

HERE WE ARE: GREETING TECHNOLOGY
WITH HEALTHY SKEPTICISM

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After participating last April in the “Colloquium on the Future of New Technology in the Arts and Humanities” and the “Technology in the College English Classroom Conference,” I came to new insights about how English departments in particular are dealing with technology. I was reassured to find that speakers from across the country face departments, schools, and administrators who offer (or don’t offer) varying degrees of support for technology; who find themselves as the sole “technology” person in the department; who have discovered their work in researching and teaching with or about technology dismissed as trendy or too vocational. There is comfort, as the saying goes, in numbers. I was also impressed with the balance of supporters and skeptics of the changes technology makes in our classrooms, research, and universities because this sort of mix can lead to productive discussions.

Usually in such forums, we’re assaulted with e-words: e-learning, e-literacy, e-College. What was memorable to me, and what I remarked on in the closing session of the conference with Karen Schiff, were all of the reoccurring a-words.

One thing on the mind of many speakers and attendees was **ACCESS** because the issue of access is an issue of class. What kinds of equipment do our students have or have use of? How might our assignments or methods unwittingly put some students at a disadvantage? One speaker at the conference noted that she was required to use web-enhancement for her composition class only to find that the one computer lab on campus had such limited hours that students could not easily access the materials on the web. One solution to the access problem was offered at the Clemson colloquium by Todd Taylor who has his writing students create their own films using equipment he has secured through grants.

A similar concern is that of **ABILITY**. Over and over when there was concern expressed about students’ ability to use certain programs, speakers assured us that “they know this stuff better than we do.” In many cases, this may be true, but there is a danger in believing—and then

acting or teaching on that belief—that students come from equal backgrounds of computer literacy. This brings us to the question of *our* ability to use the technology, too. Catherine Gouge, who spoke at the conference about developing and teaching a web distance learning course, warned that if we as instructors don't know the programs well enough to help someone with problems over the phone or email, we shouldn't be teaching classes over the web.

Questions of access and ability often lead to **ANXIETY**. What are we doing and why? How? This anxiety was at times a practically visible cloud of smoke rising from fiery talks about **ADMINISTRATORS**. Because of the hierarchical academic worlds in which we find ourselves, others are always making decisions for us to implement. There were plenty of somebody-did-me-wrong songs to be heard at these events. At the colloquium, Pamela Takayoshi encouraged us to be proactive, to join committees, to talk with administrators *before* decisions are made. But anxiety is often caused by **AGE** too—the younger speakers and attendees seemed generally less anxious about the changes technology brings.

Lest we despair, I did find many memorable presentations that voiced true **AFFINITY** for technology. Richard Lanham positively sparkled during his keynote address at the conference as he showed us that letters and words are finally able to do what they've always wanted to do—move around off the page and talk to the reader. Dixie Goswami and the young students who spoke with her at the colloquium showed us how technology is giving students renewed interest in learning and discovery.

If there was an overall central thesis to the talks at the two events, I would say we argued not that we had figured out all the **ANSWERS** about using technology, but we do want to be part of the **ASKING**. The question we posed at the wrap-up session was this: What should we be asking and what should we be asking for? The colloquium and the conference demonstrated that those of us in the humanities are already attracted to the potential benefits of using more technology in our teaching and research, but because of our genuine concern for our students and our work, we'll approach it gingerly and with a scholarly skepticism.