

**Moving Toward the Paperless Institute**

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### **Bob's Experience**

It's 1986. The Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP) is conducting its first invitational summer institute.

Some thirty of us sit in the classroom, each with a pen or pencil, notepad or binder, and massive bulk pack of readings. The facilitation team has markers, highlighters, and what seem to be endless pads of flipchart paper. When we write, as we do often, the room is silent except for the scratching of point on paper. Journals are handwritten and, looking over someone's shoulder, you see numerous scratch-outs, arrows, and add-ins.

At the end of the day, reaction sheets are passed out and we, in block letters or cursive, record our excitement and concerns. These sheets are collected, carefully pored over for feedback, and stored in massive three-ring binders. Near the end of the institute, we submit a piece we like to the facilitators, who run off copious copies, bind them with a colorful cover, and distribute them on the last day. Determined to stay connected to this great group of like-minded teaching souls, we develop a newsletter. It gets typed monthly on an IBM Selectric, retyped after revision, copied, and sent via regular mail to our membership, which grows by thirty each year.

A year later, when we develop a journal for teacher-consultants' writing, we're finally working with word processors, but still the process involves many handwritten drafts and much copying. Copy centers are our friends, as are the post office, staplers, label sheets, and Wite-Out.

### **Eric's Experience**

It's 2008. The Red Clay Writing Project is in its sixth summer institute.

There are 25 people in the room, each with a laptop in front of her or him, looking at the projected outline of today's activities. While a few participants have printed the readings from the night before, most have them open on their laptop. There are post-its and pens at every table, but they are used more for scribbling phone numbers or lunch plans than for the work of the writing project.

When we write, the room is silent except the tapping of fingers on keyboards. Notes are typed and saved in special files dedicated to this summer's work and passed among the group via email and returned with comments inserted, sections highlighted, and revisions tracked. At the end of the day we all open our laptops one last time to type a response into an online survey. The leaders then meet and talk about how nice it is not to have to decipher handwriting before poring over the responses to plan the following day's work. The responses are left on the internet as a living archive and eventually converted into a spreadsheet and placed in a file on a hard drive in the Red Clay office until it is time to produce our annual report.

During our final meetings our projects are presented on the large screen, and then collected in our virtual classroom for all past, present, and future participants to enjoy. We stay connected via our listserv, and we disseminate new information via our Web page. We recruit members to the Army of Dorkness (our site's technology team), Project Outreach, and our professional groups via email. We set meetings using Meeting Wizard, and we blog about our classrooms.

The town's largest copy center has gone out of business, but our facilitators are on a first-name basis with members from the office of instructional technology as they provide us with spare laptops, LED projectors, digital video cameras, and computer labs.

### **Setting Our Purpose**

Two summer institutes, two writing project sites, twenty-two years apart. The frameworks for both are remarkably the same—journal entries, dialogue about readings, investigation of our own writing, sharing, reacting, exploring. But one had paper at its center and the second is moving steadily toward becoming paperless. We're not sure this latter experience is entirely to be wished for. We do know that more and more frequently for us in Red Clay it seems to make sense. Because we feel the pull and allure to go paperless, we are interested in exploring this shift and thinking about not only what we have gained during this time, but also what we have lost, and the implications of both.

Our point is not to call attention to our writing project site and highlight our technological accomplishments. Although we have been promoting digital literacies and encouraging our participants to bring their laptops to the summer institute for four or five years now, we don't see ourselves as being particularly innovative in our uses of technology. In many ways our move toward the paperless institute was not intentional.

Over the past six years, however, we have consistently shifted away from a traditional paper-and-pencil stance and toward facilitating summer institutes, developing and publishing our writing, and engaging in site business electronically. So this article calls attention to what it means to bring more electronic media into play in a summer institute and other writing project activities. By interrogating our choices, we hope to

bring the dialogue to the surface for all writing project sites and perhaps point toward some useful guidelines for these developments.

### **Differing Contexts**

In 1986, PhilWP and all other writing project sites really had no choice. Paper was the medium. To put things in perspective, the first Macintosh computer came on the market in 1984. The Web was limited to university science departments and government installations. Writing was done with paper, pens, pencils, and typewriters. Reproduction took place on copiers. Bob recalls great care being taken to provide summer institute fellows with sturdy legal pads—the good kind that had a thick bind at the top, a sturdy back, and perforations that actually provided a clean separation. Those pads had to hold up to a lot of abuse.

However, when Red Clay began in 2003, the Internet was well established and laptops had all the speed and capacity of more bulky desktops. Still, the computer in our 2003 summer institute, if not exactly a rare commodity, was viewed as the minority medium of choice. About a third of the fellows brought computers, enough to have at least one laptop per table in order to facilitate common Web page browsing. It was also enough that those without computers complained about the click-clacking of keyboards during writing time, and felt justified as the majority voice in asking those making the clacking to go elsewhere so that paper and pencil writers could work in relative quiet.

Three years later, fellows with laptops far outnumbered those without, and in our last three years, all of the fellows have had laptops in front of them every day. Rather than considering legal pad choices, Red Clay facilitators seek long and strong surge protectors. Those of us who facilitate have become accustomed to fellows sitting across

from each other, lids flipped up on their laptops and fingers poised on keys like dueling pianists. Laptop etiquette has become something to be discussed. Curiously, however, in our most recent summer institutes, no one mentions the clatter of keys. It's what we do.

### **What If?**

As we noted, a shift toward greater use of technology in the summer institute has been sometimes haphazard, sometimes serendipitous, but also sometimes ignited by the question "What if?"

An example can be found in our daily feedback protocol. Our participants end each day by answering three questions: What stood out for you today? What were your concerns or issues? Do you have any additional comments? The responses are reviewed and used by the facilitators to prepare for the following day. Through the first four years of the institute, the comments were handwritten, sometimes hurriedly, just before the fellows left for the day. Facilitators would then gather around a table. Each would be dealt a share of the reaction sheets and would proceed to read, highlight, and comment. When each of us finished with a set of reactions sheets, we passed them to our right and read the new set placed before us. Handwriting was always an issue, as were storage space, accessibility, and short responses with little detail.

But in our 2007 summer institute, we facilitators wondered aloud, "What if these responses could be put online?" Within minutes, Eric ignited a sea change in Red Clay by creating a way for fellows to answer these questions via an online survey tool. Now, instead of mad scribbling, happy goodbyes, and plans for beer that night, the sounds at the end of any day in the summer institute have become mad typing, happy goodbyes, and plans for beer that night.

Facilitators still gather around a table, but each has a laptop, focusing on the content rather than the handwriting and having all the responses for each question collated in one place. What's more, the e-archive of the reactions is immediately accessible to all of the facilitators at any point and at any time of day. Wake up in the middle of the night troubled by a comment on the reaction sheets, you can call it up on your home computer and try to figure out an appropriate response. Perhaps most important, more fellows, maybe supported by the ease of typing, seem to write longer, more detailed, more helpful responses.

One "what if" begat others. What if we had fellows write online reactions to readings on the afternoon we discussed them and their impressions were still fresh, rather than waiting till the end of the institute? What if those readings were all available online? What if we sent daily agendas through the listserv rather than copying them? All little shifts that saved us paper, expense, and effort while increasing our capacity to archive with greater accessibility and detail.

### **A More Complicated Negotiation**

Aside from the loss of the eccentricity of handwritten responses, mostly the shift to detailed online reactions has given more than it's taken. But continuing Red Clay's love affair with flipchart paper has been more complex.

Flipchart paper is amazingly versatile, allowing for a range of voices to be exercised and immediate, multiple, and broad viewing of results. Teaching protocols like carousels, gallery walks, and various forms of data charting all seem to cry out for flipchart paper. It feels substantive, tactile, and collaborative when pen, marker, or crayon is applied to paper in a small-group activity.

JoBeth places a giant-sized post-it at each table, Anne inaugurates a silent book discussion, or Lois arranges rows of paper each labeled with a key idea or quotation to guide the responses, and somehow, learning magic seems to happen. Fellows sit together and write simultaneously on the same idea and then reflect together. Paper products stare back at the reader with different colors, handwriting, and often images. Writers express ideas artistically as well as through language. Arrows are drawn and points double-underlined. The fanciful adjust the presentation by writing upside down from the others or in spirals—a practice Eric loves but Bob abhors.

In 2003, wall space was a rare commodity in the RCWP summer institute and a reflection on flipchart paper was often lucky to last a day, much less a week, without being covered up by another reflection from another collaborative activity. The room became, not cluttered, but rife with flipchart paper capturing our day's work together. When we wanted to reflect on an idea from last Thursday, we had to look around the room, and sometimes under old papers, to find what we had said.

In our most recent summer institute, we continued to use flipchart paper to track our weekly and daily work, but it did not consume the room as it had in the past. Thanks to flash drives, email, wireless Internet, and ubiquitous overhead projectors with monitor hookups at your beck and call, it takes only seconds to have an image up for the world to see. With speaker attachments we can have film, photos, music, and text dancing before the eyes of our audience. With a simple email everyone in a room can literally be on the same Web page, wiki, or blog—reviewing, reflecting, and commenting simultaneously.

But the results and reviews are mixed. For example, Bob has done carousels, chalk talks, and even gallery walks with computers. He likes the fluid permanence,

meaning that the resulting work is still open to change, but it's also accessible to everyone, even when they are away from the room housing the summer institute. Still, as Eric points out, a sense of community, both in creation and viewing, gets somewhat lost. Only one person can be adding comments on a computer at a time, as opposed to a small group literally crawling all over flipchart paper. And, although the wiki page allows for more comments, it can't all be easily viewed at once, even if projected, as can multiple sheets of flipchart paper.

We, at least at this point, can't imagine laptops replacing flipchart paper, but they've become an option, a possibility in the repertoire. If the facilitation team is planning a group activity, we have to at least ask ourselves, What do we gain and how will this work be different if we gather it electronically? Frequently for Bob that choice comes down to How necessary and continually accessible does this work need to be? If the response is anywhere from *moderately* to *highly*, he is more likely to opt for an online response, preferably on a wiki. If engagement, creativity, and collaboration are more important, he might lean more toward flipchart paper. In the end, it's always about why and how.

### **Teaching and Learning Explorations**

As mentioned earlier, laptop etiquette is always an issue. In 2004 Dixie Goswami visited the summer institute and discussed her work with the Bread Loaf School of English. As she talked, Eric quietly surfed the Web to find the websites of Bread Loaf, the schools being discussed, and the project. Having this textual reference in front of him helped shape his understanding of what was being presented. However, he could have just as easily been reading email, and anyone on the other side of the monitor would

never have known. Or worse, they might have suspected that aimless surfing was exactly what he was doing.

Technology can promote an off-task behavior that is counterproductive to discussion. The lure of Facebook, email, and YouTube can pull teacher-consultants (and even facilitators) into another world that shuts out the discussion outside the screen. Granted, people have always doodled or written haikus to survive meetings, but these don't absorb attention the way the online media do. The computer allows you to completely escape the discussion at hand, and although this is sometimes a very happy place for the individual, it can be detrimental to the group.

We have been tempted to set rules regarding laptop use during summer institutes and RCWP meetings. At times we have asked people to close their monitors, but this, too, is problematic, as it prevents the sort of exploration Eric enjoyed in 2004 or the on-task email note during a summer institute discussion prompting someone to share a point they had made to you in writing group. Central to the Red Clay summer institute experience are our Teaching and Learning Explorations (TLEs), or what many NWP sites call teaching demonstrations. Summer institute fellows identify a burning question that springs from their practice and provide the summer institute audience with a sense of why that question is significant, share activities or approaches that have been successful in negotiating that issue in their classrooms, and then provide a focus for trouble-shooting or complicating some aspect of that issue that feels unresolved. Within the dialogic and inquiry-based frame of the TLE, summer institute fellows get to showcase their strengths and seek ways to analyze and adjust areas of concern.

In 2003, TLEs often focused around paper: flipchart paper group activities, individual responses in notepads, written feedback on reaction sheets. It took the entire first institute and much refinement over the winter for the concept of the TLE as a space of dialogue and inquiry to emerge. The TLEs continue in this tradition, although technology plays a larger role these days. Perhaps as a result of our focus on digital literacy projects, computer slide presentations (i.e, PowerPoint and Keynote) and other computer-based media (e.g., iMovie, Movie Maker, Comic Life) have become key ingredients in most if not all TLEs.

This emergence is both exciting and troubling. A well-produced slideshow coupled to a protocol that helps to unpack the issues raised in the show can be a powerful tool for fellows trying to dig deep on an issue of practice or further develop a writing idea. However, computer slide presentations and the like are often used in ways that tend to promote monologue rather than dialogue. Having talking points flashed on the screen can lead to talk-ats or, worse, read-ats, where the facilitator of the TLE becomes a reader of material off the screen. For this reason we have been forced to rethink our ways of scaffolding TLEs with fellows in order to promote a discourse that seems more in keeping with the dialogic intention of the work. It has never been a question of banning the technology, but more one of using it in ways that support collaborative and nuanced inquiry.

### **Our Unofficial Policy**

We have often discussed but are reticent to establish a policy or protocol concerning technology use within our site. Eric's omnipresent use of the computer during the 2004 summer institute was, at the time, quite a problem during the leadership team

meetings. We were constantly wondering what he was doing while hiding behind his computer screen. Was he checking his email? Looking up something on Wikipedia? Taking notes? Should we care? Regardless of whether he was on or off the task, his behavior was distracting to others, and this became an issue that we had to address.

As mentioned earlier, at times we have mandated that participants close their monitors to ensure that people did not use the computer as a tool for avoiding the larger discussion. However, we have never mandated that people put down pens because we were afraid they might be doodling. As we have become more aware of this double standard, we are less likely to autocratically mandate particular technologic habits. Our interaction with technology is becoming ever more complicated, and our kneejerk reactions often serve to stifle rather than promote dialogue. For this reason, we at Red Clay tend to err on the side of acceptance rather than rejection. However, even this is not entirely true as we do have a strict No Ringtones rule, and we get visibly aggravated when someone's phone starts singing in the middle of anything—even lunch—during the summer institute.

One guideline that we seem to have established is that we move to electronic submissions and feedback whenever we can. Our e-portfolio, daily feedback, reading reviews, TLE summaries and feedback, and final summer institute reflections have all been moved online, and these moves seem to have been entirely positive. Frankly, we have a hard time imagining how we survived these processes before we moved them online.

Although there are members of the leadership team who appreciate our application process, others are bothered by the fact that our applications for the summer

institute and our professional learning workshops are currently submitted solely via traditional mail. We would love to automate much of this process and move it online. That said, we appreciate that we are more likely to get student work submitted with our applications when it is delivered with three copies of the application. If we moved the application online, we would either lose this dimension of the application, or have to work through the tedium of matching email applications with supporting documents sent via traditional mail.

We have found that paper is wonderful for establishing an immediate goal: A quick note, a quick read, a quick reflection, a quick insight, all are more comfortable—well today anyway—on paper. However, technology allows us to create a living space to develop, store, and review our ideas as they grow. Our blogs, wikis, and online surveys have archived our discussions in ways that are extremely useful. Although we have teacher-consultants working for the site who possess amazing organizational skills and who dutifully file important documents when they are created, once the file cabinet door is closed, the document is practically nonexistent. There it lives in the state of limbo as a filed work of art. We are much more likely to review a thread on a blog or click through all the pages on a wiki than we are to randomly search through our filing cabinets trying to recall “the good times” or seek that cool activity we now need.

Interestingly, the use of wikis, discussion groups, and online surveys has also made the wall space of our classroom less of a scarce commodity. Our group protocols will be posted on the second day of the institute and remain through the last. We will add to the walls maybe one or two sheets a day, as opposed to three or four per morning or afternoon session, and most of it will last through the summer institute. At the end of the

month, it will all come down and be relegated to a corner in the Red Clay office or, more often than not, the dumpster behind our building. And we feel that this is right and just, because we understand that the ideas we now put on paper, while likely to have a lingering effect on our consciousness and practice, like sand art or a failed presidency, are destined for a temporary existence. While the ideas we put in our online spaces...