maher, 2001), “crop circles” (Collins, 2003), a “digital landscape” (Riddle & Sheesley, 2000), a “wildlife preserve” (Barndollar et al., 2000), and less romantically, “roadkill on the information superhighway” (Etheridge, 1995).

In the earliest years, we used almost no figurative language. Of the presentations in 1984, none of the seventeen session titles and only one of the fifty-one presentation titles included a figure of speech: Elray Pedersen’s allusion to *The Canterbury Tales* in “Computers: Gladly will they learn and gladly will they teach composition skills.” In 1985, none of the twenty-six session titles and only three of the seventy-six presentation titles were allusive: “The chicken and the egg: Theory and practice in teaching writing with word processing” (Schwartz), “The dark lady: WANDAH at UCLA” (Gerrard), and “Mom, Mikey and the machine” (Severn).<sup>7</sup> At the first few conferences, most of our titles were direct and unadorned: “Getting your Writing class into the computer lab” (1985), “Using the computer to make writing an adventure” (1986); “Text feedback: Uses and abuses” (1984), “Word processors: Thinking machines or adding machines?” (1985). Maybe we didn’t play with the language so much because we were already playing with the experience: Computers and writing was so new to us that the mere act of teaching with them was an adventure.

## 2.5. *We’ve become an institution*

If our language shows our comfort with computers and with computers and writing as a field, it’s partly because computers and writing has become established as a discipline. We’re an institution now. Ten years ago I noted that by the end of the first decade we had gone from the “lunatic fringe” of our respective English departments to a visible and less suspect subdiscipline of rhetoric and composition—we had produced a body of

<sup>7</sup> Severn refers to a popular advertisement for Life cereal that ran on TV from 1971 through 1987. In the ad, two little boys, afraid to try a cereal touted as healthy, offer it to their little brother, Mikey, who supposedly “hates everything.” When Mikey gobbles up the cereal, they shout, “He likes it! Hey Mikey!”



research, teaching practices, and lore; developed a self-consciousness as a field; and become an expected and respected presence at CCCC. Throughout this second decade we have become even more established. Not everyone will be happy to hear this—but we’ve gone mainstream.

Now we have mechanisms for acclimating newcomers to the conference and the field. In the beginning, everyone was a newcomer: Speaking of the 1982 conference, Lilly Bridwell Bowles said, “we were all novices; the experts were in the computer industry” (personal email, April 25, 1994). By 1989, a split opened between those who were just starting out and those who were eager to explore the next new thing. Participants on the listserv, Megabyte University, argued over whether the conference should make special provisions for those just beginning to teach with computers; Many felt that the conference should focus exclusively on recent technological developments and not try to bring newcomers up to speed. Since then, we’ve done both. Along with state of the art news in computers and writing, we offer a mentor program, workshops on functioning at our conference, workshops on getting published, the graduate Research Network, and for the first time in 2004, an eBay auction to help get graduate students to the conference.

The conference has also become a place to build a career. This was not the case in the early years. As you may remember, I thought of computers as my ticket out of academia, not as a savvy move up a ladder. In the 1980s, my colleagues laughed at me. By the second conference (1984) we were commiserating about how hard it was to get faculty on our home campuses to pay attention to what we were doing, let alone take it seriously, and about how resistant they were to training (we were surprisingly sure of ourselves!). By the third conference (1985), speakers were already writing about the perils of computer work at tenure time, about how their teaching was seen as faddish rather than enlightened, a distraction from the real work students should be doing. And publications in the field were difficult for our administrators to evaluate (there was no precedent) and were generally not valued as much as literary research. Only a few schools offered graduate programs in rhetoric and composition, and even fewer allowed for a specialization in technology.

Through the 1990s this situation changed radically. Though our institutions often did—and still do—find it difficult to evaluate computer-based scholarship, members of this community began to write dissertations in computers and writing and even to defend them online. Faculty members began to bring their graduate students to the conference by the van-full. The field grew a star system. The community began to give awards, and very generously: awards for best graduate research, service to the field, technology innovation, teaching, publishing, best dissertation, best Web text, K-16 participation, best article, best book or large digital project, best presentation at the online conference, technology product design, best academic Weblog, Web around the world, distinguished contributions to the field, and the “schmooze it or lose it” award for mentoring. These are a lot of awards for a small community.

Another sign that we have become established is that we have a history and an interest in our history. We began to reflect on our past on its tenth anniversary in 1994, and since then we have quite a few publications on this topic. In 2001, Dawn Rodrigues gave us a quiz to test our knowledge of our past. In 2003, newcomers who asked for a mentor were given a handout; “When I was a newbie: First-timer stories from C&W,” in which nine veterans of the conference described the thrill and terror of their first Computers and Writing Con-

ference. And in 2004, the organizers designed a blog where participants could share their reminiscences.

And we know we're established because commercial publishers are interested in us. In 1982, the organizers invited IBM, Xerox, and Apple. None of them came; they had no reason to see computers and writing as a market. Throughout the 1980s, publishers took huge risks trying to figure out how to protect the software they produced for writing classes and testing the market for the textbooks and guides that went with it. It wasn't clear that this field had a future, so it's not surprising that our earliest conferences had just a few commercial exhibits. In fact, most of the software we demonstrated was homemade, tied to the particular hardware configuration of the developers' school, incompatible with anyone else's system, and rarely available for purchase. In 1989, though, Apple, Daedalus, Garland, IBM, WW Norton, and Realtime Learning Systems all had tables at Computers and Writing, and Apple even donated a door prize—a Macintosh SE. Publishers have been an important presence ever since, and in the past ten years, as many as twelve publishers have exhibited at our conference at one time—not bad for a small specialized conference. Publishers have supported us in other ways as well, in some cases paying for our program, in others providing us door prizes, awards, meals, even parties, and giving us presents—a beach mat, tee shirts, mouse pads, tote bags.

We're also getting bigger. In 1994, I observed that we had grown in every way—the scope of our research, our goals, the breadth of our language (we were especially fond of the word *multi*), the number of presentations, the geographical location of the conference (from a room in the student union to a hotel to a campus to cyberspace), even the amount of food we ate. Though the number of participants has remained about the same since 1984—fluctuating between one hundred and sixty and three hundred and fifty, everything else has grown. In 1984, we offered seventeen sessions, fifty-one presentations, one featured speaker, no workshops. In 2002—our height—the conference offered one hundred and three sessions, three hundred presentations, seven featured speakers, thirteen workshops. In the last two years we seem to have downsized a bit—but this is still a very busy conference (Figure 1). In the first decade the average number of sessions was thirty-three; in the second, we averaged eighty. In the first decade the average number of presentations was eighty; in the second decade it was two hundred and forty-eight (Figure 2). The average number of keynote addresses and workshops has grown correspondingly.

And we play much more: In the early years there was no scheduled entertainment, later a poetry reading or talent night entered the festivities. Since then, we've gone bowling and rollerblading; watched movies; crawled to pubs; danced the two step; listened to a jazz quartet, clarinet quartet, rock band, and brass band; seen the light show at Mount Rushmore; gone swimming at Ginny Springs (Gainesville, Florida); picnicked at Bear Lake (Logan, Utah); ridden a mechanical bull at Billy Bob's (Fort Worth, Texas); visited wild life at a prairie park (Normal, Illinois); howled with wolves in West Lafayette, Indiana; and hiked in a rainforest on O'ahu.

And we're eating more than ever. In 1984, we consumed two lunches, one continental breakfast, and one banquet. Each conference after that has added more eating opportunities: Continental breakfasts, box lunches, cookies and soda breaks, banquets, cookouts, picnics, barbecues, a tea, a luau, a fish fry, a party at Michael Day's, another at David Blakesley's, breakfast at Linda Hansen's, dinner at Rich Rice's.

	Sessions	Presentations	Keynotes	Workshops
1982	0	0	0	0
1984	17	51	1	0
1985	26	76	2	0
1986	38	84	2	0
1989	33	69	3	0
1990	29	102	3	0
1991	30	90	6	0
1992	41	94	2	0
1993	54	135	3	5
1994	59	99	3	6
1995	68	213	3	8
1996	78	220	4	6
1997	80	254	2	11
1998	65	207	2	9
1999	58	175	3	9
2000	86	314	5	11
2001	97	263	7	10
2002	103	300	7	13
2003	92	304	4	6
2004	75	232	3	10

Fig. 1. Conference has grown.

	Sessions	Presentations	Keynotes	Workshops
1982–1994	33	80	2.5	1
1995–2004	80	248	4	9

Fig. 2. Size of conference: averages.

## 2.6. Richness of conference

But our mission is, of course, computers and writing. Demographically, we are not a particularly diverse group—most participants are white, most live in the U.S., most are academics, most work in college English departments and in schools wealthy enough to be wired.<sup>8</sup> And though we like to debate (is writing Javascript a rhetorical skill? Is “new media” new?), we share a basic attitude toward technology: We believe it can be both socially useful and fun; we are energized by experimentation; and most of all, we admire those who are on “the cutting edge,” which [John Walter](#) has helpfully defined as (1) “working hard to keep up with

<sup>8</sup> The most international Computers and Writing Conference took place in 1997 in Honolulu, where speakers came from Norway, Sweden, Japan, Singapore, Australia, Hong Kong, Egypt, Canada, and Mexico. The location of the conference in Hawaii might seem to explain why it attracted people from abroad, but the 2004 Honolulu conference drew no speakers from the Pacific Rim and only two from outside the U.S. (Belgium and Sweden).

the latest developments and figuring out how to use them before the For Dummies book is written” and (2) as taking “the opportunity to shape the future” (2003). From the beginning, people have come to this conference to show how they are on the cutting edge, to get closer to the cutting edge, to learn where the cutting edge is, or to keep from falling off. In the process, we have been inclusive about what we label “computers and writing.” In addition to traditional rhetorical-technological concerns—WAC, email communities, distance learning, tenure/promotion, electronic portfolios, OWLs, fair use—we talk about jazz (Laffey, 1996), architecture (Dever, 1996), comic books (Ronan, 2000), movies (Somerville, 2004), videogames (Jackson, 2002), amazon.com (Hesse, 2002), online dating (Berzsenyi, 2003), and Buffy (Busse, 2000). This inclusiveness gives a richness to a conference that might otherwise seem narrowly focused.

The verbs from presentation titles of the last ten years reveal a richness in experience as well. Though we’ve kept our rhet/comp identity and lingo alive in every program—crossing borders, interrogating, contextualizing, inscribing, intersecting, and instantiating—our verbs also express the mix of optimism and shock that I mentioned earlier and the passion, feistiness, and—mainstream or not—rebelliousness that have characterized this conference from its inception:

Addressing, advocating, affecting, aging, aligning, apologizing, arguing, arriving, assessing, assuming, balancing, **beating the odds**, becoming post-hypertext, bitnetting, **blowing out the walls**, blurring, breaking, bridging, building, **burning out**, **canonizing**, catching up, challenging, **choreographing**, collaborating, communicating, composing, coping, colliding, compelling, complicating, conceiving, conducting, **confessing**, confronting, connecting, contending, conversing, crafting, crashing, creating, crisscrossing, crossing the globe, cultivating, cybering, dancing, debating, deconstructing, demonstrating, demystifying, demythologizing, designing, developing, disassembling, discovering, disentangling, **disrupting**, **dissenting**, diverting, dramatizing, **drowning**, domesticating, electing, emerging, enabling, enhancing, enlarging, e-reading, escaping, evaluating, evolving, examining, exemplifying, exploring, extending, failing, fighting, flying, fusing, **getting embarrassed**, **getting marooned**, going with the flow, **graying**, grappling, growing, hatching, having close encounters, hoping, hopping, immersing, implementing, implying, infusing, integrating, interacting, inventing, investigating, joining, lagging behind, liberating, linking, listening, **loathing**, lurking, mainstreaming, **making waves**, managing, manipulating, mapping, measuring, meditating, mentoring, meshing, migrating, minding differences, MOOing, morphing, negotiating, networking, nurturing, opening doors, negotiating, observing, **orchestrating**, overcoming, performing, perishing, piloting, pixilizing, playing around, pleasuring, plundering, practicing, processing, promising, promoting, pulling, pulling ahead, **publishing with panache**, pushing, pushing limits, questioning, rebooting, re-charting, reclaiming, reconciling, reconstructing, redefining, reflecting, reforming, re-imagining, remaining silent, remembering, resisting, restraining, rethinking, rewiring, riding, risking, roleplaying, **RTFL**, saying no, **scratching our heads**, scrutinizing, searching, **setting fires**, shape-shifting, sharing, shifting, singing, staking out, standardizing, not standardizing, straddling, streaming, struggling, **subverting**, surprising, **surviving**, sustaining, **talking back**, taming, testing the waters, theorizing, thinking, tracing, tracking, training, traipsing, transcending, transgressing, undoing, un-ghettoizing, unlocking, unplugging, unveiling, walking, weaving, whispering, window shopping, worrying. . . .

This group has a lot of spirit. It's one of the things I love about this conference—and why, twenty-two years and twenty conferences later—I'm still here.

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