

LITERARY TECHNOLOGIES, OR,  
WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?

*by Karen Schiff*  
Clemson University

These conferences have played an essential part in our ability to gain purchase on the technologies that drive so many of our activities with literature these days. They have also showed the diversity of perspectives on the most basic of issues: for instance, how we are defining the term “technology.” I have heard people use this word to signify hardware, software, a tool, a practice, and even a way of organizing one’s work. But the category of “technology” could lose meaning if its definition becomes too amorphous. So what can we say that it is? Or, to prevent this word from becoming an all-encompassing category, what can we say that technology is *not*? Perhaps, as one audience member at the UNCG discussion forum suggested, this is needlessly complicating a simple situation: he said that a “technology” is a tool that we use to accomplish a goal. But the idea of the “tool” is just as complicated, for we could assert that the auditorium in which we were sitting was a tool we were using to facilitate a particular kind of conversation. The room’s shape, size, and configuration influence the kind of conversations that are likely to take place there. Could we therefore call the room a “technology,” as well? We could then still be faced with the question of how we were defining this term.

Perhaps the most productive road toward definition is to witness how “technology” was discussed in practice. At both conferences, people talked about the ideological effects of computer use and about the practical adjustments associated with the widespread adoption of computers. Thinking of Pam Takayoshi’s discussion of the “resigned acceptance” that seeps into many campuses that are experiencing top-down computer mandates, I asked the assembly: how can we, as professors engaged in the use of these tools, become part of the team involved in making decisions about computers? And if we do gain this role, what would we request from our institutions? Several professors mentioned that they had become—or could become—key members of university-

wide computer advisory panels. Others suggested defying disciplinary boundaries to create collaborations with faculty members in other humanities departments—not just in computer science—as a way to build coalitions and solidarity. If the technology is to become more effectively implemented in the humanities, they reasoned, we should not merely talk to the computer scientists on campus as if they are the experts in the field. We need to show ourselves to be experts on how these technologies function best in our own fields of study. Not surprisingly, there was also general agreement that we needed more time and money to conceive of new ways to use the technologies.

One audience member, after hearing many “practical” requests about classroom usage, called for a complementary consideration: that we consider more deeply the theories behind our uses of technology. Upon reflection, I think this is a key ingredient. I believe that if we are more careful about how we think about computers, we could be correspondingly more perspicacious in our choices about policy and use. Theory and practice are certainly intertwined here: to what extent does a technology change our purposes in a given class, much less in an entire discipline? Do new technologies reinstate old hierarchies of power, or create new ones?

Presentations at both conferences addressed these questions. At Clemson, the presentation of the Bread Loaf project, led by Dixie Goswami, made me think that web technology could be used to further a tried-and-true humanistic agenda. She and her team of educators brought self-reflection, creative expression, and an enthusiasm for learning to students in rural or poor school systems where being engaged in such activities was rarely encouraged or funded. These technologies also brought a classical sense of beauty into the students’ experience, by inviting students to design aesthetically clean and simple web pages.

At UNCG, Carlton L. Clark, from Texas Women’s University, complicated the question of the technology’s ideology by asking whether computers could actually seem to work towards one ideological goal while actually supporting its opposite. He suggested that hypertext, which is often touted as a medium that deconstructs an Enlightenment paradigm, is in fact often used or discussed in a way that perpetuates that very world view. If hypertext is employed to facilitate an individual’s quest for understanding, it serves an entity [“man”] rather than a rela-

tion. Hypertext is a relational tool, however: it connects ideas or details and does not uphold the notion that a text can stand alone, disconnected. Can we imagine a way of using and discussing this technology that focuses on its relational properties? If so, we perhaps could be reconfiguring power relationships so that familiar hierarchies are diffused instead of affirmed. If we move from a rhetoric of Enlightenment rationality to a rhetoric of feminist relationality—Clark suggested consulting the writings of Starhawk on the subject of power relations—we could shift not only the ways we use technology but also the ways we imagine ourselves.

Finally, I noted that the conferences seemed tinged with a grim mood. Though this atmosphere was not all-pervasive, it did hang like a fog over many of the sessions I attended. Most of the people in attendance at this final discussion session agreed with my assessment, and even seemed relieved to hear it articulated. Some contrasted the mood of the UNCG conference with a buoyant atmosphere at conferences such as *Computers and Writing*, where the level of acceptance of and enthusiasm about electronics is high.

The lugubrious feeling seems like good news to me. It indicates the credibility of the resistance that many of us encounter as we try to use technologies ourselves, or with our students, or as we attempt to institute progressive technological changes within our institutions. It also acknowledges the enormity of our task within our institutions. As Pam Takayoshi said, we are on the front lines; we are facing the changes head-on. The grim mood perhaps also accompanies the hard work of inventing specific ways to use technologies, sharing strategies and becoming more conscious of how we are using them. As we move further into the digital age and become more familiar with electronic tools, I assume we will become more technically adept, theoretically facile, and generally creative with them. So I believe that the gloomy fog will lift, and that the moods of conferences on technology in the humanities will metamorphose into something that we cannot yet predict.