Violent Networks: Historical Access in the Composition Classroom

Samantha Blackmon

In The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture Mark C. Taylor writes,

The contrast between grids and networks clarifies the transition from the Cold War system to network culture. The Cold War system was designed to maintain stability by simplifying complex relations and situations in terms of a grid with clear and precise oppositions. [...] This is a world in which walls seem to provide security. Walls and grids, however, offer no protection from spreading webs; as webs grow, walls collapse and everything begins to change. [...] Whereas walls divide and seclude in an effort to impose order and control, webs link and relate, entangling everyone in multiple, mutating, and mutually defining connections in which nobody is really in control. As connections proliferate, change accelerates, bringing everything to the edge of chaos. This is the moment of complexity. (23)

We are firmly entrenched in this moment of complexity. Taylor marks the transition of the Cold War/grid system to network culture as beginning in 1989, which is six years after the emergence of computers in public school classrooms (1983) and five years after the fifth C (computers) made its debut at Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in New York (1984). In this paper I argue that the emergence of computers in the classroom exacerbated the already prevalent issue of racial and class inequity in education.

In The Violence of Literacy, Elspeth Stuckey writes, "The violence of literacy is the violence of the milieu it comes from, promises, recapitulates. It is attached inextricably to the world of food, shelter, and human equality. [...] To elucidate the violence of literacy is to understand the
distance it forces between people and the possibilities for their lives (94).” Even more than fear of Stuckey’s “violence,” some minority students seem to feel that there is some kind of conspiracy that keeps them in their marginalized position in terms of technology and technological advancement in much the same way that minorities have historically been oppressed by the hegemonic power structure. These thoughts of conspiracy are not wholly unfounded.

According to Taylor the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 marked the transition from an industrial age to an information society. Previously, grids and walls were still being used to maintain stability by simplifying complex situations in terms of clear and precise binary oppositions and to “secure” the American status quo. In an information society, the walls become permeable screens that allow for the global flow of diverse knowledge, and everyone becomes entangled in “multiple, mutating, and mutually defining connections in which nobody is really in control” (20–23). In the years before this transition, many African Americans found themselves the intentional victims of technology and the hegemony on numerous occasions. If we are to interrogate how African American students fit into an information society, we cannot discount these “Cold War system” days and the effect that they have on the current network culture. The violent history of the dividing and secluding walls of the past ensures that change does not start at the same point or accelerate at the same rate for everyone.

If, as Taylor claims, “[t]he same information and telematic technologies responsible for the shift from the industrial to the postindustrial economy are bringing higher education to the tipping point where unprecedented change becomes unavoidable,” minority students have every reason to be wary of these technologies (233). It was telecommunications technology that was used to force many African American workers out of the Bell Phone System in the 1970s. In response to US government decrees (issued from 1973 to 1975) to reorganize personnel procedures, AT&T agreed to create the Upgrade and Transfer Program (UTP) in order to distribute $39 million in wage compensation to workers, reduce racial and sexual job segregation, and hire, promote, and transfer a “target” number of women and minorities into higher paying positions. Under the UTP, white women moved more quickly and in greater numbers into the higher-level positions than did their African American coworkers. African Americans were hired or moved into operator and low-skilled positions that paid more than their previous positions, but less than the new jobs of their caucasian counterparts. Even
more unfortunate than the continued pay inequity was the duplicitous reason that motivated the movement of African Americans into the telephone operator positions. The underlying reasons for these position shifts seemed to have been the fact that technological advancements made fewer operators necessary to place overseas calls. Because of the decreased need for operator-assisted, calls many of the operator positions were phased out of existence. Between 1973 and 1979, the number of operators in the Bell System decreased by 28.7 percent and service workers by 53.8 percent (Green 124). So, with the help of technology (or so it may have seemed) and under the guise of technological improvement, the Bell System was able to follow the government’s decrees by hiring and promoting more minorities while essentially continuing to discriminate against and decrease the number of African Americans in its company. This is the history of the old grid network, and it is a history that teachers and scholars have to acknowledge and interrogate if we expect to be able to understand why some African American students are technologically tentative.

For these students, the use of computer technology in the classroom (the same technology that historically few racial and socioeconomic minorities have had access to because of its prohibitive cost) adds another layer to the oppression that they have already experienced in higher education and society in general. In the computer classroom “Other” students are not only disadvantaged because of their race and socioeconomic status but because historically many African Americans have had little or no positive interaction with information technologies. This lack of familiarity with technology means that they are further behind their majority classmates before the course even begins. They often lack the tools necessary to successfully complete a computer-mediated course. It is as if educators are “raising the bar” of education before all of the students are able to clear the original height.

If we look at a comprehensive history of interaction with computers, we will see that people who are from socioeconomic or racial minority groups have historically had less material access to computer technology than their majority counterparts. Until quite recently computer hardware was prohibitively expensive and technology training was almost impossible to obtain in all but the most affluent school systems (in many geographical areas, this is still the case). While students in the more affluent school districts had access to computers and teachers trained to use them, more economically challenged districts found themselves without computers because of the lack of available district tax dollars and
the federal defunding of public schools. This information is not new to us in the profession. We have known for years that this technological inequity exists. However, we have not interrogated how this history of unequal material access has affected minority students in the computer-mediated classroom even when material access is no longer an issue. We have ignored the obvious issue of historical access, the access that students have to technology based on prior knowledge of and material access to technology as well as the current access that students allow themselves based upon past personal, historical, and cultural experiences with both computer technology and the hegemonic power structure that it is seen as representing. In other words, it depends not only on the students' past experiences and familiarity with computers and the Internet but also their level of comfort with (and trust in) the racial relationships (both past and present) in the United States.

In Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education, Tom Fox argues, "When students have been granted access and still fail this failure is usually blamed on the individual and their problems (maturity, preparedness, psychology, etc.) rather than looking at the social and cultural situations that surround the student" (11). If we assume that if minority students have material access to computers they should be able to perform at the same level of computer competence as their majority counterparts, we once again fail to make good on the promise of a better social and economic life through higher education. Complexity theory, with its "attempts to identify common characteristics of diverse complex systems and to determine the principles and laws by which they operate," as well as its assertion that complex systems are comprised of many parts that interact in a "nonsimple way," lends itself well to the interrogation of historical access and the assumption that once material access to computer technology is equal for all students in the computer-mediated classroom their interaction with the technology will be as well (Taylor 141). If we consider the ways that all of the aspects of the difficult history that African Americans have with technology affect their current attitudes toward and experiences with technology we can gain a better understanding of how best to integrate technology into education and of what might be some of the ramifications of teaching with technology.

Taking into consideration the effects that material and historical access to technology can have on students who are racial minorities or come from the lower socioeconomic strata and looking at these accesses as smaller components that function in a "nonsimple way" to comprise a
larger, complex machine seems to leave us with more problems than solutions. The main question seems to be, how do we even the playing ground that has been (and continues to be) pot-holed by hegemonic power structures, classism, and unfair public school funding practices? How do we ensure that our students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, have the same opportunities to benefit from higher education without disadvantaging any one group?

One suggestion is to bring the student into the conversation on how technology can both benefit and harm students in computer-mediated classrooms. As technology becomes more and more invisible in higher education, expectations of access and computer literacy and competence are raised. Allowing students not only to question the increasing level of technological skill necessary to participate in higher education and the work force but to interrogate what this means for those who lack these skills, we give them an opportunity to come to voice on the subject and possibly affect some kind of social change. If we simultaneously show them how some of the simpler technologies (email, discussion forums, blogs, and word processing software) can be used to make their voices heard, then perhaps we can move toward leveling the playing field. Through this process, students can not only learn the obvious things about rhetoric and audience but also become more comfortable with the technology and gain (or improve upon) some basic computing skills while becoming politically and civically involved in their own worlds.

Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana

Notes

1. For discussions on issues of race and inequity in education see Parks, Delpit, Gilyard, Delpit and Dowdy, and Villanueva.

2. For more on funding for technology in the public school system see Sterne.

3. In his 1992 JAC essay, Fox writes, "[S]chools have failed to make good on the promise that literacy instruction in the schools will reward African American students socially and economically. Equally serious is the fact that schools have failed to change the perception (and reality in most cases) that for African American students literacy instruction entails 'deculturation without true assimilation.'"
Works Cited


