Law enters the computer age

Practicing law used to be impossible without a good typewriter. These days, it takes a computer.

More than 70 lawyers, legal assistants and students learned how computers can be used in legal education and the practice of law at the first computer law symposium, held at Drake recently. The symposium was co-sponsored by the Law School and by Apple Computer Inc.

"We wanted to show lawyers and professors that computers are so much more than word processors," explains Andrea Charlow, professor of law and an organizer of the event. "They can make your life so much easier."

Charlow says lawyers often claim they don’t need to know how to use a computer because they don’t use it, their secretaries do. Also, they’re very intimidated by the equipment."

BUT ONCE ATTORNEYS overcome their objections, computers can be a huge asset, says Mark H. Hellmann of Chicago, vice chair of the computer law committee of the American Bar Association.

"For a lot of the smaller practices, the technology is a way to make money," he says.

"I don’t know how I’d practice law without a computer," agrees Scott Campbell, an Oskaloosa, Iowa, attorney. The technology makes work both easier and more fun, he adds.

"Computers are the best thing that have happened to us in years," says Elaine Kraft, a legal assistant in Mason City, Iowa. "Our firm is still in the phase where it seems like things take longer (on the computer), but there have been jobs we couldn’t have taken without the computers because they would have been too much work."

LAWYERS THESE DAYS can use programs that write basic legal documents such as wills, adjusting for specifics like the client’s name, says Charlow. Computers also can be used with an interactive video library, allowing students and legal professionals to hone their skills in searches, courtroom procedures or contract negotiations.

With the interactive videos, the lawyer views a proceeding being played out in front of him. The student or attorney "interacts" at times that seem appropriate.

In trial skill lessons, for example, the attorney may use the computer keyboard to object throughout the proceedings, then cite the grounds for his or her objection. After the judge rules, the trial proceeds.

The Law School and Apple are exploring the possibility of a second symposium next year.