

Letter from the Guest Editor

## Shaping Virtual Spaces: Software and the Writing Classroom

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Paul LeBlanc

If one spends some time reviewing the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) programs or back issues of *Computers and Composition*, one quickly realizes how little attention has been devoted to software. Yet one of the first questions asked when writing teachers acquire new computer-based composition classrooms is "What software should I buy?" The answer to that question has vital implications for the teachers and students who come to inhabit electronic writing spaces, for it is the software that defines those spaces, that creates possibilities, and constrains goals and desires. As Nancy Kaplan (1991) says, "Both textbooks and the panoply of other software [besides usage and style-checking programs]—word-processing programs, hypertext writing programs, and networking configurations—structure an understanding of what writing is and who does or can do it." (p. 29) As the range of software programs used in writing classes widens to include not only word-processing but also hypermedia, communications, desktop publishing, and groupware, our research must pay more attention to software and the role it plays in our electronic classrooms. As part of that effort, this special issue of *Computers and Composition* is dedicated to software for the writing classroom.

The impetus for publishing a special software issue comes largely from the work of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Committee on Instructional Technology (CIT) and its subcommittee on instructional software. Formed in 1981, the CIT explores the use of technology in the English language arts. Much has changed since 1981, and a central issue for those on the software subcommittee is the ongoing lack of information and resources available for those teachers faced with making software decisions. Indeed, it took some time even for the subcommittee to track down a copy of NCTE's software evaluation guidelines. Fortunately, the CIT chair, Gail Hawisher, is also coeditor of this journal along with Cynthia Selfe, and suggested the idea of a special software issue. It is my hope that this issue of *Computers and Composition* will serve as a resource for those teachers choosing software for their classes and that it will also mark the beginning of a renewed examination of software and its role in virtual age literacy.

The issue is divided into three sections. The first section is entitled *Software: What's Available and How to Evaluate It*. It begins with Fred Kemp's overview of software, its theoretical and ideological dimensions, and its importance for the successful classroom integration of technology. Next comes James Strickland's annotated bibliography of selected software, part of his work for the CIT and the result of weeks spent identifying software titles, confirming their existence, updating vendor information, and then narrowing the list to widely used and representative programs within eight categories. We originally planned to include a revised version of the NCTE software evaluation guidelines, but we discovered that such a revision had become a very complicated task since the original 1983 document was written. Back then, software was generally relegated to computer-assisted instruction (CAI), games, and word-processing programs. The variety and growing complexity of software programs now used in the writing classroom has made the CIT's planned revision a long-term project over which there remains some disagreement. We have decided to publish the original document to at least make it available and the basis of further discussion. To offer more insight to evaluating software, we then asked four people with somewhat different perspectives on software the same question: "If someone asked you for advice on software, what five or six guidelines would you offer them?" The answers of this group follow the NCTE evaluation guidelines and come from Paul Taylor, the codeveloper of the DAEDALUS INTEGRATED WRITING ENVIRONMENT and a gifted programmer; William Condon, an experienced classroom teacher and codirector of the next Computers and Writing Conference; Molly Hepler, a product development manager for Conduit and

responsible for handling the award-winning programs *WRITER'S HELPER* and *SEEN: TUTORIALS FOR CRITICAL READING*; and Mary Ann Eiler, a document specialist with the American Medical Association and the member of the CIT who has struggled longest with the revision of the NCTE guidelines. Their insights and wisdom are a good foundation for anyone considering the purchase of instructional software.

The second section within this issue is devoted to reviews of a wide range of software programs. It begins with Marcia Curtis's and Charlie Moran's review of Novell's *NETWARE*, the preeminent networking software for the DOS environment. While the specific considerations of *NETWARE* will be tremendously useful to those designing a networked classroom, the larger underlying argument is even more important, that networked classrooms are virtual writing spaces and that the way we shape those networks enables or constrains our pedagogical goals. The authors offer a fascinating account of their taking ownership of their virtual writing spaces. That review is followed by reviews of two programs specifically designed for networked classrooms. Lady Falls Brown reviews the *DAEDALUS INTEGRATED WRITING ENVIRONMENT*, a 1990 winner of an Educom/NCRIPTAL award that includes the much discussed real-time communication program *DAEDALUS INTERCHANGE*, as well as *DAEDALUS DISCOVER*, a descendent of Hugh Burn's legendary 1977 programs *BURKE*, *TOPOI*, and *TAGI*. Mark Amdahl reviews *ASPECTS*, a real-time conversation program originally designed for networked Macintoshes in a business setting but one that is getting increased use in writing classrooms. Two other Educom/NCRIPTAL award winners are included in this section with Evelyn Posey's review of *WRITER'S HELPER*, perhaps the single best selling program for the writing classroom on the market, and Keith Dorwick's review of *SEEN*, which offers another option for collaboration in the networked classroom through asynchronous communication—the use of electronic bulletin boards.

The second section also includes reviews of the three most popular or important hypertext authoring programs for the microcomputer. John Slatin reviews *HYPERCARD*, still the most common hypertext software used with the Macintosh and the program that first opened the door on hypertext for many in the field. Ron Fortune follows with his review of *TOOLBOOK*, the hypertext program IBM has decided to bundle with its Advanced Academic Systems, and Peggy Mulvihill reviews *STORYSPACE*, the first hypertext program designed by and intended for teachers of writing. As a group, these three reviews provide a good introduction to hypertext for those new to the technology and an effective base for comparison for those considering hypertext systems. This section ends with Patricia Sullivan's review of desktop publishing

software that is really much more than a review. It is also an insightful and broad examination of desktop publishing's role in the writing curriculum, and the annotated bibliography she includes at the end is the first such resource in composition studies.

The third and final section in this issue began as an experiment that yielded wonderful results. To gain another perspective on instructional software, I asked six experts from outside the classroom to meet with the editors at *Computers and Composition* at the 1992 Computers and Writing Conference in Indianapolis. They were as follows:

Steve Haney, Higher Education Faculty Marketing Manager for Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences for Apple Computer.

Kim Richardson, Software Acquisitions Editor for Harper Collins.

Doug Short, Consultant for Multimedia and Learning Technology for the IBM-sponsored Institute for Academic Technology.

Dimitri Korhais, Product Developer for Group Technologies.

Molly Hepler, Product Development Manager for Conduit.

Hugh Burns, Chairman of The Daedalus Group, Inc.

In that meeting, we posed questions to these experts and taped the ensuing discussion. The transcript of that conversation was edited and is presented here as a *Computers and Composition* Forum.

I asked the participants to begin by focusing on those teachers and researchers who want to design and develop their own software, an activity for which there is a tradition in composition studies that produced many of the programs reviewed in this issue. While we begin with that topic, this group's knowledge and experience brings the conversation across broad terrain. I think you'll find the reading enjoyable, informative, and provocative.

The group of people working in computers and writing is growing, but in attending conferences, participating in ongoing network conversations such as Megabyte University, and collaborating in scholarship and research, I am struck again and again by the energy, commitment, and kindness of those who are guiding us into the virtual age. This project has been no different. I want to thank all of those involved and express special gratitude to Tim Longacre, my graduate assistant, and Mary Lonergan and Elizabeth Keane, my student aides.

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## References

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