A CONSIDERABLE DISTANCE:
THE ROLE OF WRITING STUDIES IN ONLINE LEARNING
AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2017

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

First popularized with the formation of commercial and university-run correspondence schools, distance learning has made a steady, if problematic, transition to computer-based classrooms. Online courses vary widely in their curricula, but underlying commonalities in their creation and composition unite them in fundamental ways. By design and definition, the online classroom not only consistently "privileges the written word" (Cole x) but also serves a more diverse population of students through the "anytime, anywhere" nature of its educational environment.

Drawing on these foundational qualities, this dissertation examines the overlooked relationships between distance education, composition, and community colleges. Although rarely discussed together, their individual histories reveal interwoven theoretical roots that can be cultivated into purposeful partnerships to advance distance learning at a time of rapid technological development but disparate pedagogical direction.

In Chapter 1, "Starting from the Margins: Composition, Community Colleges, and Online Learning," I discuss the continued societal emphasis on the college degree as key to personal fulfillment and professional success, despite the current difficulties that traditional institutions have encountered in accommodating the influx of increasingly diverse students. These complications have, in turn, encouraged innovation in both the structure and the pedagogy of higher education, most notably the (re)emergence of for-profit institutions and the development of online learning. The for-profit sector favors the flexible format of online learning, and the ire directed at that industry has intensified scrutiny of online learning. Leaving aside the business of higher education, I emphasize the continued ability of online learning to educate an underserved segment of students and advocate the development of stronger relationships with composition

and community colleges, two areas of higher education well-aligned with the needs and purposes of online learning.

I further explain the foundation for these relationships in Chapter 2, "The Democratization of Higher Education: Histories and Mythologies," in which I not only uncover the history of distance education, but also trace the separate yet often parallel threads of composition and community colleges through the complex fabric of higher education. A theme that emerges is the tension between democratic ideals and egalitarian actualities, between the idealistic insistence that everyone should have the opportunity to earn a college degree and the realistic physical, financial, and social limitations that undermine reaching that goal. Highlighting the separate and shared evolutions of two particularly influential institutions— Chautauqua and the University of Chicago—this chapter illustrates the undervalued yet integral roles that composition, community colleges, and distance learning have played in this ongoing conversation about the purposes and practices of higher education.

Chapter 3, "+ Computers: Writing as/in Technology," shifts focus to the environments and activities of online classrooms and the technologies that create and sustain them. Composition moves to the forefront here, as writing remains the primary tool and technology of the online classroom. While writing has always served *as* a technology, the rapid advancement of personal computing devices has moved us into an era in which we regularly write *in* technology. This chapter, then, examines the symbiotic relationship between technology and writing, focusing on the pedagogical implications of engaging with these new kinds of writing in the space of online classrooms.

Chapter 4, "Community and Ecology: The Written World of the Online Classroom," moves from theory to practice, taking a closer look at the actual spaces of the online classroom

through a qualitative study of the online composition courses at my home institution, the College of Lake County. The study revealed that, though increasing in number and frequency at the College, online composition courses are still developed and delivered in relative isolation and with limited technological and pedagogical support. Through instructor interviews and an observational study of online classes, I offer a representative snapshot of the successes and struggles of online learning, highlighting the intended and achieved purposes of written communication in these online courses.

Chapter 5, "Conclusions and Recommendations: Communication Across Boundaries," builds on that study of individual online classrooms to develop recommendations for implementing institutional and systemic changes to better support and legitimate the practices of online learning and to better serve those who participate in it. I advocate for increased efforts in Writing Studies and at community colleges to advance the abilities of online learning in more local settings. By emphasizing the ability of written interaction in online classrooms to provide greater access to both the experience and the education of earning a college degree, composition and community colleges can and should become leaders in unlocking the potential of distance learning to further democratize higher education.

In loving memory of my grandparents, Thomas Emery and Thera Annette Cash,

as well as the irreplaceable Henry "Ham" Thornburg,

whose support for my educational aspirations was without limits,

as is my love for each of them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To assuage the fears of first-year composition students, I begin my classes each semester with a quote from the incomparable Dorothy Parker: "I hate writing, I love having written." Indeed. Writing a dissertation is certainly an arduous process, but the endeavor of adequately thanking all who have helped me arrive at the "having written" is a final joyous challenge.

The first and most heartfelt thanks go to my family for supporting me without end. To Elizabeth Cash, for transforming into everyone else's Ebbie but always remaining first and foremost my mom. Quite simply, I owe everything that I am to you. To my husband, Clayton, for patience beyond measure, editing prowess beyond compare, and for always having convincing answers to my most random questions. You never fail to set my mind at ease and are, without question, the awesome. To my children--Jude, Atticus, Emery, and Thera--who all came to be during the process of writing this work. Thank you for keeping me grounded in the important questions--like discerning who, in fact, started it--and for *occasionally* making my retreat to the solitude of my research seem like a respite from more difficult work. I love you all so, so much, and I officially declare us to be "after the after."

Thank you to the friends and colleagues who have not only listened and encouraged, but also given thoughtful advice and assistance at various stages of this project. Nicole Talge, Laura Stengrim, Vasilka Maslanka, Nick Schevera, Jenny Staben, Kim Voss, and Roland Miller--know that you have all played a major role in maintaining my sanity.

I am beyond grateful to the College of Lake County for providing me with a professional environment in which growth and innovation are heartily encouraged and intellectually supported. My colleagues make it a pleasure to come to work every single day and make

grading … well, grading still sucks, but you are all nevertheless magicians, miracle-workers, and heroes. I am humbled to be part of this amazing academic community.

I thank the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and particularly my committee members for the continued opportunity to pursue my work, despite the many twists and turns my personal and professional paths have taken. Paul Prior and Burks Oakley II provided thought-provoking commentary that will motivate my research goals far beyond this project. I am forever indebted to Peter Mortensen for helping me to build, and to build upon, a contemplative foundation for my pedagogy throughout my graduate days and well into my professional career. And I could not have completed this dissertation without with the cheerful guidance, resolute direction, and enduring encouragement of my advisor, Gail Hawisher. As the first member of my family to graduate from college, graduate school was an utter mystery to me; the lessons I have learned as a Writing Studies student at UIUC have become invaluable in my ever-evolving understanding of higher education and the place of my work within it.

Finally, I would like to thank my students, my unending sources of inspiration, motivation, and determination. In my fifteen years of teaching composition, I have found my students to consistently be equal parts maddening and marvelous. I cherish the vast array of previous experiences and relish the promise of each new semester. I commenced with a quote and I'll conclude with a paraphrase: Some people wait their entire lives to meet their favorite writers; I teach mine.

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CHAPTER 1:

Starting from the Margins: Composition, Community Colleges, and Online Learning

My undergraduate years at a small, liberal arts college were spent in stately old buildings; narrow hallways, creaky staircases, and wood-encased windows led to classrooms where long-forgotten papers and tattered textbooks lingered in corners, the literary artifacts of students and professors past. I graduated, moving directly to the voluptuous quad, Romanesque pillars, and labyrinth-like library stacks of a research university. Years later, I moved from that college town back to my hometown, subsequently building a career teaching on a community college campus, where uniform cinderblock classrooms, lacking in architectural embellishment, evidence varying degrees of modernity in marker-streaked whiteboards and networked "smartrooms."

As a community college professor of composition, my time has increasingly been spent in a less stately, though potentially more state-of-the-art, realm of higher education: the online classroom. Often thought to be an isolated space, as Gene Maeroff's titular assessment of this *Classroom of One* suggests, I have hardly been alone. According to a 2016 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in the Fall of 2013, 27.1% of all students enrolled at degree-granting postsecondary institutions were taking some of their courses via distance education.[1] Private, for-profit institutions show significantly higher rates of distance learning enrollment—59.3% of students take some distance learning courses, while more than half (51.7%) are *exclusively* learning at a distance ("Fast Facts"). Moreover, in recent years, community colleges—institutions which enroll nearly half of all the undergraduates in the

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[1] The National Center for Education Statistics defines a distance-education course as one that 'uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously." ("Distance education")

U.S.[2]—have seen distance education programs continue to grow, even as overall enrollment at two-year institutions declines.[3]

These are powerful numbers. While distance learning has a long and tenuous history, rooted in the formation of commercial and university-run correspondence schools in the late 1800s, it is the transition to, and subsequent popularity of, online learning that has drawn such attention to these courses without classrooms, these schools without spaces. The limelight focused on online learning has been both complimentary and critical—touting renewed access to education while doubting the value of the learning therein. More than anything else, however, the natural comparison of online learning to "traditional" teaching methods and institutions has illuminated a developing societal suspicion that the whole of higher education has never been as firmly established as its physical edifices suggest.

Indeed, the obvious disparities between these divergent avenues to education are often unsettling. Far less evident, however, is the single element that not only connects online learning to traditional education, but also links together the vastly different individual disciplines within each: writing. According to Maryellen Weimer, professor emerita at Penn State Berks and well-known expert on creating learner-centered classrooms, "The need for faculty to teach writing and

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[2] According to a report from The College Board, a non-profit organization started in 1899, which is devoted to expanding access to higher education and helping students successfully transition from high school to college, "In fall of 2014, 42% of all undergraduate students and 25% of all full-time undergraduate students were enrolled in community colleges. According to a recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), nearly half (46%) of all students who completed a degree at a four-year institution in 2013-14 had enrolled at a two-year institution at some point in the previous years. These enrollment patterns are not just picking up the occasional community college course taken by students; of those students who had attended a two-year institution, 47% had enrolled in that sector for five or more terms (NSC, Spring 2015)" (Ma and Baum 1).
[3] A 2015 study from the Instructional Technology Council, an affiliated council of the American Association of Community Colleges, reported that, from fall 2013 to fall 2014, enrollment in online programs at two-year colleges increased 4.7% while overall enrollment at these same institutions decreased by 3.5% (Smith).

thinking in every course across the curriculum has never been more crucial" (Weimer ix).

Focusing on the seeming deficiencies of online learning based on its physically disparate participants has, then, overlooked and underestimated an ever-present benefit of this pathway to education; that is, by design and definition the online classroom "privileges the written word" (Cole x). In other words, while online courses may be physically housed in the cloud, they are conceptually grounded in the concreteness of the written word.

Though evolving technologies and multimedia pedagogical tools, like embedded video lectures and interactive virtual labs, are able to deliver and assess content in innovative ways, ever expanding the boundaries of online learning, the bulk of the interpersonal communication in online classrooms—both among peers and between students and instructors—remains rooted in the asynchronous online alphabetic writing of threaded discussion boards. According to "An Analysis of Faculty Promotion of Critical Thinking and Peer Interaction within Threaded Discussions," an article in the September 2015 issue of *Online Learning* (a long-time leading journal in distance education) research in online learning and related fields suggests that "the communication that occurs in any learning environment is the most important aspect of the education process that happens in that environment" and that "the majority of the dialogue in the online learning environment occurs through the discussion boards" (Belcher et al.).

This continued reliance on writing for interaction in online classrooms is pervasive throughout all of higher education; the literature surrounding threaded discussions crosses boundaries of time and space, much like the online classrooms of which they are a part. Studies which examine threaded discussion as the primary interactive aspect of an online course span all types of institutions and every discipline within, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels,

which is not entirely surprising, given that the main affordance of written threaded discussions is asynchronous interaction, a primary tenet of the "anytime, anyplace" nature of distance learning.

The relative freedom from time and space has continually drawn all manner of students to distance education, but the flexibility allowed by online learning as a whole, and asynchronous written discussion in particular, is perhaps valued nowhere more than in the community college setting. Though widely varied in available financial resources dedicated to technological innovation,[4] in an effort to provide greater access to education, community colleges regularly explore creative options for course and program scheduling—a goal which online learning has the potential to advance significantly.

Rio Salado College in Tempe, Arizona is just one example. The first community college in the U.S. to move totally online, Rio Salado has designed its own Learning Management System (LMS) rather than using the prepackaged options, like Moodle, Blackboard, or Canvas, "because of its unusual course schedule method. The college has more than 48 start dates a year as opposed to a regular fall, spring, and summer semester schedule" (Fishman 14). The institution is a leading innovator as, among other awards, it has been recognized by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for its successful retention strategies. Likewise, the school uses a virtual ton of technology to both provide and maintain their courses. In addition to embedded video lectures and self-check activities that students complete mostly independently (guided by cooperative systems which efficiently track progress so that instructors can keep pace with their students), students at Rio Salado have access to technologies like

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[4] One of the primary recommendations from the February 2015 report, *Community College Online*, published by the New America Foundation, was that the federal government needs to "make sure that community colleges get the funding needed to promote innovative methods of course and program delivery and student support services" as, at the time of the study, there were "no federal funding streams dedicated to innovation at community colleges, even though they educate the largest share of students in higher education" (Fishman 25).

a virtual microscope. There is even a virtual cadaver for anatomy lessons. Students use

lab kits to conduct small lab-based activities from their homes. In a Spanish class,

students practice the language by using a microphone and a software program that has the

ability to gauge their accents and language skills and gives feedback. In a music history

course, students listen to embedded audio clips and respond to various writing prompts.

(Fishman 16)

Clearly, the student experience at Rio Salado College is one that is extensively immersed in

multimodal technology; and, yet, the asynchronous nature of the institution that allows it to

"retain students who are most prone to dropping out of college" (Fishman 16) continues to use

written discussion as a significant means of communication. While the school provides a

synchronous, high-tech platform for students to connect "outside" of class—"RioLounge," which

utilizes the power of Google Hangouts to help students "meet each other virtually through online

videoconferencing" (Fishman 16)—in the academic environments, "[i]nteraction among students

happens through discussion threads set up by instructors" (16). At Rio Salado, then, the use of

written discussion in online classrooms continues to be a primary and purposeful pedagogical

practice, despite the availability of, and demonstrated adeptness with, varied and arguably more

advanced technologies.

My assertion here, then, is that written, asynchronous, threaded discussions are a

sustainable, significant, and successful pedagogical tool in online learning and will remain so for

the foreseeable future. In short, writing is a relatively constant component of online classrooms,

environments which are otherwise constantly changing. And, given this continued presence of

writing in online classrooms across disciplines, my argument is that the field of Writing Studies

should play an increasingly principal role in helping to shape the architecture of these virtual campuses, built not of bricks and mortar, but of words and ideas.

Narratives of Purpose in Higher Education

Colleges and universities have long used their impressive physical presence to illustrate the importance of higher education in attaining success—a way to offer tangible proof of an often nebulous concept—but it seems we may now be on the doorstep of a new educational era, one in which, quite simply, the physical locations for learning are falling short of demand, both in terms of space and flexibility. Equating a college education with definitive success, students flood all manner of academic institution; total enrollment in postsecondary degree-granting institutions increased by 45 percent from 1997 to 2011 and is expected to continue to rise— though at a slower rate—through the year 2022 (Hussar and Bailey 20). This national trend reflects worldwide postsecondary numbers, which, according to a 2009 UNESCO report, rose 53 percent in less than a decade. This report, cited by Anya Kamenetz, author of *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education*, "concluded that there's no foreseeable way enough traditional universities could be physically built in the next two decades to match the demand" (Kamenetz viii).

The impossible expectations for adequate physical structures in which to educate our increasingly massive student body, though, is not our greatest concern. Rather, it is that, filled past capacity, philosophic conflict concerning the purposes of higher education is rising to the surface; there is a "dangerous confusion between ends and means," between equating "growing educational institutions and advancing the cause of learning itself" (Kamenetz ix). New waves of students (both recent high school graduates and returning students) are enrolling in college and university courses fueled by a sense of the need for higher education, but lacking an

understanding of what that academic endeavor should entail. According to a joint study conducted by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation in 2015,

> Americans continue to endorse the importance of having a certificate or a degree beyond high school, and they see the importance of postsecondary education increasing in the future. They view higher education as essential for getting a good job and important for ensuring a high quality of life. Although they have some doubts about whether college graduates are well-prepared for the workforce, that does not diminish their faith in the value of the degree. ("Americans Value Postsecondary…" 26)

In other words, while the value Americans place on having a *degree* is clear, the purpose of the *education* it signifies is often more obtuse.

Part of the continued impetus to pursue a college education is, essentially, the result of a lengthy but subtle marketing campaign. In the post-World War II era, a university education became "not only a mass market product but the best hope of achieving a middle-class income. Sending your kids to college is now part of the American Dream, just like homeownership; and just like homeownership, it's something we have been willing to go deeply into hock for" (Kamenetz viii).

The idea that "the only thing more expensive than getting a higher education is not getting a higher education" (Kim) is one to which we are still quite committed, perhaps because we are continually encouraged to believe that planning, at least financially, for a child's college education is a requisite parental responsibility. And the earlier, the better, at least according to a recent commercial from the Gerber Company, which explains how the well-known makers of baby food have branched out from packaging pureed fruits and vegetables to managing stocks and bonds for this very purpose. The sixty-second spot, often aired after repeats of *Sesame Street*

on the Sprout network, features five parents casually discussing college planning while their infants and toddlers quietly play nearby. One parent eschews the topic entirely, remarking, "Oh, we've got time," but another young mother eagerly shares that they have already started saving, explaining that it is never too early to start, that the college savings plan doubles as life insurance, that it is a risk-free program with guaranteed growth, and that there are no penalties, so the money can be used for anything should her daughter *decide* not to go to college (all of which implies that the only obstacles to higher education are a lack of parental financial support or student desire). The commercial ends with another couple agreeing that they had better get started, because, as the father emphatically states, looking at his infant reclined in a bouncy seat *"...you're going to college"* ("Gerber Life College Plan").

"You're going to college" may be the mantra of the middle class, but, like homeownership in the era of sub-prime loans, "going to college" during the last decade, given recent developments in higher education, has been particularly fraught with pitfalls. As Stanford economist Caroline Hoxby explains, "college-going has increased in every recession since the 1960s. What happens is that the opportunity cost of going to college—the job opportunities a person forgoes while in college—drops very dramatically during recessions. Thus, some people who would not enroll do enroll" (Parker). This increase in enrollment during difficult economic times has, historically, been particularly noticeable at community colleges as "workers seeking to upgrade skills and knowledge" often find courses compatible with their goals at these two-year institutions ("During recession: enrollment up…"). The most recent and dramatic economic downturn—"The Great Recession"[5]—was no exception. Between Fall 2007 and Fall 2010, total college enrollment grew by nearly 2.5 million students, an increase of nearly 16% in just three

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[5] December 2007-June 2009 ("US Business Cycle…")

years. Comparatively, the change in enrollment for the same length of time prior to the Great

Recession—2004 to 2007—was much less pronounced, showing an increase of just 5.6% ("Total

undergraduate fall enrollment…").

What is interesting about this recent surge in enrollment, though, is that traditional

universities and even community colleges were not the ones to receive this influx of students;

rather, for the first time, private for-profit institutions received the greatest boost in enrollment.

Though each type of institution saw a technical increase in the number of students enrolled,

during the years 2007-2010, non-profit colleges and universities—both public and private, 2-year

and 4-year—categorically lost market share while for-profit institutions gained relative ground at

an unprecedented rate.[6]

Despite the increase in demand for higher education during the recession, then, neither

private non-profit nor public colleges and universities significantly increased their enrollments.

In the years since the recession, though the overall number of students has actually decreased,

non-profit institutions have begun to rebound a bit in terms of market share. Compared to the

end of the recession in 2010, the most recent numbers from 2014 show for-profits account for

7.4% of all undergraduate enrollment (down from 9.5%), private non-profits hold 16% (up from

14.7%), and public institutions claim 76.6% (up from 75.7%). Looking at a slightly longer range

of time, however, it can be seen that for-profit institutions gained a significant stake hold in

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[6] In 2000, for-profit colleges and universities (2- and 4-year) represented 3.3% of enrolled undergraduates, private non-profits enrolled 16.9%, and public colleges and universities held 79.8%. Private non-profit and public institutions had already begun to lose ground by the beginning of the Great Recession, enrolling 15.8% and 77.7%, respectively, of all undergraduates, while for-profits had nearly doubled their share of enrollments to 6.4% in 2007. This trend continued until 2010, when for profits enrolled 9.5% of the country's undergraduates, while private non-profit enrollments dipped to 14.7% and public colleges and universities fell to 75.7%. Parsing the numbers a bit more, we can also see that public 4-year institutions saw the greatest dip, from 37.2% of all enrolled undergraduates in 2007 to 35.7% in 2010, while two-year public institutions only dropped from 40.5% to 39.9% ("Total undergraduate fall enrollment…").

higher education during the recession, and that this impact continues to be felt, even in the post-recession recovery period. The overall biggest change from the pre-recession years to now is that public two-year institutions (i.e., community colleges) have dipped fairly significantly in terms of market share, falling from 43% of total undergraduate enrollment in 2000 to 37% in 2014 ("Total undergraduate fall enrollment..."), a decline that closely corresponds to the increase in enrollment at for-profits during the same years.[7]

In essence, then, the latest recession was significant in higher education as it seems to have emphasized different options for incoming students. Funding cuts and budget restraints remain a stark reality at many four-year institutions and have resulted in increased tuition, thereby limiting the abilities of some students who might otherwise be qualified to attend.[8] Traditionally, in the absence of access to four-year institutions, students have turned to the lower-cost, open-access option of enrolling in community colleges. As the above data indicate, though, during the recent recession the desire for higher education was expectedly elevated, but the increased demand unexpectedly went elsewhere as students in large numbers enrolled in the "for-profits."[9]

The outcome of this trend toward for-profit education, though, remains in question. While not inherently inferior in terms of education, the less-than-virtuous practices and priorities of many for-profit institutions are lately coming to light, leaving their students both indebted and uneducated. A recent example is that of the unethical information practices, fiscal

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[7] The years 2000-2014 saw about a 6% decline in enrollment at community colleges and a nearly 4.5% increase at for-profits ("Total undergraduate fall enrollment…").

[8] According to a 2014 report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 47 states are spending 20 percent less per student than they did during the 2007-2008 school year, after adjusting for inflation and yet, tuition has risen nationally by 29% (Mitchell).

[9] "For-profit schools have gone from educating 2 percent of total U.S. students to nearly 10 percent—an increase of more than 1.5 million students—in just two decades" (Konczal).

irresponsibility, and subsequent collapse of Corinthian College—"one of the largest and most prominent for-profit higher education companies," at one time enrolling 77,000 students at 100 campuses—which declared bankruptcy under allegations of fraud in the form of falsifying job placement and student grade data to bolster their reputation and hide performance problems (Konczal).

We are at a potentially pivotal point in the history of higher education, then, and one that is filled with perplexing conundrums. For the betterment of individuals and the advancement of our collective society, we continually encourage students to pursue higher education. This societal encouragement, whether sincere or profit-seeking, combined with other factors, like the limited job prospects of a slowly recovering economy, has clearly been reaching potential students. They have flocked to higher education in droves, but have been met only with overflowing classrooms, student loan debt, piecemeal coursework, and insufficient support services; abundantly eager, but with an undefined direction for their educational endeavor, nearly half of these students eventually flounder, and many of them during their very first year. Another 2014 NCES report indicates that only about 59% of full-time first-time students at 4-year institutions earned their degrees, while only 20-37% of similar students at 2-year institutions followed their programs to completion (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, and Mann 4).[10] In short, students may have come to college in record numbers but, given the absence of truly "viable options for providing quality higher education to the masses" (Konczal), many fled almost as fast, their lingering financial obligations the only evidence of their educational effort. Rather than

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[10] Although these numbers do allow for a longer-than-usual timeframe for completion (6 years for 4-year institutions and 3-4 years for 2-year institutions), they do not take into account those students who change institutions, or take courses part-time (which is a significant number of students in the 2-year college category). I suspect that incorporating these numbers would at least slightly lower the percentage of students who complete their programs.

elevating individuals and strengthening our economy—i.e., achieving the democratic ideals of higher education—we are instead submitting a vast majority of our students to a system that leaves them demoralized and indebted.[11]

This clear failure to assist students in achieving the academic American Dream of a career-securing degree has led, in turn, for many newsmakers, educational theorists, and policymakers to prognosticate—or even call for—the death of traditional higher education (the title of Konczal's recent *Rolling Stone* article cited above, for instance, is "What's Left After Higher Education is Dismantled," which presupposes that our current system is coming apart at the seams). Those who aren't foretelling the demise of traditional colleges and universities are clamoring for more options, a way to educate all students and accommodate their myriad purposes in seeking out higher education. While the former hasn't happened—and won't happen, as a full collapse of our traditional educational system is fairly unlikely—the latter is rapidly developing. New options for pursuing higher education abound; the electronic pages of academic newspapers are filled daily with articles about open education, online degrees, and competency-based assessment just to name a few potentially-problem-solving innovations.

Existence is not acceptance, however—the qualities, qualifications, and capabilities of these alternative academic undertakings are uncertain and unclear. When one of these innovations attracts criticism, hits a stumbling block or, as in the current case of for-profit

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[11] According to studies conducted by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), student loan debt hit approximately $1 trillion at the end of 2011 and the "20% growth in student loan debt from the end of 2011 to May 2013 has been much faster than the growth in revolving credit products (predominantly credit cards)....Student loans now comprise the second largest form of consumer debt behind home mortgages" (Chopra, "Student Debt Swells…"). Also according to Chopra, the CFPB's Student Loan Ombudsman, the extreme indebtedness weighs heavily on a generation who are already struggling in today's economy as the "lines of job-seekers are long, states are reducing their higher education budgets, and household budgets are straining. Young consumers are shouldering much of the punishment in the form of student loan bills for doing exactly what they were told would be a key to a better life" (Chopra, "Too Big to Fail…").

colleges, fails spectacularly, the entire revision effort suffers. Corinthian College's nefarious practices and dastardly disservice to students has significant repercussions for the public perception of, and subsequent policymaking related to, other nontraditional areas of academia. Konczal's *Rolling Stone* article, for instance, lumps all for-profits together, calling them—again notably, as his article appears in a popular, mainstream media publication—a "cesspool" of higher education. The widely published catastrophe that is Corinthian College, then, calls into question all for-profits. The well-known University of Phoenix, for instance, already running short on public goodwill given its massive size and overtly corporate structure (i.e., enrollment = revenue), is now also under increased scrutiny. While the increased investment in understanding the business practices of these institutions and the efforts to ensure the ethical treatment of their students are certainly welcome as they provide much-needed corrective steps in creating a successful system of higher education, an unfortunate byproduct of the process is the perception that function and format are synonymous. In the case of the University of Phoenix, for instance, the questionable financial structure and the mode of educational delivery—almost entirely online—become inextricably intertwined. In other words, the increasingly tarnished reputation of for-profits is, by proxy, seeping into the public perception of the related, but separate, academic endeavor of online learning as a whole.[12]

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[12] When, for instance, *Inside Higher Ed* recently reported on the University of Phoenix's decline in enrollment (and, therefore, revenue), the announcement was immediately met with a cheerful comment concerning the downfall of online learning: "Most fads are unsustainable. Farewell privatized Online Ozymandias" ("Enrollment Woes Continue…"). The perception that private, for-profit, and online are always connected, though, is false. As Gene Maeroff simply states in his 2003 work, *A Classroom of One*, "most online learning is not-for-profit" (Maeroff x). The numbers have shifted over the last decade—enrollment in *some* distance learning in nonprofit institutions is at 45%, as opposed to 59% in the for-profits—but the roots of online learning are firmly in the nonprofit sector and will remain so even now that the bloom is off the proverbial for-profit rose.

Thus far, it seems, the envisioned academic revolution is a fairly spastic and sporadic affair rather than a concentrated and sustained upheaval of higher education. These disastrous and well-publicized missteps in the attempted advancement of higher education ultimately mask smaller and more dispersed successes in alternative approaches to postsecondary education and serve instead to reify and further stratify the very system they seek to subvert. Current efforts to restructure the world of higher education, which already "ranks private above public, research university above teaching college, bachelor's above associate's degree, liberal arts above vocational and technical education" (Kamenetz 25), are now isolating and oppressing new sectors of students, particularly those who approach postsecondary education *with* the deeply-ingrained notion that "college=success," but *without* the knowledge or support to navigate the first part of that equation. As Kamenetz concludes, "the current official strategy of trying to cram more of our least-prepared young people into our most resource-deprived institutions, with the absence of any other components of a welfare state or investment in quality job creation, and hoping it somehow makes America into a more broadly prosperous country is not likely to work" (Kamenetz 29).

Clearly, then, the current state of higher education is capable of producing some thoroughly pessimistic predictions about the future of academia in our country. Moreover, these narratives loudly lament the lack of prospects for students, even those who successfully complete their college degrees, as they continue to be mere "consumers" of the increasingly corporatized and commoditized college education.

Somewhat softly and from the sidelines, however, other stories are starting to be told, stories that look holistically at the history of higher education, stories that elucidate the pattern of problems inherently present in the unwieldy realm of postsecondary education. John R. Thelin,

for instance, in his insightful tome, *A History of American Higher Education*, explains that our

"traditional" system of higher education, though modeled on much older, even ancient, ideas of

the university, has barely been in place for more than a century. Furthermore, various types of

education beyond (and often seemingly "below") the traditional four-year institution have always

already been emerging; everything from correspondence courses to community colleges started

as educational innovations, either companions to or alternatives for the seemingly-established-

but-actually-still-developing "traditional" university. As Thelin puts it, this "increasing variety of

models for undergraduate education…was symptomatic of both the health and the weakness of

American higher education" (306-307).[13]

Today, too, new narratives are pushing back against the overly-negative portrayals of

postsecondary education and its future. In a direct response to Konczal's piece, for instance,

Joshua Kim of the Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning writes, "Reading the

Rolling Stone article *What's Left After Higher Education Is Dismantled* will leave you nothing

but depressed. Don't be. Our future is better than you think." He proceeds, then, to echo Thelin's

thoughts about the merits and difficulties with the diversification of higher education, adding the

important idea that the ultimate hope for higher ed lies in the understanding that "learning is

ascendant." Meaning that, despite disruptions caused by the formation and failures of different

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[13] Even Thelin, however, all but ignores distance learning—published in 2004, his 300+ page book about
the whole sweeping history of higher education mentions it only this once: "Inclusion spread, and by
1996 one could speak of a formidable new sector known as 'Higher Ed, Inc.'—a phenomenon that
Richard Ruch has called the 'rise of the for-profit university.' Foremost among such institutions was the
University of Phoenix, with a multistate network of sites along with reliance on 'distance learning'
technology to offer both coursework and degree programs. Like it or not, the presidents of established
colleges and universities were forced to acknowledge that proprietary colleges and institutes were
unwelcome guests who were going to stay for dinner, especially when the main course was federal
student aid" (340-341). Here, distance learning is put in scare quotes and couched in a decidedly snarky
description of for-profit colleges, which solidifies the impression of distance learning as a less-than-
legitimate form of higher education, and one that is linked only with institutions who often seem to place
economics ahead of education.

structures and institutions, the overall quality of education in our country is improving through

our continually increasing knowledge of how people learn. Advances in cognitive science and

subsequent implications for pedagogical practices (slow though that development sometimes is)

mean that educational innovations have not only the potential, but the probability, of improving

the overall quality of education and *that* "is one of the great unremarked upon stories of our

generation" (Kim).

It is a story that I plan to tell a significant part of here. As more and more is expected of

what a "college education" will do for its students, the definitions of "college" and "education"

will expand and contract like bellows, continually breathing life into the debates swirling around

higher education. Kim concludes, "It will be a wild, risky, and scary ride." Undoubtedly so—all

the more reason to find capable drivers. As I explain in the next section, those most likely in

possession of the skills necessary to navigate these new terrains are, in fact, found in the least

likely of places: the marginalized realms of composition, community colleges, and online

learning.

Educating the Masses from the Margins

While I will delve more deeply into the history of higher education in the next chapter,

one basic tenet is important to understand here: Those colleges and universities which currently

profess to be "traditional" may certainly have some reasonable sense of maturity to them, but the

overall system of higher education in the US has never *not* been in a state of flux. As Thelin

asserts, in fact, even amidst the national social, political, and economic turmoil of the time, at the

turn of twentieth century, it was higher education that was "the ultimate unregulated industry"

(118). Higher education's wayward adolescence is often, perhaps purposefully, overlooked, a

sort of defense mechanism against the emergence of new and potentially unwelcome areas of

academia. Lacking this understanding of higher education's historical context allows current criticism to sustain the marginalization of whole disciplines and departments while simultaneously suppressing innovations both structural and pedagogical. In sum, in an effort to emphasize the established-ness of current institutions, we are stalling the evolution of the whole educational system; shooting ourselves in the foot and wondering why it hurts to walk.

Though experimentation and innovation are essential to evolution, systemic shifts are, indeed, difficult to maneuver, if for no other reason than the overwhelming prospect of overcoming institutional inertia. As explained in the previous section, we have quite a conundrum on our collective hands: "American colleges and universities have wandered into a state of continual expansion characterized by overextension of functions without clarity of purposes" (Thelin 361-362). If we are to steer ourselves clear of this predicament—to remember, refine, and reassert the purpose of higher education and to then *fulfill* that promise to our students—we do not require a full academic revolution, per se, but we are in need of an intensely objective reassessment of the aims, obligations, and opportunities currently circumscribed by higher education.

What we need, essentially, is to review the history of higher education, to revisit perspectives we have perhaps overlooked, and to use this rereading to engage in an inclusive revision of the system as it currently stands. The work that I do here with online learning in community colleges is just one piece of the overall ideological and systemic shift that is now needed in higher education but, like other such societal shifts, the nature of change is expectedly incremental.

Both metaphorically and literally, the changes in higher education that I envision my work here contributing to are reminiscent of the transition cultures experience in moving from

orality to literacy, as described by James Paul Gee and Elisabeth R. Hayes in *Language and Learning in the Digital Age*. Literacy and education are inherently intertwined and so, too, are their processes of transformation; like societal shifts in communication, the re-articulation of higher education will also be predictably "slow and uneven," undoubtedly resulting in feelings of both gains and losses (Gee and Hayes 20). In the evolution of communication, the well-established but ever-evolving oral culture was forever altered by the arrival of written language and then even more profoundly so by the invention of the printing press. Spoken language, though, was never in danger of being obliterated by its written counterparts, despite its purposes being altered and rearranged in both expected and unanticipated ways. Likewise, in the realm of higher education, as I stated earlier, traditional colleges and universities are not on the path to extinction; they are and should remain the vibrant, valued, and continually evolving foundation of our educational system. We should, though, also be willing—excited, even—to accept and engage with those innovations that could potentially serve as the educational equivalent of the printing press. Online learning, particularly given its potentially transformative ability to provide greater access to education, is arguably one such innovation.

While online learning already has a rather extensive history—extending, in the outmoded form of correspondence study, almost as far back as any other endeavor in American higher education—its uptake in academia has more often been a short-sighted solution to the issues of inadequate space addressed earlier rather than a purposeful employment of the pedagogically progressive innovation it has the potential to be.[14] Given the not-uncommon feeling that these

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[14] Taking away the limitations of classroom space allows institutions to enroll far more students than can fit on-campus and many often do so, while also using less-expensive adjunct labor to run the classrooms. For-profits like the University of Phoenix employ this method almost exclusively, but many nonprofit colleges have also "created thriving and profitable distance education operations that enroll far more students than they have on their campuses. These include institutions like Bellevue University in Nebraska, and Indiana Wesleyan and Southern New Hampshire Universities" (Blumenstyk 71).

courses are at least partially motivated by financial outcomes rather than instructional aims, online learning has therefore sometimes come to be regarded as parasitic; the format and those who fit into it have regularly been regarded as outside the purview of legitimate learning.

Regularly relegated to the sidelines, online learning, though, finds itself in good company. As Kamenetz asserted, higher education has a history of compartmentalizing, ranking, and stratifying its institutions and disciplines in an effort to fashion prestige in the place of a clear purpose. Composition and community colleges are two enduring facets of our system of higher education that have continually been given short shrift in terms of institutional status and educational acclaim. It is perhaps fitting, then, that some of the greatest recent support for the authentic aspirations of online learning are, in fact, coming from these same underappreciated areas of academia.

Composition, community colleges, and online learning have, in fact, travelled very similar paths to this point in the history of higher education. Despite their continually marginalized positions in academia, the shared elements of these backstories create the opportunity for present partnership and future advancement. Each, too, as I will explain in the following chapter, is closely connected to the foremost purposes of higher education, namely literacy and democracy.

As such, I return to a provocative idea espoused in Gee & Hayes's history of literacy that symbolically voices the current struggle of online learning:

> In the days of handwritten books in the West no book was written in a local or 'vulgar' language (i.e., languages other than Greek and Latin). When the monks copied the books of Greece and Rome, including the copies of these books originally preserved in the Islamic countries of the middle east, they sometimes wrote notes (and even limericks) in

their local languages (like Gaelic in Ireland, English in England, and so forth) in the

margins of the manuscripts (copies) they were producing (Saenger 1997). The margins

did not 'count.' This 'marginal' practice gave rise to a revolution, the eventual production

of books and knowledge in languages other than Greek and Latin, and eventually the

death of Latin as the language of religion and scholarship. *In the history of literacy,*

change regularly comes from the margins. Practices we see as aberrant and marginal

often represent the future. (Gee & Hayes 55, emphasis added)

Through gaining a better understanding of the inner and interworking of these areas—

composition, community colleges, and online learning—I aim to not only illustrate their

individual influences in academia, but to also demonstrate their unique combined ability to

facilitate the productive growth and development of higher education as a whole.

The strategic and united effort I advocate here has, as all educational aims should,

students at its heart. Therefore, while I insist that the *areas* of composition, community colleges,

and online learning move from the margins, my primary concern is that those *within* these areas

of education come away from the precipitous edge on which they now reside, a precarious place

that positions them between the haves and have-nots of higher education. As an academic with

strong ties to each of these areas, I know well the challenges faced by the always-overworked

and oft-overlooked faculty therein. What motivates my arguments, though, is not that these areas

and their respective academics aren't appropriately lauded, it is that the *students* within these

areas receive the same skeptical and sidelong glances, that their sincere successes are inherently

suspect, that their education is perpetually viewed as "less than" that of students who follow a

more "traditional" path. First-year composition students in an online learning environment at a

community college—barely admitted within the boundaries of higher education, I can think of

few other groups of students less well-equipped to demand adequate attention to their needs and the fulfillment of their expectations, as evidenced by their tendency to fade away after only a few assignments.[15] And so, to make our students matter, to give them both substance and solidarity, faculty in these fields must first make ourselves matter.

This making ourselves matter is, of course, no small task, and one that the areas of composition, online learning, and community colleges are unequally-equipped to undertake. So, while this endeavor is ultimately a united one, in which roles will arise, evolve, merge, and dissolve as necessary, at this early stage a provisional leader is needed at the forefront; a position for which I believe composition and its teacher-scholars are currently best suited.

The Critical Leadership of Writing Studies

Of the three innovative but oft-ignored areas of higher education under study here, Writing Studies is the most recognized as a stand-alone field of specialization, a cohesive discipline. Apart from the historical tether to English departments (which can skew the outside understanding of the field and conflate literary analysis with the work of composition), by definition, compositionists have dedicated knowledge concerning writing and the teaching of writing. Community colleges and online learning, in comparison, are not fields in the same sense of the word. Instructors who teach online or those who work at a community college need not to have formally studied those particular areas before becoming part of them—even experience-

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[15] Students who withdraw are, not surprisingly, an understudied population (if they un-enroll from classes, they are often difficult to reach after-the-fact). As a small representative example, though, the College of Lake County (the community college where I work) conducted a survey of withdrawn students during the Fall 2014 semester. Of the 14,263 college-level students enrolled, 1,198 (8%) withdrew completely (dropped all of their classes) before the withdrawal deadline for the semester. Of those, 744 students (62% of those who withdrew) dropped between the opening day of class and the 15% point of the semester (Lombardi). These numbers only indicate those students who actively and officially dropped their classes; others often remain on the roster despite discontinuing their attendance or participation in the course.

based knowledge is often simply welcomed, rather than required. Indeed, those who might be considered specialists in the areas of community colleges or online learning might typically be found in administrative rather than instructive roles.[16]

While, then, Writing Studies may sometimes be undervalued as a discipline, community colleges and online learning are almost entirely unrecognized as cohesive primary fields of study. Rather they are often plainly regarded as different forums for providing and taking classes and, whether in fact or simply in perception, both are considered places where students and faculty "wind up" when better opportunities aren't available[17]. My own institution, the College of Lake County (CLC), for instance, recently spent significant time, money, and effort in a long-term "re-branding" campaign, in part to overcome the alternate acronym—the "College of Last Chance"—given to the institution by its own community.[18] Indeed, as open-admission

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[16] There are, of course, ways to become an expert in either of these areas—one can earn certificates in the mastery of online teaching, for instance. However, research and continued professional development in the areas of community colleges and/or distance education is almost always secondary to the instructor's primary area of expertise rather than the central focus of their education.

[17] Data from the jointly conducted Gallup/Lumina Foundation 2015 survey I noted earlier indicates that, though community colleges and online learning are increasingly accepted, the "dominant way Americans perceive college education is 'a campus where students live and attend classes with the goal of getting a four-year degree'" ("Americans Value Postsecondary…" 13). Moreover, only "39% of U.S. adults strongly agree or agree that the quality of education at an online college or university is just as good as education from a traditional college or university," while 25% still strongly disagree or disagree that "an associate degree is a well-respected degree in the United States" (16).

[18] In a particularly unfortunate piece of bad press, famous pseudo-alum, the actor Vince Vaughn, conveyed this alternative title to the nation on *Late Night with David Letterman* in 2003. (Thanks, Vince!) Talking about Vaughn's movie *Old School* (about a traditional college fraternity), Dave asked how Vince's college experience compared with the movie's depiction. Vince's reply: "I didn't go to college. I went to a school called Life, Dave. Our school colors were black and blue. Uh, I went to a…I grew up in Illinois, and there was a community college called CLC, College of Lake County, we called it College of Last Chance [audience laughter]…and I went there for two weeks, and then I had enough. I wasn't good in high school—horrible student. So then I moved to Santa Monica, and my parents were, like, you should really…I moved to Los Angeles, they were like, you should enroll in a college, 'cause if this doesn't work out, you have something to fall back on…So I signed up for Santa Monica Junior College and I had an agent, I got an agent right away. […] But they got me an audition for *Who's the Boss?* Five lines on *Who's the Boss*? And I had a quiz the same day. I didn't take the quiz, I went to the *Who's the Boss?* audition. I didn't get it, but I never went back to college afterwards. But I got a private jet to come today." (Babbage3)

institutions, community colleges "are often the only or the last chance for a college education for many of America's students" (Fishman 2)—and are sometimes perceived to similarly be a last resort for those who teach there as well; some higher education or none at all, some academic work or none at all. Likewise, distance learning courses (particularly those through entirely online institutions) are seen as "pay to play" businesses, driven less by educational aspirations than economic desires. Essentially, both community colleges and distance learning courses are perceived as places to obtain a functional degree, not earn an enduring education and, therefore, no specialized knowledge, experience, or skill is necessary to provide or take classes therein.

Of course, these impressions of online learning and community colleges, and their teachers and students, are precisely the stereotypical attitudes and ideologies that my work intends to dispel. The fact remains, however, that many both within and outside of higher education have these particular half-empty glasses in front of them and while that remains the case, online learning and community colleges could use an additional voice to advocate for their legitimacy and value. Though composition may be seen as a minor cog in the machine of higher education, its larger field—Writing Studies—is at least generally viewed as a distinct and necessary piece of equipment, both as a discipline with scholarly development and as a department with pedagogical relevance.

Writing Studies' established sense of disciplinary identity is, of course, not the only reason for its potential position as a leader in arguments for online learning, particularly at community colleges; rather it is the centrality of its subject matter—writing and the teaching of writing—that truly serves to unite and uplift these areas of higher education. While the field of Writing Studies extends far beyond the freshman writing classroom—indeed, it is "inherently interdisciplinary" (Ritter and Matsuda 1)—first-year composition falls squarely within the scope

of writing scholarship and practice. Whether regarded as a stand-alone subject with concentrated content or a mere service course for subsequent serious study, first-year composition is undoubtedly considered a mainstay of a college education. As a course that students overwhelmingly need, but which needs very little to operate, institutions increasingly offer these classes online in an effort to attract and accommodate more students, particularly when physical seat space becomes an issue (Bergin 1). In other words, composition is quickly being pushed into the realm of online learning, ready or not. Luckily for higher education, this is a leap that Writing Studies is more than ready to take.

The first-year composition course I teach at the College of Lake County (both online and onsite), for instance, is what I loving refer to as "the last class anyone wants, but the first one everyone needs." There are some similarly "high impact" courses in math but, at a community college where courses, career paths, and life goals are incredibly diverse, English 121 is one of the few commonalities between most students who enter the door on any given day (or night).[19] Likewise, the assessment goals of nearly any community college include helping students learn to write effectively, to better communicate in academic settings and beyond.[20] Given the

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[19] Of course, there are also students who must go through developmental English classes before taking 121, a few who do "comp" out based on AP or other test scores, and plenty of adults taking courses in areas (e.g. enrichment or continuing education) that don't require English 121, but the vast majority of students at CLC need this specific course. Data from the CLC Annual Profile of Students, Fiscal Year 2016, for instance, shows that the overall annual headcount for the institution (all campuses and formats) was 25,059 (including adult education and vocational students); 3,340 of those new students were "college reading and writing ready" (68.1% of new students, with 18.4%, then, being at or below the developmental level and 13.5% undetermined) (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Planning and Research).

[20] This is, of course, a clear learning outcome in traditional research universities and liberal arts colleges as well, but it is a goal that can more often be reached through other means at those institutions (e.g., taking other writing intensive courses, more students with higher AP scores, or, many university students elect to take this sort of "gen ed" at their local community college over the summer to save their more expensive credit hours for courses more geared toward their major). In short, first-year composition is certainly a mainstay at most, if not all, institutions of higher education, but does not necessarily connect the experience of students the same way as it does at a community college.

purpose of these institutions, the need for this instruction and the potential it has for creating a common experience are both particularly intense.

Writing, and therefore composition studies, is even more integral to distance and online learning. Early distance learning courses—correspondence courses—were entirely based on writing, given the lack of other available technologies. Today, despite impressive progress in technology—the increasing availability of video lectures and synchronous mixed media conferencing—most online learning remains firmly rooted in writing. Even those classrooms that incorporate minimal discussion have writing as the foundation, as assignments and instructional materials are most often "delivered" to students in writing. No matter how many high-tech bells and whistles a distance or online learning class uses, there is almost always more reading and writing involved than in a traditional face-to-face class.

Moreover, composition's attention to technological development has practically paralleled the employment of technology in distance education. With the anticipation and arrival of the personal computer, technology and its relationship to writing has been the focus of a small but significant group of compositionists. The specialization of computers and writing, though relatively new, already has a history ripe with research on the nature of the relationship between technology and its users. The first written history of the field, *Computers and the Teaching of Writing in American Higher Education, 1979-1994*—written two decades ago, about the previous two decades—establishes the existence of and exigency for this subfield: "Such attention to the past suggests that computers and composition is becoming self-conscious as a profession, and that our enterprise is no longer simply a series of experiments within composition, but a coherent subdiscipline with its own identity" (Hawisher, LeBlanc, Moran, and Selfe xii). Another early scholar in this subdiscipline, James Porter, explains the unique focus

that I contend makes computers and composition particularly well-suited to attend to the development of, and thereby argue for, online learning: "Many researchers in other fields study Internet behavior, computer-mediated communication, new media designs, and the like—but for more than 20 years it has been the field of computers and writing that focuses specifically on writing within/in-the-technology" (Porter xviii). Writing—and the interaction it inspires—has, to this point, been a key component in bringing the humanity to technology. The study of that written interaction, the practice of using "technology with heart," as Nardi and O'Day put it, is a perspective that online learning can greatly benefit from and which computers and writing can provide.

The attention to technological spaces as environments for interaction has the potential to also serve community colleges well. Since the "focus of the field is not technology-as-machine but rather technology-as-culture-space as well as technology-as-production-space, as a virtual environment in which humans live, not just a medium through which they talk," (Porter xviii) computers and writing helps create a bridge between traditional classrooms and online learning environments. This is an endeavor that is particularly underfunded and overextended in community colleges, a place where online learning is perhaps most needed. While, then, composition is already a well-established foundational element of community colleges, the work of computers and writing adds innovative possibilities for development and growth.

In sum, then, the perspectives and approaches of computers and writing are well-suited to the significant amount of work that still needs to be done in both online learning and community colleges, opening up a nearly uncharted area of research for the field's teacher-scholars. Most of the work in computers and writing scholarship, for instance, focuses on using technology *in* the classroom, rather than examining technology *as* the classroom. Likewise, many of the

technological and pedagogical issues of concern to computers and writing (e.g., the "digital

divide" and problems with technology-for-the-sake-of-[usually expensive]-technology) overlap

with those of community colleges, and yet there is rarely reference to those specific institutions

within the pages of computers and writing research.[21]

From Hauntings to Happenings: Methodological Moves in the Study of Online Composition

In Hawisher and Selfe's *Passions, Pedagogies, and 21st Century Technologies*, Sarah

Sloane discusses the "haunted" nature of writing technologies: "Every writing technology bears

visible traces of earlier writing technologies in its design and in how writers use it…" (63). Since

its inception, distance education has been intricately intertwined with the writing technologies

that have facilitated its presence in higher education and, indeed, it has been haunted by the role

of writing and the technology that has shaped its past. To understand and evaluate the

possibilities and potential of current distance learning formats and environments, it is important,

then, to trace the threads of technologies back to an earlier, formative time.

In Chapter 2, then, the first function of this work is to trace the parallel threads of

composition, community colleges, and correspondence study through the complex fabric of

higher education's history. "Simply" adding computers to these distinct narratives weaves the

threads together, embedding elements of one story in another, allowing multiple pasts to merge

and creating the necessary context for a productive site of present-day inquiry: the online

composition classroom.

Online classrooms can be categorized in multiple ways; they are most certainly a tool and

a technology—an alternative delivery method for education—but they are also a place and an

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[21] Community colleges, of course, have their own journals and publications to focus on issues specifically related to them, but my point is that these two areas (community colleges and computers and writing) should engage in a dialogue more often than they currently do.

environment, the dimensions of which are paradoxically (de)finite (often, password-protected) and yet without physical boundary. Online *composition* classrooms, moreover, multiply and make meta the definitions of other online course spaces. All online classrooms are largely made up of writing, from the code used to create and illustrate the space to the still-print-based nature of most course material—but in online composition classrooms, of course, writing is also the central subject matter. And, as Dennis Baron notes, in his brief history of writing, "Pencils to Pixels: The Stages of Literacy Technologies," "[W]riting itself is always first and foremost a technology, a way of engineering materials in order to accomplish an end" (16). Chapter 3 more thoroughly discusses the relationship between writing and technology, but suffice it to say here that, essentially, online composition classrooms are written technological spaces in which the technology of writing is taught.

Chapter 3, then, moves away from the overtly historical analysis in favor of a focus on environments and activities; seeking to understand the architecture of and interactions surrounding online classrooms. The underlying historical analysis is continued in the sense that a primary goal of this work is to discern how the writing technology of the online classroom and its environment contribute to the always-already-being-written history of higher education. In short, this chapter looks at how the development of online classrooms—online composition classrooms, in particular—is undoubtedly "history in the making."

While Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical issues and implications related to online teaching and learning, particularly with respect to writing, Chapter 4, then, provides a site-specific study of online learning at the College of Lake County, a comprehensive community college in Chicago's northernmost suburbs, delivering an analysis of actual online classroom spaces, with particular attention to the written discussion boards, as well as interviews with the

instructors who design them. I approach this study using an ecological approach derived from the work of Bonnie A. Nardi and Vicky L. O'Day in *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart*. Their titular term, "information ecologies," nicely captures the complicated and dynamic web of influences, interactions, and exchanges that characterize the online classroom, making this a valid and valuable perspective from which to assess the form and function of these online spaces.

This multi-layered approach to understanding online learning, and its inextricable relationship to writing, leads me then, in Chapter 5, to develop recommendations for implementing institutional and systemic changes to better support and legitimate the practices of online learning. Though history shows online learning is constantly in danger of being usurped and corrupted by profit-driven institutions, I conclude that a concerted and united effort between Writing Studies and community colleges can significantly advance the abilities of online learning in more local and legitimate settings. My recommendations for best practices and suggestions for future research illustrate the ability of online classes to provide greater access to quality education. Through an emphasis on the process and products of composition, Writing Studies and community colleges have the opportunity to become leaders in unlocking the long-sought, but ever-elusive potential of "distance education" to truly democratize higher education.

CHAPTER 2:

The Democratization of Higher Education: Histories and Mythologies

My work in this chapter is primarily to construct a historical narrative or, more precisely, to examine the intersection of three significant narrative threads within the history of higher education: composition, distance learning, and community colleges. As Debra Journet explains, the purpose of narrative is to explain the significance of

> unique events or clusters of events…rather than general laws about invariant
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> phenomena…. In constructing these narratives, researchers select (out of everything they
>
> know to have happened) those events they deem most significant and arrange them in
>
> terms of their *temporal sequence and causal relations*. The resulting narrative interprets
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> the past from the perspectives of the researchers' present (their methodological,
>
> theoretical, and rhetorical commitments). (Journet 17, emphasis added)

Journet also points out that, though this narrative must be convincing in its use of converging sources and data—much like triangulation in empirical research—there is no way to definitively "prove" that these narratives are the "right" ones; they are almost always open to interpretation and re-interpretation. Fittingly, then, the construction of my narrative relies heavily on this openness to reinterpretation, particularly with regard to distance education, which has a much richer history and foundational connection to the underlying ideals of higher education than its critics have lead us to believe. Often seen as snake oil peddled in the shadowy corners of academia—which helps current skeptics keep it sidelined—I hope to instead shed light on the democracy-based beginnings of distance learning and its sincere efforts in educating all manner of students.

Journet further explains, "It is not an exaggeration to say that the work of rhetoric and composition is inescapably narrative" as "narratives are complex, mediated, and rhetorical" (Journet 20). As the previous chapter shows, the enduring saga of post-secondary education in the U.S. is nothing if not increasingly complex, and that is before we even consider curriculum. Colleges and universities have spent considerable time and effort building both the ideological foundation and the physical space to argue that higher education is necessary to success, with success generally suggesting financial security, professional stability, and personal satisfaction. Therein, though, lies the rub—if college is necessary for success, then our democratic values dictate that this educational opportunity be accessible to all. The financial details of a college education are not the focus of this project, but it is difficult to put them aside completely. Discussions concerning who goes to college and what that "college education" does for them are always, in part, a cost-benefit analysis. From early colonial efforts in promoting higher education to more recent movements seeking to eliminate student debt, the expense of the experience and education provided by colleges has always been suspect. The "college = success" dynamic remains ingrained in our cultural identity, but outside of the traditional four-year degree, there is no clear indication—and often, little information—about how students should navigate the first part of this equation. The relatively linear and prescribed educational plan present at the primary and secondary levels suddenly, at the entrance to "higher education," becomes a murky maze of possible paths, fraught with lengthy detours and disappointing dead ends.

In short, the somewhat idealistic insistence on the need for an egalitarian system of higher education has long stood in opposition to the more realistic crises of physical space and accessible opportunity. It is evident that college has never been, nor can it ever be, a one-size-

fits-all academic endeavor, and as such, the history of higher education abounds with attempts to diversify its missions, formats, and locations in order to accommodate the increasingly diverse student body. Some efforts have, indeed, educated and elevated students, while other methods have served only to further isolate them. Perhaps most problematic in this situation is that accurately assessing the relative success of educational innovations in structure, curriculum, or format is often difficult in the short-term. As Robert J. Connors wrote in *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, "If history teaches us anything, it is that our own understanding of our historical moment is always necessarily limited" (Connors 17).

Hence, the turn to history in this chapter; understanding the separate pasts of composition, distance education, and community colleges, and interpreting the intersections thereof, allows for a fuller engagement with their current roles and a firmer grasp of future possibilities. Moreover, an appreciation for how these areas of higher education similarly but separately formed, flourished, and sometimes faltered aids in envisioning pathways for cooperative efforts and a shared leadership role in the continued advancement of and access to higher education.

Experience v. Education: Early Motivations for College Enrollment

The nascent motivations for seeking out a college education and the purposes of emergent pedagogical practices are briefly worthy of attention here, as they indicate that upward social mobility—"success!"—has always been a clear goal of higher education in the U.S. Early efforts, though, were uneven at best. While primary education developed rapidly and fairly consistently after the American Revolution, colonial colleges were formed sporadically and superficially, the term "higher education" forming a less-than-accurate description of the work accomplished therein. Connors, for instance, cites Alexis deTocqueville's perception of the

American educational system in 1831: "'there is no other country in the world where proportionally to population, there are so few ignorant and so few learned individuals as in America. Primary education is within reach of all; higher education is hardly available to anybody' (*Democracy in America*, 55)" (Connors 113-114). While primary school attendance was typical, it was also typical that employment was gained by birthright (first sons and farming), was a trade that was passed down (apprenticeships), or simply did not require formal higher education. College, therefore, was really just something for those *with* money but *without* any other immediate prospects to *do*; post-secondary schooling, in short, was more about socialization than education.

Moreover, in the formative years of higher education as an even loosely unified system, a period which extended from colonial days to the antebellum era, a mere college *affiliation* was enough to convey a sense of prestige and status. As class distinctions continued to develop, "the colleges became increasingly distant from the world and experience of most American families" (Thelin 25), given the prohibitive cost and time commitment. While certain professions (specifically ministry, teaching, law, and engineering) were the supposed focus of time spent at college during this era, the "education" gained was, realistically, more about social experience. In essence, college was a sort of finishing school for a certain class of men, minus the balancing-books-on-head curriculum (although, then at least books might have been employed in some potentially useful fashion). After a year or two at a particular school, a young man was able to leave respectfully, having become a college-experienced (if not actually educated), ratified member of the elite.

During the latter half of the 19th century, the benefits of post-secondary education in terms of actual learning progressed at a rather moderate rate, while the rhetoric concerning the

"need" for college intensified rapidly. By the turn of the century, then, the increasingly insistent idea that college was a necessity, combined with financially flailing institutions increasingly in need of funding, forced the doors open a little wider, creating colleges that were, essentially, open-enrollment. The student bodies of these institutions were then comprised of two different strata: the still-present experience-seekers who hoped to gain entrance into the social elite by proxy, and a newly-developed employment-focused group of "pragmatic students, primarily those from impoverished backgrounds, [who] stayed just long enough to complete their L.I. (license of instruction) certificate, which would allow them to gain immediate employment as public school teachers" (Thelin 96-97). Far from financially prosperous and struggling to meet the differing demands of their students, the curriculum and pedagogical practices were likewise quite slow to develop: "Seldom did a college or university have the luxury of carrying out a coherent philosophy of higher education without at least considering concessions that would favor institutional survival" (Thelin 107-108).

Though educational institutions might not have been able to create, let alone adhere to, their own individual mission statements, other contemporary cultural shifts supplemented the lackluster institutional objectives and helped develop the structure and purpose of higher education; namely a renewed interest in democracy. In the next section, I illuminate the ways a developing desire for democracy in education provided a unifying theme that stimulated the cultivation of composition, distance learning, and community colleges.

Democracy, Chautauqua-style: The Rise of "Popular" Education

The incomplete and uneven individual institutional mission statements of the mid-to-late nineteenth century were eventually eclipsed by an overarching call for democracy in and through

education as the young country developed its national sense of self.[22] Connors describes the concurrent evolution of America's culture and colleges thusly: "During the first fifty years of the nineteenth century, the new nation of the United States was striving to define itself as a culture. Populist elements were increasingly powerful after 1800. Jeffersonian and then Jacksonian democracy had produced an ethic of egalitarianism that extended into all areas of national life, including education and language" (Connors 113-114). Our understanding of democracy as equality—or at least equal opportunity—continued to develop alongside our institutions of higher education, which were expanding both in purpose and structure, as the Morrill Act helped open land grant universities like the University of Illinois, women began enrolling in increasing numbers, and vocational specialties gained a stronghold. In short, after the Civil War, "the purposes behind enrollment were much broader. Students wanted something new…and the colleges and universities underwent radical changes as they scrambled to give it to them" (Connors 124).

These attempts at new approaches to higher education extended beyond our in-the-process-of-becoming-traditional universities. As Harold B. Dunkel and Maureen A. Fay explain, "democratic sentiments about man's natural right to knowledge reinforced movements of popular education" (Dunkel and Fay 3), particularly in the emerging field of adult education. Since the early 1800s, community-based lyceums and literary societies had offered continuing and cultural education to adults through lecture courses, debate clubs, and discussion groups. While there were many separate movements throughout the country, one form of popular

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[22] This desire for democracy, though, was by no means immediate. Though colonial colleges developed during an era ripe with the rhetoric of freedom and democracy, educational equality and opportunity were not explicit elements of those cries. In fact, as Thelin explains, "Democracy in the modern sense of the word had little support among colonial leaders….The forthright statement of one Virginian sums up the worldview of the young men who typically went to the colonial colleges: 'I am an aristocrat. I love liberty; I hate equality'" (Thelin 26).

education is particularly worthy of note: the Chautauqua. As R.B. Tozier puts it in "A Short Life-History of the Chautauqua," this form of adult education was "[f]irst an idea, then a movement, and finally an institution" (Tozier 69).

Founded in 1874 by the Reverend John H. Vincent and a wealthy businessman named Lewis Miller,[23] the Chautauqua Institution in New York was initially a religious endeavor, devoted primarily to training Sunday school teachers which, over several subsequent decades, developed into a system that "experimented with a variety of educational methods; its summer schools, literary and scientific reading circles, and correspondence courses—all prepared, administered or taught by college professors—exemplified fresh approaches to 'higher learning' for adults" (Dunkel and Fay 3). This "mother" Chautauqua Institution had at least three "daughter" Chautauqua Institutions as well several hundred other "chautauquas" scattered throughout the U.S., all loosely modeled on the original, though not formally affiliated with it (Scott 394).

By 1934, though, R.B. Tozier proclaimed the death of Chautauqua.[24] Owing to cultural and institutional changes—e.g., "moving pictures" and radio emerging as popular forms of entertainment, a World War creating a loss of local leadership, and the disintegration of community life in rural towns based on improved means of communication and travel (Tozier

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[23] Scott calls him a "prosperous inventor-manufacturer" and also notes that he was father-in-law to Thomas Edison (391).

[24] This article is notable for being written during the era of the original Chautauqua (rather than providing a historical account of the movement from a distant perspective) but is also quite pessimistic in its telling of the "life history" of Chautauqua. Tozier positions what he perceives as the imminent death of Chautauqua as the result of a larger problem, the decline of American culture, which he bemoans throughout the brief article. While Tozier is, therefore, perhaps not the most reliable of sources concerning the historical impact of Chautauqua, his tone and argument are interesting in that they are echoed in present-day articles, like Konczal's *Rolling Stone* piece, which fervently predict the collapse of our current system of higher education based on cultural changes not unlike those Tozier describes. Tozier was not altogether incorrect, but he underestimated Chatuaqua's lasting impact and was overconfident in his assertion that the institution would fully fade from existence; likewise, I suspect the current articles concerning the state of higher education suffer from the same issues.

72)—he asserted that the mother Chautauqua institution had become a shell of its former self. Tozier's history gloomily concludes: "The Chautauqua assembly has passed, leaving in its place recreational centers or religious conferences. The circuit Chautauqua, having made its last stand in a few widely scattered rural towns, apparently has no offspring; and with its passing there will be no institution remaining as a memento of its former glory" (Tozier 73).

While certainly lacking the stature and overarching influence in education that it exhibited during its heyday, strictly speaking, Tozier's prediction about the future of the Chautauqua Institution proved to be false. The present Chautauqua Institution remains a not-for-profit community "dedicated to the exploration of the best human values and the enrichment of life" through the arts, education, religion, and recreation which, during its annual nine-week summer season, draws about 8,000 residential participants ("Our Mission"). Moreover, in assessing the legacy of the Chautauqua Institution, Tozier's predictions missed the mark. Believing the life-history of Chautauqua began with the birth of an idea concerning religious training and cultural education and ended with the death of its capstone institution, what Tozier failed to see was that, even by the early twentieth century, Chautauqua's legacy reached far beyond the mere physical institution. The Institution, it seems, served as an inspiration to several of the influential individuals involved in its "glory days" —most notably, William Rainey Harper—who took iterations of the movement with them into subsequent positions of educational power. These new movements, in turn, left the imprint of Chautauqua's ideas and ideals deeply embedded in the formation of our modern-day system of higher education.

From Chautauqua to Chicago: Democracy and Elitism in University Planning

While often overlooked and potentially more indirect than initially imagined, Chautauqua's influence in the development of American higher education is nearly irrefutable.

As John C. Scott extolls in "The Chautauqua Movement: Revolution in Popular Higher Education," "the doctrine of Vincent, as put into practice through Chautauqua, contributed to the twentieth-century adult education movement" by insisting that "educational opportunities should exist beyond formal schooling" (Scott 391). In other words, the "overarching goal of Vincent's theory and practice at Chautauqua was the democratization of education for adults, regardless of social class, age, or gender"[25] (Scott 391). Since, to this point, higher education in the U.S. was almost exclusively for young, elite males, this seemingly simple idea was in fact rather revolutionary.[26]

The relatively short-lived prominence of Chautauqua in this important movement in adult and open education could, ironically, possibly be attributed to one of its core strengths—the ability of its teachings to travel. Before the development of the circuit, or travelling, chautauquas "helped bridge the gap between country and city life and exposed a generation of rural youth to the possibilities of collegiate education" (Scott 411), several of the Institution's young leaders—including George Vincent, son of the founder Reverend Vincent—cut short their time at Chautauqua to pursue other academic endeavors.

One of these young leaders was the now (in)famous William Rainey Harper, who was initially recruited by the elder Vincent in 1883 to teach Hebrew language and literature. Though

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[25]Scott astutely notes here that race is not mentioned in Vincent's 1886 book.

[26] Though the influence of Chautauqua in higher education is both evident *and* largely unacknowledged, it should be noted that Scott's article serves, in effect, as the antithesis to Tozier's piece. While Tozier diminished Chautauqua's legacy, Scott attempts to draw deep connections where it's possible only coincidences reside, attributing a wide array of educational innovations—from public libraries to university presses—back to Chautauqua. His hyperbolic conclusion proselytizes, "It would be *difficult to overstate* the revolutionary influences of Chautauqua upon higher learning in America. The list of firsts associated with the movement is *staggering* in regard to the democratization of and permanent structural changes in adult and university education. Indeed, the evidence is weighty enough to compel a *historical revision* of how the overall higher education system developed during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Scott 410, emphasis added).

he quickly proved to be an "administrative talent" and was promoted to principal of the College of Liberal Arts in 1887,[27] by that point he was already splitting his time between two places of employment, having also accepted a professorship at Yale University in 1886. By the time he left Chautauqua to establish and assume the presidency of the University of Chicago in 1892, Harper had been directing both academic and popular programs at Chautauqua (Scott 400).

Though relatively brief and somewhat scattered in terms of particular position, it is abundantly clear that Harper's ideas about the structure of higher education were heavily influenced by his tenure at Chautauqua; in particular, his experience working directly with Vincent to form the short-lived and little-known Chautauqua University, which was composed of five major divisions: Chautauqua Assembly, Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC), Chautauqua College of Liberal Arts, Chautauqua School of Theology, and Chautauqua Press. Chautauqua University promoted popular higher education through summer sessions and correspondence courses, and offered both a "classical curriculum" and newer scientific classes, as well as degree, certificate, and non-degree programs (Scott 399). While the causation isn't entirely certain, it would appear that Harper's investment in this university project was crucial as it was "abandoned" (Scott 398) in 1892, precisely when Harper left Chautauqua.[28] Chautauqua's loss, though, was Chicago's gain, as Harper took the foundation of the failed Chautauqua University and used it to revive and completely renew another institution: The University of Chicago.

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[27] At Chautauqua University—in operation for about a decade on the same grounds as the Chautauqua Institution, the University and the Institution seem to be nearly synonymous in terms of theoretical foundation if superficially separate in structure.

[28] By all accounts, Harper's departure from Chautauqua was amiable; he even continued, for instance, to serve as Extension faculty.

The original University of Chicago was in operation from 1858 to 1886 and, according to the history written by Thomas Wakefield Goodspeed in 1916, "was an essential factor among the forces, the conjunction of which prepared the way for, and combined eventually to create, the present University" (Goodspeed 20). Despite this assertion, and Goodspeed's insistence that this first endeavor be "regarded as successful," the first University of Chicago proved financially unstable and, as such, unattractive to Harper, who was offered the presidency of the original University of Chicago in April of 1886. Harper, it seems, saw the writing on the wall and declined the position; in June 1886, the University ceased its educational work (Goodspeed 19).

In subsequent years, a plan spearheaded by (the deep pockets of) John D. Rockefeller slowly brought the University back into existence, this time with William Rainey Harper accepting the opportunity and responsibility for organizing and administrating the college as its "founding" president. The carte blanche provided by John D. Rockefeller[29] allowed Harper to create his ideal university and, in doing so, he borrowed rather heavily from Chautauqua's organizational outline to form the institution that would become his legacy. Like Chautauqua University, Harper's University of Chicago had five divisions: The University Proper, the University Extension, the University Press, the University Libraries, Laboratories, and Museums, and the University Affiliations.

Though not a one-to-one correlation between Chautauqua and Chicago, the fundamental connections are rather clear, particularly in the focus on established sectors of the University that

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[29] Admittedly, this characterization glosses over much of the conversation and conflict that was important in establishing the University of Chicago. As Goodspeed explains in detail (often through archived correspondence) the methods of obtaining supplemental funding and the amounts needed, as well as the selection of leadership, and the size of the intended institution were all part of a long and negotiated process between Rockefeller, Harper, and several other key players (one of them Mr. Goodspeed, author of this history). The effectual outcome of these negotiations, though, was, indeed, that Rockefeller procured his founding president through the promise of financial and creative freedom in forming the University as he (Harper) imagined it.

have the ability to reach out to the community. Although not solely devoted to correspondence study, that particular form of outreach education was the longest-lasting and most well-known department of the University Extension, possibly helped by Harper's service as a faculty member in this department (Pittman 172). As such, Harper's significant support of extension services are often interpreted as a commitment to democratic education. For instance, in "An Alien Presence: The Long, Sad History of Correspondence Study at the University of Chicago," Von Pittman paints Harper as a leading proponent of democracy through education, using his conscious and concerted effort to include correspondence study in his university as evidence of his ideological convictions:

> William Rainey Harper believed that correspondence study should be an integral part of the great university he founded. Universities should not only discover and generate new knowledge. They also should disseminate it, he believed. Thereby, they could advance one of the chief progressive causes of the day, the democratization of higher education. (Pittman 181)

Though the inclusion of correspondence study and other extension-based educational opportunities certainly gave a "modicum of respect" (Pittman 181) to this already-undervalued form of education, Harper's "democratic" leanings may not have been as beneficent as we have historically been lead to believe.

Even with all the talk of democracy in education and the many movements in that direction, undoubtedly there remained unequivocally elitist attitudes in academia, particularly in America's increasingly prestigious universities. Harper was, of course, not without critics and opponents, even at his own university. Thorstein Veblen, a well-known economist who had come to the university as a graduate student during its early days, later "characterized Harper's

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goal of democratizing access to higher education through extension work—including correspondence study—as frills to please and deceive an ignorant public. Like many academics of the day—and up to the present—he believed such egalitarian efforts were foolish" (Pittman 174).

Herein lies the potential distinction between Harper's beliefs and his actions—while the definition of democracy had, in its societal scope, moved beyond meaning *merely* freedom, it did not yet fully include an inherent sense of egalitarianism; stuck somewhere between liberty and equality, then, "democracy" could be wielded in favor of both popular and elitist ideals. And it seems that William Rainey Harper was particularly adept at manipulating this ambiguity to convey public support for popular education all the while acting as an elitist, continually elevating the status of his preferred division, the University Proper.

As an academic and an administrator, Harper often articulated his beliefs concerning democracy in education. In his book, *The Trend in Higher Education*, published in 1905, the year before his death, Harper writes: "Democracy has been given a mission to the world, and it is of no uncertain character. I wish to show that the university is the prophet of this democracy and as well its priest and its philosopher; that, in other words, the university is the Messiah of the democracy, its to-be-expected deliverer" (Harper 12). While Harper acknowledges that democracy "must include the masses and maintain their sympathy and interest" (Harper 12), and he takes pride in the nation's developing interest in popular education, this particular work crystallizes his still-stratified and status-driven view of higher education which advocates for the existence of popular education but, ultimately, insists on the exultation of the university. As William DeGenaro puts it in his article, "William Rainey Harper and the Ideology of Service at Junior Colleges," using Harper's logic, "university students are like religious leaders who will

become the individuals protecting our democratic values, and because not just anyone can play that role, we need to be careful about who we allow into the university" (DeGenaro 193).

Harper's inclusion of an extension division in his original plans for the University of Chicago was a first for this kind of popular education (Pittman 170), but his reputation as a leader in the movement for more democratic education comes more from his organizational innovations within the University Proper shortly after its opening in 1892. While the roots of the extension division can be fairly well traced back to Chautauqua and other emerging efforts in adult education, the unique structure of Chicago's University Proper were Harper's own and have, therefore, earned his epithet as "the father of the American junior college" (Bower and Hardy 7).

The motivations behind Harper's decisions to divide the University Proper are largely debatable, but the facts of the matter are rather straightforward. Instead of being sectioned into the typical four classes (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), Harper's University Proper was divided into two distinct levels which could generically be referred to as an upper and a lower division. Initially, the lower division was referred to as the "Academic Colleges" to draw a connection to the secondary schools (high schools and academies), while the upper divisions comprised the "University Colleges." In 1895, however, "Harper coined a new name for the lower-division departments: he called them junior colleges 'for want of a better name' (Campbell, 1929)" (Witt et al. 14). In 1902, this lower division of the University Proper migrated to the secondary level to form a six-year high school and then, eventually, a standalone two-year college—Joliet Junior College, which is "widely recognized as the oldest public junior college in America" (Witt et al. 24). Although he did not live to see the full effect of his efforts, Harper's hopes came to fruition as "a system of free-standing two-year colleges 'affiliated' with

the university" rapidly began forming; by 1910 at least thirteen junior colleges had been established with more in the works (Witt et al. 29). By all accounts, then, Harper had—nearly single-handedly—started what would become the community college movement.

Traditionally, narratives concerning the creation of community colleges have painted Harper in a favorable light, a paternal figure who used the division of his university to unite secondary and higher education. Witt et al. call Harper a "true gift" to the community college movement, explaining that it was his "unique character and reputation" that "made him the perfect mediator between the elitist forces of the large universities and the democratic forces of the public schools" (Witt et al. 17).

A sort of logical fallacy exists, however, in the purely positive portrayal of Harper's legacy. Since Harper did, indeed, create the first junior college, and these institutions are thought to be bastions of democracy, "the people's colleges," we often assume that Harper's motivations were equally magnanimous. Much of the evidence, though, points not to egalitarian ideals but to elitist motivations—Harper's desire to use junior colleges as gatekeeping mechanisms to preserve the prestige of the University. As DeGenaro explains,

> Harper envisioned the junior college and lower-division coursework as institutions of service. For Harper, the lower division, as a domain of liberal learning and general education, served the upper division, a domain of research. In kind, the junior college was an extension of the high school that served the senior college. The ideology espoused by Harper transformed lower-division courses from autonomous units of liberal learning into gatekeepers that maintained the selectivity of the 'senior' level of higher education. (DeGenaro 186)

This assertion is supported by accounts from Harper's colleagues. Goodspeed, for instance, recounts the first meeting of the Faculty of Arts, Literature, and Science, held on October 1, 1892, the opening day of the University of Chicago:

> At the close of this meeting the President expressed the hope that the time would come when the Junior (then called the Academic) College work would be transferred to some other place, and "the higher work be given all our strength on this campus." This was from the beginning a favorite idea with President Harper…. For the first quarter-century the hope of the President was not realized. The Junior College received as much attention as the Senior, and the two flourished together. (Goodspeed 247)

While, then, Harper's paternity as the "father of the junior college" is widely accepted, contemporary accounts and historical archives show his actual affiliation to be more along the lines of an absentee parent—providing lots of lip service, some financial support, and the occasional personal appearance, but ultimately rather consumed by interests elsewhere.

Focusing here on information that runs counter to the dominant narrative is not meant to diminish the significance of Harper's contributions to higher education. Regardless of his motivations, in creating the University Extension and the Junior College, Harper was able to rapidly invigorate and direct a movement for greater access to education that had otherwise been wandering rather aimlessly for decades. Fully subscribing, however, to the "prevailing myths" about the origins of two-year colleges would ignore a particularly relevant thread of historical knowledge which continues to affect the structure and operation of higher education. Histories of community colleges similar to that of Witt and colleagues typically and unequivocally glorify the democratic foundations of these "people's colleges." For instance, "The fuel for the junior college movement was America's expanding democracy. As historians have pointed out,

democracy is contagious. Once the door to full citizenship is open, more and more people demand to be admitted" (Witt et al. 1). DeGenaro summarizes the mythology surrounding community colleges thusly: "*Community colleges are democratic experiments in education. Community colleges provide ethnic and racial minorities and members of the working class access to higher learning, so they must be good*" (DeGenaro 182, emphasis original). The problem, though, is that these narratives ignore the movement's "emphasis on hierarchy, a dominant motif for higher education during the remainder of the twentieth century" (DeGenaro 185). Since its inception, then, the junior college has held a dual, and sometimes duplicitous, role—both door-opener and gatekeeper.

In all, Harper's legacy largely remains one of innovation, inclusion, and outreach—and rightly so. Perhaps in an effort to preserve his image as the egalitarian president of an elitist university, though, these narratives overlook the many sacrifices made in the name of democracy, primarily (and ironically) the systematic marginalization of whole factions of higher education. One such sacrifice is, in fact, of distinct import to my project: the devaluation of first-year composition.

Composition, of course, existed well before the 1892 establishment of the University of Chicago, but its reputed antiquity in the form of rhetoric was insufficient in shielding it from Harper's influence. While Harper's formation of an Extension division was a double-edged sword that managed to simultaneously perpetuate and subordinate correspondence study, his decision to split the University Proper into upper and lower divisions only cut one way, essentially severing the relationship between research and pedagogy, and firmly placing the work of teaching writing, humanities, and general education classes in the lower—and lesser—division. In short, as DeGenaro explains, "The research into the history of the two-year college

movement has implications for compositionists by addressing the question of why one area of academic work is more valuable than the other" and also draws attention to "the notion of 'service work' [which] has its antecedents in this movement" (DeGenaro 185). Though written composition courses do not appear to have made an individual appearance on Harper's educational agenda, they nevertheless felt the effects of Harper's organizational actions. Simply by virtue, then, of its own democratic position as a bridge between secondary and postsecondary (and, at the time, lacking a scholarly research contingency), composition at found itself pushed further toward the outer edges of higher education.

In sum, distance learning (as extension education), community colleges (as junior colleges), and composition (as first-year writing) all entered the twentieth century having been significantly shifted and shaped by William Rainey Harper and his radical reorganization of higher education. Though Harper influenced each of these areas separately and to varying extents, the formation of the University of Chicago proves to be a pivotal moment in each of their histories. The following section further explores the developing—and increasingly linked—narratives of these areas as they move forward from their new foundations.

The Shared Histories of Composition, Distance Learning, and Community Colleges

Though the histories of community colleges and distance learning *can* be traced farther back than the early days of the University of Chicago, it is evident that the era of Harper's presidency had a lasting and uniting effect, placing them on parallel paths at the college level from that point forward. Bower and Hardy, in fact, go so far as to assert that already "[w]ell-known as the father of the American junior college, Harper is also considered by some to be the father of American distance education, because he strongly supported this form of education

during his Chicago presidency. Thus, the connection between distance education and community or junior colleges dates back over one hundred years" (Bower and Hardy 7).

The development jointly experienced by extension learning and junior colleges at the University of Chicago ran parallel to contemporary changes in composition that happened elsewhere and on a larger scale. Harper's academic organization placed composition in the lower division, effectively eschewing its place in higher education but, ultimately, composition was not a specific concern for Harper; rather, it was simply part of the large group of general education and liberal arts courses that, in Harper's estimation, were not worthy of attention in the Senior College. While Harper's categorization, then, may have contributed to composition's place as a mere "service" course, it was another already well-established, prestigious institution—Harvard University—that truly instigated the devaluation of composition in higher education.

The infamous "English A" course at Harvard arose out of the "great literacy furor" of the 1880s (Connors 97), during which it was determined that the writing capabilities of many entering college students were falling severely short of expectations. Hoping, like Harper, to preserve the selectivity of the student body at a time when greater access to higher education was being demanded, Harvard professors, led by A.S. Hill, instituted a writing exam. Those who failed the assessment were required to take English A, which served as "the prototype for the required freshman course in composition that within fifteen years would be standard at almost every college in America" (Connors 11). While, then, the creation of community colleges and first-year composition may have happened separately, their beginnings were clearly linked. As DeGenaro succinctly states, "Both the new junior college and the new writing course at Harvard were born as gatekeepers" (DeGenaro 197). At the turn of the twentieth century, community

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colleges and composition both found themselves borne into the center of a contemporary tension between egalitarian and elitist educational aspirations, the balance of which would, at least temporarily, be shifted in favor of the burgeoning university ideologues. The result was a paradoxical positioning of composition and community colleges as simultaneously indispensable to the university and yet entirely ignored within it—a placement and perception that carries through to our present day educational system.

At the time, the newly-created community colleges had only ever known placement at the outer edges of higher education, but the same was not true of the more complicated composition, the rhetorical roots of which can be traced back 2,500 years to a place of prominence in education (Connors 18). The Harvard-based reincarnation of composition as a mere course, a prerequisite to "real" learning, then, essentially erased this connection and dealt a historical blow to the discipline. Connors explains, "As sociologists of the field as well as historians, we must deal with the perceptions as well as with reality; and the general perception of composition is that it is a recent and questionable discipline with a shallow and inauspicious past" (Connors 18).

The effect of this conflicted history is that, as Connors puts it, composition's "self-definition is tenuous at best" (Connor 18); in other words, the field, until relatively recently, seemed to suffer from a perpetual identity crisis. This problem does not subside even if we allow for a different start point for the origin story. As Ritter and Matsuda explain,

> Some will argue that U.S. college composition was born at Harvard in the 1890s; others will argue that it was not truly born until the beginning of the 1970s. Still others will position the birth of the field at various points in between, including 1911, when the National Council of Teachers of English was formed, or 1949, when first Conference on College Composition and Communication took place, or 1950, when the journal *College*

Composition and Communication debuted. The date one chooses has much to do with

what one insists is being born. (Ritter and Matsuda 2)

For the purposes of my historical narrative, the origin of composition is squarely set in the

creation of English A, but I quote Ritter and Matsuda at length here because they outline

precisely the ongoing tension that allowed a millennia-long relationship with rhetoric to rapidly

transform into a single course untethered to any particular academic discipline. During this

"critical era," a clear distinction was made "between the study of rhetoric as an *art* and

composition as a *skill*" (Ritter and Matsuda 3, emphasis original). This division positioned

rhetoric as a discipline worthy of continued scholarship, while composition was merely a fleeting

instructional endeavor. In other words, this separation of art and skill at Harvard and

elsewhere—rather reminiscent of Harper's division of the senior and junior colleges—

contributed to the increasing rift between researching rhetoric and teaching composition, creating

lasting categorizations and stratifications that would impede the crucial understanding of

composition as both a course and a field of study.

Moreover, undervalued even within the lower division, the teaching of composition was

considered a corrective rather than a critical endeavor, meaning that no theoretical or

pedagogical foundation was necessary to conduct class. Teaching the first-year writing

requirement was a task undertaken by the lowest ranking academic writers—typically graduate

students or adjunct faculty in English literature. As such, "[c]omposition was the only college-

level course consistently carried on by people whose only real training came from the rules and

tenets found in the textbooks they asked their students to buy" (Connors 100-101). While today,

for better or for worse, we recognize the first-year writing course as "composition's almost

universal common feature" (Moon 3), the long-term lack of research, and subsequent lack of

consensus concerning the permanent or provisional nature of the first-year course, further hindered the formation (or, reformulation) of the larger field. Composition's half-century gap, then, between the first first-year course in the 1890s and the assembly of a body of scholarship related to the teaching of writing or writing practices in general has perpetuated a teaching/research schism that is, in other disciplines, either less divisive or, at least, is more easily and often traversed.

The field of composition as a scholarly discipline did, of course, eventually form and flourish, well beyond its association with the first-year writing course.   Understanding the early struggles with disciplinary identity, though, is important here since, as I briefly explained in Chapter 1, self-definition and distinction as a scholarly field are still significant issues for both community colleges and distance learning. In short, relegated to the outer edges of academia by Harper and Harvard, community colleges, distance learning, and composition have similar tales to tell concerning the elitist agendas initially served by the egalitarian efforts to provide greater access to higher education. While, too, all three of these areas proved to be resilient and dynamic, surviving skepticism of their purposes and critiques of their very existence, I would argue that composition has made the strongest strides forward in terms of establishing authority in academia. With first-year writing a continued component of the curriculum in higher education—and with the growth of several subfields like writing across the curriculum and computers and writing—composition is well-poised to be a leader in and an asset to the historically conjoined areas of community college and distance learning.

Democracy Now: The Unexpectedly Egalitarian Legacy of Early Elitist Agendas

While new perspectives on the history of Harper's work at the University of Chicago challenge the mythology concerning the creation of community colleges—disputing the idea that

they were, from the beginning, "democracy's college," or institutions created with an ideological

commitment to egalitarian and democratic values (Moon 4)—the legacy has garnered increased

legitimacy in recent years. Initial intentions aside, community colleges have, indeed, developed

into institutions with "distinctive missions, which often emphasize the importance of serving a

high number of underprepared students" (Bower and Hardy 9). Past U.S. Presidents from

Lyndon Johnson to Bill Clinton as well as our current President, Barack Obama, have focused

much of their educational policy efforts on the community college. In 1963, Johnson signed into

law the Morse-Green bill (the Higher Education Facilities Act of 1963), which called for the

construction of 25 to 30 new public community colleges each year, along with a loan program

that would enable an additional 70,000 to 90,000 students to attend college (Johnson, Lyndon

B.); Clinton created a 1997 tax credit for the first two years of college (Scott 391); Obama has

proposed a plan to provide a free community college education to "an entire generation of young

Americans, as long as they're willing to work, keep their grades up, be responsible, graduate on

time" ("Obama, Tom Hanks…"). While these efforts are not entirely free of the problems posed

by the historical position of community colleges—a free, two-year degree certainly still doesn't

hold the same "cachet" and marketability as a university diploma—the desire to provide greater

access to higher education smacks less of elitist lip-service as it increasingly has concrete

political, legal, and social standing.

Furthermore, Harper's erstwhile and inadvertent linkage between community colleges

and distance learning has taken on new life today, particularly with the arrival of the internet. As

Bower and Hardy explain, the diverse populations traditionally served by community colleges,

the commitment to teaching, and the willingness to provide education "anytime, anywhere" has

made community college a "natural 'first tier'" for the implementation of distance learning

(Bower and Hardy 9).[30] This is a connection that has clearly caught the attention of students

seeking courses at community colleges; as a recent *Inside Higher Ed* article, "The Increasingly

Digital Community College," indicates, distance education (mostly in the form of online classes)

is responsible for nearly all increases in student enrollments at community colleges as the

"flexibility of online classes, the growth of hybrid models and the ability to use smartphones and

apps to conduct classwork have made distance learning more appealing to students" (Smith).

The already increased access to higher education provided by community colleges, then, is

enhanced by the availability of internet-based distance learning; the abstractly democratic

beginnings of community colleges have, ironically, found a more concrete foundation in the

virtual environment of the online classroom.

Writing History, Revising the Future

Composition. Community Colleges. Distance Learning. Three separate areas of

academia, drawn together at the turn of the twentieth century by conflicting calls for change in

higher education. In theory, the origin of each was overtly explained as a means of creating a

more democratic system of higher education when, in reality, all were quickly and surreptitiously

sidelined by elitist attitudes and skeptical outlooks. Forced to the margins of academia, the

development of each of these areas has been uneven, and the future more than a little uncertain.

Composition. Community Colleges. Distance Learning. What each often lacks in overt

institutional support is made up for by an investment in innovation and, as such, the arrival of the

internet has been a boon to the individual areas while also working as a bonding agent, creating

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[30] There have been other notable intersections of community colleges and distance learning between
Harper's heyday and now; one of the early innovations in modern-day distance learning, for instance, was
the 1956 "TV College," a "remote" education curriculum provided by a Chicago community college.
Over the course of a decade, it enrolled over 100,000 students and 65 completed their entire associate's
degree by television. Of course, not surprisingly, one of the first courses offered was English
composition (Witt et al.).

the potential for a purposefully shared evolution that stretches ever more closely to the democratic ideals only previously imagined.

Though Chapter 3 moves away from this overtly historical analysis in favor of an examination of the technological growth of online learning, particularly in regard to writing, this theme of democracy is unwavering; the ideals of the past remain an undercurrent in discussions of online learning, resurfacing in issues related to the accessibility and egalitarian spaces of online classroom design.

CHAPTER 3:

+ Computers: Writing as/in Technology

This dissertation has the distinct perspective of having been written over the course of a decade or so, from 2006 to the present day. This longitudinal study of the literature has also serendipitously paralleled ten years of significant development and growth in online learning.[31] Early studies in online learning and other educational technologies anticipated this growth as well as many of the challenges that would be encountered along the way. Likewise, though some advances in technology were less predictable than others (e.g., faster internet speeds were anticipated, but the capabilities of the smartphone have exceeded expectations), the general ability of the internet to create virtual networks—and our subsequent ability to navigate them— have unsurprisingly been the subject of much social conjecture and academic conflict since their inception.

Debates surrounding technology—from file sharing to net neutrality—have flourished and subsided; concerns about technology in education—from the legitimacy of plagiarism detection programs to the boundaries between professional and public writing via social media— have ebbed and flowed. Despite these debates' continual cycle of development and dissolution (and sometimes subsequent resurfacing) and the at-least-tangential relationship of computer-mediated communication in each, the discussions surrounding the pedagogy of online learning, particularly in the realm of composition, have been less consistent. In other words, advances in the technological and technical aspects of distance learning are certainly having an impact on

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[31] Key findings from the *2014 Survey of Online Learning* indicate that this year's 3.7% increase in the number of distance education students is the *lowest* recorded increase in the last 13 years, and that both public and private nonprofit institutions recorded a significant distance enrollment growth that was offset by a decrease among for-profit institutions (Allen and Seaman). The same report for 2015 reflects similar growth; overall, distance education showed a year-to-year growth of 3.9%, but the number of students enrolled in those courses at for-profit institutions decreased yet again (Allen et al.).

online classrooms, but the conversations surrounding those same spaces have progressed at a much slower rate, with some of the core issues concerning, perhaps plaguing, online learning remaining in a stable, but ultimately unresolved, state.

These lengthy pauses in the progress of online learning pedagogy are troublesome, particularly with regard to composition, since writing often serves as the underlying commonality uniting virtual spaces that otherwise vary widely and wildly in terms of curriculum, structure, and instruction. Online learning utilizes writing more than traditional classrooms in that most, if not all, student-instructor and peer interaction takes places via writing. In virtual composition classrooms, in fact, one tends to write not only to compose prose for assessment, but to also compose one's identity. Moreover, writing plays a major role in creating and supporting an online classroom environment which, since its inception, has been potentially more liberating and egalitarian than that of its onsite counterparts, as these spaces allow "greater accessibility between the facilitator and the student" (Cole ix).

And yet, until recently, there have been notable pauses in Writing Studies research related to what should be predominant issues regarding the potential pedagogical purposes and uses of writing within online classrooms. If we look, for instance, at *Computers and Composition*, a leading journal in the scholarship concerning technology and writing, a clear flurry of research is evident when the leap from classroom to computer is initially made— including special volumes devoted to distance learning in 2001 and 2006.[32] For a brief period, then, technology and pedagogy were seemingly almost in synch; technology advanced rapidly and pedagogy developed at a dead sprint in an attempt to keep up. As one turn-of-the-twenty-

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[32] *Distance Education: Promises and Perils of Teaching and Learning Online*, vol. 18.4, 2001, edited by Patricia Webb Peterson and Wilhelmina Savenye; *Distance Learning: Evolving Perspectives*, vol. 23.1, 2006, edited by Jane Blakelock and Tracy E. Smith.

first-century study pointed out, "It appears that change in higher education has accelerated more in the past ten years than it has the past ten decades, fueled in part by the use of the Web as a featured tool" (Lowry, Thornam, and White 298-299).

Halfway through the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, there was a distinct decline in the scholarship of online composition classrooms, and conversations concerning the pedagogy of distance learning in this discipline slowed significantly. While recent work shows a renewed interest in studying online teaching and learning, the nature of these discussions is now asynchronous in that the pedagogical portion of the education-technology relationship is not just cautiously lingering behind the developmental cycle of technological tools but has, instead, found itself almost entirely out of the loop.

Though this re-uptake of research related to online teaching and learning in Writing Studies is heartening, it has also subtly revealed the significant amount of time since these topics have been a focus of the field. One 2013 *Computers and Composition* article, for example, tackles the important issue of the "disembodied" student learning process in the online classroom, beginning with this question: "Do advances in technology afford opportunities to improve upon what we already do well in our classrooms or just comprise a juggernaut, fueled by economics and an increasingly consumerist model of higher education that will eventually render our current pedagogical work unrecognizable?" (Gillam and Wooden 24). An important inquiry to be sure, but one that has been asked since the beginning of time in terms of online composition; its current relevance is not an indication of enduring contemplation, but of an underdeveloped discussion. Furthermore, the article relies heavily on Palloff and Pratt's *Building online learning communities: Effective strategies for the virtual classroom*—a

significant work in distance learning, but one which was published in 2007, what we might call technological eons ago in terms of the platforms available for building those communities.

Likewise, another contemporary *Computers and Composition* article claims that "much attention has been paid to online first-year writing instruction in recent years, as evidenced by growing scholarship on online writing instruction" (Rendahl and Breuch 297). However, despite the optimistic reference to this "growing scholarship," the cited sources are largely from 2005 or before and, with the exception of Scott Warnock's *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why?* (2009), none of the sources from the latter half of the decade play a significant role in this particular research. To be clear, my observations here do not doubt the due diligence of Writing Studies' promising new research related to online learning; instead, I invoke these studies to illustrate the dearth of collective information from which we currently have to draw. As a compositionist actively engaged in the development of online learning at my particular institution during this period, I suspect that elsewhere and independently there was also much doing of and reflecting on the kind of work that is only now re-entering the publication-based discussion of the field. Though this period of near-silence on issues related to online learning has created a disconnect between the field of composition and the broader realm of distance learning, the renewed attention to published research indicates it is a gap for which a strong and sustainable bridge will soon be built.

The absence of sustained inquiry in composition concerning the pedagogy of online learning is masked by an overwhelming amount of interesting and productive research on technology and education, particularly on how specific technologies may best be partnered with curriculum. These studies and discussions, though, merely lie adjacent to the truly central issues of online learning, particularly where composition is concerned. In short, while writing is and

will remain a primary component of the online learning environment for the foreseeable future, we need to do more than establish its predictable presence in virtual classrooms. Rather, we must be more consistent in researching and more persistent in writing about the pedagogical processes and products developing in these spaces in order to better advocate for writing and the broader processes of composition as productive and creative forces in the whole of online education.

Attitude Adjustment: Minding the P's & Q's (Pedagogical Questions) of Online Learning

While much of the early research in online distance learning, particularly within composition, but also across disciplines, is unavoidably outdated, there remain several insightful sources which posed essential questions and provide enduring guidance. The most prevalent refrain from these now "ancient" tomes of online learning remains the necessity of putting pedagogy before technology. This privileging of pedagogy over technology persists in distance learning literature but more as a principle than widespread practice, in that the examination of the specific tools used often overshadows the underlying purpose for engaging with them. The problem of *how* to put pedagogy before technology—or how to at least wed them in truly productive ways—is still something of a mystery, particularly in terms of large-scale, long-term efforts. In the absence of answers, then, we have continued to ask the same questions. Though journals devoted to distance education have been consistently published, the extraordinary breadth of content, structures, and technologies that fall under the purview of this learning format has left little room for cohesion or a clear sense of purpose across the spectrum, often leading individual articles to deal primarily with small-scale technical matters rather than addressing the broader technological issues.[33]

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[33] Like Writing Studies' renewed efforts, though, the broader research on distance learning shows recent signs of significant development, in part due to the evolving understanding of distance education to more

The root of this problem lies in current attitudes toward technology. When the development of computer technology began to truly influence all levels of education—in the early- to mid-1990s—attitudes concerning technology were categorized in myriad ways. Patrick O'Sullivan, for instance, proposed a spectrum of perspectives ranging from dystopic technological determinism to utopian social determinism. The former views technology as an independent, willful entity "that imposes itself on human social dynamics" (O'Sullivan 54) to the detriment of those socio-technological relationships, whereas the latter believes human motivations and goals direct the course of technological development, with an intuitive understanding of and ability to overcome challenges, resulting in increased productivity and improved human interaction. As an extension of technology, online learning was also the recipient of equally diverse outlooks and predictions. Peter Navarro summarizes two extreme perceptions of distance learning, the critics who viewed "cyberlearning…as a dangerous catalyst for replacing professors with 'digital diploma mills'" and the "depersonalization of the learning process" and the proponents who believed it would "provide more individualized instruction and more accommodation for different learning styles" resulting in experiences that were equivalent to or better than those of the traditional classroom (Navarro 281).

After much time and fierce debate—but little conclusive empirical evidence (Navarro 281)—it seems that we have landed fairly squarely in the middle of each spectrum. In terms of

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accurately be defined by the term online learning. For instance, one of the most prominent journals on distance education, the *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, in October of 2014 became simply *Online Learning* (Shea). Moreover, since then, precisely half of the issues produced (4 out of 8) have been special issues devoted to specific topics. The increasing presence of these themed volumes indicates an attention to the need to address, from a wide range of perspectives and disciplines, recurrent issues in online learning rather than continuing the previously less-organized arrangement which produced a relatively random grouping of articles independently focused on topics of varying prevalence and pervasiveness throughout the learning format.

technology, particularly in educational settings, we have reached what O'Sullivan called the "mutual influence model," in which

> educators can use the ways in which technology can affect interaction and information processing to reshape the education process. These changes can improve, or undermine, educational goals. The technology's characteristics are important considerations, but the applications that develop will ultimately determine whether the uses are beneficial or not. (O'Sullivan 57).

We remain similarly planted in the middle of the debates concerning online distance learning which, contrary to predictions, has caused neither an apocalyptic leveling of traditional educational structures nor a revolutionary shift of pedagogical thought; it has simply settled into a seemingly permanent, though nebulously positioned, place in higher education.

After the disconcerting forecasts concerning the potentially extreme effects of technology and online learning in higher education, it should perhaps be comforting to find ourselves in such a moderate position. However. These middle-of-the-road positions come with their own problems: We have shifted our gaze from the horizon to the pavement directly in front of us, a different approach to be sure, but one that has brought us no closer to reaching our destination. That is, we've turned to smaller scale questions (e.g., How does this particular software program work?) sacrificing persistent attention to the larger issues (e.g., How does distance learning best benefit its many stakeholders?). We troubleshoot rather than problematize and theorize. We continue to help technology progress, we keep online classrooms populated, and we "manage" them both—sometimes very effectively—but we have yet to truly envision a sustainable plan for adapting to and evolving with either one. As Shannon Madden explains in her article, "Obsolescence in/of Digital Writing Studies," "with computer devices proliferating so quickly, it

can be difficult to do the crucial work of interface critique in ways that keep pace with the range

of digital tools that are available and pedagogically useful" (Madden 30). Instead of continuing

to approach technology and online learning with vigorous critique, then, we have, out of

necessity or complacency, adopted the approaches Evgeny Morozov refers to as *technological*

solutionism and *digital defeatism*, which together "preclude critique of technologies and

foreclose change," meaning, "when we accept technologies as inevitable, we are less likely to

resist them or to question the social and political practices they engender" (qtd. in Madden 36).

On O'Sullivan's spectrum of technological and social dystopias and utopias, we might call this

positioning a sort of socio-technological purgatory; a place where minor changes and small

actions exist but meaningful actions are absent and systemic change is all but impossible.

An anecdotal example related to the courses I discuss in the next chapter illustrates how

these attitudes take shape in actual educational endeavors: In 2001, the College of Lake County

formed the Online Learning Advisory Committee. While some of the committee's functions

were practical in nature (e.g., "Review enrollments, completion rates, and student satisfaction in

online courses"), its primary charge was to serve, as the name suggests, as an advisory group and

liaison to the larger college community concerning the evolving issues related to online learning.

Later, the name was changed to the Alternative Instruction Committee (AIC) to indicate its

relationship to other forms of "alternative" instruction (e.g., telecourses) but the mission

remained the same: to serve as a place of discussion and development for pedagogy and policies

regarding online and other technology-based methods of instruction. When I joined the

committee in 2007, telecourses and the like were all but a thing of the past and the purview

already also included what would come to be known as "web-enhanced" courses, meaning those

onsite classes that also incorporated Blackboard, our chosen and contractually-bound "learning

management system" (LMS). As, though, these "web-enhanced" classes became more prevalent

on campus (now, a significant portion of classes use Blackboard at least for announcements and

record-keeping functions),[34] AIC meetings gradually turned from the technological to the

technical. Suffice it to say here that, the assessment of its educational worth notwithstanding,

there is a fair amount of technological defeatism in our continued use of this platform to

"administer" or "deliver" the materials of our courses, online and otherwise. Blackboard has

slowly overshadowed and completely subsumed other similar platforms (e.g., WebCT, Angel)

and has continued to regularly release new versions and updates, and, as such, has likewise

consumed nearly all of the attention of the AIC agenda. Conversations have often focused

exclusively on the featured changes of new versions of Blackboard and whether faculty are

prepared to accommodate those alterations into their current course structures. Perhaps even

"worse," if we are not contemplating changes (because, at least there is some thoughtful

discussion concerning affordances and challenges), we are troubleshooting past updates. Rather

than, for instance, exploring possible strategies for structuring productive discussions in online

classes, we seek information about how to modify appropriate due dates when copying a course

from one semester to the next. Immersed, then, in a culture of technological defeatism, the

contemplative examination of alternative methods of instruction has transitioned into the

practical distribution of technological solutionism for a single LMS.

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[34] Individual courses, though, are not designated as such in the course catalog or elsewhere, likely because *all* instructors are strongly encouraged by the administration (at the behest of the students) to employ Blackboard in at least some minimal fashion. In fact, even after much ado about contractual obligations and pedagogical infringement, the CLC Faculty Senate recently provided the formal recommendation that all classes use Blackboard, at least in the minimal capacity of posting the course's syllabus and updating student grades. The motivation here—when framed benevolently—was not to push the use of a specific technological tool, but to promote the principle of increased access, using technology to provide students with basic information about their courses and academic standing.

This inadvertent loss of mission, however, has recently come into focus, as other structural and administrative shifts have happened at the college. The committee is now—happily—seeking to update and reinvigorate its goals (and its yet-to-be-determined name). To do so, committee members are returning to the documents that originally formed the group and are taking stock of the motivations and purposes set forth therein.

It is my assertion that discussions of distance learning across the disciplines likewise need rebooting. To bridge the now visible gap between early distance learning scholarship and the current, minutia-entrenched research regarding online classrooms and coursework, we need to take the perhaps counter-intuitive step of separating pedagogy from particular technologies so that we may study the relationship more holistically. To begin this process, much like the work of the committee-formerly-known-as-the-AIC, I focus on finding the place we started to veer off track; specifically, by looking at where distance educators had hoped to go and the paths they had planned to get there. By studying these early predictions about the future of distance learning, we are, then, looking at a time before technological solutionism and digital defeatism had robbed insightful and overarching instructional questions of their pedagogical foundations in favor of providing rapid troubleshooting for particular technological problems and applications. In short, I return us to what was originally expected of online distance learning, examine what actually happened, and anticipate what might transpire if we correct our theoretical course.

Digital Memories: The Way We Thought We Were Going to Be

To begin this reflective look back at past predictions of the future, I turn to the pedagogically formative work, *Teaching and Learning Online: Pedagogies for New Technologies* (2001). In the introduction to this volume, editor John Stephenson details the ways distance learning "might be." Stephenson takes an appreciatively level-headed approach to

distance learning at a time when academics, policymakers, and software developers alike were completely losing their minds over the topic—either excitedly blinded by the possibilities boundary-less education proposed or entirely paralyzed by the potential technological isolation and disembodiment it threatened. Remaining reasonable, Stephenson writes:

Neither is it assumed that it [online learning] will replace existing schooling or campus-based learning, although it might significantly affect how formal teaching is organized. However, it is assumed that online learning will meet the needs of many for whom conventional education is inappropriate or unavailable, supplement the range of learning opportunities for those currently in educational institutions, change the relationships between teacher and learner and significantly enhance the reach of learning throughout the community. (Stephenson ix)

Precisely; Stephenson, well, nailed it. Online distance learning has supplemented rather than supplanted traditional coursework; it is now an advantageous feature of many educational programs, but is not a standard fixture of any definitive discipline. Moreover, the technologies through which online distance learning is "delivered" have also influenced the culture of onsite classrooms, as electronic communication via email or LMS alters the dialectical dynamic of students and teachers throughout the academic community.

Given, then, Stephenson's apt overall assessment of the place and purpose of distance learning in higher education, his contemplative "The Way It Might Be," which details the potential future attributes of distance learning, is also worthy of some time and attention. Stephenson's list of nine predictions concerning the development of online learning falls into two main categories: how online learning will affect the learning process and how online learning will affect the teaching process (with, of course, some overlap in how changing these

two processes simultaneously affects the overall outcomes of education). The predominant theme of the learner side of the classroom is that there will be more responsibility for the education process on the side of the student. As Stephenson puts it, "Learning will be substantially learner managed, and not just in terms of location, timing and lack of direct supervision. Learner responsibility will extend the relevance of their learning to the learner's longer term development and its applicability to and opportunities for involvement in their current interests and activities" (Stephenson 223). Stephenson again hits on a variety of issues that are timely to today's discussions of distance learning; the student's forced independence (sometimes bordering on isolation), the flexible nature of time and space, and the need for "networking and collaboration between individuals or groups of learners" (Stephenson 223) all speak directly to current issues of classroom structure, student motivation, and success.

On the teaching side of things, Stephenson envisions a pedagogy which supports this newfound sense of student responsibility. Instructors, he imagines, will package material differently and will be able to draw from more and varied kinds of resources. In effect, given the early freedoms of the internet, Stephenson anticipates the Open Education Movement,[35] particularly in terms of the educational resources and learning materials instructors would have at the ready. While allowing students more responsibility for their own learning requires a different pedagogical balance that teachers are sometimes unprepared to adjust to, the wealth of resources—information, materials, and expertise—Stephenson believed instructors would have access to informed his idea that there would then be more time for teachers to turn their attention toward the also-important task of becoming proficient in technological design and support. As he says, "The design and delivery of online learning materials will become a major educational

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[35] Summary of Open Education Movement here:
http://www.openeducationweek.org/what-is-open-education/ ("What is Open Education?")

activity in its own right" (Stephenson 223). Since students and instructors alike will have more

responsibilities, Stephenson also explores the potential of an additional role in the learning

process—that of an "educational producer" who will join together "the educational aspirations of

teacher and learners with the expertise of material designers" (Stephenson 223). Certainly,

"educational producer" has become an additional role within the online classroom, but the

significant question of who assumes that position—and the particular rights and responsibilities

it encompasses—is the subject of much contention and lamentation, primarily because, unlike

the roles of teacher and learner, the technological facilitator is, at the moment, often an entity

(e.g., a software development corporation) rather than an academic and pedagogically proficient

individual.

       While, then, Stephenson provides the most level-headed look into the future from a turn-

of-the-century standpoint, it is also too heavy-handed in favor of students' responsibility for their

own learning. Likewise, though he accurately perceives the need for collaboration between

pedagogical expert and material designer, the "educational producer" role he conceives as the

connection is idealized, to say the least. Overall, then, while the issues and alterations

Stephenson imagines coming to the forefront are right on target, the particular balance of roles

and responsibilities he envisions overshoots the current capabilities of the online classroom.

Stephenson concludes with the assertion that: "There will be a major switch in emphasis from

the election, processing and packaging of content *by the teacher* to the selection, processing and

adaptation of materials *by the learner*, drawing on multitudinous sources—much of which will

be beyond the control or expertise of the teacher" (Stephenson 224, emphasis original).[36]

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[36] If anything, rather than portraying the "typical" current online classroom (if such a thing exists),
Stephenson's vision of the future of online learning environments more closely resembles the current state
of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). While MOOCs lay outside the boundaries of my study, the
fact that the most realistic expectations of the future of online learning come closer to explaining MOOCs

This retrospective look at these predictions concerning online education ultimately serves not as an assessment of Stephenson's talents in foretelling; rather, it is an opportunity to momentarily pause in our journey to appreciate how far distance education has come in such a short amount of time and, yet, to realize how uneven the terrain ahead remains as those developments have been both erratic and largely localized. An increasing awareness of the need for consistent communication and coherence among disciplines, though, as well as Writing Studies' recent efforts to contribute to these conversations in its published research, suggests that we are heading in the right direction. While we continue to construct virtual classrooms using the available resources of individualized situations, we are becoming better at communicating and contextualizing the affordances and limitations of those creative processes, allowing us to more widely and directly address the issues that will ultimately help the evolution of the entire landscape of online learning.

Out of Alignment: The Scattered Stakeholders of Distance Learning

Though the pause in research surrounding online learning was ultimately, then, relatively short-lived, it has left us with a few significant lessons. The lack of cohesion in understanding distance learning as an interdisciplinary, interconnected field of study and the tendency to deal with the technical over the technological led the literature to be a fragmented amalgamation of localized experiments, experiences, and assessment of expectations. That final quality is the truly limiting factor—a situation in which there is a lack of alignment among the major stakeholders in online distance learning and, therefore, successes in one area or for one part of the educational equation do not necessarily translate to generalizable elucidations of the broader issues involved in elevating online learning in higher education.

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than the smaller and more defined online classrooms indicates a potential problem with conflating the two in discussions and debates concerning the state of online learning.

In the aptly titled article from Stephenson's same volume, "The Problems with Online Learning are Systemic, Not Technical," Hase and Ellis attribute the lack of progress in online distance learning to an absence of alignment between the major stakeholders: administrators (and the institutions they speak for), faculty and instructors, support personnel (IT), and students. As they explain, "Without proper alignment, resources can be wasted, energy dissipated and the overall outcome can fall well below what was expected by all stakeholders" (Hase and Ellis 32). Indeed, the misalignment of stakeholders has been a consistent deficiency of online distance learning and not only have resources and energy been wasted, this lack of a collective understanding of goals and strategies has only opened the door for online learning to receive perhaps even more than its fair share of criticism. David Noble, for instance, a well-known disparager of distance learning, might have misplaced his distrust and denigration of distance learning, as the misalignment of messages led him to misdirect his criticism at the form of education itself rather than at the potentially malevolent motivations of the administrators and institutions who supported it.[37] As a response to Noble's widely-read *Digital Diploma Mills* indicates,

> Dr. Noble is right to oppose university administrators and their profit motivated corporate partners in their plots to use technology to control higher education. This top-down process to change is deservedly doomed to failure, and I wish Dr. Noble a speedy victory. Unfortunately, rather than focusing his attack on the process, he is unable to control his strong anti-technology bias and risks losing the support of those he needs most—faculty

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[37] Indeed, given the collapse of Corinthian, the even-more-recent demise of ITT Educational Services ("Important Information Regarding…"), and the continued decline of enrollment in for-profit online learning, it seems that at least the current heyday of these particular "digital diploma mills" is winding down, hopefully leaving room for nobler efforts in the online learning format.

and students—with indefensible attacks on the technologies of distributed learning and instruction. Such a waste! (White)

Categorically criticizing all of the technology involved in online distance learning does little to deter the employment of those technologies within education. Conversely, though, simply promoting new technologies does equally little to advance the efforts of online learning as a whole. Rather, as online learning does present a challenge to the entirety of the existing educational paradigm, we need to spend more time and energy exploring how those technologies can facilitate a better sense of alignment between the major stakeholders of online education—students, teachers, and administrators. We seem to have spent years spinning our pedagogical wheels because we have failed to realize that the "level of alignment of the elements determines the extent to which strategy, structure, and culture creates an environment that facilitates the achievement of organizational goals" (Semler qtd. in Hase and Ellis 32). This is a call that has been made time and again, but has yet to truly be answered by the literature. As Hawisher (citing Palmquist, Keifer, and Zimmerman) argued in a 2001 speech concerning Writing Across the Curriculum and online learning: "We must continue our efforts to build communities of shared concerns about writing, speaking, thinking, and learning, communities that bind students and teachers—and I would add administrators—into shared allegiances rather than differentiated structures." (Hawisher, "Online WAC…" 10-11).

While, then, the work here will certainly explore and analyze particular technologies of online distance learning, the focus is not on a critique of the technology itself but, rather, on understanding the dynamics of the relationships as they function with and within these technologies and, ultimately, on the ability of these relationships to facilitate fulfilling and successful educational experiences for all those involved.

The dynamics that need to be studied, then, to better understand how to reach the goals of all the stakeholders are as follows: the relationship between writing and technology, which is a continual work-in-progress; the structure and strategies of online courses, including who builds them and how; the roles of teachers and students within the online classroom and how those roles interact with each other; and, finally, underlying everything is the mostly-written communication that both creates the online classroom and demonstrates how these dynamics play out.

Computers + Writing = Tool + Technology

Computers are, of course, the predominant technology linked to online distance learning as they have, quite simply, made this alternative form of education possible.[38] Though essential to the very existence of online distance learning, however, computers are not the technology that should receive the most attention when exploring the pedagogy and practice of online learning. The technology that deserves top-billing in this educational setting is, in fact, writing.

To understand this proposed positioning of writing as the preeminent technology in online distance learning, we must first better understand technology as a concept; what qualities constitute a technology, distinct from the characteristics that typify a mere tool. The categorical definitions of these products and practices are, of course, dependent on context; they are also debatable, overlapping, and evolving, particularly in regard to the attitudes and impressions of technology held by schools and society-at-large at any given time.[39] But, as Scott DeWitt

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[38] Or, they are, at least, the most recent technology to assist in its evolution; it could also be argued that literacy is actually the technology that makes this kind of education possible: "The technology that freed us the most from the here and now was literacy. Literacy allowed language to be uncoupled from conversation among humans in specific contexts of use." (Gee and Hayes 12)

[39] Although it further belies my at-home television habits, I can't help but make note here of the "Word of the Day" sketch from a current (2014) episode of *Sesame Street*. "Technology" is the word of the day and Elmo and Christina Hendricks (*Mad Men*) define it as a tool that helps us accomplish a task or that makes something easier. They go through the typical items we think of as technology—laptop, iPad, smart phone—until Miss Christina has a hard time physically holding on to all of her technologies. At the end, they use the "technology" of a backpack to make it easier to carry all of the other technologies because,

astutely noted, *predicting* where technology will go next is not nearly as useful as *directing*

where it will go (4); and, to best plot our course, we need a fuller picture of the vessel we are

guiding.

As his attitudinal spectrum was one of the most comprehensive regarding perspectives

toward technology, I return to the ideas of Patrick O'Sullivan for some clarity on the definition

of "technology" and how that conception influences related practices. In one of the first books

written about the pedagogy of online classrooms as we now know them, 2000's *Issues in Web-*

Based Pedagogy: A Critical Primer, O'Sullivan muses on definitions of technology, settling on

the idea that technology is "a technique, a way of accomplishing a goal" or, more simply, "the

study of how things get done," (O'Sullivan 51). These definitions differ from our common

conceptions of technology in that they do not focus on the concrete physical equipment, but on

the "goal-directed human activities" (O'Sullivan 51).

This comprehensive conception of technology as the connection between human activity

and hardware, rather than a distinct tool or artifact, is reinforced by Hawisher and Selfe's

contemporary article, "The Passions that Mark Us: Teaching, Texts, and Technologies." Here,

the authors apply the definition specifically to computers at a time when they have become

important in educational settings

> …not simply because they are tools for writing (they are not simply tools; they are,
>
> indeed, complex technological artifacts that embody and shape—and are shaped by—the
>
> ideological assumptions of an entire culture), but rather because these machines serve as

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after all, a backpack is a tool that makes something—carrying things—easier. I find it fascinating that "technology" is now a word/idea that needs to be taught to preschoolers *and* that this simple sketch is actually a fairly sophisticated demonstration of the concept. It is possible that the need for a lengthy discussion about the definition of technology is heading towards obsolescence just as quickly as the devices Hendricks was having trouble handling ("Elmo and Christina Hendricks…")!

powerful cultural and catalytic forces in the lives of teachers and students. Although the

machines themselves mean little to us…the work they support and the connections they

make possible mean a great deal. (Hawisher and Selfe, "The Passions that Mark Us…" 2)

These discussions acknowledge the complex relationship between human interaction and

technological artifacts and mirror O'Sullivan's "mutual influence model" of educational

technology without falling prey to the conceptual complacency and technological defeatism that

later views of technology comport. Both conceptions demonstrate an understanding that

"technology cannot exist in isolation from human social constructions" (O'Sullivan 51), a view

that did not gain as firm a foothold as it deserved. Instead, we seem to have since fallen

backwards into the belief that "technology" resides solely in the tools and artifacts, which, to

some extent, function of their own accord.

While then, the arrival of computers in academia undoubtedly signaled a shift in the

landscape of higher education, we have lost sight of the fact that, at their core, computers are

simply computational devices. The truly transformative *technologies* are not the material

machines, but the activities and relationships those tools have inspired and supported.

After reasoning through these definitions, it is easy enough to reconfigure the computer

in our minds not as the entire technology, but as technological artifact, a tool we employ in

various technological endeavors. The distinction between tool and technology, however, gets a

little more complicated when we turn to the entity that is online learning and its "classrooms."

The boundaries between human action and technological artifact are blurred, as human action

and interaction are only apparent *in* the technological artifact, and so human actions seemingly

become mechanized. Though created by and for humans, once properly programmed, these

online spaces *could* continue to exist, continue to run their programs and 'deliver' their

assignments and information, without any human intervention. An online classroom, for instance, could easily run on "autopilot" for an entire semester if assignments were set on a timed released and electronically assessed. This cyborgian existence is largely responsible for our inherent mistrust of online classrooms and the educational practices employed within them. Onsite, physical classrooms do not continue to function without human interaction; they do not continue to have the appearance of life when they are, in fact, devoid of humanity.   Online classrooms, on the other hand, may continue to have visible traces of human activity, perhaps even ghostly apparitions of humans in the form of avatars or pre-recorded videos, when they are also, in fact, empty.

In short, this is where we get tripped up with online classrooms. Because they are online—because they are conducted entirely through the computer—we confuse the classroom shell, the computer programming, with the classroom as technology. We forget that the invisible walls that form the online classroom space are no more a technology than are the physical walls of the onsite classroom. The ability to continue functioning independent of human action may distinguish it, but that ability serves no purpose; without human interaction within these classrooms, nothing gets done and, therefore, there is no true technology inherent in online classrooms.

What does breathe life into these classrooms, what creates purpose, what allows goals to be accomplished, is the *writing* that happens there. The technique, the *technology*, is not the online classroom, but the writing which takes place within it. While, then, ensuring that we use an appropriate tool to accomplish our purpose (and making sure that tool is used appropriately) is, of course, an important function, what is more important is how we employ the true technology, how we make writing happen.

Making Meaning from a Mark: Writing's Transformation from Tool to Technology

The history of treating writing as a technology is actually quite long, if little known to those outside the field. I present some of that history here, briefly, as I believe composition's well-established perspective of studying the technology of writing can better prepare us to understand the role of computers and online classrooms as tools and artifacts in the technological endeavor of online education.

As a technology, writing has faced criticism since, as first-year composition students are endearingly wont to write, literally, the beginning of time. Andrew Feenberg explains:

> Plato initiated our traditional negative view of the written word. He argued that writing was no more than an imitation of speech, while speech itself was an imitation of thought. Thus writing would be an imitation of an imitation and low indeed in the Platonic hierarchy of being, based on the superiority of the original over the copy….That we still share Plato's thinking about writing can be shown in how differently we respond to face-to-face, written, typed, and printed forms of communication. These form a continuum, ranging from the most personal to the most public. (Feenberg 22-23)

Writing, then, has always already faced much of the same criticism that is now levied at online learning. That our ideas are still rooted in Plato's early impression of writing probably explains why, according to Starr Roxanne Hiltz, we see the variability in quality of online courses as much more marked than the same unevenness in face-to-face instruction (11); it is, in essence, a continuation of the ancient debate about the merits of speech (the face-to-face classroom) versus the capabilities of writing (an online classroom). Despite the lurking shadows of platonic discrimination, writing as a practice also has pivotal philosophical proponents. The works of Aristotle, Plato's student, have formed a foundation for arguing persuasively both *in* writing and

for writing. The basis of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is the "power to see, in each case, the possible

ways to persuade" (Shields); to adapt technique to context in meeting a particular goal. The

goals of rhetoric, it seems, are likewise linked to those of technology. As Carolyn Miller

explains in the foreword to Stuart Selber's *Rhetorics and Technologies: New Directions in*

Writing and Communication:

> rhetoric and technology are both arts of design: they are both in the business of balancing
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> innovation with tradition, of initiating change and then compensating for it. If rhetoric is
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> the art that adjusts ideas to people and people to ideas, we might characterize technology
>
> as the art that accommodates the material world to people and people to the material
>
> world. This shared dynamic gives rhetoric and technology a shared ambivalence toward
>
> both tradition and innovation (or what Kenneth Burke called "permanence and change").
>
> (Miller x-xi).

Writing, as a technique, a technology, a way of getting things done is a valuable partner to

rhetoric, and the conclusion we can come to, then, is that one—speech or writing—isn't *always*

better than the other; rather one is more appropriate, more persuasive, and more powerful given a

specific situation, a particular audience, and a desired outcome. To better understand the online

classroom and its potential successes and shortcomings—to assess the appropriate techniques for

its situation—we need, then, to better understand writing as a technology and, specifically,

where, when, and how it can be effectively, productively, and persuasively applied.

Conceptualizing writing as the predominant technology in an online class is a daunting

shift in perspective for myriad reasons. To begin with, the term "writing" is a rather slippery one

in that "it could refer to the text itself, or to the process of creating the text, in both the technical

and intellectual sense of create….Writing also specifies an action…and so highlights the

rhetorical, performative dimension" (Porter xviii). So, where, specifically, lies the technology in writing? In the physical or the cognitive process? In the product of those processes? None of these, it seems, if they are done in isolation. While the physical and cognitive process of writing may result in a written artifact, that artifact does not function as a technology—as a technique for accomplishing a specific, rhetorical, and performative function— until it is given a purpose through its situational context. O'Sullivan also discusses the early distinctions between writing as tool and technology:

> [T]housands of years ago, written communication and the development of phonetic alphabets were revolutionary developments that allowed people to transcend time and space in their interactions, with significant consequences for the development of civilization (Fidler; Logan; Manguel)….[W]riting technology includes the artifacts of various materials used to make marks of some sort….[b]ut it was the system of symbolic communication that generated shared meaning to the markings that is at the center of what we consider "written communication." (O'Sullivan 51-52)

Writing, then, can be both the tool (i.e., the ability to make marks on material), as well as an artifact (i.e., the written product of that ability to make marks on material), but it does not gain meaning, does not serve a purpose, does not become a *technology* until it is able to create a shared sense of meaning, to communicate. Writing *in* the technology of an online classroom, therefore, does not become writing *as* technology until it is part of a conversation.

Watch Your Language: The Difficult Evolution of Written Discussion

Millennia later, with firmly established alphabets and lexicons, it is, of course, possible to perceive nearly any written artifact as fulfilling a communicative function and, therefore, for almost all writing to fall under the definition of technology. In an educational context, the

written technology most often employed is one "characterized by text of a certain length, complexity, and expected integrity," (Hesse 34), otherwise known as the essay. This form of writing is also, of course, shared by both the physical and online classroom. Online courses, however, up the ante a bit and also employ the technology of writing as a more direct method of communication—in written discussions. The dialogic nature of this writing elevates its value as an educational technology—that is, a method of instruction through which knowledge is exchanged and created and, therefore, learning occurs. Why, then, does there remain such strong skepticism—and outright scorn—about this space in which much remains written instead of spoken? Plainly stated, what's the big deal?

Just as simply, perhaps, is the seemingly recursive answer: It's a big deal, because it's a big deal. Revolution and evolution are never easy, and the move from physical classrooms to online spaces, from spoken conversations to written discussions, represents both. Such upheaval—even if ultimately progressive and transformative—can initially and paradoxically prompt a reassessment and revaluation of older technologies. As O'Sullivan indicates, "The new environment created by the newer technology can cast the older technology in a new light, sometimes highlighting benefits that were not as apparent before different ways of accomplishing goals emerged" (O'Sullivan 53). The online classroom—and what writing needs to do in it—has potential which is as provocative as it is promising; its innovation excites, but also invites us to cling more closely to the physical classroom and its familiar separation of spoken and written language.

While O'Sullivan indicates that this defamiliarization with old technologies can actually lead to unexpected progress in that we examine and employ the old technology more effectively, Sarah Sloane explains how the "haunting" of older technologies keeps us entrenched in the

technical aspects of adaptation from one technology to another, rather than allowing us to actively embrace and engage new possibilities and purposes. When we fail to be "critically aware that our encounters with new communicative technologies are always colored by memory, informed by learned response, and haunted by earlier experiences with writing, reading, and communicative technologies" (Sloane 50) we also "constantly reinvent the wheel…never consider[ing] alternative modes of transportation" (Sloane 64).

This tension created by the technology of writing simultaneously pulling us into the future and reaching to us from the past generates a dynamic that makes it very difficult to make decisions and to, in fact, move anywhere at all. It is not so much, then, that we are moving from a physical classroom dominated by spoken language to a computerized, print-based space, it is that this move changes the ways that we think, write, and act. It is not only that we must write instead of speak, it is that we must write differently than we have ever written before. Though we have previously employed these technologies and tools, the online classroom asks us to engage with them in a different context and for different purposes, which means that we must also develop different cognitive processes—in other words, we must not only consider, but create and advocate for alternatives modes of transportation to assist in reaching our destination.

Answering the "So What?" Question: Implications for Online Composition Students

Altering how we, as teachers, think about the technology of writing is one way to begin the creative process of helping our students similarly understand its changing purposes and uses. Porter explains that this kind of writing (and its corresponding research) requires a shift in terminology, suggesting specifically the term *digital writing*. He explains: "The term *digital* signifies the dramatic shift from the analog and print world to a new kind of writing space altogether. Digital refers to computer-mediated technology, to be sure, but the term carries

cultural connotations and avoids the instrumentalism implicit in terms like 'computer' and 'Internet.'" (Porter xviii, emphasis original).

Encouraging a distinction in terminology to position the primarily written discussions in online classrooms as separate from the more stringently-assessed essayistic writing typical of academic coursework, particularly in composition classrooms (and to also perhaps more closely align the dialogic compositions of written discussion with the multimodal composing students increasingly—and seemingly naturally—do in their daily lives through social media platforms), may be one way to create a sort of fresh start for teachers and administrators, a way to begin thinking differently about the online classroom and its written discussions as an educational entity acting parallel to, rather than as a substitute for, the onsite classroom. But it's only a start. For a true transformation to occur students must be directly addressed as significant stakeholders in the educational equation. Altering the theoretical conceptions and practical applications of writing both as and in technology does little if the effects of those transformations aren't felt by those who should, by design, be the ones to reap the most benefit from the alternative mode of educational communication.

Opting to learn in an online classroom—regardless of the circumstances or motivations— asks a great deal of students. While, as pedagogues and researchers, we can discuss the theoretical idea of writing as technology and the understanding of the computer as a mere tool, these assertions and their implications are, at best, implicit and, more likely, entirely non-existent from the student perspective. Most students, in fact, even those who are experienced online learners, probably have the very opposite impressions—viewing the computer as the technology and the writing as the tool. Truly, it is even more likely that students are entirely unaware that the distinction might be worthy of consideration.

From the student perspective, the difference between tool and technology is seemingly and simply semantic, but what online learning students *do* have is an acute awareness of, and investment in, the ease (or lack thereof) in dealing with the internet-based environment in which they are supposed to learn. In my many years of teaching online, typically my students' frustrations with the "technology" are expressed in terms of their failure to possess the right "computer skills," meaning these students feel they lack the ability to locate and utilize the requisite spaces of a particular online course.

The unfortunate irony here is that the source of student angst lies in that same seemingly semantic separation of tools and technologies, only here on the student side. As explained earlier, the work that takes place in the environment of the online classroom is an entirely new construct, precisely because of the unique relationships it creates between writing and technology. While *digital writing* may be an appropriate term for describing the communicative work of the online classroom on the production side, we are without an equally descriptive and fitting expression of how that work should be received. In order to make the cognitive shift to the online classroom, then, students need not just a new way to write, but also an alternative approach to reading. In other words, students need a new "literacy" in order to navigate and productively engage in these online spaces.

When, then, students lament their lack of "computer skills," they are, in fact, indicating a sense of inadequacy along the lines of an "illiteracy"—the inability to appropriately read and engage with the spaces in which they are meant to interact and learn. Of course, "literacy" is a term even more loaded than "technology." As Glenda Hull, for example, said, "We think of reading and writing as generic, the intellectual equivalent of all-purpose flour, and we assume that, once mastered, these skills can and will be used in any context for any purpose, and that

they are ideologically neutral and value free" (qtd. in Wysoki and Johnson Eilola 352). Let me be clear: I do not imagine all-purpose literacy as the secret ingredient in the recipe for whipping up the perfect online course. I do, however, believe that, like, "technology," "literacy" has a popular and shared (mis)understanding, and terms like "computer literacy" have already found their way into the common lexicon. Therefore, harnessing students' already-established perception of "computer literacy" as their level of technology-based skill is a useful way to develop a dialogue about the aptitudes and attitudes students realistically need to successfully participate in online learning.

Just as our theoretical conversations concerning technology have become short-sighted and technical, so are students' understandings of their computer-related abilities. The technical issues of online learning—because they are obvious and immediately impedimental—often take precedence. Momentary panic and paralysis of work leads students to seek out the solutionism in their instructors; teachers, and particularly the technical support personnel they work with, are hard-pressed to resist solving the problem in favor of pausing to help students develop strategies to resolve that which is likely a long-term *issue* behind the student's temporary *problem*. The flexible schedule of the online classroom is, after all, in most cases, still at the mercy of the fast-paced, forward momentum of the overall academic calendar.

A brief example here of the implications of problem-solving versus issue resolution: In Blackboard, students have a variety of options for viewing messages on the discussion board. They can enter a discussion forum by clicking on a number representing "Unread messages," which then shows them isolated messages in the order that they were posted (but irrespective of where they are located in the context of the whole discussion). Typically, early in the semester, hoping to ensure proper posting of their work, students often click on this "unread" number,

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expecting to be able to review a message they have just posted. Blackboard, however, automatically marks a student's own messages as "read" when it is posted (the logic, I presume, is that the software assumes students read their own messages prior to posting them). Students are often confused by the absence of their messages in the "unread messages" column, as they have not yet read them as an officially posted message.

When they inevitably inquire about the inability to see their own posts, an instructor can easily solve the immediate *problem* by providing the same explanation I have just described— they need to enter the discussion forum as a whole, where their comments will be displayed with all of the other posts (both read and unread). The larger *issue*, however, is that this question is indicative of a student's general practices for reading messages in the class. The tendency to read discussion posts using this "Unread Messages" feature, which provides individual messages in chronological order but out of context, hinders a student's ability to truly follow and learn from an online discussion. To go beyond simple solutionism, an instructor would need to help the student understand the larger issue related to technological literacy—that is, for the student to fully comprehend the development of the discussion concepts, the forum should almost always be viewed as a whole (where discussion messages are "threaded" to provide clues to context and development). Students, then, must take the additional technical action of choosing to view the forum in "tree view," which connects the initial discussion posts and their replies in contextualized threads of linked messages rather than in a basic, chronological list.

This sense of student frustration is where the theoretical technological foundation and the concrete technical practice first intersect in online learning; where teachers have the opportunity to support students' engagement with their own technological development (despite their possible resistance), or, conversely, to merely assist them in the practical solutionism they may

more readily desire. In addition, then, to placing emphasis on the technology of writing in online classrooms, we need to develop our definition of literacy as it relates to online distance learning. Rather than responding to gaps in students' "computer literacy," then, we need to focus on the development of what Hawisher and Selfe call *technological* literacy. As they explain:

> By *technological literacy*, or *literacies*, we mean the practices involved in reading, writing, and exchanging information in online environments, as well as the values associated with such practices—cultural, social, political, and educational. For us, the term differs from *computer literacy* in that it focuses primarily on the word *literacy*— thus, on communication skills and values—rather than on the skills required to use a computer (Hawisher and Selfe, "Literate Lives…" 2, emphasis original).

While there is, then, some merit to the "computer literacy" that students so often lament lacking, teachers need to emphasize the value of having more than a basic working knowledge of computer functions. True, students who possess computer literacy can complete assignments, but students who achieve technological literacy can earn an education—and we need to remember that the goal of the former is to actively and emphatically encourage the latter.

In all, then, students will best succeed in online learning if they are able to both explore the cognitive differences involved in digital writing and develop a confidence in their technological literacy. Fostering these emerging abilities in students is no small feat, but it is an essential one as it allows them to not just navigate, but to actually, virtually inhabit the online learning spaces available to them.

The Online Classroom: Outside In and Inside Out

Though online learning is increasingly popular in higher education and the perception of the format is developing some definition, these learning spaces of the online classroom remain a

rather mysterious entity. While the education that happens in physical classrooms is undoubtedly diverse in terms of structure, content, and quality, currently, near every American adult has received at least some of this "traditional" schooling (if only at the primary and secondary levels).[40] Moreover, depictions of traditional classroom-based learning are pervasive in popular culture; even in the fantastical world of, say, *Harry Potter*, much of the learning takes place in classrooms where students sit in rows of desks, facing a lecturing, questioning, demonstrating teacher, an expert in that specific magical subject. Whether we envision Hogwarts, Harvard, or any school in between, most of us can clearly visualize the setting and situation of a traditional classroom. Indeed, as Lowry, Thornam, and White note, "time travelers from nineteenth-century America would be completely disoriented by what they observed in a twentieth-century hospital, but completely at home in a twentieth-century classroom" (298-299). While it is possible, even likely, that this statement will not hold true beyond the first half of the twenty-first century, given the increasing number of experimental and flexible classroom arrangements and emerging pedagogical technologies, for now even a casual observation of these spaces, combined with a cultural understanding of a historically "typical" classroom, provides a basic understanding of the activity taking place within those walls.

The same cannot be said of online classrooms. As newer, lesser-known, and password-protected sites requiring special permission to gain entrance, these spaces are obscure to

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[40] I stipulate "currently" and qualify with "nearly" because there are numerous other educational movements and settings taking hold in the US for a variety of social, economic, and political reasons. There is, for example, a resurgence in homeschooling, an increase in Montessori schools, and even some rumblings about an idea called "un-schooling" (which is a form of homeschooling that focuses on hands-on, experiential learning). Moreover, free and public online education is increasingly becoming an option for elementary and secondary students. In other words, the traditional classroom is something that nearly all adults *right now* have had experience with, but this statement might be less true in the coming years. Indeed, it may be *because* nearly all adults are familiar with our traditional classrooms that traditional schooling is coming under such fire. These arguments, however, lie beyond the scope of my work here.

outsiders. "Outsiders," here, too, is a rather large group, denoting not only those outside higher

education, but rather those who are not *the* teachers or *the* students within *the* particular

classrooms. Faculty members, students, and administrators alike, even those who are highly

enmeshed in the physical environment of a particular institution, may remain oblivious to and

outside of those imperceptible online walls.[41] These classrooms are, in effect, entirely silent and

fully invisible—they can exist and function without anyone outside of the online space having

any awareness of the educational endeavor undertaken therein. This essential distinction

between the onsite and online classroom, then, is the chasm from which many of the struggles of

online learning stem. Unlike the common knowledge that exists concerning the physical

classroom, we lack a shared perception of how these spaces look, feel, and function, which

creates a breeding ground for misunderstanding and mistrust.

A recent article that evidences this intrinsic distrust is the May 2015, "Five Studies Find

Online Courses are Not Working Well at Community Colleges." Written by Jill Barshay for *The

Heckinger Report*, the article was quickly picked up by *U.S. News & World Report*. The article's

title accurately reflects the content as Barshay presented it, but the conclusions drawn were

quickly and thoroughly rebutted on several fronts, most notably by Peter Shea, associate provost

of online learning at the University of Albany SUNY and editor-in-chief of *Online Learning*,

who explained the overreach of her claim and the conflicting evidence she failed to include.

Two weeks later, Barshay (seemingly begrudgingly) published a second article—"The Online

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[41] In 2011, when I earned tenure at the College of Lake County, I had been teaching online for two of my four years of employment at the college. As a community college, the tenure process largely focuses on teaching and service to the college. As such, my onsite classrooms had been routinely observed—by peers, by my tenure committee, by the division's dean—and my performance evaluated. To date, however, my online classrooms have only been observed by specific invitation, meaning that, though I regularly teach at least half of my 15-credit hour load online, both pre- and post-tenure, no formal evaluation of my teaching in these spaces has been conducted, nor is there a specific requirement or procedure in place for observations of any instructor teaching online.

Paradox at Community Colleges"—which explained the data more accurately; that is, the data showed that students enrolled in online classes at community colleges in California were, indeed, "11 percent less likely to finish and pass a course if they opted to take the online version instead of the traditional face-to-face version of the same class," but that those students who take and pass online classes are actually more likely—25% more likely, to be exact—to complete their two-year associate's degree or to obtain another certificate or degree. Moreover, students who take online courses tend to graduate more quickly than those students who take entirely onsite courses.

While the skewed data and overblown conclusion about the failure of online learning at community colleges is, of course, concerning, conflicting reports about the assessed success or failure of distance learning are nothing new. The larger problem with Barshay's article, though, is her equally off-base characterization of the online classroom. She writes that "computerized instruction is still in its infancy," a more than misleading characterization. As I have earlier argued, online learning is anything but new—more analogous to an unruly teenager, trying to find its identity and position in higher education by pushing its boundaries, sometimes, admittedly, a bit recklessly. Moreover, "computerized instruction" is an entirely obtuse portrayal of online learning, reinforcing the idea of cyborgian classrooms and suggesting that online learning comes *from* a machine rather than from a human being *through* a machine.[42]

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[42] Many other characterizations are equally overgeneralized and misleading. For instance, "online courses, where students can log in at their convenience and complete assignments at their own pace"; "To be sure, the design and production of online community college courses are decentralized and primitive"; "Online students might see a brief video clip of the professor each week, mentioning upcoming topics, but rarely is an entire lecture videotaped"; "Of course, students can email questions to the professor or post them on an online bulletin board, but they can't ask a question in the middle of a PowerPoint presentation and receive an answer in real time." All of these belie a complete lack of understanding about the form and function of online courses.

Reports like those from Barshay both illustrate and perpetuate the lack of a shared vision concerning the form and function of the online classroom, likewise creating a steep learning curve for both students and teachers who decide to enter this ephemeral and ever-evolving landscape. The inevitable technical difficulties of online course participation earlier described are exponentially complicated by the unformed and uninformed expectations of its intrepid inhabitants. A final complication, too, is the inherent isolation of these classes as well as that of the pedagogues and participants who work within them; the teachers and students working online may also remain unseen, unheard, and unacknowledged as members of the academic community.

While some of this mystery dissipates once *in* the online classroom, the apparent invisibility of its participants and feelings of functional isolation may linger—and for good reason. Although instructors and administrators may have the ability to detect the presence and track the movements of participants, most students are still at least initially alone when they first enter the online classroom. The overall structure of a typical online classroom is, essentially, what McKee and DeVoss call a "digital panopticon" (7). Students fail to fully exist in these spaces until they "speak," usually via writing.[43] Sometimes, even then, it may be unclear to whom the student is speaking—are they posting an assignment which only the instructor sees or

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[43] This failure to "exist" in an online classroom without writing has both metaphorical and practical repercussions. Each semester at CLC, faculty are required to complete Non-Attendance Rosters after the 15% mark of each class (the point at which a student can no longer withdraw themselves for a refund and no record of the course on their transcript). On this roster, instructors must verify that the students enrolled in the course are, in fact, attending the class and assign a "WN" (Withdraw, Never Attended) to those students who have failed to appear. For onsite classes, the criteria for "Academic Participation" is fairly straightforward: Has the student been physically present for at least one class period? For online classes, though, presence in the class is harder to ascertain and can be gauged in several alternative ways. To be considered in attendance, a student needs to: "Participate in an online discussion" or "Take an interactive tutorial or computer based instructions" or "Contact an instructor to ask a course-related question" (SROps@clcillinois.edu). In other words, simply logging into the Blackboard classroom is not sufficiently representative of presence. The underlying idea is that to exist in an online classroom, a student must actively make their presence known, and often that minimal presence is conveyed through writing.

a discussion board message, visible to many or all of the students in the class? Even to those within it, then, the setting and activities of the online classroom are often initially an enigma. And, for those who are less tech-savvy or academically aware, the puzzle of the online classroom may be one that is either endlessly frustrating or unknowingly inhibitive.

In comparison to their students, the paradoxes of public and private spaces pose less of a problem for instructors of online courses, as teachers are generally at a technological and academic advantage, having content knowledge and, if not more experience with technology, then at least access to more areas and information within the classroom. The crises of isolation and identity, however, are perhaps elevated for instructors in these classrooms. Primary to the pedagogical puzzle of online learning is the question of how an instructor demonstrates true *teaching* within the online classroom. The *apparent* ease and automation of teaching in the online classroom (à la Barshay's "computerized" instruction) brings us back to that element of inherent distrust in this setting-less educational setting.

In sum, then, the technology that makes online courses possible also shrouds them in secrecy; the richly complex, but completely hidden, environment of the online classroom often appears from the outside to be little more than disembodied, disenfranchised students working (not learning) in isolation, loosely led by a teacher so closely tied to the technology that the two are indistinguishable. And, though these fears, frustrations, and inquiries are sometimes expressed with sarcasm rather than sincerity, they all hold some validity; essentially, the criticism of online classrooms may be chronically under-informed, but it is not entirely unfounded.

For these reasons, then, it makes sense to work toward creating a common understanding of these classrooms. We should move beyond thinking of them as mere *spaces*—technological

vacuums in which work may be present, but people are ultimately absent—and instead focus on depictions of them as actual *places*, virtual environments with real potential, which, just like physical locations, flourish or fail largely based on the actions and interactions of their architects and inhabitants.

The effort here, and in the study that follows, is to better illustrate these dynamic environments and, drawing on the work of Nardi and O'Day, to envision these places as information ecologies, or individual "system[s] of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular local environment" in which "the spotlight is not on technology, but on human activities that are served by technology" (49). In other words, examining and understanding the true inner workings of online courses requires a complex approach that accounts for the place in which the work is done (including the design efforts involved in producing the space), the people who are doing the work, and all of the interactions between those various working parts—a focus "on relationships involving tools and people and their practices" (50).

Setting the Site-Specific Blackboard Stage

Though the standardized platforms for online learning often come under fire for a variety of reasons—their cost, their lack of pedagogical flexibility, the corresponding ease of standardizing and automating education, their technical fragility and glitches—I find Scott Warnock's take from *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why* on the issue of Course Management Systems (CMSs) or Learning Management Systems (LMSs), namely Blackboard, one with which I appreciatively agree. Simply put, these systems are currently a necessary "evil." As Warnock explains to his audience of first-time online instructors, "If you become interested in this mode of teaching, you will soon discover that in terms of technology, the possibilities are endless; but I'll assume that you want to lower the technology barrier as much as

you can, and for teachers new to the online environment, that means using a prepackaged CMS" (Warnock xviii). For the College of Lake County (CLC), the institution at the center of my study, and many, if not most, other institutions this pre-packaged CMS is Blackboard.[44]

While my instructor interviews, committee work, and general employment experience at CLC have elicited no shortage of complaints about our chosen CMS and I have my own gripes about Blackboard's endless updates and always-new versions, ultimately, it provides most of the features of all other LMSs and, as is my operating view of most technology, I believe that the devil you know is better than the one you don't. While, with particular reference to composition, early in the development of computers and distance learning there were calls for instructors to maintain an active role in software design (e.g., Paul Leblanc's *Writing Teachers Writing Software*), that call went largely unmet; the advance of technology was too fast and the pedagogical demands were already too great. In place of that ideal, then, standardized course management systems give us the technology we need to teach a class proficiently and professionally.

I offer this position on learning platforms as a prelude to studying the work that happens within them because these spaces simultaneously proffer possibilities and seemingly set limitations on the activities therein, thereby challenging instructors to become what Walls, Schopieray, and DeVoss, in their 2009 *Computers and Composition* article, would call site-specific classroom "hacktivists."

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[44] As of March 2015, Blackboard held 35.2% of the market share for LMSs at US institutions of higher education with full-time enrollments greater than 700. Moodle is a fairly distant second with 20.3%. If split by enrollments rather than whole institutions, Blackboard garners 46%, while Moodle has only 16.2% (i.e., nearly half of all students using LMSs are using Blackboard). While this number is surprisingly significantly down from an estimated 80-90% about five years ago, Blackboard is currently "taking significant actions to more rapidly build a K12 presence" as a different path toward regaining an even larger percentage of the higher ed market share ("LMS Data").

In the article, "Hacking Spaces: Place as Interface," these authors redefine the term "hacking"—generally negatively construed as subversive technological action—to instead mean a "community-oriented act engaged to better our relationships to and work with computers and…instructional spaces" (274). Similarly, they revise the idea of a "hacker" (based on *The New Hacker's Dictionary* definition) to be "a person who willfully and creatively overcomes or circumvents limitations" (275). The hacks discussed by Walls and colleagues are oriented toward the physical classroom and the technology therein, but the concepts can—and should— easily be transferred to the context of the online classroom as, applied onsite or online, "hacktivism is most powerful as the tool of instructors who inherit the design of classroom environments from someone else and who are often absent from the design decisions" (275).

The authors' three main suggestions for redesigning the space from within are: know the system, know the people, and know the methods (283). In other words, since "[s]pace design is rarely—if ever—accidental, and…spaces construct the social, that is, the positions and activities of the people in that space" (284), in order to best use the spaces we are given, we need to understand the whole system—the entire ecosystem—of which they are a part. Walls, Schopieray, and DeVoss further suggest that composition instructors are particularly well-positioned as proponents of change for the physical classroom as "writing teachers have a long history of 'hacking' things: genres, traditional classroom design, instructional methods, even the very definition of what writing is" (284). Likewise, I assert here that these teachers are similarly well-suited to the task of "hacking" the online classroom, as we have at our behest the tool and the technology most capable of creating change from within: writing.

Locating the Learning in the System: The Centrality of Written Discussion in Online Classrooms

Increasingly, as I have explained, it is not at all unusual for fully onsite classes to have an online component that allows students to download handouts, submit assignments, contact instructors, and check grades via the institution's chosen LMS. At the College of Lake County, for instance, all onsite courses have a ready-made Blackboard space attached to each class, which an instructor can decide to either leave inactive or to open to their students to whatever extent best serves their pedagogy. Though the same tools are available to both onsite and online courses, instructors of onsite courses use the tools of the LMS to differing degrees; generally speaking, written discussions are not a central feature of onsite classes, as the understanding seems to be that spoken, real-time conversation (rather than written, asynchronous discussion) is one of the clear distinctions between onsite and online classes, given that these courses meet in-person, on-campus, and on a regularly scheduled basis. The fact remains, however, that Blackboard is becoming a campus presence far beyond online classes. Many professional development and training classes are also offered—to full-time faculty, adjunct instructors, and staff—via Blackboard and include, as a major component for credit, participation on the discussion boards. It is possible, then, that the increased onsite presence of the LMS may be a step toward demystifying the realm of online learning.

While, then, the entirety of online learning—the history and the future, the classroom and its technology, the structure and the policies—are important parts of the picture, the *written activity and interaction* are the particular elements which currently most distinguish online courses from their onsite counterparts and which separate the field of Writing Studies' investment in online learning from the interests of other disciplines.

The writing I primarily focus on in the study that follows is the largely alphanumeric text typically employed in the asynchronous threaded discussion boards of the online Blackboard

classroom. Here, though, I first provide an overview of the various ways writing and other texts

can be employed in these virtual classroom spaces. In Chapter 1, quoting Cole's 2000 *Issues in*

Web-Based Learning: A Critical Primer, I stated that online learning privileges the written word

and, indeed, earlier explanations of writing as technology in this chapter have provided evidence

of its prominence throughout the early development of online learning. And though technology

is changing, this reliance on alphanumeric writing remains, for the most part, true today,

although perhaps with varying degrees of constancy and intentionality—important distinctions

which require a bit of elaboration.

In the 2016 *Computers and Composition* article, "The Problem of Teaching Presence in

Transactional Theories of Distance Education," Jason Dockter, a community college

composition instructor, cautions against an over-reliance on writing, even in the online

composition classroom, after an online student meets him in-person and conveys that he is much

different (more approachable, nicer) than she had perceived him to be based on his prior email

communication. He writes,

> Like many other online instructors, both my pedagogy and communication were deeply
>
> rooted in the written. Even though I incorporated multimodal composition projects into
>
> my class, my communication with students continued to privilege one mode (linguistic)
>
> and one media (alphanumeric writing). Within OWI [Online Writing Instruction], the
>
> primary way many instructors teach and communicate with students is through writing
>
> and text-driven media, learning management systems, PowerPoint and Word lectures,
>
> and discussion boards. (Dockter 78-79)

Reasoning through various theories—reader response, Communities of Inquiry, and transactional

distance—Dockter explains that, because materials in an online class are delivered at a distance

and received individually, the communicative acts in an online classroom "more closely resemble the relationship between an author and readers than the relationship between a teacher and students in a f2f classroom" (76). Since, then, the "teacher has no control of whether a student reads those texts, how a student's imagination or emotion affects that reading, nor could the teacher anticipate how students' previous educational experiences with teachers and courses might influence their reading of those texts," (76) Dockter arrives at the conclusion that to help students make meaning from the course material, instructors should create courses that communicate in ways beyond "just written text" (85).

In short, Dockter is advocating that teachers in online composition classrooms embrace multimedia and employ multimodal methods of communication; this proposition, however, does not inherently reduce the significance and effectiveness of written communication within those classrooms. Though not a distinction Dockter makes clear, his analysis focuses primarily on the way *content* is delivered in the classroom; how students receive information and independently make meaning from it. Though discussion boards are mentioned sporadically, little attention is devoted to the subsequent pedagogical and interpersonal interactions necessary to negotiate and develop students' initial individual interpretation of content into the shared understanding that indicates deeper learning—a process that I argue writing continues to be well-suited for in the online classroom.

In other words, exploring multimodal content delivery and advocating for elevating the role of written communication in the online classroom are not mutually exclusive goals, but, for my purposes, the latter is currently of greater importance to the sustained development of online learning, while the significant barriers to the former, both pedagogical and practical, leave it mainly outside my current project's parameters.

There is little question that the use of multimodal content would lighten the reading load (in the traditional sense of that phrase), lessen the overall burden of autonomous work for online students, and better engage them with the course material. However, while often technologically savvy and accustomed to navigating multimedia information, at least informally, these skills are unlikely to be consistent across students with diverse backgrounds. And, as one of the goals of first-year composition is to help students become more sophisticated and critical readers,[45] employing multimodal materials in teaching writing in online composition classes necessitates that we also teach appropriate alternative strategies for "reading" these new media texts effectively.

Aside from the additional technological and pedagogical requirements of embedding multimedia material within the online classroom, there are also very practical considerations, namely that of accessibility. The materials of multimodal instruction must be made accessible to students with disabilities[46] and, particularly for students in the community college setting—or, rather, those taking online courses *through* an open-access community college, but not necessarily regularly visiting that institution's physical campus—content needs to be delivered in a way that is accessible using the technologies available at, for instance, the local public library, as that is conceivably some students' only consistent option for internet access.[47] In advertising

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[45] The Course Reference File (CRF) for both English 121 and English 122 at the College of Lake County (the composition courses in my study), for instance, list "read critically using appropriate strategies" as a primary learning outcome. As these are both first-year composition classes that are part of the Illinois Articulation Initiative agreement, it stands to reason that this reading goal is applicable to first-year composition at a number of institutions.

[46] This is becoming an increasingly important issue. Recently, for instance, the University of California, Berkeley released a letter from the Justice Department finding several of their free MOOCs to be noncompliant with ADA requirements, specifically videos that were did not provide adequate accommodations for individuals who are deaf or visually impaired. Since the courses are offered for free and bringing them up to the required standard would potentially be expensive, the institution is considering pulling them entirely (Jaschik).

[47] In "Assessing Learning in Redesigned Online First-Year Composition Courses," Bourelle et al. provided a specific example of ensuring accessibility in the redesign of an online first-year composition

online courses at CLC, for instance, the website reads: "The online option allows CLC students to work on their courses 24/7 from any location that provides Internet access" ("CLC Online…"). In addition to creating the materials, providing these accommodations can prove to be a significant barrier to their successful inclusion in a course which may lead instructors to continue relying on writing for content delivery as well as discussion.

These issues of access are, likewise, one reason that, regardless of what form(s) students *receive* material in, for online composition courses at community colleges, the work students *produce*, particularly in terms of regular class participation, is likely to remain firmly rooted in writing (alphanumeric text) for the foreseeable future.

Rather, though, than viewing this inability to move "beyond" writing as a limitation of online learning, I tend to view it as an opportunity, a chance to make meaningful the still-prevalent text-based communication we regularly participate in outside of academia. Onsite composition classes, on the whole, teach students to write essays, a skill which, though still relevant and purposeful even in our high-tech culture, students often begrudgingly learn since they doubt the need for the specific practice of essay-writing once out of academia (indeed, unaware of writing-across-the-curriculum endeavors, they often doubt the purpose of essay writing beyond their required composition or other humanities courses). While essayistic

course at a large public university, but they were able to do so because the Pearson Learning Studio platform they used professed to be "capable of delivering online learning to students with disabilities." They describe a process that would be rather difficult for any individual instructor to achieve independently: "The university-employed instructional designers worked with the faculty redesign team to deliver courses in accordance with standards set forth by Section 508 of the American Rehabilitation Act. For instance, when a student scrolls over each graphic or video, a description of that image is embedded, attending to students who may not be able to hear the video or who may have trouble viewing images on a screen. Additionally, curriculum developers wrote interpretations of digital resources for students who could not view the videos, which may include not only students with disabilities, but also those who may not have access to high-speed internet. Developing an accessible course requires considering students who have disabilities, and also accounting for how materials are presented for learner success."

literacy is certainly important in that it helps students learn not just to write essays, but to reason

critically and present information in a cogent way, online composition classrooms elevate the

writing stakes. Students must write to speak, must write to participate; they must, in fact, write

to simply be *present*. Given the increasingly internet-based culture in which we live, then, *this* is

the kind of writing students increasingly need to know how to do.

In the next chapter, then, I work to develop a better understanding of how the structure of

the online classroom and the roles and relationships it inscribes facilitate and frustrate these

efforts in technological literacy and digital writing. This understanding is developed through a

qualitative study of the online composition courses at the College of Lake County, in which

interviews with the instructors and observations of the Blackboard classrooms provide insight

into the difficult alignment of instructional expectations, course design capabilities, and student

activity within these spaces.

CHAPTER 4:

Community and Ecology: The Written World of the Online Classroom

"While knowledge making is imperative for any disciplinary field…it is particularly important for the field of writing studies, where the object of study—contemporary writing practice—is not fixed, but fluid and changing. This knowledge making depends on what John C. Dewey calls 'competent inquiries,' which we understand to be inquiries which are systematic, self-conscious, clearly articulated, and warranted." (Haas, Takayoshi, & Carr 51)

A Study of Online Composition Classrooms: Proposed Purposes and Practical Actualities

I entered this research process to better understand how discussion boards contribute to the overall learning that takes place in the online composition classroom, enamored with the idea that online composition classes take place almost entirely through writing (with the exception of the occasional video, phone call, or in-person meeting) and curious about the invisible pieces of the puzzle that fit together to form disparate spaces into the specific place that is the online classroom. My Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposals do, indeed, describe a study with the qualifying characteristics described by Haas, Takayoshi, & Carr in the opening paragraph of this section. Given issues of access, I decided to study first-year composition courses (English 121 and English 122) at the College of Lake County, the institution where I am employed as a full-time instructor.[48] Here, then, was the study as it was proposed to the IRB:

> The purpose of the qualitative research proposed here is to better understand 1) the way
> writing functions in online college composition courses, 2) the technological limitations,
> accommodations, and facilitations involved in teaching and learning composition in an

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[48] Not an unusual move in the research process, as the vast majority of studies concerning online classrooms involve the researcher's home institution. While much teacher research is based upon the reflection, critique, and analysis of one's own classes, the seemingly secretive nature of online courses also places rather strict boundaries on potential research sites. The limited and limiting here-and-now nature of the research surrounding "anywhere, anytime" learning impacts the whole body of research surrounding distance learning and online classes, really, since the data—beyond large surveys like those conducted by the Online Learning Consortium—that can be extracted from these courses is difficult to generalize to other courses, disciplines, and institutions.

online setting, and 3) the perceived educational experience of online composition

instructors and students. The proposed study intends to answer the following questions:

What are the varied ways in which writing is used in online composition classrooms?

What do online students expect from an online writing course and how do they perceive

their online learning process in comparison to the traditional, physical classroom?

The plan was to observe the online classes—on a technical level, this meant being enrolled in the

role of student in each of the participating Blackboard classrooms, which gave me access to

everything the class could see as well as emails and announcements sent to the whole class

through Blackboard—and to conduct interviews with the instructors of those courses and any

student volunteers concerning the experience of teaching and learning in an online classroom.

My intention was, then, to construct a sort of ethnographic portrait of the online composition

classroom alongside a holistic analysis of the discussion boards therein.

Unlike much teacher research, I decided against including my own classes in my data as I

thought my observations might have a negative effect on the community I was trying to study.

Often, students in a community college setting are returning after years of being out of school or

are first-generation college students with little experience in or support for higher education—

and, as such, they are already self-conscious about their writing, their technological capabilities,

and their general ability to function as students. While, as I'll explain momentarily, having an

outside observer/researcher "in" the online classroom is apparently almost unnoticeable to online

students in general, doing "double duty" as both teacher and researcher in my own classes

seemed potentially prohibitive to the already-difficult task of conducting online discussions and

other learning and communicative tasks.

I reasoned, however, that observing the classes of my colleagues was the next-best thing to studying my own. Although our teaching styles are distinct and our online classrooms are differently designed, outside the bounds of my study, the participants are colleagues and friends I often collaborate and converse with in working to address pedagogical problems and strategies. Although I had not done so at this point, it was not an uncommon practice to informally "sit in" on each other's online classes—generally by being added into the classroom as a student, just as I did for my study. In fact, during the semester I conducted my study (Fall 2010), two instructors were informally observing my online classes for their own pedagogical purposes (one was a participant in my study, the other was not teaching online that semester).

While the informal (and undocumented) nature of these observations needs further consideration in terms of the ethical implications (e.g., Would students mind that another instructor was viewing the course? Does that matter?), it was clear that some form of teacher research was always already happening in our department, as unstructured and informal attempts to understand our students as writers and to increase our teaching effectiveness through sharing our experiences were a natural part of our work practice. My point here, then, is that the anecdotal information gleaned from informal conversation and collaboration with other instructors in my department undoubtedly played a role in both the development and process of conducting my research. As I will explain in Chapter 5, though, the way this experiential knowledge informed and, in some ways, conflicted with the more structured study of the actual online classrooms, suggests that a more formalized process for exchanging information and ideas—in addition to the casual conversations—might prove more beneficial to the development of our online classes as a whole.

While, then, my study represented a sort of business-as-usual for the colleagues that I observed, it would appear that my presence as a researcher in their classes was also, for better or worse, largely unnoticed and almost entirely disregarded by the students as well. For each class with a participating instructor (4 instructors, 5 classes), a description of my study, the instructor's agreement to participate, and my role as a classroom observer was posted in the Announcements section of the Blackboard site at the beginning of the semester (where it would remain for the entire semester) and a copy of the document was also placed in the Course Documents section. These documents gave students the option of withdrawing from the study by emailing me (which meant that I would not open any of their posts or read any of their work) and also asked for volunteers to be interviewed about their online learning experience after the semester had ended. It was also made clear that the students' instructors would have no knowledge concerning any withdrawals or agreements to be interviewed.

Only one student (out of over 100) actively withdrew from the study by contacting me via email; unfortunately, that was also the same number of students who contacted me and arranged to be interviewed at the conclusion of the semester. I found these first quantifiable numbers to be indicative of some interesting issues related to online classroom research, primarily in relation to the general level of student engagement; if students read the document posted in the Announcements (admittedly, a big "if"), inaction was the default behavior. Nearly all students were (apparently) amenable to the observations, but almost none of them had the explicit ability or desire to participate further in the study. Aside from the one withdrawal and the single interview, none of the students showed any indication that they were aware of my presence in the classroom or of the study being conducted at any point in the semester.

This seeming lack of student awareness regarding my study gave me some interesting behaviors to ponder regarding student engagement in online classrooms, but it also placed a significant stumbling block in my research. As my IRB plan explained, I had hoped to use the interviews as a way to triangulate the study—to understand how students perceived the course in comparison to their instructor's intentions—and so the lack of student interview data shifted the focus of my study significantly.

Though the lack of triangulation in my study has purposeful precedents—Rouzie, studying synchronous serio-ludic rhetoric CMC in online classrooms, for instance, felt that learning the students' intentions and impressions of the interactions might actually be counterproductive to the study—it is more indicative of the very nature of internet-based research. James Porter explains that, particularly when studying internet-based places and participants, researchers can't simply import a standardized set of methods; instead, scholars must "begin by massaging, adapting, reshaping, and remaking both the methods and the methodologies" (Porter xiv). Researching in these spaces, then, is like teaching: a recursive and reflective practice involving a continual reassessment of what I want to know, what data I have available, and how those two components can work together to reach practical, purposeful, and significant conclusions. This shift in focus, though unexpected, is well-aligned with developments in the realm of teacher research. Lee Nickoson summarizes the current position and purpose of teacher-researchers by comparing the practices of two scholars in the field—Stenhouse and Berthoff:

> Unlike Stenhouse, who promoted teacher inquiry as an effort at objective rendering of student learning, Berthoff defines teacher research as a professional enterprise in which the role of teacher as expert insider is privileged, and the teacher's anecdotal knowledge,

or lore, is valued. Moreover, whereas Stenhouse promoted empirical, naturalistic, and

observational methods of inquiry in which the classroom functioned as a site for

systematic data collection, Berthoff envisioned teacher research as practitioners calling

upon extant knowledge based on recollections of and reflections on teachers' experiences

in the classrooms and situating that knowledge among new scholarly conversations.

(Nickoson 103).

Positioning myself as a Berthoff-aligned teacher-researcher, the data collected from my study

combined with my own knowledge and experience in teaching these same online classes

ultimately elicits a two-pronged purpose for the results of my study. The immediate goal is to

reflect the results of this study back to the colleagues who helped it happen, as a way of

developing these courses and the pedagogical practices we employ in teaching them. On a small

scale, then, it is my hope that these observations and analyses advance the teaching of online

composition at the College of Lake County in a big way. As Ruth E. Ray explains, teacher

inquiry has, after all, "increased teaching effectiveness as its explicit goal" (Nickoson 103).

More broadly, however, by situating the issues that arise from these observations and interviews

among current online learning scholarship, my analysis adds to the established body of work

concerning the role of written discussion in virtual classrooms, and, perhaps more significantly,

contributes to the growing conversation regarding the specific purposes and exigencies of online

learning in the community college setting.

A Study of Online Composition Courses at the College of Lake County: An Overview

In the previous section, I explained the initial design of my study, the theory-based

thought process behind it, and the necessary alterations that were made along the way. Here, I

give a more comprehensive portrait of the context for the study, the participants, and the data

collected as these descriptions lay the groundwork for the analysis that follows.

The study was conducted during the Fall 2010 semester at the College of Lake County, a

comprehensive community college in northeastern Illinois, which enrolls, on average, about

15,000 students each semester.[49] My study focuses on the transfer-level, first-year composition

courses taught at the College: English 121 and English 122 (English Composition I and English

Composition II, respectively). In the Fall 2010 semester, there were 100 sections of English 121

offered and 40 of English 122; included in this count are six online sections of each course.[50]

These composition courses are taught by both full-time and adjunct faculty. Full-time faculty

have a 15-credit hour course load, which means a 5:5 teaching appointment (unless receiving

release time for an administrative position or special project); adjunct faculty are limited to 10

credit hours per semester, which generally translates to a maximum three-course teaching load.

During the Fall 2010 semester, the 140 sections of English 121 and English 122 were taught by

14 full-time and 46 adjunct faculty.[51] While some full-time English faculty teach a full load of

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[49] FTE is around 8,000. CLC has three campuses: Grayslake (main), Lakeshore (Waukegan), and
Southlake (Vernon Hills). CLC employs over 200 full-time faculty members as well as nearly 1,000 part-
time instructors ("Who We Are").

[50] These numbers fluctuate a bit from semester to semester and year to year, but are representative of
typical enrollments. For the current semester (Fall 2016), 115 sections of English 121 and 45 sections of
English 122 are being offered. The number of online sections has also remained consistent at around 6
sections of each composition course over the years *until* this semester when, facing a severe shortage of
classroom space due to the massive construction projects the College has undertaken, the department was
asked by the administration to add several online sections *after* the semester had started, even if it meant
instructors would then be teaching an overload. "Late start" classes (which generally begin 1-3 weeks
after the start date of the regular semester) are not unusual, and some staffing decisions are made close to
the beginning of the semester if enrollment is less than anticipated, but most class assignments for full-
time faculty are made nearly a year in advance, so these particular last-minute online classes (2 sections
of English 121 and 2 sections of English 122, all taught by full-time faculty now teaching an overload)
were a first for the department.

[51] Again, this is consistent with our current numbers. For the Fall 2016 semester, the 160 sections of
English 121 and English 122 are being taught by 15 full-time and 48 adjunct faculty. The English
department currently has 21 full-time faculty members and, based on those who regularly teach in the
department, approximately 75 part-time faculty.

first-year composition, others teach courses in developmental English, literature, creative writing, technical writing, journalism, film, humanities, critical thinking, or some combination thereof.

At the College of Lake County, both English 121 and English 122 are considered "first-year composition," as the 100-level course number indicates, and both are needed to fulfill the transfer requirements of the Illinois Articulation Initiative agreement.[52] Students, however, do not necessarily take these as a back-to-back sequence; while English 121 is typically taken during a student's first year at CLC[53], students often wait until closer to the end of their academic career at CLC to take English 122.[54]

In terms of content, English 121 more closely aligns with a "typical" first-year composition course, covering issues and skills such as audience awareness and analysis, generally culminating in some form of introductory research essay. English 122, then, is more comparable to a secondary or advanced composition class, focusing primarily on source-based writing. The formal descriptions for each course as found both in the Course Reference File (CRF) and on the CLC website are as follows:

> **English 121:** This course is designed to help students develop their competence in college-level writing and in the analysis of texts so they can enter the dialogue of the

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[52]"CLC participates in the Illinois Articulation Initiative (IAI) which is a statewide agreement between many Illinois colleges and universities designed to help Illinois college students transfer credit as easily as possible…The IAI establishes a 'package' of lower-division general education coursework accepted at all participating schools which is called the Illinois Articulation Initiative General Education Core Curriculum (IAI GECC)." English 121 is a C1900 course; English 122 is the C1901R course. English 126 (Advanced Composition: Scientific and Technical Communications) can be taken in place of English 122, but only a few of these sections are offered every semester (Fall 2016 has 2 sections offered). English 121, English 122 (or English 126), and Communication 121 (Fundamentals of Speech) fulfill the Communications component of CLC's General Education Core Curriculum required to earn the A.A. degree and/or earn IAI transferability ("Illinois Articulation Initiative").

[53] In cases where the student enters the college as "language proficient" or "college ready."

[54] This is an interesting issue in and of itself at CLC because there is some initial, intra-institutional research that suggests taking these courses in a strict sequence would better prepare students for academic writing across disciplines but, aside from advising, there is no clear mechanism to require that students take *both* of these courses early in their academic career.

academic community. This course includes the analysis and practice of argument and the use of critical thinking to read, analyze, and produce college-level texts.

English 122: This course furthers the work done in English Composition I by providing students more experience as academic writers, readers, researchers and critical thinkers. To help students construct their own meaning while engaging with the texts of others, they will develop the ability to collect, evaluate, and incorporate varied sources in thoughtfully-written analyses and arguments. Students' work should demonstrate the ability to position themselves within the context of academic and societal conversations using a variety of texts, which may include literature, arguments on various issues, news articles, films, advertisements, and websites. ("Find Classes")

Online sections of these classes follow the same CRF, but the course is conducted entirely online (there is no required onsite component), primarily in Blackboard classroom.[55] There were no hybrid or blended sections of English 121 or English 122 during or prior to the Fall 2010 semester.[56]

My initial call for volunteers for my study went out to faculty members scheduled to teach composition (English 121 or English 122) online, asking them to participate in an interview about their online teaching with the possibility of observing the classes over the course of the semester. Based on the response to that call for participants, the following became the data for my study: I interviewed 5 of the 8 instructors teaching online composition.[57] Of those five, one instructor agreed to be interviewed, but declined having me as an observer in her

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[55]In the Fall of 2010 there was no formal definition of "online" provided by the department or the institution. Recently, the College has made efforts to make online our fourth campus "location" and, as such, has formally defined the different learning formats available. Online classes "are sections where all face-to-face instructional hours are replaced with online instructional hours. Students may need to come to campus to attend an orientation or take exams at a testing center or approved proctored facility" ("CLC Online…").

[56] In Fall 2011, I piloted the first blended section of English 121; one of my study participants (Professor MC) taught the first blended English 122 section the same semester. Each class met once a week for a standard 75-minute course period and completed the remaining work online. The department continues to offer 1-2 hybrid sections of each course during the Fall and Spring semesters, although the course schedule (the ratio of onsite/online time) continues to be negotiated.

[57] Besides myself (I taught two sections of English 121 online), the instructors who did not participate in my study were one full-time faculty member teaching one section of English 121 online and one part-time faculty member teaching two sections of English 121 online and one section of English 122 online.

English 122 class. One English 122 instructor agreed to the interview and observation, but at the beginning of process it became evident that she did not use the discussion boards in her classroom and so I did not conduct an observation of her class.[58] Of the three remaining instructors who agreed to be interviewed and observed, one taught one section of English 121, one taught one section of English 122, and one taught two sections of English 122. In all, then, I have interview data from five instructors, and observation data from a total of 4 sections of the two different composition courses (1 section of English 121, 3 of English 122).

As noted earlier, those instructors who allowed me to observe their online classes also posted a document in their Blackboard classrooms, notifying students of my study (and allowing the option of individually withdrawing from it) as well as asking for volunteers to be interviewed about their online course experience. English 121 and English 122 are both capped at 22 students and all appeared to be full, or very nearly so, at the beginning of the semester,[59] meaning that I had a potential pool of approximately 110 students. Of these, one student emailed at the beginning of the semester to withdraw from the study and one student allowed me to conduct an interview with her at the conclusion of the semester (both of these students were enrolled in English 122).

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[58] As the focus of my observations was the interaction between instructor and students and this course did not have this component, I did not observe the class. In retrospect, observing the syllabus and structure of the course, even in the absence of the discussion board data, could have contributed to my overall analysis of online classes at CLC, but I neglected to collect this information before my access to the courses ended.

[59] Based on the number of initial discussion participants, as well as the general trend that online classes always fill. I did not request access to class rosters or grades at any point in the semester (i.e., I do not know which students formally withdrew from the classes nor do I know who/how many successfully completed). This was a conscious design decision, in line with leaving my own classes—and therefore my own students—out of the data collection. The overall purposes and qualitative methods of my study did not require this information and I firmly believe asking to collect it from my participants (meaning, the students, the instructors, *and* the institution) would have further reduced my already small pool of willing participants.

Participant Profiles: Pedagogical Motivation, Classroom Design, and Instructional Interaction

Before moving into specific observations and analysis of the online discussion spaces, I provide here some of the fundamental ideas around which these online classrooms were structured, based on the interviews, course documents, and overall design of the participating instructors. Full-time faculty at CLC have a great deal of latitude in designing and developing their courses; decisions about how to fulfill the basic goals of the course as broadly outlined by the Course Reference File are entirely at the discretion of the instructor. These decisions include the content and design of writing assignments, the selection of readings and/or textbooks (or the decision to forego a textbook), and the weight and worth of typical (but not standardized or required) course components, like discussion/participation, response papers, and peer review.[60] Not surprisingly, then, the experience of taking English 121 or English 122 at CLC can vary widely between instructors before even taking the onsite or online format of the course into consideration. I explain this flexibility with course design to make an important distinction concerning the goals of my study. Though certainly an important issue, my study did not seek to evaluate these courses in terms of their adherence to or fulfilment of the CRF requirements. Rather, I seek here to better understand how instructors envisioned their courses, how they communicated their individual expectations to students, and how they then engaged students in helping them meet those expectations in an online classroom setting.

I have selected a set of initials for each professor to easily identify them as separate from the pseudonymous first names I later use to discuss the student participants. I begin here with the

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[60] Adjunct faculty, including those teaching at CLC for the first time, have only slightly less flexibility in that they generally have to select a textbook from a number of texts approved by the department. In terms of accountability, too, all instructors have to keep their syllabus on record in the division office and all textbook requisitions are approved by the department chair and dean each semester.

two instructors who I interviewed but did not observe, followed by the two other instructors of

English 122 who I both interviewed and observed, ending the instructor profiles with the one

instructor of English 121 who I interviewed and observed, and complete the overview of

participants with a summary of the single student interview.

Professors BG and WL: Reluctant Pioneers

I provide the profiles of these two professors together not only because their classes are

the two for which I only have interview data, but also because they were both part of the first

wave of CLC instructors who, between about 1995 and 2005, began venturing into teaching fully

online classes, and both had been doing so since, at least off and on or when the need arose.[61]

Neither, though, had been intrinsically motivated to make the move to online teaching and, based

on our interviews, still remained fairy skeptical of the endeavor despite it being, as Professor WL

put it, "a direction in which the department was clearly going." Both felt there was a sense that

administrators were moving from subtly to not-so-subtly suggesting that online courses were

needed, particularly for courses that were deemed "high impact," like first-year composition.

Professor WL further explained that when others talked about plans for designing their

online classes—a colleague, for instance, who she paraphrased as saying, "I can go into the web

and I can get the syllabus from some syllabus place out there and I can import all of that and I

can put all of these canned courses online"—she started to feel nervous about the quality of

online courses at CLC, which motivated her to experience first-hand the work that needed to be

done to teach online. She also wanted to be a knowledgeable voice in contributing to the

departmental policies that were being developed surrounding online English classes. At the

time, it was decided, for instance, that literature courses would not be taught online because the

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[61] Both, incidentally, have also since retired.

level of discussion necessary to effectively conduct the class would be difficult to achieve in a virtual classroom.[62]

In terms of discussion, both Professor WL and Professor BG had experimented with different techniques and course structures, but ultimately found it nearly impossible to get students to engage with each other. Professor BG attributed the lack of peer interaction to be, at least in part, due to the typical character and makeup of her online classes, which, she indicated is generally more populated with "non-traditional" students (e.g., returning students who are working adults) than the straight-out-of-high-school students we tend to see in our morning and early afternoon main-campus classes. As such, online learners, as she put it "are very expedient users of their time. They are all about the bottom line." This characterization of online students was similar among all of the online instructors I interviewed and is also consistent with my understanding of the composition of the student population of my online courses in the seven or so years I have taught online at CLC. As returning students often have greater responsibilities related to work and family outside of the online classroom, it is not surprising that they are more focused on their individual goals for the course than on the process of learning through interacting with their peers.

Professor BG suggested another potential barrier to discussion and peer interaction: students' expectations based on inconsistent requirements across courses. While the expectation of being able to work from anywhere with an internet connection has been fairly clear to students from the beginning, it seems the expectations for engagement—or even basic individual

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[62] As a caveat to that, though, she thought if any literature class should be taught online that it should be the course in Children's Literature as the class is generally taken by elementary school teachers, who would likely both appreciate the flexibility it provided their schedules (as an onsite class, it is always offered in the late afternoon/evening) and be able to adapt to the technological needs required to participate in the class. Currently, CLC still does not offer any literature courses online.

activity—varies drastically between courses (or possibly even different sections of the same course) at CLC. Students who have taken courses in other disciplines, then, are sometimes surprised by expectations for interactive learning in an online setting. As Professor BG explains, "…students have explicitly told me, 'This isn't like my other class, why do I have to go on *every* week?" While, of course, requirements for attendance, participation, and other assignments vary between onsite courses and classes (there are probably plenty of classes one can pass by merely showing up to take the major tests), the difference lies in that online students feel the freedom to be vocal about *not* being vocal in the online classroom. Professor WL likewise agreed that the students' perception is that they should not have to participate in discussion because they are taking an online class.

Whether the discussion boards were required or simply available, Professors BG and WL found students to be resistant to writing in the Blackboard forums, preferring to seek help and interaction elsewhere. Forums designated for course questions, for instance, were typically left empty, with students deciding to individually email the instructor instead. Here, while Professor BG explained that students *tended* to email rather than post, Professor WL stated emphatically that students *never* go to the discussion board if they have questions and, moreover, when she had suggested that they use the discussion boards to interact with each other or work together, the students' reply was, "Eh, we'll just do it through Facebook."

Both Professors BG and WL found peer discussion and interaction to be less-than-successful and therefore either decreased their emphasis on those aspects of the online classroom or eliminated them entirely, particularly given that the individual student/teacher interaction that students seemed to prefer tends to take up a great deal of instructional time and energy. Professor BG felt, at least initially, that she had to be accessible at all times. As she explains,

"The first time I taught, Amanda, I thought 'Why would *anybody* want to do this? This is not being more flexible. I found myself tied to the computer." Likewise, Professor WL also found the purported "flexibility" of teaching online to really mean that she was always "on," and yet, that constant availability failed to create any real sense of connection with her students, a point she came back to multiple times throughout the interview. Early on she explained, "…certainly there's not a sense that you know the class and, for me, that's always been kind of a big deal. I really enjoy getting to know my students and having a fostering sort of a…welcoming atmosphere, so that's a little bit missing or lacking." Equally distressing, and echoing the anxieties expressed by Dockter in the *Computers and Composition* article earlier discussed, was that Professor WL felt that her students had no real sense of who she was as a teacher. Feeling forced by the format into leading a teacher-centered classroom—"It's me running the show."— Professor WL felt at a loss for how her students regarded her, and, therefore, how receptive they were to what she was trying to teach them:

> "I think in my…on the whole for, like, 90% of my face-to-face classes, they would probably tell you that I'm a pretty good teacher, that I'm fairly understanding, that the classroom is relaxed and comfortable. I don't know what my online students think of me, because it runs the gamut, right? You have very needy students that are always emailing you and you're writing back…and email is such…it's so weird. You just don't know how you sound on email or how a student will interpret something…do I put a smiley face so they understand? Online my students probably think that, um, I hope that they think that I'm organized…I'm hoping that they would think that I'm receptive…that I get back to them in a good amount of time and that I give them enough feedback. But as far as building sort of personal friendships or relationships with them…"

Though Professor WL's comment trailed off here, it was clear that for both she and Professor BG, the "colder, more clinical" setting of the online classroom was, though a space of legitimate learning, a far less preferable place for teaching.

Interestingly, however, Professors WL and BG each remarked on the ways teaching online had altered, in fact improved, their onsite teaching. Online students' focus on getting the work done, and as efficiently as possible, had led both to be more organized and instructive through documents, even in their face-to-face classes. Professor BG noted that her essay assignments and rubrics, in particular, had become far more specific since she was not able to explain them in person to her online students, and this level of detail benefitted her onsite students when they were working on assignments outside of class.

Both instructors had also come to see Blackboard as a useful tool within the onsite classroom. Professor WL explained that she now used Blackboard "religiously" in her onsite classes to "warehouse" or "archive" all of the assignments of her course as well as to post grades more regularly for students. Though Professor BG had used discussion boards minimally in her online classroom, she had experimented with them in her on-campus developmental composition classes, using them to encourage participation from those who were reticent to talk in class, providing her students with designated lab time to do this work. She concluded that the discussion boards had "the ability to elevate a face-to-face class, if used judiciously."

Ultimately, then, both of these instructors, who had seen online learning unfold at CLC and had contributed to its development, ended their tenure still unsure of its potential, but more confident in the need to continue to develop the relationship between technology and teaching.

Professors RA and MC: The Second Wave Reaches the Shore

Professors RA and MC were what I would call the "second wave" of online composition instructors at the College of Lake County (I would also include myself in this cohort). Hired a year apart (in 2006 and 2007), online composition courses were already well enough established in the department that the job announcement for each of the positions included the potential for teaching online sections of English Composition I or II. When I conducted my study in 2010, both Professors RA and MC had been teaching English 122 online for over a year; this small group of newer instructors (again, myself included) slowly started to teach online sections that had regularly been taught by instructors from the same cohort as Professors BG and WL, but who were thoroughly tired of continuing the experimentation involved in online instruction and/or found other courses and projects more suited to their pedagogical goals and interests.[63]

This small second wave of online instructors came to this teaching format for different reasons than Professors BG and WL. The history of the development of these courses in the online format was not well-known; the classes were simply there, in need of instructors, and suited individual goals both personal and pedagogical.

For Professor AR, the move to online was one done enthusiastically, if a bit impulsively. As she describes it, the first-year evaluation of her teaching indicated that she needed to use more technology and her response was (a good-natured) "I'll show them!" Indeed, she jumped into online teaching—English 122—without ever having used Blackboard and without a clear sense of what online learning was. As there was, at that point, no formal, or even widely-suggested, training for online teaching, Professor AR spent the summer before her first online

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[63] Two instructors, in particular, had recently opted out of teaching online (in planning my study, I had assumed I would be interviewing them); more than six years later, though consistently very active and vocal members of the department, they have not returned to teaching online.

class reading the Blackboard manual, taking the tutorials, and experimenting with her class shell to build the course she would teach.

Professor MC's move to teaching online was also done without hesitation, but with less trepidation than that of Professor AR. Although not entirely familiar with fully online courses, Professor MC began teaching online being reasonably well-versed in Blackboard from using the LMS in her onsite courses and looked at the challenge of building an entirely online class as a worthwhile trade-off in terms of the increased flexibility in her teaching schedule.

Though both of these instructors essentially started from scratch in building their online classes, by the Fall of 2010 both were very comfortable, confident, and conversant in the strategies they had developed for teaching online. Despite learning to teach online during the same stretch of time, however, these instructors' classrooms were structured quite differently. Both courses had the requisite researched essays (Professor AR's were grouped around literary genres; Professor MC's focused on argument-based approaches to a social issue) and smaller assignments leading up to those essays. In terms of discussion and participation for the class, though, Professor AR took a fairly traditional approach to group discussion, providing a different forum for each new topic to be discussed, while Professor MC organized her discussion boards instead as individual student portfolio spaces. Each forum was devoted to the work of one student and the subsequent peer and instructor feedback that work received. Though all of these portfolios were available to the whole class, there were no discussion forums devoted solely to class discussion. Each discussion forum was named for a different student and then had the following description (identical for each student):

> This is your personal portfolio space where you will post your major essay assignments, where classmates will peer review your work, and where I will leave commentary on your assignments. Make sure you label each message clearly and appropriately in the

subject heading. This forum will fill up over the course of the semester and it will serve you well to keep your posts organized with clear titles.

The function of the discussion spaces for each class was reflected accordingly in the grading criteria provided by the respective syllabus for the section. Professor AR emphasized the importance of discussion, writing:

Expectation of Students

This course will have controlled release of information. Therefore, all students are expected to log-in *at least once a week* (for approximately 3 hours, like a face-to-face course) in order to complete the week's tasks, discussions, and assignments. Reading assignments must be read in full before you begin discussions and writing pertaining to them. Roughly 25% of your course grade is designated for class participation; *you are expected to thoroughly and thoughtfully engage with your peers in discussion boards as instructed.* (emphasis original)

Professor MC's syllabus, on the other hand, does not have a designated grade for participation, other than the 15% of the course grade devoted to peer review, nor does it indicate a specific amount of time that must be spent online. Her syllabus reads,

Peer Response (15%)

Reading and responding to your fellow classmates' papers is a large component of this class. I will give you specific instructions for peer response. Please pay attention to those instructions as you will not receive credit for doing whatever you want. There are many benefits to an online writing class: mostly *you can learn how to improve your communication* and academic writing skills without being obligated to attend class at any particular time or place. (emphasis original)

In their interviews with me, both Professor AR and Professor MC explained the structure of the peer interaction in their classes. Professor AR's discussion spaces asked students to post responses on various topics related to the content they were studying (e.g., Define and discuss the assigned fiction genres: science fiction and magical realism). For each discussion forum, students were to compose an initial post akin to a brief response paper *before* reading anyone else's messages (this worked on the honor system) and were then required to interact three

additional times. This could mean writing back and forth with one person or responding to the initial posts of three other people. This was a system that Professor AR felt worked well, but was not without its challenges, as "I've seen people with the minimum do amazing, and I've seen people just say 1, 2, 3 and I'm done. That's what I struggle with—getting them to truly engage."

This struggle for true engagement is what led Professor MC to forego the whole group discussions in favor of the more bulletin-board like student portfolio system: "I'm not sure that group participation is really such a…a big thing, especially in 122. I think I probably could get them to have some semblance of conversation with each other, but I don't feel like it serves, like it really has a clear purpose, you know?" Moreover, she explained, while online classes theoretically allow students more time to think and to compose their discussion comments, "they don't use that extra time—they still say whatever comes to mind at the time" sometimes even more so than in the onsite classroom, where the immediate reactions of other students and the instructors might give them pause. The portfolios helped alleviate this struggle in that students still understand they are they are working together—and that the instructor is working with each of them—but the focus remains on the work of the students.

In all, my conversations with Professors AR and MC showed that, though both recognize that there is still much work left to be done in terms of improving the quality of and engagement in online classes at CLC, each remains thoroughly convinced that there is unquestionable value in online learning in the accessibility offered to students and the flexibility provided to instructors. As Professor MC concisely stated, "This online thing? It's not going away."

Professor HK: New Kid on the Block

Last but, not least in my line up of instructors is Professor HK, who was both the only study participant teaching English 121 and the instructor newest to teaching online at CLC. In

fact, six years later, Professor HK *remains* the full-time faculty member newest to teaching

English 121 online at CLC, though she is no longer by far the newest full-time faculty member in

the department.[64] Professor HK also represented an interesting perspective in that she was the

first online instructor in the department who fell under a new policy that required all new online

instructors college-wide to go through a prescribed online instructor training program. Online

teacher training is a perpetually contentious issue at CLC. It was believed by the committee who

proposed the mandatory training that, ideally, *all* instructors who teach online would be required

to participate in this training. Since, though, many of the instructors already teaching online had

1) been "pushed" into online teaching by administrators or other colleagues in evaluative

positions (e.g., tenure committees) and 2) had been teaching online for quite a while at this point,

the potential of retroactively making training a requirement received significant pushback (i.e.,

invocation of the contract) and, ultimately, was dropped. Any instructors teaching online prior to

the Fall 2009 semester, then, had been grandfathered in to this new training policy.

In other words, Professor HK was the only instructor who *sought out* an online teaching

assignment rather than having it, in some sense, thrust upon her, even though this appointment

now came with a serious pedagogical prerequisite. After notifying the department, division, and

Professional Development Center (PDC) that she intended to teach online, Professor HK had

then gone through the requisite courses:

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[64] The English department has hired no fewer than 7 new full-time faculty members since Fall 2010. It is worth noting here, too, that there have been several new adjunct faculty online English 121 instructors. Adjunct appointments are made after full-time faculty have selected their courses for the semester, which indicates that there were not enough full-time faculty members interested in teaching online English 121 to cover the standard six sections English 121 online. Until this period, adjunct instructors had not been permitted to teach online courses (one of the policies Professor WL had been part of creating), with the thought that having both teachers and students at a distance from the institution would be potentially problematic. The need to offer online sections despite the lack of faculty interest in teaching them, however, altered this policy. One new full-time faculty member did begin teaching English 122 online during this time.

1)   **Online Learning Pedagogy,** a 4-week online course offered by the TLETC,[65] expecting 1 hour/week of work.

2)   **Blackboard as and Instructional Tool**, a 3-week course offered by the TLETC in a blended format

3)   **Online Learning: An Overview**, an 8-week online course offered by the Illinois Online Network (ION) ("Online Teaching Requirements")

In our interview, Professor HK described the training as "intense." The ION course alone was 8-10 hours a week for 8 weeks; in addition to her standard 5:5 course load and status as an untenured faculty member, she recalls this period being "like, Hell."

Despite actively pursuing the opportunity to teach online, Professor HK approached the endeavor with a mixture of intrigue and skepticism. In her own words: "I thought just, like, oh that would be cool. I wonder how that works. I wonder if they learn differently. Can this really be something you can teach writing on, because I'm not too sure that you can." Beyond intrigue, her interest was also piqued by a desire to serve the needs of her developmental writing students. Many of them, she said, experienced real difficulties in getting to the college and she felt, as a community college, we should be exploring every possible option for serving every possible student. In effect, then, like Professor WL, Professor HK was also driven by a mixture of intrigue and distress; though interested in technology, she felt compelled by the needs of her students to develop her teaching to include online courses. Rather than being drafted by the college, however, she was leading the charge, learning to teach online in the already-established first-year setting, but advocating that *the college* expand to better serve its underprepared students by increasing its online offerings.[66]

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[65] The Professional Development Center has since gone under a name change and is now called the Teaching, Learning, and Educational Technology Center (TLETC)

[66] To date, developmental English has not gone online at CLC, although there have been some early experiments with teaching these courses in a blended format.

Professor HK's convictions concerning online learning at CLC were strong enough motivations to keep her on course and, though strenuous, she believed the training was valuable and actually strengthened her commitment to teaching online. Through the training she gained both practical tools and theoretical knowledge for teaching online, as it provided her with concrete models on which to pattern her own course design as well as more abstract understandings about how to adapt her onsite teaching to the online classroom.

Immediately after completing the newly-required training, Professor HK had jumped into the deep end by teaching two sections of English 121 during the previous summer session. Fall 2010, however, was her first full-semester English 121 class.[67]

Professor HK's training heavily influenced her course design and made discussion a predominant feature of her classroom structure. Though her course requirements list "Journals & Discussion" together as worth 15% of the overall course grade (so, less than the 25% in Professor AR's class), her syllabus emphasizes the importance of thinking about the work of the course—the readings, the essays, the class discussion—as a way of developing understanding through interaction:

> Welcome to English 121—English Composition I. Imagine yourself entering into an "unending conversation"—an academic dialogue that started well before you entered this classroom and will continue once you leave. I ask you to consider the idea of the Burkean Parlor (below), which comes from rhetorician Kenneth Burke's parable of the parlor in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*:
>
>> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one

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[67] Summer courses at CLC are distinct not just in terms of time but also in student demographics. The 8-week session often serves students from other universities who are opting to take the relatively inexpensive course at CLC during the summer to then transfer credit back to their home institutions. The motivations and makeup of the classes, then, are quite different; these distinctions mean that this Fall section of English 121 was, essentially, HK's first real experience with teaching the course to a "typical" group of CLC students.

present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

As you enter into this course, you are embarking on unfamiliar territory, as many other students have before you. As the course progresses, the material will become more familiar to you. As you work with your fellow classmates and me, you will become more comfortable with the reading and writing assignments, as well as class discussions. Starting a new course can be like starting a new job or meeting new friends—there's an adjustment period, yet with time and effort, success can be achieved in the end. Invest in yourself through education.

In addition to this rather extensive explanation that works to prepare students to enter academic discourse, Professor HK also provided a full 2-page handout on discussion procedures, complete with a rubric. During our interview, she explained that th   e structure of her weekly discussions was based on the online classes she had taken; students are assigned a question (related to reading from their textbook or, later in the semester, a novel) and write an initial post to answer it, along the lines of a brief response paper. Peers then respond to these initial posts, providing counter opinions and asking questions as a way to help the original poster become a sort of "expert" in that particular area. Modeling herself after the instructor of her ION class, Professor HK viewed herself as a facilitator of these conversations—a role she makes explicit to students in the "Guidelines for Discussion Handout":

My role in the Discussion Board is that of a facilitator. As with a face-to-face class, my goal is to have whole-class conversations, not just me lecturing. Within the Discussion Board, I will interject when necessary, but my expectation is that answers to discussion questions will prompt conversation between all of you—the students. Don't worry, if more explanation is needed or information is inaccurate, I will be there. In addition, you should ask questions if you don't understand information.

The discussions, then, were designed to encourage interaction among the students, with Professor HK's input when necessary. To complement these whole-class discussions, students

also completed weekly journal entries. Using another section of Blackboard, Professor HK and her students could converse individually and privately in writing (her students would respond to a prompt, she would provide commentary and feedback, and space was provided for her students to respond).

Interestingly, though Professor HK heavily emphasized written discussion in her online classroom, peer review was absent as she explained that, during the summer, she had found it to be an unproductive assignment in the online setting. Though a consistent component of her onsite classes, she found Blackboard to be too "clunky" for her or her students to efficiently manage and manipulate the formal essays of the course. For these essays, in fact, Professor HK asked that students email them to her rather than submitting them through Blackboard's gradebook or drop box, as was the common practice (she also then provided feedback via email). In this way, then, the structure of student interaction in Professor HK's class was entirely flipped from that of the work done in Professor MC's class (the class in which there was *only* peer review and no whole-class discussion), a distinction that highlights Professor HK's decision as one based on technical troubles rather than pedagogical principle. In other words, designing her classroom independently, the perceived limitations of the course platform altered Professor HK's pedagogical plan, though other instructors in the same department had found ways to "hack" a similar space to maintain a place for that same peer review exercise.

In all, though Professor HK had willingly extended herself significantly for the opportunity to teach online, after two summer sections and in the midst of this third class, she still felt that the "verdict is out" on online classes and how well they support the students and teachers who are part of them.[68]

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[68] She has, though, continued to teach online almost every semester since, so I would informally assert that she finds online courses to be an endeavor that is still worthy of time and attention.

Stella: The Lone Student Voice

The overall goal of my interviews was to gain an understanding of both instructor and student perceptions of the online learning experience at CLC. Particularly given the still-small number of online composition instructors at CLC, the five instructor interviews provided a fairly detailed picture of the teaching side of this format. Conversely and unfortunately, my understanding of the student perspective, despite the much larger pool of potential participants, remains far less comprehensive, as only one student volunteered her voice for this project.

The single student interviewee for my study, who I call "Stella," took English 122 with Professor MC; she was a "reverse transfer" student who was taking classes at CLC for one semester before returning to her home institution, one of the larger state schools in Illinois. During our interview, Stella explained that online courses were not her first choice either at CLC or at her home university, but that, for this period, the online classes (she was also taking one in math) were the only ones that could accommodate her work schedule. The experience of taking an online class did not alter her preference for onsite classes; in fact, though she would not opt for an online class in any discipline, she was now adamant that she would *never* take another online math class.

Although Stella clearly preferred onsite classes, she was satisfied with her experience in English 122 online and did provide some interesting insight into the student perspective in her class. While she found engaging with the material to be more of a struggle online—she felt she needed to rely on the book more than she would in an onsite class—she was quite impressed with the amount and quality of the peer interaction. Professor MC's class, as explained earlier, was designed without whole-class discussion but, instead, structured around public student portfolio spaces in which peer critiques and instructor feedback was posted. For Stella, "peer

feedback was probably the most beneficial thing in that whole class….Everyone had, like, positive feedback and, like, helpful feedback that really benefited your paper."

Stella likewise believed that the level of interaction with her professor was sufficient. She found Professor MC to be readily available when she had a question—although it meant composing an email rather than simply asking in class. Outside of the extra effort to ask a question, though, comparatively, she believed that she likely would not have much individual interaction with an onsite instructor, so the online class proved to be not much different.

Overall, then, Stella's preference for onsite classes seemed to be more about the additional effort necessary to individually engage with the material online, rather than having it presented in an onsite classroom. The online interaction with the other people in her class, however, particularly her peers, actually exceeded her expectations in terms of the benefits to her learning; a thought-provoking perspective, indeed, given that the peer interaction in Professor MC's classes focused entirely on critiquing student work rather than conversing as a class.

Understanding Perceived Experiences: Much Needed Conversations

Through my interviews, I sought to understand the perceptions and experiences of instructors and students teaching and learning in online composition classes at the College of Lake County. The pooled knowledge of these particular participants has allowed me not to just gain access to the ideas behind the arrangement of and activity in individual online classes, but to understand and document an interesting and potentially influential piece of CLC's 45-year history—the nearly twenty-year development of online learning through composition pedagogy. What my interviews revealed was a history that runs parallel to the development of attitudes toward online learning as a whole; moving from those who were skeptical of its value and felt somewhat forced into the virtual classroom to those who, though still wary of the technological

issues involved, feel professionally compelled to engage with this learning format for the sake of their students, providing greater access to higher education and, ultimately, more opportunities for the success that is still so conceptually tied to the achievement of a college degree.

Perhaps even more significant than the information I took away from the interviews, though, was what I learned through the process of conducting them—our online instructors are, indeed, in need of greater support and more active channels of communication. Although I approached the interviews thinking they were, in essence, a formality—because I was already fairly familiar with my colleagues' pedagogical attitudes and strategies having been an active participant in both professional and casual conversations and collaborations with my fellow teachers—I learned that they all still felt professionally isolated and, to some extent, pedagogically imprisoned in the online classroom. Each of the interviews quickly turned into an extended conversation in which my interviewees asked me at least as many questions as I put forth to them—not because I had, at that point, any particular expertise in the area, but because talking about the teaching provided greater insight into the work we do in these spaces, even more than observing those concepts in action. I think Professor BG best articulated the value of these conversations in her response to my question about her ideal online teaching scenario. Rather than thinking of a technological tool she would like to employ or a desired skill she hoped students could possess, Professor BG described her ideal online teaching scenario as one in which online instructors had a definitive forum in which to share their experiences: "I guess one thing I would like is more collaboration, not only with my English colleagues…I'd really like a community of online instructors."

All that the Eye Can See: Writing, Technology, & Teaching at Work in the Online Classroom

While interviews with my colleagues addressed one of the major goals of my study by providing some much-needed insight into the range of conceptions and perceptions regarding online learning, studying the online classrooms allowed greater contemplation of the way those plans and expectations played out. I used the observations of the online classrooms, then, to address the two other, interrelated goals of my project; that is, to better understand the technological limitations and accommodations of online composition classrooms, and the role of written discussion within those settings.

My initial intent in working with the observation data was to do a "massaged" version of discourse analysis, a la Porter's description of mixing and manipulating methodologies for internet-based research (Porter xiv). While much of the scholarship concerning ways of formally (and often quantitatively) working with text—online and off—proved interesting and valuable, ultimately I decided to look at my data more holistically given the varied structure and content of the discussions and classrooms I observed. [69]

I approached the data with these frameworks in mind to, essentially, see what I could see; to develop a clear sense of the struggles and successes in these discussions and to uncover and explain the roots of each. While informed by the many theories and methodologies footnoted earlier, my analysis was largely conceptualized through James Paul Gee and Elizabeth R. Hayes's *Language and Learning in the Digital Age* and the classifications therein: "Small talk" (in which the social interaction/relationship is more important than the content), "middle talk" (where the social interaction/relationship and content are of more equal importance), and "big

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[69] Wysocki (in Bazerman and Prior) talks about format issues from typeface to page arrangement; Laflen and Fiorenza talk about evidence of emotional attachment/engagement, Bazerman's work with intertextuality, and the Community of Inquiry framework from Garrison and Kanuka (elaborated on by Clarke and Bartholomew) and many others all informed my work.

talk" (where the content is more important than the social interaction/relationship) (Gee & Hayes 25-30).

Though only loose categorizations, viewing the discussion boards through this terminology helped crystalize one of the most significant issues related to understanding the communication in these online composition classrooms. That is, even in thoughtfully-planned, content-rich online classrooms there is an apparent lack of visible interaction between the participants therein which, in turn, has the potential to continue to call into question the level of student engagement and learning possible in online settings.

The sections that follow, then, take a closer look at the limited discussions that were present in the classrooms I observed. In keeping with the initial goals of my study, I first examine the subtle ways that technology can undermine interaction, and later shift to an analysis of the strategies employed in written discussion to engage students and encourage learning.

Software: Working Within the Invisible and Inflexible Boundaries of Online Classrooms

While earlier I defended Blackboard, specifically, and the concept of an institution-wide LMS, generally, that is not to say that the current situation of online classroom space is not without its faults. One of the primary problems faculty have with instructional technology, as John G. Bryan explains in "And Now, A Word From Our Sponsor," is "its inherent inflexibility—or, at least, an inability to adapt to the sometimes idiosyncratic desires of individual faculty (such as having a collaborative work group with 25 members). The technology, some would argue, takes precedence over the faculty, forcing them to reshape their curriculum and instruction to accommodate the technology" (Bryan 52). However, Bryan continues, "too often, in my experience, the greater inflexibility occurred in the faculty member whose years of classroom success had resulted in little desire to explore alternative approaches

that might yield greater success" (52). The theoretical tug-of-war over technology use plays itself out by creating three categories that undermine the efficiency and efficacy of online teaching: technology we have but do not need, technology we need but do not have, and technology that we could put to better use (to, in turn, work better for us).

The particular learning management system in which we work does not entirely determine which of these categories we most often experience but, as the LMS equivalent of a "big box" store, Blackboard certainly contributes to the overexposure to and overconsumption of superfluous technology. The design is, by necessity, geared toward a broad academic audience and therefore creates the illusion of greater choice than actually exists for individual disciplines and instructors; so many seemingly appealing options appear that, if we do not enter the classroom with a clear sense of purpose, it is easy to become distracted and confused about which tools best suit our particular pedagogical needs. We can choose from any number of eye-pleasing color palettes as a theme for our classroom, forgetting that fonts and graphics are often mere window dressing, meaningless without a well-formed "floorplan" and a firm foundation of content, both of which must be easily accessible to students.

We must learn to ignore the technology that we do not need or (and this is harder) do not yet know how to effectively use, lest it clutter up our online classrooms with seemingly awesome applications that actually frustrate rather than facilitate teaching and learning. Blackboard and other similar LMSs are far from perfect, but—until we have the time, forethought, and inclination to do better (and by "we" I mean faculty, administrators, and institutions both individually and collectively)—they serve a purpose, particularly if one approaches their use with focus and attention to our core pedagogical values. An insightful comment from my

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interview with Professor HK comes to mind here. Talking about classroom design, she

summarized her personal approach to innovation thusly: "I can only do one new thing at a time."

While need and usefulness can be difficult to initially discern when teaching online,

ultimately, leaving alone the technology that we have but do not need is certainly the easiest

LMS issue to deal with. Likewise, lamenting the technological capabilities that we "need" (often

read: "want") but do not have is unproductive, particularly for dealing with our immediate

teaching situation. The unfortunate truth of the matter is that, at the moment, there is no easily

accessible route for voicing problems and manifesting change in our big box LMSs; right now,

the focus must be on working with the technology we have and can use, to make it work better

for us.[70] Those features of the LMS that we do elect to use (or which are unalterable defaults)

need to be employed critically, so that the pedagogical intent and purpose are not lost in the

seemingly inflexible interface of the online classroom. A contemplative approach to the

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[70] A couple caveats here: By "the technology we have," I mean focusing on the technology that exists, rather than imagining what new technologies could do *if only* they existed. If there are useful technologies that exist but are inaccessible, I believe instructors should advocate (often, by appealing to the appropriate administrators) to *have* those technologies. For example, based on budgets and the way Blackboard tools were packaged for purchase, for a number of years, CLC only had licenses to allow the entire campus access to about half a dozen Blackboard Collaborate (initially Illuminate) rooms, spaces designed to conduct synchronous communication using text-based chat, audio, webcams, whiteboards, and recording features. This meant that anyone desiring to use the spaces had to make an appointment and that, in effect, they were only used for meetings and were not accessible for teaching purposes, despite the potential of the features to serve all instructors well. Particularly given that online instructors were being encouraged to make better use of their online office hours (rather than doing the bare minimum of being readily available by email during those hours), it was fairly easy to demonstrate the need for broader access to the Collaborate spaces. This seems to have been a demand that arose at more than just our institution because Blackboard also responded by restructuring their bundling options to make it more financially feasible to provide greater access to this feature. All Blackboard classes at CLC—both onsite and online—now come with the option of using Collaborate anywhere, anytime. Likewise, I certainly do not mean to suggest that instructors should entirely cease to envision and express the desire for technological innovation that would better serve their pedagogical purposes. What I am advocating here, though, is that the exigency lies designing the best possible classroom we can in the here and now, to avoid letting the theoretical benefits of imagined technological tools create a barrier to the effective employment of those technologies that are currently readily available.

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technology we have can allow us to "hack" the spaces of our corporation-created technological classrooms, putting our pedagogical abilities to the best, most productive use.

For the purpose of my study, there are several seemingly small, but actually noteworthy and illustrative software-related settings in Blackboard that implicitly establish the foundations and boundaries of discussion. These particular examples are, of course, specific to Blackboard, but they are undoubtedly representative of the *types* of issues inherent in all standardized LMSs.

One important example of the ways the technology can create a barrier to a more cohesive online classroom is the lack of flexibility in allowing participants to use the software to shape and share their identities within the confines of the discussion boards. Distance and online learning have often been touted as bastions of democracy based on their ability to decenter the authority of the instructor and ostensibly create an egalitarian space in which everyone has equal opportunity to speak. While these claims are, to some extent, true, the anonymity = equality equation only works to a point. Particularly for students new to the online classroom, the lack of clear leadership in the discussion space can be detrimental rather than freeing for participants in the conversation. The "Introductions" forum in Professor HK's English 121 class, for example—the students' first endeavor into online written discussion in this classroom—gained 155 posts from 21 participants in less than a week's time (the majority of these messages were posted within the first few days of the semester). This means that while students were becoming oriented to the entirety of the online classroom—the course policies, materials, and technological tools—in addition to similar information from their other classes and their continuing work and family responsibilities (many of these students, for instance, were parents whose own children were also returning to school for the beginning of the academic year), they were also expected to read an average of 20 messages per day for one discussion forum. Granted, the "Introductions"

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forum is typically one of the most energetic of any online class (subsequent discussions in

Professor HK's class average about 50 posts over the same amount of time) and does not require

participants to grapple with difficult course concepts (it is, quite literally, "small talk"), but the

sheer amount of text produced can be overwhelming for those not yet comfortable with

conversing in writing.

While the proliferation of posts can appear promising for the development of community

and the overall performance of the class, problems can arise based on the uniformity of the posts

per the parameters set by the software. Though the messages *can* be viewed in a sort of

hierarchy of original posts and replies,[71] and the author *can* write a subject heading for each

message (or, like email, allow replies to be filled in automatically, i.e. "Re: John's

Introduction"), unlike email, authors/participants *cannot* change their "handle" or signature to

indicate how they prefer to be addressed and/or establish their role within the classroom. Every

post automatically displays the name the student is registered for the class with in our institution-

wide computer system (PeopleSoft). While less problematic than if posts that were identified by,

say, ID numbers, the inability of students, instructors, and other classroom participants to alter

their screennames for more accuracy of identity, at best, subtly connotes a sense of impersonal

inconvenience to the classroom and, at worst, contributes to the student's difficulty in navigating

the sea of text that is written discussion.

Ranging from mildly inconvenient for the participant to entirely disruptive to the

discussion dynamics, these are just some of the issues that arise from a simple software setting:[72]

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[71] Tree view v. list view. The student has to select "tree view" to see messages placed into hierarchical conversations. Otherwise, messages appear in a simple chronological list. Instructors do not have control over which view the students have and the feature is not largely evident to those unfamiliar with the options (and list view is the default).

[72] Since I'm using pseudonyms for all of the students, my examples here are representative, not exact. There were, however, instances of each issue addressed here in the classrooms I observed.

1) The limitations of the school registration software in terms of capitalization and punctuation transfer to the classroom. Therefore, Andrés is simply Andres, and LaNai O'Connor is Lanai Oconnor.[73]

2) Students with popular names have a difficult time gaining distinction. A class may have, for instance, three Jennifers. While, ultimately, their last names may help distinguish between posts from these three individuals, the ability to change the name that appears with their posts would likely be a faster way of gaining a sense of each person as an individual (particularly since, often, Jennifer would actually prefer to be addressed as Jen, Jenny, or Jennie).

3) Students who prefer to be addressed by a name other than their legal name largely have that desire ignored. Gerald Scott Smith who, everywhere else, prefers to go by "Scott" is always Gerald Smith in our classroom (since it's a middle name, "Scott" makes no appearance). The preferences of "Teresa" who goes by the "Terry" are likewise difficult to accommodate lacking the right support or allowances of the software.[74]

Given the almost unavoidably disembodied student of the online classroom, this additional level of software-based impersonalization is both disrespectful and potentially disorienting to students in the online classroom. The increasing diversity of our student body gives us a plethora of unique names—each one deserving of acknowledgment and respect. Moreover, the

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[73] This is also a problem with our school's registration system, which is antiquated and a bear to deal with. Heaven help a student if there is a clerical error or they change their name after a marriage or divorce—it's nearly impossible to change a name in the system once entered.

[74] This has also become an increasingly important issue as colleges and universities seek to better serve the needs of diverse populations, for instance, transgendered students. Currently at CLC this is one important exception to the legal-name-only rule in Blackboard (i.e. a transgendered student can have their name altered in Blackboard—though not on rosters—even if they have not legally changed their name), however, I know anecdotally that the process is often long and difficult. Thankfully, change seems to be on the horizon: Northern Illinois University *just* announced that, beginning on November 15, 2016, students will be allowed to enter a preferred name into their online profiles that will establish the proper name to use in Blackboard and on class rosters (admissions documents, official transcripts, financial aid materials, etc. will still use a student's legal name) ("Preferred Name Now an Option…"). This is an immensely important change that will hopefully spread to other colleges and universities with haste.

inability of a student to consistently use their preferred name as their identity within the context of discussion creates awkwardness and confusion among participants. For instance, consider the third example above. As the instructor, I may remember that "Gerald Smith" prefers to go by "Scott" because my role requires individual attention to each student (although, as it is not unusual for me to have over 100 students per semester, even this can sometimes become difficult). Responding to him in discussion, then, I might write something like: "As Scott says, writing even a bad first draft can be a challenge." While I have a firm understanding of who Scott is, other students in the class would be unlikely to recognize that I am referring to the student they read as "Gerald Smith." How would they recognize and find "Scott's" original message if they were trying to follow the thread of the conversation? It would likely be quite difficult, which seems an unnecessary breakdown in communication.

In her class, Professor HK attempts to "hack" her way around this problem by asking students to "sign" their name with each post—her instructions explain: "Yes, we see that it is you who posted, but it makes it easier when you're in a thread to have the writer sign her name." This is an effort, though, that elicits mixed results. Most students tend to sign their names when they are posting the initial text in a new thread. These messages are typically longer and written more formally, likely because they are often in direct response to an assignment. In other words, they more closely resemble a response paper—something a student might submit in class for an onsite course. In an online class, then, it is used as a "discussion starter," and is lengthier than a comment one would make during an in-class discussion. As these initiating texts are more assignment completion than discussion participation (what Gee & Hayes call "big talk"), it seems reasonable that students would more often remember to accompany this work with their name, as they might on a printed piece of writing they would physically submit in class. Once

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the initiating text is posted, however, most students—and even Professor HK—tend to write "quick" responses (brief, conversational, "middle talk" posts) that lack the formality of the initiating text and are also absent the student's "signature."

These issues with unalterable names and student identities are not insurmountable nor do they *seem* to be explicitly troublesome to those participating in the discussions. Admittedly, nowhere in the discussion transcripts does any student explicitly express confusion concerning a student's Blackboard-assigned identity. It is true, too, that productive discussion can be had in onsite classrooms in which students do not know each other's names. In addition to democratizing the discussion, then, it could be argued that the shift from a focus on identities to a content-centric text in online classrooms might elicit discussions that are equally productive, as it appears was the case with Professor MC's peer-review-only conversations which were successful in terms of the number of students who regularly participated in them and also lauded by her student, Stella, in our interview.

I would argue, however, that this lack of control over an important aspect of identity—one's name—is more than a simple problem with software and that, in what is already a mysterious environment for many students, it subtly but significantly contributes to the already assumedly impersonal and isolated nature of the online classroom.

Along these same lines, but even more problematic than the automatic and unalterable names, is the lack of distinction between the roles of the classroom participants, primarily that of student and instructor. While some aspects of a decentralized classroom are undoubtedly beneficial—students have equal opportunity to "speak" and the ability to directly address each other without instructor mediation—the inability to easily *find* the teacher in the discussion can take the concept too far, leaving students disconcerted and dismayed with the perceived level of

instruction. In Blackboard classrooms, the instructor's messages are identical in appearance to those of students—posts from professors are listed with their (unalterable) first and last name just like those of their students. While most students likely know their professor's name (although, unfortunately, this is not an absolute given), if, during any given discussion, a student falls behind, there is no easy way to search for posts from the professor to catch up on the relevant course material, regardless of whether the discussion is arranged hierarchically or in a list. Even in the most utopian discussion in which students bring the most important and enlightening information to the table and the teacher acts merely as facilitator, the very role of the instructor—onsite or online—necessitates that this individual serves as a sort of touchstone for engaging in and developing the discussion. When an instructor that is already physically invisible also become textually obscured, the likelihood of students (particularly, first-time online, first-year composition students) independently and productively participating in discussion is drastically reduced.[75]

Ironically, it is another automatic software feature that provides evidence of this problematic positioning of the professor in online discussion: tracking the number of views. Blackboard automatically records and posts the number of times each message has been "viewed." This statistic appears in the upper right hand corner along with the timestamp and looks something like this: Total views: 11 (Your views: 3). A basic mathematical equation allows a user, then, to understand how many times a particular post has been viewed by others.

This software feature has problems of its own—it falls into the "technology that could work better for us" category—the repercussions of which affect the perceived presence and

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[75] The latest iteration of Blackboard does place a small gold star next to the instructor's name (a student of mine likened its looks to that of a toy Sheriff's badge), but this emblem only appears once one *opens* the individual message so its presence serves little purpose.

location of the instructor. As would be expected, the number of views a message receives decreases as the thread progresses and the time allotted for the discussion dissipates. In the second thread of the "Introductions" forum of Professor HK's class, for instance, the original message (a student's introduction) has 112 views (remember, this is a class of 22 students + one instructor). There are twelve responses to the original post (two of them are additional contributions from the student who posted the initial message). Several of the first responses have 40 or so views, but the last message in the thread has only 9. These numbers indicate that some of the students viewed the initial post and its replies multiple times, perhaps because the course and online discussion were new to them. This feature and the data it provides, however, are deceptive in their seeming simplicity and usefulness. Rather than providing a real sense of readership, the numbers only actually allow for supposition and speculation. A larger number *may* be indicative of a post that is popular across the class, but it is also possible that it is simply evidence of an insecure author—particularly during the first weeks of the class, it is not unusual for a student to reread their own posts multiple times to ensure accuracy of content and placement. In this case, then, a post with 112 views may still only have a handful of viewers (perhaps as few as two), meaning, in short, that these numbers are, in actuality, fairly useless.[76]

Returning, then, to the software's impact on the instructor, both in our interview and in her description of the discussion process in her course documents, Professor HK positions herself

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[76] Here, Blackboard might do well to follow social media settings by either 1) recording and reporting *who* has viewed particular posts (as Facebook can do for posts in closed groups) or 2) allowing students to voluntarily leave some sort of trace evidence of their presence in a particular post (by clicking something akin to a "like" button). These features, however, come with their own considerable ethical and pedagogical considerations—students might, for instance, feel overtly and overly surveilled if Blackboard automatically tracked and displayed data for each message they had read or, given an easy and voluntary way to record their presence, students might click a "like"-like button to indicate reading messages that they hadn't really engaged with in hopes of earning credit for simply "showing up."

primarily as a facilitator of discussion. She asserts her attention to discussion in terms of reading

everything and responding *as necessary*. Here, then, Professor HK's course design places some

emphasis on the fact that her participation in discussions is significant—a discussion post from

her is indicative of important input or information (i.e.,"big talk"). Indeed, she does not

comment at all in the first major discussion of the semester which (among other possibilities)

indicates that she was satisfied with its progress and did not feel the need to intervene.

When, then, Professor HK makes several appearances mid-week during the second major

discussion of the course, I might imagine that these posts were noteworthy. For the students,

however, this doesn't appear to be the case. Although, overall, there are fifteen participants in

this discussion forum (in a class generally capped at 22), the number of views for Professor HK's

posts are always in the single digits. Roughly speaking, this means that, at best, only half of the

students who participated in the discussion forum (and a third of the students initially enrolled in

the course) read the discussion commentary of the course's instructor. If a teacher speaks in an

online classroom and no one listens, is she really teaching? While this explanation does not take

into consideration the other forms of communication Professor HK was likely engaged in with at

least some of her students—e.g., emails and assignment feedback—it does indicate that a

remarkably small number of students felt the need to even *open*, let alone engage with,

discussion messages from their instructor.

One reasonable deduction to take away from this information is, I believe, that there was

nothing to distinguish the instructor's comments from those of peers and, thus, most students

viewed only messages from threads in which they had already participated—if indeed they read

anything after posting their required messages—without regard for the author's potential

authority in the overall conversation. In terms of the onsite classroom, this would be equivalent

to an individual student "tuning out" any discussion that did not immediately and exactly pertain to him or, even more dramatically and significantly, walking out of the room altogether as soon as he had expressed his own ideas. This strategy, which would be impractical if not impossible in the onsite classroom, might instead be viewed by students in an online classroom as efficient given the amount of discussion text to be viewed. Unfortunately, this easily-employed online method of discussion participation is misguided—the lack of engagement with the *whole* discussion (each of the threads in a given forum) gives students a myopic view of the course content and its applications.

Likewise, without the software's help to make clear distinctions in roles, other potential resources in the classroom can go underutilized. During this particular semester, for instance, Professor HK had an "embedded" librarian in her class—a designated librarian with access to her class and its discussion boards. In the discussion forum called "Research Questions," one student (Thomas) asks a question and receives responses from the librarian (as well as the instructor) in less than 24 hours. There is, however, nothing to determine the knowledge, authority, role, or position of the person who posted the response. In reviewing the transcript, in fact, I only realized that the response came from an embedded librarian—as opposed to a peer— because *I* recognized the librarian's name as a colleague with whom I had previously worked. While explanations in other course documents made reference to the assistance available from the librarian during the semester, on the actual discussion board, there was nothing to indicate this opportunity to other students who might have overlooked the information elsewhere. As Thomas's question and the responses from Professor HK and the librarian were the only three messages in this "Research Questions" discussion forum, it seems that a potentially valuable resource (a librarian dedicated to this section of the English 121) was almost entirely ignored.

All of this is not to say that a simple tweak of the software would instantly solve issues of identity and authority within the online classroom. Blackboard does, in fact, continually alter (theoretically improving) its current version and has addressed issues adjacent to the ones discussed here; in line with social media platforms, Blackboard now allows users to create profiles, complete with pictures, which automatically accompany each message a user authors (although that picture is only visible once a reader *opens* the message, so it still does little to distinguish users in the long list of names[77]).

Of course, expecting the software platform to be the sole source of solutions to problems of identity and participation is unrealistic; pedagogy and praxis are largely responsible for the relative successes of online discussion. Unfortunately, here too, the continual upgrading of Blackboard creates yet another point of contention. A common recurring discussion in the Alternative Instruction Committee meetings is when and how we should move to a new version of Blackboard (not always the *newest* version, since that would often be too much of a change for instructors and students alike). Blackboard's tendency to continually release newer, "improved" versions continually disorients instructors—we sometimes elect to stay "behind the times" rather than disrupt the online worlds of our institutional community, particularly at inopportune times (between the Fall and Spring semesters, for instance). There are also, I believe, technical issues concerning server space and speed to consider—but for the moment lie beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say here, the less-than-systematic release and adoption of these newer versions of Blackboard means that we are unevenly gaining access and

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[77]And, of course, many students do not set up these profiles because they are not required to. Additionally, and particularly at a community college with the large number of "nontraditional" students, seeking an adult face in a profile pic does not at all suggest that one has found the class's instructor.

adapting to technologies that might benefit our teaching for fear of disrupting the fleeting sense of security and equilibrium we collectively feel in our online classrooms.

The software, though, remains a significant component in the equation of classroom dynamics. The argument I am making here, then, is that, often enough, elements inherent and unavoidable in the software to which online instructors are beholden increase the incline of the uphill battle they are already fighting in terms of drawing students in. And since these elements *are* inherent and unavoidable—and there is no straightforward and transparent path of recourse—overworked instructors often turn a blind eye to the potential obstacles. With "bigger fish to fry" in the world of online teaching and learning, these seemingly innocuous annoyances of the inimitable LMSs slowly and silently undermine progress in the pedagogical practices of aspiring and experienced online teachers alike.

In terms of the software, then, teachers must remain vigilant to not only our own needs, but also to those of our students, as their issues are often separate and more subtle than those faced on the instructional development front. As we will see in the next section, these sorts of problems potentially burden instructors by positioning them as the technological advocate of students—only one of the many roles an instructor must inhabit when teaching in the online classroom.

Teachers: Split Personalities and Problems of Presence

The chances of complete consensus among colleagues concerning the "best" LMS are slim; even at the departmental level, the designs and desires of individual educators are generally so diverse that attempting to meet the criteria set forth by everyone's technological wish lists would likely be a never-ending endeavor. Moreover, given carte blanche to create our ideal online spaces, the temptation to "explore the limits of technology rather than understanding how

it influences learning" (Alexander and Boud 4) would also probably prevail, and pedagogy would further suffer. Therefore, using an undoubtedly imperfect but blessedly well-established LMS (like Blackboard) may slightly limit our control of the spaces in which we work,[78] but it allows us the more important freedom of fully inhabiting our roles as teachers of writing.

Settling for a certain standardized LMS, however, does not mean that teachers entirely abdicate their participatory role in the process of designing online classrooms. Quite the contrary—focusing on the pedagogy and possibilities in these already-created spaces places teachers in a new and potentially powerful position. As Lester Faigley writes:

Indeed, I see teachers needed more than ever before because the demands of digital literacy are greater cognitively and socially than those of print literacy. Because we have a great deal of convincing to do, I believe that teachers have to enter policy debates, even when they are not invited. We have to convince those in corporations and government and the public at large that teachers should still be allowed to determine the curriculum and be granted leadership roles in educational policy. So the downside is that we're going to have to learn a lot more and do a lot more and speak out a lot more, and we're probably not going to be directly rewarded for doing it. But if we're underappreciated, under-loved, and underpaid, at least we're not irrelevant. And that's our big advantage in the long run. (Faigley 139)

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[78] Incidentally, particularly since many of our community college students decide to transfer to other colleges and universities, employing one of the more popular LMSs potentially better prepares our students for the transition to another school in that they have a familiarity with the general structure of these online spaces, even if the entire learning management system isn't exactly the same.

In short, LMSs can continue to emerge, merge, dissolve, and regenerate at will; to some extent,

they are always beholden to the educators who use them[79] and so the efforts and advocacy of

teachers are better spent elsewhere.

Despite, then, being physically removed from the online classroom and still somewhat

overlooked in academia in general, the role of the writing teacher is being elevated and expanded

rather than diminished by the development of distance learning. As Alexander and Dickson

point out in the introduction to their compilation concerning this very topic—*Role Play:*

Distance Learning and the Teaching of Writing—the roles that teachers are starting to craft for

themselves in the online classroom vary widely: "Teachers can see themselves as mentors,

coaches, friends, guides into the world of intellectual endeavor, or gatekeepers for that world.

They can play rescuers of the ignorant, bringers of knowledge or catalysts for student

development" (4). The role(s) that instructors elect to inhabit are often influenced by the

motivations that moved them to pursue online teaching. Early in their exploration into the roles

of the online classroom, Alexander and Dickson also assess the two primary motivations for

instructors to migrate to online learning: a love for, or faith in, technology or sheer desperation.

The first group is rather self-explanatory—they find the format of online classes appealing based

on the interesting interplay of pedagogy and technology (and further, perhaps, because of the

potentially liberating nature of that relationship for both teachers and students). The desperate,

however, "often find themselves suddenly assigned to distance learning classes courtesy of

administrators who decide that the college or university need to provide (at best) more access to

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[79] Following this logic: Although stakeholders are not always entirely aligned in these issues, truly
unhappy teachers typically lead to dissatisfied administrators who are, in turn, unlikely to allocate funds
for a product that hampers the ability of the institution and its courses to run smoothly. Since an
unprofitable LMS is likely not long for the online world, any corporate LMS is, to some extent,
responsible to the teachers who use it.

students or (at worst) to bring in more money" (Alexander and Dickson 1-2). Not surprisingly, instructors who self-identify as independently attracted to online learning tend to take a more active role in the virtual classroom than those who have been drafted into distance education.

As explained earlier, such a split existed at CLC when I began my study in 2010, given that Professor HK was the only instructor who truly initiated her own involvement in online learning and, likewise, was the only instructor who made full and consistent use of the discussion boards for whole-class interaction, meaning both peer-to-peer and student-instructor engagement.[80] Each instructor's impetus for teaching online seems to have had a significant influence on the role she adopted within that space. While Professor HK's motivation and subsequent training helped shape her online identity as a facilitator of interaction between students, Professors BG and WL, as instructors for whom online teaching was at least initially an obligation rather than a choice, fashioned their online pedagogical roles in isolation and, in turn, circumscribed individual students to a similar separation from their classmates. While, of course, these de facto online tutorials certainly had positive qualities in the one-on-one attention students received from their instructor, ultimately, this format proves entirely too taxing for the instructor and also leaves a significant component out of the learning process as we would ideally imagine it for online students; specifically, in not attempting to harness the possibilities

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[80] Professor AR used whole-class discussion boards, but did not participate on them with her students. Rather, she chose to provide a summary and response to the class through the Announcements section *after* the discussion had concluded (e.g., A full screen announcement which begins: "Good efforts in this week's discussions! I'm keeping the Discussing short stories forum open for another week or so to encourage you to revisit while you write your essays. Regarding SF and MR [Science Fiction and Magical Realism]: Defining these terms is nearly impossible (so great effort in trying!) due to the fact that simple answers do not suffice for such sophisticated genres…" and then goes on to provide more resources for continuing the discussion). These announcements, however, do not refer to specific students or particular comments made on the discussion board. Professor MC also used the discussion boards, but did not use them for whole-class discussion.

of online discussion, students lose out on social aspects of learning that can be crucial to their college experience and education.

Professors AR and MC straddled this fault line between love and desperation, coming to online learning with more ambivalence than their colleagues. While both used the discussion boards to varying degrees, neither had a central space designated for a dynamic similar to that of an onsite classroom in which students and their instructor are all engaged simultaneously, if not synchronously, in the same conversation.

As Ellen Hendrix explains in "A Language All Its Own: Writing in the Distance-Learning Classroom," "Experience has shown that students grow as writers, people who are able to write for a specific purpose or achieve a certain goal, through collaboration, but interaction with other writers has to be supportive and consistent" (64). In other words, interaction through online written discussion is rather imperative for both establishing the student's sense of self as well as the improvement of their writing abilities. This kind of interaction, though, is notoriously difficult to inspire, often leaving even experienced online instructors disillusioned with the process and products of online learning.

This problem has largely been exacerbated rather than alleviated through the literature; a great deal of research has been devoted, in both composition and online learning, to the topic of creating community in the classroom. From Mary Louise Pratt's contact zones to Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt's online learning communities, there is a near obsession with forming a thorough sense of connection between the students who simply happen to be taking these classes together. This insistence on the creation of "community" between otherwise unattached students is, I think, a bit overzealous. Particularly in online learning, I believe we are using idealized notions

of community to (over)compensate for our fears that the critics' perceptions of online learning as disembodied and dehumanized hold an inevitable validity.

While the desire and attempt to form a classroom full of individual students into a coalesced and cooperative community is, indeed, a noble aspiration, in reality, regarding it as a requirement of pedagogical success creates an ideal that is nearly impossible to attain, particularly within the short timeframe of an academic quarter or semester; and, as such, the design of our online classrooms becomes at least partially self-defeating in the inability to consistently realize this exceptional goal.

The unrealistic expectation of community creation is one of the many reasons I prefer to think of online classrooms instead as "ecologies." Considering the online classroom environment as an ecosystem focuses the examination on how individual actions contribute to *the way* the whole group functions, whereas the concept of community insists on the formation of intentional interactions and the adoption of specific roles in a concerted effort to move the whole group towards a particular goal. Ecologies can function, flourish even, with many individuals striving for myriad independent goals as, by the very nature of their spatial proximity, these efforts inherently impact and interact with those of other individuals. A community, conversely, suffers when there is a lack of cohesion in the efforts and ambitions of the group. This distinction, though perhaps only slightly more than semantic, does indeed have significant repercussions for our assessment of the value and relative success of online written discussions as well as for our overarching understanding of the aims of higher education.

If we choose to look at classrooms as potential communities, then courses which fail to create significant social and academic connections between individual classmates are found to be lacking. If, though, we view the same classrooms as ecologies, in which the goal is for all

individuals to simultaneously strive to fulfill their own purpose to the best of their abilities and, as such, contribute to the health and wellbeing of the larger group, suddenly online classrooms are not the isolated wildernesses they are often depicted to be.

This distinction between community and ecology falls under the purview of the teacher because, like selecting and employing pedagogical roles, instructors establish the type of environment in which their students are expected to interact.

Since, then, Professor HK was the most consistent employer of whole-class written discussion and the only teacher to clearly define her role within them, my descriptive analysis of the interaction in those spaces largely focuses on the inner-workings of her class. To begin, I return to the "Introductions" forum, a space where, as the title suggests, the instructor and the students introduce themselves to the rest of the class. While similar activities tend to take place on the first day of onsite classes, as well, in an online classroom these initial announcements of presence also often have a permanent place within the conversation of the course. In an onsite classroom, the specific information provided about each individual—names, interests, majors, etc.—is quickly conveyed and easily forgotten, leaving an impression of each person rather than a fuller picture. Online introductions, however, tend to provide more information as they can be crafted over a longer period of time (a few days as opposed to a few minutes) and they do not have to comply with the time limitations placed on in-person remarks competing for precious classroom minutes. As such, rather than a staccato recitation of personal statistics, these introductions tend instead to take the shape of a narrative, complete with cause-and-effect, triumphs and trepidations, often allowing greater insight into the personality of the student than if the student were physically present.

In short, the written introductions of an online class are "small talk" that do big work. For her class's introduction assignment,[81] Professor HK posts some technical advice (e.g., "start a new thread") and then provides some clear parameters for her student's introductory posts: "I'd like your introduction to be in paragraph form and to include the following: your name, your experience with online classes, something you might like to share with the class about yourself, and what you hope to get out of this class beside three credits." She also asks that everyone post at least three responses to other introductions by the end of the first week of class and then posts her own introduction as an example.

In her sample introduction, then, Professor HK employs a variety of rhetorical techniques to establish the tone of the classroom and model the desired qualities of online written communication. She works to create a sense of rapport and the illusion of physical proximity by punctuating her post with several rhetorical questions. Although asynchronously participating and physically absent, Professor HK writes in a way that suggests she is actively engaging with each student as they "meet" her. She explains, for instance, that this is only her second semester teaching online and then asks, "Are you worried?" Attempting to quickly allay any fears, she follows with, "Don't be," and then an explanation of her training and qualifications. Likewise, stating her goal for the course—"to assist each one of you with becoming stronger writers, readers, researchers, and thinkers"—she asks, "How will I do this? You'll just have to wait and see. Sounds exciting, right? I <u>know</u> you are shaking your head 'yes'." She ends the post with the same affable tone, letting them know they shouldn't hesitate to ask any questions and should feel free to respond to her introduction.

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[81] Interestingly, in online classes, introductions tend to be actual (low stakes) assignments as opposed to the general perfunctory pleasantry they are in onsite classrooms. This is just one way in which online classes, by necessity, require active participation rather than mere physical presence to accomplish the same work.

Essentially, then, Professor HK's introductory post is a conversation with herself, presented in a way that anticipates her student's concerns about an invisible professor and a challenging course. The approach seems to be an effective one—of the 155 messages in this forum, 26 are in response to Professor HK's initial introductory post and cover a wide range of topics from favorite sports teams (an amiably heated debate between support for the Cubs or the White Sox), to particular areas of interest in the communities surrounding CLC, and even a few remarks explaining hesitations about taking a writing class.[82]

HK's post gives students a strong sense of the expected tone and structure of conversation and they largely follow suit. In addition to allowing the students to build an initial sense of connection, these introductory posts also provide a touchstone for students and teacher alike to return to over the course of the semester. For instance, an early active participant in the class discussion is Thomas, a 40-year-old male returning to college after dropping out during his first attempt 20 years ago. In his introductory post, Thomas provides a rather extensive history that tells a fairly typical narrative of the non-traditional/returning community college student. Thomas had held the same job for nearly 20 years, but had been laid off during the recession and, although he had since found employment, he was also coming back to college in the hopes that an education would help him advance his efforts in establishing a new career.

Thomas's introductory posts elicit a lot of camaraderie and evoke the narratives of other students, particularly those in similar situations; these interactions evidence the many motivations these students have in taking this course as well as help alleviate some of the initial

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[82] A student writes: "On a serious note, I will say I am a little worried about the research paper. I cannot remember one paper I had to write in high school, nor the structure. So I will apologize in advance for asking a lot of questions regarding the paper." Professor HK then replies: "No worries on asking a lot of questions. That's what I'm here for! Ask away." Each of these statements are part of larger messages that also talk good-naturedly about the difficulties of being a die-hard Cubs fan.

insecurities they hold. Just a few excerpted examples from the sixteen responses Thomas receives: "I am 49 years old and just finishing up my associates in fire science…Hand [*sic*] in there, you will get your associates, just be patient"; "Here I thought I was going to be the oldest. You'll be fine."; "Well first off I would like to commend you for going back to school. I don't know if I would have or not. I wanted to start school because I want my kids to see that it's important to have an education. I can't tell them to go to college if I never did."

Although it would be dangerous to rely too heavily on this introductory information or to attempt to play armchair psychologist based on the incomplete, self-painted pictures of students, these early conversations with and between students do allow online teachers potentially useful insight into the personal lives and extracurricular responsibilities of their students. Thomas, for instance, explains that his current job requires him to complete a great deal of paperwork on Sunday in anticipation of the week ahead. Knowing this information helps establish some expectations for the "flow" of conversation over the week; although one of the more eager and active students in class discussion, Thomas's work schedule typically kept his posts from being among those posted at the beginning of the week which both gave other students the opportunity to initiate discussion and to also allow Professor HK to anticipate a slight midweek re-invigoration of the conversation.

Building on the information conveyed and the relationships established in the "Introductions" forum, then, allowed students to establish their own system of functioning in the online classroom while creating a shared sense of reliability between all of the participants. Reflecting, in our interview, on the first several weeks of class discussion, Professor HK commented that students like Thomas (he and a handful of other students) were her "saving

grace" because they allowed her to step back a bit from the discussion, giving some of the control to the students without the entire endeavor running off-track.

Though during this particular semester Professor HK felt herself to be gifted with students who helped her gauge the appropriate amount of intervention and interaction she needed to provide in the class discussion, as my interviews illustrated, this is often one of the trickiest balances to strike in online discussion. Even in these discussions which Professor HK deemed successful, there were some stark contrasts in her approach that might have proven confusing to some of the less engaged members of the class. In the introductory forum, for instance, Professor HK, in developing working relationships with her students, made the effort to respond to every person, and usually within a 24-hour timeframe. In the semester's first discussion of actual course material, however, she was entirely absent from the conversation. While Professor HK's preferred and asserted role as facilitator provides the basis for the differing levels of participation in these two consecutive forums, her varied volume of posts also highlights a continuing struggle for most instructors engaged in online written instruction: finding the right balance between presence and omnipresence.

Structuring and conducting class discussion is a challenging aspect of teaching onsite or online. Particularly in composition, there is a general consensus that a decentralized classroom, in which students speak directly to each other rather than relying on the instructor, is ideal as it best promotes the growth of the student as a critical thinker. As Antonette explains, "For a student to gain self-efficacy in the online class space, he or she must become comfortable as an active learner. This cannot happen in a space that does not allow the student to negotiate his or her relationship with the teacher *and* other students" (Antonette 141). While, then, HK's minimalist intervention approach does allow for the type of student-to-student interaction that

might indicate a successfully decentralized—and therefore rather democratic and productive—classroom, if students trust that she is, indeed, reading everything without responding to anything, it also simultaneously places her in a position of omnipresence which counteracts that decentralization by essentially placing the students under surveillance, reinforcing the idea of the online classroom as the digital panopticon.

Furthermore, adopting a policy of only speaking to the whole class when directly spoken to or when a problematic "situation" arises can have detrimental repercussions in other areas of the course. Too-infrequent instructor commentary in class discussion can have the effect of alienating students, inspiring their distrust, or making them too dependent on private communication. As I described earlier in the chapter, when Professor HK did make an appearance in the second content-based discussion forum, her comments went largely unread and received very little response, indicating that students had become disengaged with this portion of the course. Given her earlier absence in discussion, they seemed to overlook her commentary, perhaps believing her contributions to be of little importance (a "too little, too late" perspective) or possibly having found alternate channels for receiving any desired feedback (e.g., email and critique on their individual work). In this way, then, though Professor HK's discussion spaces certainly created some interaction between students,[83] *her* seemingly unpredictable interaction with those students in these same spaces potentially created student-teacher relationships that were equally as isolated as those of Professors BG and WL.

While it is difficult to definitively discern the entire network of communication between Professor HK and her students, and to, therefore, draw direct correlations between discussion

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[83] The level of true "interaction" is up for interpretation as there remained the pattern of initial post + responses, but later discussions generally stopped at this level (i.e., there was no back-and-forth or development of the discussion as neither the initial poster nor other students replied to these responses).

participation and overall course success, it is demonstrably clear that the class began the

semester as active and engaged with the instructor, other classmates , and the material, but that,

by only halfway through the semester, this energy is significantly diminished (a mid-semester

discussion forum has only 39 posts and 12 participants—most of which were the required initial

response papers rather than real contributions to an ongoing discussion). While entirely possible,

even probable, that Professor HK gave her students ample academic attention in more private

communication,[84] the slow decline of written discussion doesn't convey those efforts.

This *apparent* lack of engagement with the class as a whole comes back to one of the

primary problems with online learning—the invisibility of effort and the corresponding

assumption that invisibility equals absence. In the online classroom, as Desmet and colleagues

explain, "The teacher and her labor become *invisible*; she must work extra hard to create and

maintain a *presence* in the virtual classroom; only by creating an illusion of perpetual presence,

therefore, can the teacher meet her students' expectations" (Desmet et al 22, emphasis original)

not to mention those of administrators and, indeed, all of academia.

Online Design: Are You Talking to Me?

Questions concerning teaching presence and interactive discussion are far from reaching

conclusive answers, although the renewed uptake of these issues, in Writing Studies research in

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[84] Although I was not privy to this type of communication, it's also likely that individual emails were exchanged between Professor HK and students during this time. Not finding a suitable method in the Blackboard interface, HK's "hack" required students to submit their formal essays to her via email at this point (a practice which she has since discontinued)—this requirement in addition to the ubiquity of email in general means that students were likely comfortable emailing their professor. Further evidence of this is the surprisingly empty "Student Questions" discussion forum. This semester-long forum is without a single post. The forum description states that its purpose is to be a place for asking questions that don't necessarily pertain to the specific material for the week (with the hope that this will keep the instructor from needing to answer questions more than once via email). Though no students submitted questions to this forum, it's unlikely that there really were *no* questions, so it follows that students preferred to email HK.

particular, is heartening and indicates a forward momentum to which I believe my work here contributes. My interviews provide an informative history about the development of online learning in one of the largest departments at the College of Lake County, an institution that is not only an integral component of the extensive community college system in Illinois, but as such, is also a significant entity in higher education as a whole. Moreover, the interviews and observations provide insight into the otherwise invisible online classrooms at the College, revealing the differently designed spaces for information and interaction, as well as the thought processes that seek to engage and educate the students therein.

While my analysis of the intended design and actual performance of the online classroom does not conclusively discern the effectiveness of any one discussion method over another, what it does highlight is the continual conflict instructors feel over the theoretical value of interaction versus the pedagogical practice of discussion in these online spaces. In other words, there is an inconsistent alignment of the expectations communicated and the classroom practices employed. Professor HK's Blackboard classroom, for instance, *may* be a beautiful illustration of an ecological approach to online learning, particularly tailored to the environment of the community college, wherein the instructor primarily connects with individual students, but also assists them in interacting with each other, and provides opportunities for engagement with the larger academic community around them. When, however, the very syllabus that begins the class establishes the expectation that these students are entering a virtual Burkean parlor, a space of sustained inquiry, discussion, and debate, it become difficult to assess the interesting but inconsistent interactions therein as successful.

While a difficult goal to achieve in an online first-year composition course, the ideal of the Burkean parlor that Professor HK begins her class with could still serve a significant purpose

for these spaces, if the expectation of participating in an ongoing conversation is shifted instead to the instructors of these courses. In other words, an ecological approach to online classroom design may be sufficient in terms of the interaction necessary for our students to successfully fulfill the goals of the course, but the instructors of these courses require a stronger sense of community outside of these classrooms in order to continually expand and reevaluate our understanding of the ways these evolving online spaces can best achieve their pedagogical potential and educational purpose. After all, if the history of higher education has taught us nothing else, we have learned that if we build it—a university, a community college, or a virtual campus—they will come. So, quite simply, we had better learn to build it right.

CHAPTER 5:

Conclusions and Recommendations: Communicating Across Boundaries

Locating Distance Learning Online

One of the greatest challenges of studying, understanding, and developing distance learning is that the scattered historical landscape and nebulous nature of its format have made it so very difficult to nail down. Throughout this decade-long endeavor, I have often revisited my favorite description of this beautiful mess of work: Studying distance learning is like taking "a snapshot of a cyclone" (Maeroff xi). I believe, though, that the storm is passing. Despite the raucous and fervent blustering of prophets and cynics alike, and the substantial debris scattered around the ruins of crumbling, profiteering pseudo-schools, a new day seems to be dawning, revealing the still-intact scaffolding of authentic alternative education. Distance learning has survived the storm because it is now located, quite literally, in the cloud.

Though it began in print-based media, *distance education* has developed alongside technology, morphing almost entirely into *online learning*—an evolution with repercussions that extend far beyond a simple shift in semantics. As the format of distance learning has so often overshadowed its function, it has been difficult to remember that, above all, "distance learning has more to do with learning than with distance" (Mariani). While proponents have long-professed this primary tenet—nearly fifteen years ago, Burks Oakley II, founding director of the University of Illinois Online initiative, explained, "I never use the words 'distance learning' because, really, it's distanceless learning. It's providing new access to education" (qtd. in Mariani)—the idea of "distanceless" learning has been a hard sell since, for so long, so much of education has been focused on the location of learning.

Now, though, that nearly all distance learning *is* online learning, we *have* a location for this education and the distanceless ideal can be a reality. So much of our personal and professional lives are able to be located online—from friends and photos, shopping and banking, to research and résumés—that imagining distinct places for teaching and learning online is exponentially easier than it was even five years ago. Distance education, as separate from online learning, was difficult to associate with a particular institution as its teachers and students were dispersed across countries or continents with little to link them together. While the alternative format provided new access to education, it remained unwieldy in its ability to actually, effectively educate. Online learning increasingly, though, originates from an individual institution; providing online classroom ecosystems located in the cloud but hopefully firmly rooted in an already-established educational community.

Findings: The Continued Prevalence of Isolation

My study at the College of Lake County found that online learning at this school, like that of many community colleges, it seems, is still in a somewhat early stage of development, despite having been part of the institution for nearly half of its existence.

The overarching theme of the interviews I conducted with the instructors of these online composition classes is that instructors feel isolated, unsupported, and unsure of their pedagogy in the online classroom. Despite being part of a generally collegial and collaborative department, each instructor developed the content, designed the classroom, and delivered their classes without significant additional technological or pedagogical support. Moreover, for Professor HK, the only instructor who did receive formal professional development before teaching her first online class, the help she received proved to be a burden to her already overextended schedule rather than a welcome boon to her pedagogical practices, as she still found herself

"hacking" her way around technological deficiencies in her online classroom for which the non-CLC related online pedagogy course did not account.

There is no real question, then, that more support for training and professional development is necessary to effectively educate instructors migrating from onsite to online classrooms. As the report on *Successful Online Courses in California's Community Colleges* explains, "It is critical to move away from the isolated, faculty-driven model toward a more systematic approach that supports faculty with course development and course delivery. A systematic approach better ensures quality by creating teams of experts with a range of skills that a single instructor is unlikely to have completely" (Johnson, Mejia, and Cook 3). These sorts of structured teams, it seems, would be a welcome addition to the development of online learning at CLC.

My study likewise suggests that this sense of separateness carries through to the student side of the educational equation. Though unfortunate in terms of achieving the original goals of my study, the *lack* of student interview data I was able to collect is quite possibly indicative of the continued isolation also felt on the other end of the computer. This scarcity of student voices is reflected in the literature of online learning; though many understand the main motivations for moving toward online education—flexibility chief among them—and quantitative data concerning the overall success of students within these courses is emerging, the students themselves are rarely heard in the research surrounding their classrooms. We do not have a clear sense of who these online students—speaking in terms of local or national populations—really are or the process through which they earn their education. Outside of the timestamps that mark the work they submit in their classrooms, we know little about where, when, or how these students incorporate their online learning into the rest of their lived experience. The lack of

willing student interviewees for my study suggests to me that students do not realize the importance of their voices and that many of them might still feel at a distance from their education, even when taking online courses through an institution within their community.

Though bountiful in terms of the sheer amount of text, my observations of the written discussion forums pointed to a similar inability to diminish the separateness of students (and possibly instructors) in the spaces of the online classroom. Despite an emphasis on discussion and interaction in both the instructor interviews and their individually-created syllabi, the classrooms I observed showed minimal interaction between peers as well as between students and instructor. Though the potential for interactive and productive discussion exists in online classrooms, the pedagogical strategies for encouraging and developing it are not clearly understood or employed. Likewise, instructors are either uncertain about how establish their role in online discussion or, at least, about how to fully and consistently engage with students while inhabiting that role. There is the relatively strong possibility that instructors *are* engaging with their online students in more individual, less visible ways—emails, informal feedback, online office hours—but both the effectiveness and sustainability of this approach in online learning remain unclear.

Overall, my findings indicate that online learning at the College of Lake County is likely on par with many of its peer institutions, as the qualitative data I gathered reflects the results of the most recent large-scale research related to online learning in community colleges. Though there are specific conclusions and recommendations in the sections that follow here, my most insistent message is that which was expressed in a September 2016 webinar held by the *Online Learning Consortium*. The webinar, titled *Community College Completion Paradox Panel Discussion*, moderated by Jeff Young, Editor-in-Chief for *Inside Higher Ed,* featured a panel of

experts—Peter Shea, Shanna Smith Jaggars, and Hans Johnson—discussing the inconsistent results of online learning in California. While this research was, indeed, important, as I have referred to it several times throughout my work here, the most important insight I gained was from the final written comment of a participant in the chat space. Using the screenname Karen R, this participant expressed the following: "Thank you for producing this research. Just a quick plea: more research and publications on distance learning in community colleges please!" This comment was quickly followed by agreement from others before the Collaborate Classroom session closed. In the weeks following the webinar, this comment has remained with me because it is, quite simply, the bottom line: there is so much more work to be done, so many more discussions to be had.

Conclusion: Classroom Ecologies and Community Colleges

Having explained the contributions and continued questions derived from my study of online composition classrooms at the College of Lake County, I return here to the broader conclusions drawn from the entirety of the research gathered during this lengthy study of online learning. For the purposes of my study, I have set aside the model of learning communities in favor of instead examining online classrooms as ecosystems. By definition, both ecosystems and communities are comprised of dynamically interacting individuals, but the conceptual separation of the two lies in that the shared sense of purpose that is necessary to sustain a community is not requisite for the success of an ecosystem. Practically speaking, a classroom can successfully function with individual students who participate and interact with others, fulfilling the requirements of the course, but who do not feel any real sense of commitment or responsibility to the larger group. Though the learning that happens in these environments is, hopefully, both

enduring and transferable, the productive relationships formed can be temporary and contained to the space(s) of the classroom.

I would argue that most college classrooms, in fact—both onsite and online—function using this learning ecosystem model. Students who enter a college classroom not knowing most of their classmates manage to work together with those individuals over the course of the semester and, with the exception of friendships that form and then develop *outside* of the classroom, these students end the semester taking knowledge gained from the class, but leaving the working relationships behind. Ecologies do not survive because particular individuals form lasting bonds and continually work together, they are sustained by establishing a system of roles which can be inhabited by members of a group and then subsequently be transferred to other individuals without disrupting the stability of the overall environment. Creating a community within one's classroom is an admirable feat, but one that may not be inherently reproducible from semester to semester depending on the particular personalities present in any group of students. What *can* be reliably replicated, however, is the productive classroom environment that is put into place through curricular structure and pedagogical practice, allowing students to independently thrive and actively participate in the learning process. In short, ecologies focus on sustaining the places and practices, while communities concentrate on supporting the people.

Moving outward to consider the interaction of these individual classroom ecologies as part of a larger institution, then, I return to the idea and ideal of fostering participation in a community. While learning can happen successfully in an ecosystem, the greater experience of becoming educated is best done as part of a community. This leap from classroom ecosystem to academic community is, I think, where online learning noticeably falls away from, and draws much criticism in relation to, "traditional" education. Individual classes on physical campuses

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are inherently part of the larger college community—with supportive educational amenities like writing centers, advising offices, and extracurricular activities—while online classes, no matter how expertly run, can often seem like individually-operated, isolated islands of learning. While, then, the successful structure and performance of individual classrooms is, of course, important, so, too, is the purposeful connection of those spaces to a larger institutional community.

If, though, online learning is not really "distance" learning but, instead, an alternative option that allows for flexibility and a distinct experience with comparable learning outcomes, then situating this form of education within the community college may create an exemplary academic relationship—mutually beneficial in that, if both the students and the courses are given the right support and resources, it serves the students, elevates online learning, and provides greater access to the institution. Moreover, as these academic institutions are specifically developed for, fully enveloped in, and largely supported by the same municipalities they serve, online courses have the potential to strengthen the connection between the college and the community as students may develop an affiliation with a familiar institution without frequenting the physical campus.

Conclusion: Writing the Curriculum Across the Disciplines

Writing has the potential and the power to transform students from passive to active learners, a quality also demanded of students in online education. It is fitting, then, that the way students often express their engagement with online classes is through writing. Written discussions have the potential to ignite a vibrant and recursive process of critical thinking in courses across the curriculum, not only expanding students' knowledge of content, but also developing their ways of knowing.

Unfortunately, according to *Engaging Ideas*, the widely-read and well-regarded tome on writing across the curriculum, "Most faculty do not read a lot of pedagogical material" (Bean viii) even as it relates to their own content and discipline. Tackling writing—and writing *online*, no less—therefore tends to overextend the pedagogical aspirations and abilities of even the most dedicated professor. And yet, "the most intensive and demanding tool for eliciting sustained critical thought is a well-designed writing assignment on a subject matter problem" (Bean xvi). The form and function of online classes, whether based in alphanumeric text or multimodal communication, allow us to play with the boundaries of what constitutes a "writing assignment," making endless opportunities for developing critical thought through composition.

This significant problem remains, however: While writing is proven has proven to be a productive path to learning, learning to teach writing is a route that few are willing to traverse.

This conflict creates a space for the field of Writing Studies to emerge more audaciously as a leader in online learning. As argued in earlier chapters, Writing Studies has a unique evenhandedness in grappling with the potential benefits of technological innovations while holding firm to the fundamental worth of writing as the original always-evolving technology. As such, Writing Studies has the parallel abilities to 1) argue for the slower, but more thoughtful, adoption of and engagement with emerging technologies, highlighting the continuing value of writing in online classrooms and 2) to continue the research necessary to understand students' engagement with and through writing in online classrooms and to develop corresponding pedagogical practices. The outcome of these endeavors is to assist instructors across the curriculum in creating "an environment that demands [the students'] best writing," (Bean xvi), perhaps without them even realizing it.

Although admittedly many metaphorical miles down the hypothetical path I am proposing, it is possible too that, if written discussion can be shown to truly help students better master the content of their courses, then this might likewise be exercised as a worthwhile practice in the supplemental electronic spaces of "traditional" classrooms. Essentially, then, written discussions—one of the main elements that currently separates onsite from online learning—could be realized as an effective means of unifying these two educational environments.

In sum, considering "distance education" from these multiple perspectives asserts my overall argument: that, although composition, online learning, and community colleges emerged independently into the work and world of higher education, moving forward, they should be mindfully united in their purposes and progress. In all, I advocate that these often underrepresented and undervalued areas of higher education make a concerted effort—and with haste—to move from the margins of academia into positions of power in the decision-making processes concerning the technological policies and critical pedagogies in higher education.

Creating and sustaining joint efforts in advocating for online learning are, of course, ambitious goals, but ones that can begin building momentum, as the remaining sections explain, with methods that are local and relatively low-key.

Recommendations: Local and Global

Like online learning itself, the recommendations derived from my research serve purposes both local and global. Given my professional and pedagogical investments—and the subject of my original study—it is not surprising that my assertions apply specifically to the particular institution of which I am a part. Similarly, though, to the serendipitous but

uncontrived historical connections[85] between the three different areas of my investigation, my suggestions for consciously cooperative efforts in moving forward extend beyond the limited scope of my school to the whole of higher education.

The structure of my recommendations here reflects my earlier analysis of online classrooms, highlighting the most important issues to be considered with regard to the technological design of the classrooms and the pedagogical practices of those who teach in them.

In terms of software, I repeat a simple suggestion I've made elsewhere to emphasize its significance here: We *must* remain mindful of the undeniably predetermined plan of continual technological obsolescence (Madden) by tempering our responses to technical innovations with the continuity of theoretical technological research. Put into practical terms, we will best know how to adopt and adapt the endlessly new versions of Blackboard to our classrooms if we always already have a deeply embedded and clearly articulated understanding of our purposes for including a learning management system in our teaching. Moreover, this focus on our pedagogical purposes serves to shift the dynamics of technological development, allowing the "end-users" to instead *start* conversations, if not with software developers, than with instructional designers and, if those positions are lacking in our particular contexts, to advocate for the instrumentality of knowledgeable support staff to advance the teaching and learning done in online settings.

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[85] Jean Ferguson Carr notes, in the afterword to *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition*, that many rhetorical historians pay homage to the power of serendipity—"the moment of discovery or 'luck' when fragments appeared to connect, when effects found causes, or when a search uncovered an 'origin'"—but that, in actuality, the work has less to do with 'luck' and more to do with "the ability to be open to illumination" combined with patient labor and attention to detail (Carr 239-240). In conducting my research, I have felt that my position as an online composition instructor at a community college primed my ability to acknowledge serendipitous areas of overlap between composition, distance learning, and community colleges but that the actual work of the research, beyond coincidence, unearthed and made sense of these closely but unexpectedly entwined roots.

In addition to the conversations we have with those who create, provide, and employ our technology, my primary suggestion for teachers—in a work which focuses on the power of the written word—is that they do more talking, specifically with other online instructors at their respective institutions. We are much in need of an exemplary organizational entity for helping online instructors collaborate and communicate with each other in a local setting. In other words, before we can address the forms and functions of communication *in* the online classroom, we must first develop a meaningful structure and consistent support for discussions *about* the online classroom.

This is easier said than done, particularly in the community college setting. A particularly astute article in the March 2016 *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* titled, "Toward Local Teacher-Scholar Communities of Practice: Findings from a National TYCA Survey," points out the very practical reasons research and formal professional development are not top priorities or even possibilities for faculty at these institutions as often an individual instructor's workload simply cannot accommodate engagement in additional professional development (Toth and Sullivan).

Moreover, much of the literature regarding teaching online explains the experiences of one instructor pioneering interesting practices at their particular institution which, in turn, often leaves its audience of online teachers to adapt and attempt these ideas individually and in relative isolation. While some online instructors have more support, training, and guidance than others, there is a disconnect between the literature about online learning and the mechanisms for interpreting and employing those lessons in a local setting. If we want to better model the creation of a learning community for our students, we need to be involved in them ourselves. We need, then, a more formal, sustained, and standardized system for exchanging ideas about,

and examining the practices of, online teaching at both the departmental and college level so that we may better communicate and assess the outcomes of online teaching and learning practices across disciplinary and institutional boundaries. Toth and Sullivan call these groups "local teacher-scholar communities of practice" and advocate for their use as a way to more thoroughly engage two-year college faculty in the conversations of the broader field, as "a professional model in which scholarly engagement becomes an integral part of a department's teaching and administrative work. Such communities would situate teacher-scholarship within shared day-to-day departmental practices, fostering faculty professional identities grounded in both local and disciplinary knowledge making" (248).

This insistence on an institutional investment in online learning through a structured and supported network of localized instructor discussion groups leads me to my recommendations related to its students. Ultimately, the success of online learning relies not just on the pedagogical practices of individual virtual classrooms; rather, it hinges on the ability to fulfill the educational *and* experiential goals of its students. In other words, students need to be made to feel connected to the institution *at* which they are studying, even if that work is happening remotely.

Almost without exception, instructors are an online student's most immediate connection to the physical campus and, as such, for the sake of their students, online instructors need to be firmly rooted to their onsite institutions. This instructor-institution relationship can take many forms; it might mean, for instance, that the position of online instructor is accompanied by a required onsite component (designated onsite office hours, for instance) which would, by default, require the instructor to be local to the institution, even if the student is not. At the very least, however, an instructor of online classes needs to have a comprehensive understanding of the

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institution's particular policies and procedures in order to best serve a student who may otherwise have little to no interaction with the larger institution that resides just virtually outside the boundaries of the online classroom.

While a sense of connection to the school through the instructor is particularly imperative if it represents the extent of the institution's commitment to its online learners, ideally instructors would serve as just one nexus of affiliation in a larger network of support for these students. An institution which merely provides a smattering of courses via computer is not yet one that is truly invested in online learning; rather, concentrated effort and dedicated resources comparable to those available to onsite students need to be allocated to the development of a legitimate and lasting online campus.

Creating Community in the Online College Experience

In the end, this is only the beginning. While distance education, even in the form of online learning, is not a new endeavor, there is still novelty in the now-reasonable expectation of earning an authentic, accredited education virtually. Given the opportunity to reflect and reinvent, what we are ascertaining from previous attempts at this alternative academic format is that, though successful teaching and learning practices are undoubtedly an essential element of any online *course*, a fulfilling and fruitful online *education* requires the additional support of a surrounding community. This expectation should not be unexpected as it is one that harkens back to the early ideals of higher education, which called on students to acquire knowledge *and* experience.

At this potentially pivotal moment, then, both Writing Studies and community colleges have the opportunity—indeed, the responsibility—to lead the way in online learning; serving as

thoughtful pedagogical innovators and supportive community builders, we can simultaneously

become a stronger presence in and provide greater access to the world of higher education.

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Institutional Effectiveness, Planning, and Research

Memo

To: Amanda Cash

From: Nancy McNerney

CC: Roland Miller

          Arlene Santos-George

Date: August 27, 2010

Re: Request for Research Approval

Please be advised that your research request to conduct your dissertation research at the College of Lake County has been approved under CLC IRB #10.001. Your research will observe the discussion spaces of online composition classes at the College of Lake County and conduct one-on-one interviews with both the instructors and the students who participate in these courses.

We determined that your research project is in conformance with the CLC Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. This determination was based on a review of your submitted and approved IRB application (attached) to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Please contact me at ext. 2419 or Arlene Santos-George at ext. 2417 so we can direct you on how to proceed following our IRB guidelines. It is important that the CLC students participating in your study give you their informed consent and understand that they can withdraw from the study at any time. Most importantly, please ensure that they sign all necessary forms. Copies of these signed forms should be sent to the Institutional Effectiveness, Planning and Research Office before you conduct the class discussion/focus group.

We wish you good luck in your research project.

Attachments (1)

CLCIRB #10.001

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research

Institutional Review Board
528 East Green Street
Suite 203
Champaign, IL 61820

August 9, 2010

Gail Hawisher
English
201 English Bldg
M/C 718

RE: *Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms*
        IRB Protocol Number: 11003

Dear Gail:

Your response to stipulations for the project entitled *Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms* has satisfactorily addressed the concerns of the UIUC Institutional Review Board (IRB) and you are now free to proceed with the human subjects protocol. The UIUC IRB approved, by expedited review, the protocol as described in your IRB-1 application with stipulated changes. The expiration date for this protocol, UIUC number 11003, is 07/29/2011. The risk designation applied to your project is *no more than minimal risk*. Certification of approval is available upon request.

Note: Please supply a copy of the College Of Lake County IRB approval letter as soon as it is received.

Copies of the enclosed date-stamped consent form(s) must be used in obtaining informed consent. If there is a need to revise or alter the consent form(s), please submit the revised form(s) for IRB review, approval, and date-stamping prior to use.

Under applicable regulations, no changes to procedures involving human subjects may be made without prior IRB review and approval. The regulations also require that you promptly notify the IRB of any problems involving human subjects, including unanticipated side effects, adverse reactions, and any injuries or complications that arise during the project.

If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me or the IRB Office, or visit our Web site at http://www.irb.illinois.edu.

Sincerely,

Sue Keehn, Director, Institutional Review Board

Enclosure(s)

c: Amanda Cash

STUDY INFORMATION SHEET

Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms

You are invited to participate in a research study concerning the uses of technology and written communication in online composition classrooms. Please read the following information about the research being conducted to decide if you would like to opt out of the study.

This research study is being conducted by Amanda Cash, a full-time English instructor at the College of Lake County and a doctoral student in Writing Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, under the supervision of Dr. Gail Hawisher, a professor in the English Department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This research study aims to better understand 1) the way writing functions in online college composition courses, 2) the technological limitations, accommodations, and facilitations involved in teaching and learning composition in an online setting, and 3) the perceived educational experience of online composition instructors and students.

PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

This research study consists of two main components: online classroom observation and individual interviews. Please note that although your instructor has allowed Ms. Cash to be an observer in your online classroom, you may opt out of this study by simply letting Ms. Cash know, as described in the following paragraph. You must be 18 years or older to participate in this study. If you are not yet 18 years old, please notify Ms. Cash and your discussion postings will be excluded from the study.

First, Ms. Cash will "sit in" as an observer in the discussion spaces of your online classroom for 2-3 days each month. Students will always be notified by Ms. Cash (via email) when she will be present in the online classroom. Students who wish to participate in the study at the level of classroom observation needn't take any further action and should participate in the class as usual. Ms. Cash will observe the classroom structure in action and note the development and progression of ongoing class discussions. While the classroom will be observed several times throughout the semester, none of the data will be analyzed until after the semester has ended. Therefore, students who wish their comments to be omitted from the final analysis can opt out of the study at any point in the semester. Students who wish to be removed from the study need only to contact Ms. Cash via email (acash@clcillinois.edu) or phone (847) 543-2448 with a brief message to the effect of "I wish to be removed from the research study." Removal from the study means that Ms. Cash will not open or read any messages posted by the student and that any notes already taken about discussion posts related to the studen will be deleted. Ms. Cash will promptly respond to all such requests to verify the student's removal from the study. Removal

IRB Application Supplementary Materials
Proposed Study: "Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms"
RPI: Gail Hawisher, Investigator: Amanda Cash

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from the study does not in any way affect the student's status or role in his/her College of Lake County composition course.

Second, Ms. Cash will conduct in-depth interviews will individual participants (on a volunteer basis) after the semester has ended. The interview will last approximately 30 – 60 minutes. Ideally, interviews will be conducted face-to-face but, depending on the individual situation of the student, interviews may also be conducted via email, instant message, or phone. For face-to-face and telephone interviews, the researcher will take notes and, with permission, audio-record the interviews. For email and instant message interviews, the written transcript of the interview is all that is needed. If a participant does not feel comfortable with the conversation being audio-recorded, only notes will be taken. In the interviews, participants will be asked to discuss their experiences with the class and to describe the benefits and drawbacks of participating in an online composition course.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

The risks for students participating in this study are minimal. Students may experience a sense of discomfort in that the online nature of the course makes Ms. Cash's presence in the classroom invisible. To alleviate this possible discomfort, Ms. Cash will explicitly announce the days on which her classroom observations will take place via an email message prior to each observation period. There is also a slight risk involving the loss of privacy or of potential identification in research reports. The safeguards described in the following section, "Confidentiality of the Study," however, minimize these risks substantially.

Participation in this study offers you the chance to reflect on your online class experience. The primary benefit of this research is to increase knowledge about the ways online classes function, thereby contributing to the larger body of research devoted to examining the teaching practices and technological capabilities involved in distance learning as a whole. On a more local level, participation in this research may benefit future instructors and students of online composition classes at the College of Lake County as the study seeks, in part, to determine ways to develop and enhance these specific courses in future semesters.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF THE STUDY

Efforts will be made to keep all personal information confidential. Participating students' identities will be held in confidence in reports in which this study may be presented or published. All physical data, including any physical audiotapes, obtained during the study will be kept confidential and secure. The audio-recordings will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only by Ms. Cash and Dr. Hawisher. The audio-recordings will be coded to remove individuals' names and will be erased after transcription (within one month of completing the interview).

The confidentiality of data collected via IM or email interviews cannot be guaranteed, but efforts will be made to keep the information from those interviews secure. Information from those interviews will immediately be removed from the IM program or email message and copied into a separate document void of identifiable information (names, email addresses, etc.). The original

IM conversation/email will then be deleted and the new document will be kept with the research materials in a locked filing cabinet accessible only to the research team.

All subjects will be assigned a pseudonym and their identities will be protected by keeping all identifying information in a locked filing cabinet. The results of this study will primarily be disseminated through the dissertation project of which it is a part and journal publications/conference presentations that emerge from that dissertation project. The results will also be shared with the English Department at the College of Lake County as a way of developing teaching practices and enhancing course structures for the department's composition program. Pseudonyms will always be used in reporting the results of this research.

Furthermore, each student's decisions about participation in the study will be confidential. Instructors will have no knowledge of students who choose to opt out of the online classroom observation, nor will instructors know which students have agreed to be interviewed after the completion of the semester. Ms. Cash and the instructor will not discuss individual student progress, the grades, or assessment of any students at any point during the study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Ms. Cash, your instructor, or the College of Lake County.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions or concerns about this study, and your involvement in it, at any point in the semester, please contact Amanda Cash, at acash@clcillinois.edu or (847) 543-2448, or Dr. Gail Hawisher at hawisher@illinois.edu or (217) 333-3251.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

IRB Application Supplementary Materials
Proposed Study: "Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms"
RPI: Gail Hawisher, Investigator: Amanda Cash

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INFORMED CONSENT
For English 121/English 122 Online Instructors (Classroom Observation & Interviews)
August 2010

You are invited to participate in a research project, "Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms," which aims to better understand 1) the way writing functions in online college composition courses, 2) the technological limitations, accommodations, and facilitations involved in teaching and learning composition in an online setting, and 3) the perceived educational experiences of online composition instructors and students. This project will be conducted by Amanda Cash, a College of Lake County English faculty member and graduate student in the Center for Writing Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and under the advisement of Gail Hawisher, Professor of English and Founding Director of the Center for Writing Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

For this project, you will be asked to allow Ms. Cash access as an observer to your Fall 2010 online section(s) of English 121/English 122. Ms. Cash will observe your classes for 2-3 days each month, taking notes on the classroom structure, the methods of delivering course material, and the progression of class discussions in the public spaces of the online classroom. You will also be asked to participate in two 30-60 minute interviews, one at the beginning of the Fall 2010 semester and one after the semester has ended. During the interviews, Ms. Cash will take notes and, with your permission, audio-record the conversation. In the first interview, you will be asked to discuss your plans for your online section(s) of English 121/English 122 as well as your past experiences with online courses. In the second interview, the discussion will focus on your assessment of the Fall 2010 semester and your subsequent plans for future online courses.

The audio-recordings and all other information obtained during this research project will be kept confidential and secure. Physical audio-recordings and data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only by members of the research team. Audio-recordings will be coded to remove individuals' names, will be transcribed by Ms. Cash within a month after the recording, and then deleted.

The results of this study will be part of a doctoral dissertation and may also be used in journal articles, conference presentations, and the development of pedagogical materials for the English department at the College of Lake County. In any publication, presentation, or pedagogical materials, pseudonyms will be substituted for any identifying information.

The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. The most likely risk of participating in this research is loss of privacy or potential identification in research reports. However, the safeguards described above minimize these risks.

Participation in this study offers you the chance to reflect on your online class experience. The primary benefit of this research is to increase knowledge about the ways online classes function, thereby contributing to the larger body of research devoted to examining the teaching practices and technological capabilities involved in distance learning as a whole. On a more local level, participation in this research may benefit future instructors and students of online composition

IRB Application Supplementary Materials
Proposed Study: "Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms"
RPI: Gail Hawisher, Investigator: Amanda Cash

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classes at the College of Lake County as the study seeks, in part, to determine ways to develop and enhance these specific courses in future semesters.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Ms. Cash (acash@clcillinois.edu; (847) 543-2448) or Dr. Hawisher (hawisher@illinois.edu; (217) 333-3251).

Please check one of the following:

☐ I agree to allow Ms. Cash to audio-record our interviews.

☐ I decline to allow Ms. Cash to audio-record our interviews.

I have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to participate in the research project described above. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at (217) 333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

IRB Application Supplementary Materials
Proposed Study: "Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms"
RPI: Gail Hawisher, Investigator: Amanda Cash

INFORMED CONSENT
For English 121/English 122 Online Instructors (Interviews Only)
August 2010

You are invited to participate in a research project, "Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms," which aims to better understand 1) the way writing functions in online college composition courses, 2) the technological limitations, accommodations, and facilitations involved in teaching and learning composition in an online setting, and 3) the perceived educational experiences of online composition instructors and students. This project will be conducted by Amanda Cash, a College of Lake County English faculty member and graduate student in the Center for Writing Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and under the advisement of Gail Hawisher, Professor of English and Founding Director of the Center for Writing Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

For this project, you will be asked to participate in two 30-60 minute interviews, one at the beginning of the Fall 2010 semester and one after the semester has ended. During the interviews, Ms. Cash will take notes and, with your permission, audio-record the conversation. In the first interview, you will be asked to discuss your plans for your online section(s) of English 121/English 122 as well as your past experiences with online courses. In the second interview, the discussion will focus on your assessment of the Fall 2010 semester and your subsequent plans for future online courses.

The audio-recordings and all other information obtained during this research project will be kept confidential and secure. Physical audio-recordings and data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only by members of the research team. Audio-recordings will be coded to remove individuals' names, will be transcribed by Ms. Cash within a month after the recording, and then deleted.

The results of this study will be part of a doctoral dissertation and may also be used in journal articles, conference presentations, and the development of pedagogical materials for the English department at the College of Lake County. In any publication, presentation, or pedagogical materials, pseudonyms will be substituted for any identifying information.

The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. The most likely risk of participating in this research is loss of privacy or potential identification in research reports. However, the safeguards described above minimize these risks.

Participation in this study offers you the chance to reflect on your online class experience. The primary benefit of this research is to increase knowledge about the ways online classes function, thereby contributing to the larger body of research devoted to examining the teaching practices and technological capabilities involved in distance learning as a whole. On a more local level, participation in this research may benefit future instructors and students of online composition classes at the College of Lake County as the study seeks, in part, to determine ways to develop and enhance these specific courses in future semesters.

IRB Application Supplementary Materials
Proposed Study: "Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms"
RPI: Gail Hawisher, Investigator: Amanda Cash

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Ms. Cash (acash@clcillinois.edu; (847) 543-2448) or Dr. Hawisher (hawisher@illinois.edu; (217) 333-3251).

Please check one of the following:

☐ I agree to allow Ms. Cash to audio-record our interviews.

☐ I decline to allow Ms. Cash to audio-record our interviews.

I have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to participate in the research project described above. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at (217) 333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

IRB Application Supplementary Materials
Proposed Study: "Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms"
RPI: Gail Hawisher, Investigator: Amanda Cash

INFORMED CONSENT
Student Interview

January 2011

You are invited to participate in a research project, "Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms," which aims to better understand 1) the way writing functions in online college composition courses, 2) the technological limitations, accommodations, and facilitations involved in teaching and learning composition in an online setting, and 3) the perceived educational experiences of online composition instructors and students. This project will be conducted by Amanda Cash, a College of Lake County English faculty member and graduate student in the Center for Writing Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and under the advisement of Gail Hawisher, Professor of English and Founding Director of the Center for Writing Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

For this project, you will be asked to participate in one 30-60 minute interview early in the Spring 2011 semester, to reflect on your online course experience from the previous (Fall 2010) semester. During the interviews, Ms. Cash will take notes and audio-record the conversation.

The audio-recordings and all other information obtained during this research project will be kept confidential and secure. Physical audio-recordings and data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet accessible only to members of the research team. Audio-recordings will also be coded to remove individuals' names and will be transcribed within a month of recording. Once transcribed, the audio-recordings will be erased.

The results of this study will be part of a doctoral dissertation and may also be used in journal articles, conference presentations, and the development of pedagogical materials for the English department at the College of Lake County. In any publication, presentation, or pedagogical materials, pseudonyms will be substituted for any identifying information.

The risks for students participating in this study are minimal. The most likely risk of participating in this research is loss of privacy or potential identification in research reports. However, the safeguards described above minimize these risks.

Participation in this study offers you the chance to reflect on your online class experience. The primary benefit of this research is to increase knowledge about the ways online classes function, thereby contributing to the larger body of research devoted to examining the teaching practices and technological capabilities involved in distance learning as a whole. On a more local level, participation in this research may benefit future instructors and students of online composition classes at the College of Lake County as the study seeks, in part, to determine ways to develop and enhance these specific courses in future semesters.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Ms. Cash (acash@clcillinois.edu; (847) 543-2448) or Ms. Hawisher (hawisher@illinois.edu; (217) 333-3251).

Please check one of the following:

☐ I agree to allow Ms. Cash to audio-record our interview.

☐ I decline to allow Ms. Cash to audio-record our interview.

I have read and understand the above information and voluntarily agree to participate in the research project described above. I also certify that I am 18 years of age or older. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Signature	Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at (217) 333-2670 (collect calls accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

**University of Illinois
at Urbana–Champaign**

RECEIVED

AUG 0 4 2010

INST REV....

WAIVER OR ALTERATION OF INFORMED CONSENT (45CFR46.116(D))

ALL APPLICATIONS MUST BE TYPEWRITTEN, SIGNED, AND SUBMITTED AS SINGLE-SIDED HARD COPY. PLEASE, NO STAPLES!

Responsible Project Investigator (RPI):

| Last Name: Hawisher | First Name: Gail | Dept. or Unit: Center for Writing Studies |
| Phone: (217) 333-3251 | Fax: (217) 333-4321 | E-mail: hawisher@illinois.edu |

Project Title:
Written Communication in Online Composition Classrooms

To request IRB approval of a waiver of the requirement to obtain informed consent completely, or of a consent procedure which does not include, or which alters, some or all of the elements of informed consent, please provide a response to ALL of the following questions. Please be specific in explaining why each statement is true for this research.

1. The research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects.

There are no physical risks to the students participating in the study. Participation in the classroom observation portion of this study does not require that the students do anything beyond their normal course work. The primary risk to these students is the potential feeling of surveillance as online classroom observation means that they are unable to discern when Ms. Cash is in the classroom and which areas are being observed (hence, the possible feeling that they are always being observed). Notably, though, this is also true of the online "movements" of their instructor and peers--so Ms. Cash is not alone in this omnipresent but invisible role. To minimize the potential discomfort caused by the research, however, Ms. Cash will be explicit about her observations by sending an email to the students prior to each classroom observation period (see attachment for Section 12: Research Procedures). This email will also remind students that they may email or phone Ms. Cash to request removal from the study (after which their messages in the online classroom will not be opened or read by Ms. Cash; if data frome that particular student has already been collected, it will immediately be deleted from Ms. Cash's notes).

Also, this study seeks to examine the progression of class discussion in an online, written format; while some specific student comments may be cited (pseudonymously) as examples, ultimately the focus of the research is on the structure of the discussion as established by the instructors and the development of the discussion as a whole (not on the work and words of individual students). Students, then, are participants in that they are creating the individual comments that form a discussion, but they are primarily being studied as a group--so the risk to individual students is, indeed, minimal.

2. The waiver or alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects.

Students will be informed (and reminded throughout the semester) that their decision to participate in or to opt out of the study will have no impact on their instructor's assessment of their work in the course. All correspondence about the study will be between Ms. Cash and individual students; the instructor will have no knowledge as to which students are participating in the study and which have requested removal from it.

As composition students frequently share their work in peer-review groups and other public settings as a primary part of the course, it stands to reason that most students will not mind the small addition of Ms. Cash "sitting in" on their discussions as a non-participatory, non-evaluative observer. Students will repeatedly be made aware of the study, though, and will have ample opportunity to quickly and easily remove themselves from the study via email or phone, if they so choose.

3. The research could not practicably be carried out without the waiver or alteration.

University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign

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One of the potential benefits of this study for the English Department at the College of Lake County (where Ms. Cash is a full-time faculty member) is to improve the quality of the online courses for the students who take them. Currently, there is no screening or counseling process to help students assess their potential success in online classrooms. Not surprisingly, the attrition rate for these courses is quite high (sometimes as few as 25% of the class finishes the course with a passing grade). Additionally, particularly given that the population being studied are community college students, the potential subjects are more likely to be juggling a variety of different responsibilities--work, school, family, etc. These reasons, and considerable experience (nearly 10 years) teaching online courses at a variety of institutions, leaves Ms. Cash convinced that obtaining explicit written consent from all individual students would leave the study with a paucity of data. Since online students often have difficulty maintaining their place in the course, any additional tasks--like mailing, or even emailing, consent for participation in a research study--are very likely to be overlooked or ignored. The study seeks to study the progression of whole written conversations and class discussions--individual comments from the handful of students who might return a written consent (or provide consent electronically) would be crippling for this study, rendering the classroom observation portion of the study all but pointless.

4. Whenever appropriate, the subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation. No information about the study will be withheld from the student-subjects as it is being conducted, so all pertinent information will be conveyed to subjects during their participation in the study. In all likelihood, subjects shouldn't need any additional information about the study beyond their participation in it, but should something relevant arise, the subjects will be advised accordingly. Ms. Cash plans to be as transparent as possible about the study throughout the research process.

RPI Signature: _____ Date: __8-4-10__

IRB Member Approval: _____ Date: _____

APPROVED

JUL 30 2010

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