The Problem with Education Technology (Hint: It’s Not the Technology)
by Ben Fink and Robin Brown. Utah State UP. 2016. 46 pp.

Late in Fink and Brown’s slim book, which examines the relationship between educational technology and writing curriculum, my eyes brimmed with tears. A student in Fink and Brown’s class has written to her father about Hegel’s philosophy and how it has raised questions about her faith in God. The father responds, “Let’s talk more about the complex thought of Hegel’s philosophy of Geist later. Cordially, Your daddy.” No fireworks, no big emotions—just one human being responding to another human being through writing. My emotional response comes on the heels of an unrelenting critique, not only of automated essay scoring (AES) and the many uses of technology in writing classrooms but also the sorry state of much classroom instruction that has established the groundwork for the current debate. While Fink and Brown see writing instructors as partially responsible for the educational technology malaise, they also see possibilities for shifting the trend away from AES and toward more human (and humane) writing.

The book’s twelve chapters begin with the 2012 CCCC Convention debate about AES between Les Perelman, who has a long history of arguing against automated essay scoring, and researchers from Educational Testing Service (ETS) who were defending a new product, “the e-rater® Scoring Engine.” Fink and Brown conclude that while Perelman’s reasoning wins the debate, ETS and its like-minded companies win the larger public battle because they promise what the writers call “labor saving devices.” This, they argue, is a futile endeavor when it comes to writing instruction. Using Bourdieu’s language of “cultural capital,” Fink and Brown examine the “durable dispositions” that are established only through enduring practice and effort. In short, “[t]here’s no way to get those dispositions, other than investing in labor.” Any community college writing instructor knows this to the marrow of one’s bones: teaching writing and learning to write well is work, plain and simple.

The book’s most provocative portion is when Fink and Brown point to those responsible for this shift away from human instruction and toward mechanized instruction: writing instructors. Many writing instructors frequently shape writing assignments that elicit robotic, formulaic, and predictable writing. In other words, we ask students to create writing fit for an AES evaluation: “Protest as we might, we as a profession are still deeply invested, and complicit, in the robotic approach to schoolwork.” The writers critique
“the paper,” a piece of writing unique to school settings, something they call “an artificial contrivance.” Harken to your days as an undergraduate student, and you need little more description than that. I’ll admit: I have assigned writing more akin to “a paper” than to the Montaigne-esque essay. To create a writing environment where students genuinely wrestle with an idea or flex their creative muscles means reading those writings not holistically but fully present, wrestling and flexing the reading muscles right there with the writer. This approach is more demanding than scanning for an interesting lead, a clear thesis, and well-developed examples in body paragraphs. Fink and Brown, alluding to Paul Deane, Les Perelman’s debate opponent at the St. Louis CCCC Convention, conclude, “[t]he problem isn’t the technology, but the nature of the ‘writing construct.’ We made it what it is. [ETS and supporters of AES] just dutifully (and lucratively) responded to it.”

Sigh.

This matters to me, as it should to any community college writing instructor. Community colleges are the first to feel budget cuts as the powers-that-be squeeze more from less. To those powers, AES and other “labor-saving devices” save more than labor: they reduce both staff and budgets. This is our livelihood, people!

The urgency of this matter was driven home to me last summer. I coach a baseball team, and my son keeps statistics. He found an app called GameChanger©. Enter the statistics, click a button, and the application creates a plausible-if-clichéd article about the game and the team. My first thought? There goes my job.

Of course, we aren’t asking our students to create plausible-if-clichéd writings, are we? Fink and Brown challenged me to ask myself: Why do I teach writing? What is valuable about writing? What kind of environments can I create where this valued writing can occur? The answers to those questions must produce something more moving and engaging than the plausible-if-clichéd.

Fink and Brown’s solutions are neither magical nor simplistic. They are surprising to many, I suspect. In the face of the education technology company onslaught, the only response that will win not just the day but the long haul is organizing ourselves. They contend that other than “a small, powerful group of corporations and government bureaucrats [. . .], most people don’t like mechanized schooling. [. . .] The people, it seems, are on our side. The problem, daunting as it may be, is ours to solve.” In an environment where it is all too easy to close our office doors and hunker down for the day, Fink and Brown suggest something radical: talking with one another, working together, putting our considerable rhetorical skills to work collectively to not only save ourselves from our lesser selves, but to improve the writing environment for our students.

I was reminded: oh, yeah—that’s why I teach writing.

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