Introductory Vignette: The Time for Technology in the Writing Classroom Is Now

Many secondary writing teachers have wondered why, in the age when there is technology for every purpose, they spend so much time laboring over student essays. They focus on copy more than on supporting evidence and organizational structures. They are blinded by overshadowing numbers of mechanical problems in student writing. Because technology has progressed and now provides more than simple word processing functions to assist writers, we should investigate how to leverage 21st century technological sophistication to help students develop writing skills.

How often have writing teachers found themselves less than forty-eight hours away from the end of a semester, with grades due, students wanting feedback on their last essays, and feeling as if they are drowning in student writing? I have experienced a feeling of dread at that time as I positioned myself with a grade book, three rubrics—one for each type of essay in the stacks before me—green and purple ink pens that won't insult developing student writers, and a coffee cup. The dread was a result of just one thing: I knew I would again spend hours playing copy editor, never reaching the highest level of dialogue with my students. Once again, those conversations with students that focus on the meaning of writing would not happen.

As one of those teachers who took feedback to mean I had to comment on all aspects of student writing every time I was presented with essays, I was definitely drowning. But the most rewarding part of my work was the result of thorough, consistent, and timely feedback to students. Learners would actually stop and thank me! Comments from grade 10 and 11 students included recognition that they finally knew what to work on to improve their composition. Receiving a letter grade with general comments was not helpful to them. Knowing they needed

to work on comma splices or verb tense consistency meant nothing if I didn't highlight examples in the paper and show the writer how those errors could be edited.

My own interest in becoming a better teacher, led me to online essay scoring software. I piloted a product from ETS. Together with two colleagues we reviewed the feedback students were receiving from the software and were able to note that flagged errors were not errors in our judgment. I asked the students who used the software to give me their impressions of the software's usefulness. Most felt that it was very helpful to receive highly detailed feedback on the mechanics of their work almost immediately. These writers were serious about wanting to improve their work. While we teachers were skeptical of the types of errors noted, the students wanted the opportunity to look at those errors themselves. They made use of linked resources and worked on revisions.

That one-time short pilot went no further. The cost of subscribing to online services that provided writing feedback seemed prohibitive at the time for what we thought we would gain in student learning. The era was one in which teachers were still learning about how technology can improve learning, and quite honestly, we weren't sold. Times have changed, software is more readily accessible, students live with virtual interactions, and products have greatly improved. Today's automated scoring essay (AES) software can improve classroom discourse about the meaning of writing.