

# Technoliteracy

*A student's view*

BY JORDANA HORN

**W**hy am I writing this? After all, I know very little about computers. I was introduced to them in fourth grade, where my classmates and I learned Apple programming intricacies like “run.” But I must confess that I developed no great love for these machines. For us never-to-be-hackers, the lessons were merely welcome diversions from grueling drills in the Dewey Decimal system—to say nothing of opportunities to play the popular computer game “Oregon Trail” behind Mrs. Hardy’s back.

My family bought a computer when I was in high school; we knew it better as a typewriter with a screen. I took a giant, information-age-esque step forward and learned how to *save* things. Oh, yeah...and we could even play “Oregon Trail” in the privacy of our own home. It was the best of all possible worlds, no doubt. In short, I have never exactly been a “techno-geek.”

I didn’t expect my technoliteracy to grow in the context of a humanities-based college education. I carefully tailored myself and my interests toward becoming a poster-child for the liberal arts—English and communications major, concentration in politics and literature, Executive Editor of *The Daily Pennsylvanian*.

Just when and where I least expected it—in an English class during my senior year at Penn—the two worlds collided. Well, they didn’t exactly collide; they bumped into each other ever so casually, as if there was nothing unusual about mixing technology and literature. In addition to our intense class discussions in our “Literature of the Holocaust” seminar, the class was encouraged to post to a listserv. That was all.

I am writing this because it is clear to me that the revolution is computerized, it is here at the University, and it is time for us to get on board.

## Revolutions, rising voices

Truth be told, I didn’t even realize Penn needed a revolution of any kind. I thought nothing of the fact that everyone was too intimidated to talk to the professor in a big lecture class. Or the fact that no one ever bothered to start a conversation with classmates about the material just learned in class. Or the fact that some classes were just too big for a student’s thoughts to be heard, to be challenged, or even to *matter*.

Intellectual dialogue does not happen nearly enough at Penn. And so, from the beginning of freshman classes, there is the possibility of being lost in endless corridors of complication—the huge lecture hall, the sporadic appointments with advisors, the complete separation of intellectual and social life at Penn. There is Smoke’s and there is Shakespeare, and never the two shall meet.

This divide was dramatically crossed in English 293, where students’ passions and ideas were not constrained to the perimeters of Bennett Hall 127, Tuesday/Thursday, 1:30-3 PM. On the listserv, the discussions raged on into the night and the early morning, demanding that we as students think, contemplate, and make our intellectual lives a relevant and ever-present part of our day-to-day schedules. In each electronic discourse, we were subjected to a far more arduous test than any exam—the test of self-expression, the ability to interact and learn from one another. We forged both personal relationships and intellectual exchanges; no longer hampered by time or constrained by coolness, we held a vigorous debate. Moreover, the debate allowed us to speak *(continued on next page)*

all the words that currently are going unsaid in University classes—all the dialogue that could not have taken place within the current framework of academic structure. This lack of dialogue is a loss that we should not only acknowledge and mourn, but should fight against.

Technology in the classroom is creating a new Locust Walk at Penn—a common intersection for intellectual exchange, meeting, and friendship.

## Confronting our future

The detractors of technology in the classroom would argue that it creates the ultimate impersonalization of intellectual and human contact. It is important to recognize, though, that impersonalization is already affecting Penn. This recognition must be coupled with the realization that we can and do have the capacity for using technology to augment, supplement, and reinforce interpersonal contact, not to replace it.

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In my opinion, the most cited argument against technoliteracy stems from a simple and unadulterated fear of newness. As one alumnus put it to me, new forms of technology continuously present generations with what he termed the “paradigm gap.” Basically, when it comes to technological literacy, either you’ve got it or you don’t. There is timidity where there ought to be temerity, coming from a deep-seated fear of being left behind. Faculty, students, and administrators who have never used e-mail, heard of the World-Wide Web, or used their computers as anything more than word processors are fearful about stepping into the realm of the unknown. They appear content to remain where they are.

When it comes to the fear of newness and the general stagnancy confronted when attempting to change, there is a need to face the inevitable (which, for the record, ought

to go without saying at such an entrepreneurial University). Change, newness, and modernity should challenge us, not cripple us. A university is made for moving forward, and we will serve neither our current nor future communities through recalcitrant paralysis. For all of the hype surrounding the infamous and now clichéd newness of the information superhighway, it has the potential to make *society* new. Since information and communication are aggressively and independently sought-after commodities, the university can have a pivotal role in developing their future forms.

We have the equipment for doing so already in hand, both in terms of technology and our inherent curiosity. By integrating use of the Internet into *every course at the University*—through listservs, departmental gophers, World-Wide Web exploration, and interactive environments—we will be better able to work with one another and to work with people we may never meet in the larger context of the world of Internet users. It will do no one any good to complain that technology is moving too fast; rather, making the most out of technology while recognizing its potential flaws will only strengthen the scaffolding of Penn’s intellectual culture—which has, all too long, been on a sort of “deferred maintenance plan” of its own.

## The new University

Through expansion of the University’s use of the Internet, a family can become involved in its son’s or daughter’s intellectual experience. Administrators can see for themselves what is going on in the classroom. And alumni won’t have to wait for Homecoming to be impressed by the spruced-up Locust Walk—because they can be wholeheartedly involved in the ongoing conversations of a new and enlivened University.

Giving the present that kind of intellectual and technological attention places that much more importance on, and faith in, the future. Students will be allowed to reconstruct classroom conversations, but more importantly, to construct conversations of their own—and faculty, parents, and alumni will be allowed to create a new virtual campus with constant intellectual growth.

After all, as the gate by Houston Hall says with its wrought iron inspiration, *Invenimus Viam Aut Faciemus*—we will find a way, or we will make one. Perhaps never before has it been so easy to do both.

*Note: This article was based on a presentation at the Virtual University conference in January 1994. The conference was sponsored by the SEI Center for Advanced Studies in Management, the Annenberg School for Communication, and the School of Engineering and Applied Science.*

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