Confessions of a computer facility

By David B. Sachsman

Someday soon the last typewriter will disappear from the last newspaper newsroom. It will have been owned by an editor senior enough to have had a secretary re-type material into the paper's computerized word-processing system.

Video display terminals and the computers that run them are essential to modern journalism. They speed the delivery of news, and they cut costs by eliminating typesetters. All-in-all, the very model of high-tech efficiency.

When newspapers began computerizing, many journalism departments followed suit, installing VDT systems in their news labs. These initial systems became outdated quickly and sometimes were difficult to maintain. Because they were usually interconnected systems, when one thing went wrong, the whole system shut down. Smart-thinking departments kept a room with typewriters just in case.

The Department of Journalism and Mass Media at Rutgers University did not join the first wave of computerized journalism education or the second (when systems really began working). Our justification was that our student interns were having no difficulty learning to use VDTs on the job (true), and that our function was to try to teach writing and editing, not word processing (also true but somewhat fallacious). We usually failed to mention that the real problem was the money. These things cost money, and we didn't have it.

Rutgers centralized its information-oriented programs in a new School of Communication, Information and Library Studies in 1982. Now we mass communication types were linked with speech and communication researchers and library and information specialists. The library people already had some computers and wanted more, and we all agreed to work first for a computer room for research and then for a computer classroom. The research room was put together in 1983 with a variety of personal computers, and in spring 1984 the university agreed to fund the computer classroom.

The doors of the computer classroom opened in September 1984, and there were wonders to behold. It had 20 IBM PCs, linked to printers and modems, and the teacher's station had two large monitors for display purposes. The computers were not interconnected except by modem (the money had stretched only so far), but then again if something went wrong with one machine, the rest were unaffected. And the IBM PCs could take virtually any program.

Problems

The first problem involved time and space. There simply wasn't enough time to fit clases from three different departments in the room. Ideally every session of every writing class should have been held in the room. But because of the time and space

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problem, our writing courses continued to be based in our typewriter classroom, moving to the computer classroom only for specially scheduled classes.

This killed the continuity, but it didn't seem to hurt the students. They generally mastered the basics of word processing in three or four hours, even when those hours were widely separated. As it turned out, one 80-minute period at a time was more effective than double-period classes.

How did we manage such efficient education? None of our regular journalism teachers knew how to use an IBM PC in September 1984, and six months later some still didn't. Fortunately, our teaching assistant, a Ph.D. student in library and information studies, had her own computer at home and immediately mastered the IBM PC. We wanted her to teach the classes, and to have the regular instructors either sit in with their own students or take special classes. As it turned out, some did neither, and while the students learned quickly, some teachers did not.

We should have realized how uncomfortable seasoned teachers would feel when asked to learn along with their own students. Many instructors instead stood by and watched the classes without assuming the role of students.

We also should have remembered how busy teachers get in the middle of a semester. They had no time for special word-processing classes. And what was the payoff for them? None of their offices had computers. How

Two fundamental questions

Are there any easy answers to two basic questions about computers and journalism education? Is it *our* business to teach computer literacy? Is there a *right* way to use computers in writing and editing classes?

Many of us are just as uncomfortable in the role of teaching computer literacy as we are in the concept of teaching typing, or even spelling and grammar. Somebody else should have done it. Our business is writing and editing — on a professional level. But we must teach spelling, grammar, and "head-to-machine" typing to many of our students because we cannot permit them to move up the ladder without these skills. And it is really too early to expect these same students to be computer literate before they come to us.

If we want to introduce computers into the classroom, we simply must provide computer literacy training. Those of us who are philosophically opposed to this are probably right, just as we are right that is is not our business to devote valuble time to spelling. But we do many things in this imperfect world that we oppose in theoretical perfection, and so we had better just figure out how to teach these things, rather than waiting for somebody else to solve these problems.

There are many *right* ways to use computers in writing and editing classes. Most of us learned a long time ago to judge writing and editing teachers not by their methods but by their products, the improvement shown by their students. The very nature of academic freedom is to allow qualified teachers to figure out which methods work for them.

The value of networking computers is to give individual instructors additional teaching options. The teacher who now uses an overhead projector to show one student's work to the class should have the option of using a computer network to put that student's work on all the screens in the room so that all the students can try their hands at editing it, and so that any individual's solution can be flashed around the room for all to see.

Networking also solves the software distribution problem, because the appropriate software can be sent to every station in the room with the specific material that is to be worked on that day. Networking gives greater options to each individual teacher-experimenter. And at this stage, the key is to give each of us as many options as possible, and the chance to fiddle with them until we figure out what works best for us.

could they become fluent on IBM PCs when they were doing their own work on typewriters?

The solution is to put IBM PCs in offices, and we expect to be able to do this. But not all at once. These things are expensive. And part-time instructors, who have had the same problems learning the new system, are certain to be last on the computer gift list.

Some of our professors have complained that too much class time was being devoted to word-processing instruction. This problem is likely to take care of itself. In the first year, every student in every writing class had to learn to use the IBM PCs from scratch. In subsequent years, the more advanced students will have already had this instruction, and the work they do on the computers will be an integrated part of their courses. This already has begun to take place in some of the classes, and as the teachers take over instruction in the computer classroom, the new resource will become fully integrated in course content.

The beginning writing classes will continue to devote three or four sessions to the computers, but this isn't all bad. Many of our students in the past have spent a similar amount of time learning to write head-to-typewriter. Now they're all learning to write head-to-computer, and they seem to be enjoying it.

What about the classroom itself? Did we buy the right equipment and programs? Although virtually everything has worked, we should have done some things differently. We should have checked in advance whether it was possible to read material displayed on the large monitors from the back of the room. It isn't. And we should have interconnected the computers, although it would have been very expensive at the time. We knew we would need to move stories back and forth between stations, and sometimes to all stations at once, but we thought we could use modems or carry floppy disks from one computer to the next.

We haven't done either of these things. Instead, teachers move from station to station, giving individual instruction. This works, just as it does in a typewriter classroom, but we need to interconnect to make full use of the computers. Fortunately, it is now much cheaper to interconnect IBM PCs, and we expect the school to make this change as soon as possible.

We followed the lead of the communication researchers and the library and infomation specialists in choosing the Wordstar word-processing program. While it clearly is a difficult program to learn, our students have been mastering the basics, at least so far as to be able to write and edit their own stories. We have stayed with it because is is an industry standard, and knowledge of it is likely to help students gain employment. Not necessarily in newspapers, but just about everywhere else. And like Latin, once one knows Wordstar, everything else seems to come easier. But we haven't made any final decisions. That's one thing we learned not to do when dealing with computers.

What our students want most is to use the computers to write their stories (and everything else) on their own time. This is what everyone wants, and across the nation computer rooms are kept open day and night.

The problem is that someone must be present at all times to help students and to provide security. This is a very costly proposition. While the school has been able to keep the room open for some additional hours, it generally has been locked when not being used by a class. And, for security reasons, the key has been

locked up at night and on weekends, so that even professors have been unable to use the room in the off hours without planning in advance.

This concern for security has not led to a user-friendly environment, and while students simply have been angry that they have not been able to gain access, some instructors also have felt insulted. The solution to the student problem is to keep the room open and staffed whenever possible. The solution to the faculty problem is to provide teachers with PCs for their offices. These are the two most important things any school should do to make full use of a computer classroom.

Upgrading needed for ad education

By Daniel K. Stewart

A critical examination of advertising education in the United States since the turn of this century shows that it has not been particularly conspicious for its growth towards an organized body of knowledge.

Advertising remains at a very low level of scientific explanation, administratively controlled in most universities by faculty whose research publications in advertising are either non-existent or of questionable validity. Clearly, this level of "professionalism" leaves much to be desired for a 90-billion dollar industry.

A careful analysis of advertising education over the last 85 years indicates two major facts about the administrative organization of advertising in universities.

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• Advertising, when controlled by faculty in cognate disciplines, has not been able to rise above a level of understanding (and explanation) of anybody whose main intellectual interests are in other fields. Historically, this control has resulted in advertising programs that have been restricted (for the most part) to those areas of advertising pertaining to its most visible vehicular aspects, namely, media, graphics, layout and production. While advertisements, commercials, promotional pieces, etc., are the physical products of such training, *valid* research pertaining to the communication function of advertising (for which these physical vehicles exist) is virtually nonexistent.

Thus, with advertising education being limited in universities primarily to vocational, technical training, it should be of no surprise in 1985 that coherent knowledge pertaining to the communicative success or failure of specific advertisements, commercials, etc., is difficult to find. As *Ad Age* put it, "But on we go, measuring eye pupil dilation, voice pitch and basal skin, and we still don't know much more about what makes advertising work than when *Advertising Age* came out with its first 12-page issue."[1]

It seems clear that we have not developed as a discipline much beyond John Wanamaker's remark in the 19th century, "I know that half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; but I can never find out which half."

Coherent advertising research requires a coherent theory of communication, and this type of intellectual preparation is simply not a major part of most "hands-on" programs in advertising. On the one hand, it is admitted that most courses in communication theory suffer from the theoretical bias of materialistic