

Meeting the University Community f2f: Why Online Writing Course May not be the Best Option for College Freshmen

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Introduction

Success or failure of online courses often depends on the presence or absence of a learning community in the course. Since students and the instructor do not meet face to face, they have to rely on frequent and effective communication via e-mail or web-based systems in order to learn and teach, to exchange ideas, to receive and give feedback. The importance of creating learning communities in online courses has been well documented. Much of the literature on distance and online learning assumes the need to create learning communities if online learning spaces are to be successful. Authors of such works typically go beyond arguing for a need to create a learning community that is understood and shared by most practitioners of distance learning, and into the discussion of what best ways exist to create such communities. For example, in her 2004 piece "Growing Virtual Communities," Debbie Garber outlines ways in which online educators may increase their students' chances to become members of true online communities. In the essay, Garber also points to the difficulties facing anyone who is trying either to create or to participate in a virtual community, such as an online class. She states:

Too often the assumption is made that simply by putting online technology into place for people to use, we have "built" a virtual learning community. We cannot assume that a learning community will naturally grow from a virtual learning environment, however (Schwier, 2002). Social factors are the key to nurturing or growing a learning community, online as well as face-to-face. It is important to understand these factors, because they can create barriers to the community's growth.

The importance of building a true community of learners, one whose members participate in the group's activities willingly, creatively, and actively, and one in which differences of opinion and conflicts are created and resolved productively and benefit all learners, is especially important in online writing courses. The current paradigm of teaching writing presupposes community-based learning, which involves increased exchanges both among students as well as between students and the instructor. Composition is generally taught as a process, in a workshop environment where the instructor is expected to create conditions for learning and to facilitate learning rather than be the "sole provider" of knowledge.

In addition, students in such courses are expected to know and work with one another, to discuss reading and writing assignment, and to exchange peer advice helping each other to improve as writers.

One of the most important tasks facing a writing teacher in a face-to-face class is also the creation of a community of writers, readers, and thinkers. The concept of community building in writing classes is a well established and argued one, and its discussion can be found in both theoretical and pedagogical literature on teaching writing. At the heart of the idea of a writing classroom as a learning community is social constructivism rhetoric, which, among other things, postulates that reading, writing, and learning are social processes and that writers rarely create alone. Instead, they typically engage in dialog about their writing with others. The idea of the community in the writing class has been developed, among others, by such rhetoricians as Kenneth Bruffee (1984), Joseph Harris (1996), Patricia Bizzell (1994), and many others. These and other authors not only regard community building as an essential task of writing teachers and students, but also point to problems and difficulties that learners and teacher may encounter on the way to creating genuine learning communities.

The Community Paradox

As all writing teachers would know, first-year college writing courses are usually required of all or most incoming students. They are typically taught as part of a university general education program in a two-course sequence. The mission of many general education programs in universities across the United States includes not only giving new college students basic knowledge and helping them decide on their future academic majors, but also introducing them to the concept of an academic community and assisting them in understanding and using the conventions which govern such communities. For examples, the mission statement of the General Education Program at James Madison University, which also calls itself The Human Community lists the following goals of general education:

- to graduate students who will be informed citizens, well prepared to participate in public life and public decision-making;
- to provide students with critical skills in reasoning, communication, and technology that build a strong foundation for course work at JMU as well as for their lives and careers after college;
- to introduce students to core areas of knowledge that are central to the history of western civilization, including its

- interactions with other traditions within the global community;
and
- to invite students to know themselves intellectually, emotionally, and physically and to consider the connections between values and behavior.

Notice that prominent roles in the mission statement are allotted to community-based learning and of human interaction. The need for students to be “well-informed citizens” who “participate in public life and public decision making” are mentioned before disciplinary knowledge or technological skills.

It appears then that because most existing models of online learning are based on the idea of a learning community and because good online teachers make every effort to create learning communities among their students, writing course would be particularly well suited for online delivery. As we stated earlier, current composition pedagogy emphasizes the idea of a learning community as central for successful teaching and learning.

Many writing courses are, indeed, suitable for online delivery. We have taught writing online successfully many times, both at our current institution, James Madison University, and at other institutions. We have taught required first-year level courses as well as advanced, upper-division, writing intensive courses online. Overall, those classes were a success. However, in this paper we would like to argue that when trying to offer online instruction in writing to traditional, incoming college freshmen, writing teachers and administrators need to be especially careful. In fact, we would like to go as far as to say that offering online writing courses to traditional-aged incoming college freshmen during their first semester of university life may be detrimental to their future success as learners and members of the academic community. In the remaining pages of the paper, we would like to explain our position and to explain why we believe that incoming college students should take their first college writing classes face to face and, if they desire, move on to online learning later in their academic careers.

Online Writing Instruction at James Madison University

In order to understand our argument, readers need to know the context in which online writing instruction is done at our institution, James Madison University. JMU is a public university, with about 15,000 students and an independent Writing Program. In addition to serving the first-year writing needs of JMU students (over 3,000 students a year), under the auspices of the university General Education Program, we have a vibrant and popular minor in rhetoric and writing and are currently working on proposing an undergraduate major in

rhetoric and professional writing. All full-time and tenure-track faculty teach freshman composition and take pride in their work.

The JMU Writing Program has been offering online writing courses during the fall, spring, and summer academic sessions for the last four years. Online writing instruction started when two members of the Writing Program (Shelley Aley and Teresa Murden) applied for a General Education grant to develop online sections of GWRIT 102, the second of a two-course sequence of writing requirements.¹ The 102 course was offered in “packages,” with Package E focusing on media and technology. While Murden and Aley did not receive a grant from the General Education Program, they did receive funding from the Vice President for Academic Affairs to work with the JMU Center for Instructional Technology to develop what is termed a “distributed learning” course.

The first online GWRIT 102E was offered as a distributed-learning course, meaning it was offered during the fall semester of 2001 to on-campus students who received training in the BlackBoard software before the class began and met with the instructor for individual and group conferences throughout the semester. Distributed-learning courses attract the attention of administrators, because they cut down on the need for classroom space; once the one-day training session in BlackBoard was complete, the students and instructors could meet from wherever they had access to an online computer: a dorm room, an office, off-campus housing—anywhere. And the individual and group conferences could take place in the instructor’s office.

Students who took the distributed-learning course reported that they enjoyed the online environment, because they could meet with the teacher in her office when necessary, and this kind of contact was encouraged for consultations on using BlackBoard as well as on revising drafts the students were writing for class. Community development was possible in both the online- and face-to-face environments. All-in-all, this learning environment provided the best of both worlds, although it increased the instructors’ work load and time spent with students one-on-one. So while it was popular, it was not a very effective use of resources for the Writing Program, which was already taxed by service to General Education through freshman writing.

Dr. Murden moved to another university within the next year, and it was up to both of us (Shelley Aley and Pavel Zemliansky) to propose online writing courses in the future, if we were to carry on.

By this time, the Center for Instructional Technology had money to fund and train instructors who wanted to work in the online environment. Pavel Zemliansky, who came to JMU three years ago as an experienced online instructor of writing, went through the CIT training and, with Aley, taught online sections of the

¹ The two-course sequence was eliminated in the fall of 2003, replaced by a single course, GWRIT 103: Critical Reading and Writing.

freshman writing course during the summer sessions. Because the course was now entirely online, Aley suggested that it be offered to upper-division students who, for various reasons, had not taken the course as first- or second-year students and now needed to fulfill the general education writing requirement in order to graduate. Thus, members of our general education online writing classes are sophomores, juniors, and graduating seniors. This suggestion to limit the course in this way came after Aley's experience teaching the freshmen who were in her distributed-learning courses. The students in those courses flourished if they took the time to meet with their instructors and fellow students face-to-face. When they failed to do this, they often did poorly, or demonstrated poor understanding of what they were supposed to do.

In addition to the online sections of freshman writing courses, other writing courses, which are part of our minor in rhetoric and writing, were offered online by Zemliansky. At this time, the dean of General Education began to encourage us to offer more sections of our online freshman writing course, GWRIT 103, which was now the single-course requirement replacing our two-course sequence requirement (GWRIT 101 and 102). Her reasoning was based on our need to move as many freshmen as possible through the writing course during the summer, thus saving us classroom space and instructional resources.

While the dean's request appeared reasonable, we were seriously concerned about allowing first-time freshmen to get their writing course "out of the way," so to speak, during a four- or six-week summer online writing course. Typically, the first two weeks of the class are devoted to learning the ropes and adding and dropping students from the roll. The last two or four weeks, depending on the length of the semester, are often an exercise in catch-up for many of the students. A 15-student enrollment in such a course can dwindle to 10 or 12 students, with fewer students doing as well as their counterparts in the face-to-face environment. The students already familiar with BlackBoard and accustomed to the demands of college have a better chance of keeping up than do the freshmen. We wonder, after teaching the course online for the last three years, how facing this kind of rigor could enhance an incoming freshman's first college writing experience.

Over the last two years, we have been able to persuade the General Education dean that most freshmen need the full fall or spring semester in the traditional classroom to develop as writers in the college community, before they step into the virtual realm. Perhaps, if an instructor had the time and energy to do so, he/she could teach a distributed-learning course for freshmen during the fall or spring semester, although the time and energy it takes to do so can be overwhelming with our four/four teaching load. We would like to see online teachers receive course releases or other support to develop online writing courses and test them, but funding for this activity would have to come from outside the Writing Program, which currently has no money for this kind of research. As stated earlier, General Education did not fund our last grant

request. Without the support from the Vice President, we would not have been able to develop and offer the online courses we now have. Financial support is crucial to the development of online instruction.

Additional Reasons not to Encourage Freshmen to Take Online Writing Courses

Besides our concerns about offering summer online courses to entering freshmen, mentioned above, we have other concerns about teaching our freshman writing online. They are as follows:

- Face-to-face interaction with peers and instructors is an important part of the first-year experience. Often the freshman writing course is the smallest, most collaborative course freshmen will experience. If face-to-face delivery is replaced by online delivery, our students will suffer the consequences of this loss.
- Most incoming freshmen have to revise their ideas about reading, writing, and learning drastically as they enter college. They have to learn to approach writing as a process, to invent, draft and revise, and offer and receive feedback to drafts in progress from their peers and their instructor. We believe that taking the required general education writing class face-to-face will ease this transition better than taking it online.
- Finally, from teaching writing online, we can say that experienced learners, readers, and writers will build and participate in online learning communities more successfully if they know how to do that in face-to-face learning situations. Incoming freshmen are at a disadvantage later in their educational experiences if they miss out on the face-to-face, interactive experience as freshmen.

Conclusions

The concerns we have outlined in this presentation about teaching freshman composition online raise issues about whether or not online writing courses should be offered to incoming freshmen, especially during the summer session before they enter the university. And while we have seen evidence that under certain circumstances freshman students can do well, we also have concerns about the amount of time this kind of instruction takes away from a faculty member's other responsibilities. Key to our concerns is the question: Is the online course worth the effort, and does it really make learning better than in the face-to-face classroom?

We suggest that the ideas and concerns presented in this paper be developed into hypotheses for further testing. The results of such studies would be valuable for the development of a phenomenology of teaching writing online, just as the work of the people cited in this paper, in addition to those like Janet Emig (1971), Linda Flower and Robert Hayes (1981),

Lester Faigley (1986), and James Berlin (1988), just to name a few, moved our discipline toward articulating philosophies of writing instruction over the last 25 years. Those working in the field of technology and writing have begun this kind of work, including such people as Jay David Bolter, Gail E. Hawisher, Cynthia L. Selfe, through their essays, books, and edited works.

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