

DISSERTATION

ONLINE WRITING RESEARCH IN THE  
UPPER-DIVISION COMPOSITION CLASSROOM:  
CONSTRUCTIONS OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AND CRITICAL DIALOGUE

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### ONLINE WRITING RESEARCH IN THE UPPER-DIVISION COMPOSITION CLASSROOM: CONSTRUCTIONS OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT AND CRITICAL DIALOGUE

This dissertation is comprised of three related articles examining social engagement and critical dialogue practices in the upper-division online writing classroom. The three manuscripts are presented with bookend chapters to introduce and discuss the larger research project. The over-arching questions this research asks are:

How are teaching and learning supported and constrained in online writing instructional environments?

How can constructions of social engagement in the online Writing Arguments classroom support critical learning and critical dialogue?

The three articles examine the teaching of writing in an upper-division online writing course, Writing Arguments, which is a rhetorical theory course in composition. This compilation of continually evolving research captures the dual importance of enhancing online education as well as the need to construct social engagement in the online classroom. Additionally, as the Writing Arguments course lends itself naturally to areas of opposition and difference, the final two studies focus specifically on critical dialogue and learning in the online classroom.

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CHAPTER 1  
LEARNING AND TEACHING IN THE UPPER-DIVISION ONLINE WRITING  
ENVIRONMENT

**Introduction**

I had been teaching Rhetoric and Composition courses in campus classrooms for several years when I was asked to create an online format of an upper-division composition course. Within the field of composition and rhetoric at that time, online instruction was viewed as anathema to quality teaching and learning. I wondered how to effectively teach writing and composition through asynchronous online instruction. How would an online environment affect learning? How could I build a community of learners and safe space for sharing and responding to each other's drafts? I created the course and got IRB approval to study the learning outcomes of my on-campus and online courses. At the same time, I was bringing into these courses opportunities for students to engage in critical learning through dialogues across difference – addressing public discourse around racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and related topics. I was intrigued at the affordances created for such critical dialogue through online discussion boards. As a teacher-researcher, I set out to move past my early assumptions and biases of the limitations of online instruction to examine both its affordances and constraints for teaching and learning writing and composition in general and for critical learning and critical dialogue in particular. Over the space of three years, I constructed the research project represented in this dissertation.

This dissertation is comprised of three related articles surrounding online writing instruction (OWI) in the advanced college composition classroom, with bookend chapters to



introduce and discuss the research project. The larger questions this research project addresses include:

How are teaching and learning supported and constrained in online writing instructional environments?

How can constructions of social engagement in the online Writing Arguments classroom support critical learning and critical dialogue?

This chapter will demonstrate how these two overarching questions drove the design of this dissertation study as well as how they shifted in order to accommodate new and emerging dimensions of online writing instruction (OWI). The studies in this dissertation were conducted in chronological order: the study described in Chapter 2 was completed in 2016, the second study (Chapter 3) took place in 2017, and the final study (Chapter 4) occurred in 2018. This first chapter will serve to introduce all three studies and the conceptual framework that binds them. I also discuss my positionality as a teacher-researcher in this project and the limitations and potential significance of this work

### **Unpacking the conceptual journey of this research project**

The goal of this project is to examine these new educational spaces in order to expand the learning possibilities and potentials in the online writing classroom. Online writing instruction (OWI) becomes an important topic for research as the virtual learning environment creates infinite affordances and constraints for education. Many educators find it difficult to make the shift from traditional classroom instruction into these new computer-mediated spaces. Hewett is one such writing professor who has been researching Online Writing Instruction since 1995. In her earlier work, she notes that “The slower, less obvious interactivity [of the online interactions between student and teacher] due to its non-real-time nature has caused some scholars to view

asynchronous teaching as somewhat limiting” (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, p.70). While real-time (synchronous) online education has continued to develop alongside asynchronous e-learning, the differences in presentation, style, and pedagogy are continually made apparent.

In addition to these pedagogical concerns, the literature regarding online education is similarly troubled. When I began my teaching education, I was driven by the book *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction* where the authors state, “there exists a vital need for critical, empirical research into both the ‘processes’ and ‘outcomes’ of OWI” (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004, p. xiv). This need continues to persist due to the varying ways in which technology, learning management systems (LMS), and education continue to evolve at a rapid pace. Additionally, the need for research grows as traditional teaching methods are not easily molded to online learning situations. As Hewett and Ehmann (2004) argued, “we have found that few straightforward transitions exist between traditional (face-to-face) and online contexts because, we believe, there is something fundamentally different about teaching and learning in virtual environments” and further that, “even our most seasoned face-to-face instructors found themselves needing to develop new repertoires of strategies and skills [...] these repertoires did not come easily to our instructors” (p. xiii). These concerns continue to be common themes heard throughout English departments as teachers of English persist in their trials, implementations, reflections, and observations of computer-mediated teaching strategies for online writing instruction.

Several challenges associated with teaching humanities topics online involve the changed social dynamics and interactions that result from these computer-mediated spaces. Many humanities educators believe in the importance of social collaboration as it pertains to learning, and similarly, many online educators would agree that the social dynamics are perhaps the most

changed aspects of the online learning environment. “Many researchers report that collaboration, conversation and problem solving don’t succeed as expected in netlearning environments” (Enqvist & Aarnio, 2003, p. 1). Due to these important considerations, I sought to bring social interaction components to each iteration of the online, upper-division, Writing Arguments composition course I taught.

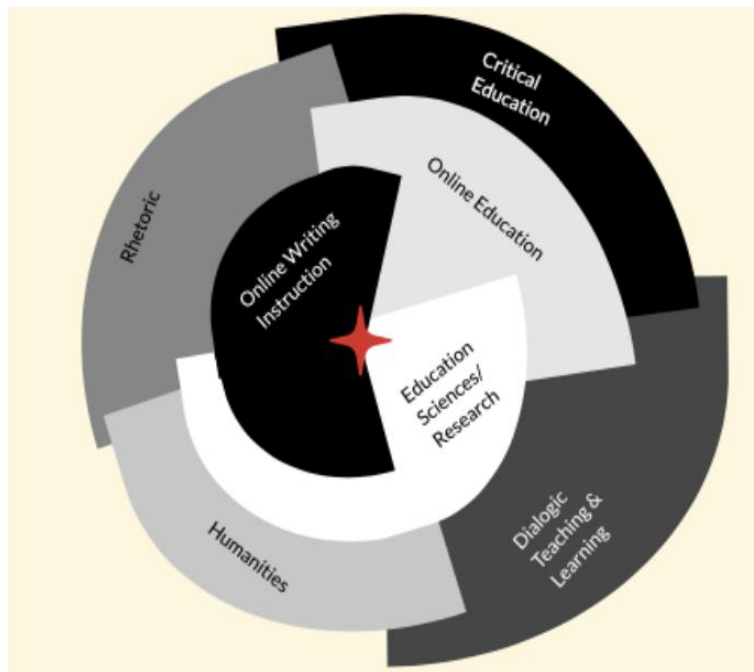
The skills and tools I began to implement surrounding social and dialogic learning in my online classroom led to my realization that a more critical perspective would be necessary in addressing the various topics of this course (e.g. Brantmeier, 2011; Allman et al., 2009). Additionally, my research continued to link these important concepts, “critical” and “dialogue”: “In teaching and learning situations, in knowledge construction, especially in online learning environments, these concepts of dialogue and authenticity are seen to be more and more important” (Enqvist & Aarnio, 2003, p.1). My definition of critical dialogue developed from the ideas that define it as talk and interaction that engages people in deconstructing oppressive and hegemonic discourses and reconstructing more equitable, humanizing discourses (Jennings, et al., 2010). Within the rhetorically framed Writing Arguments course I teach, I found it nearly impossible (as well as unproductive) to avoid critical dialogue as I worked to implement dialogic social learning opportunities for my students. For example, we engaged in talking (in real time and through discussion boards) and writing around current events regarding racism, sexism, and classism. Though the critical dialogue in my research does not get to the aspects of deconstructing oppressive discourses, specifically, the online conversations within the research are trending toward that direction. In the future, I hope to learn more about how to navigate these types of discussions online in order to have more deconstruction and reconstruction taking place. This unique combination of tasks and challenges further supports the exigence of this work.

As such, this 3-manuscript dissertation seeks to cover a variety of topics present within a specific upper-division online writing classroom. While the three articles each examine the teaching of writing in an upper-division online writing course, there is a sharp division between the first article and the second two. This division captures the shift in teaching trends that occurred during the span of my coursework, as well as my passions and pedagogies. The shift in teaching trends, in the field of writing/composition, includes both a shift toward online teaching and toward effectively creating classroom communities that support the social construction of knowledge and critical dialogue —no matter the method of delivery.

The trajectory of proposed research articles begins with a statistical comparison of a rhetoric and composition course taught in both on-line and face-to-face environments in order to gain an important foundation of learning outcomes and interaction criteria. The second two studies then examine in-depth some of the more nuanced approaches, opportunities, and constraints present when implementing critical pedagogy in online writing classrooms. Thus, I developed online learning composition classrooms that intentionally aligned with a new version of the on-campus course I was teaching. It is important to note that the online course was developed first to avoid translating content from an on-campus version that may not be suited to online learning. With IRB approval, I examined the processes and practices of teaching and learning within these classrooms. In the second two studies, I intentionally focused on elements of critical pedagogy toward the goals and activities within two sections (one online and one on-campus) of Composition and Rhetoric courses. I then collected data during the implementation of these courses, including, with consent from participating students, online discussion board transcripts, email notes from face-to-face interviews, and student assignments. I describe in more

detail the data collected and how it has been analyzed in the sections describing Articles 2 and 3 below.

As I began to frame my research, I found that many forces were at play as my interdisciplinary training, coursework, research, teaching, and interests crossed paths and connected in new and ever-surprising ways. As a result, I created a visual in order to construct the importance of each theme and define their differences and connections for myself. The image below demonstrates the seven areas of literature methods I have attempted to fold into this dissertation: critical education, online education, rhetoric, online writing instruction (OWI), education sciences and research, dialogic teaching and learning, and humanities. The overlapping shapes demonstrate where I note connections between these areas. Larger shapes symbolize the range and breadth of particular topics, while smaller shapes pulled to the forefront symbolize the newness and immediacy of the work.



**Figure 1**  
*Design of Literature Methods*

With these clear goals and teaching opportunities, I have developed a passion for learning how to implement critical dialogue and consciousness in college composition courses. Therefore, this research contributes to three different areas of significance (1) the literature surrounding the current state of online education, specifically at the university level; (2) critical pedagogy within online writing instruction; and (3) research surrounding online discussions and the dialogic learning of the online writing classroom.

This research provided me the opportunity to examine the opportunities or affordances as well as the constraints and limitations for online instruction in Rhetoric and Composition. The three studies are driven by the following research questions:

### ***Study 1 Research Questions***

How do learning outcomes compare between online and face-to-face versions of the same composition and rhetoric course?

What are students' perceptions of teaching and learning in their respective course environments?

### ***Study 2 Research Questions***

How do online college composition students respond to asynchronous discussions that involve current and controversial topics?

How are opportunities for engaging in critical dialogue supported and constrained through an online discussion forum?

### ***Study 3 Research Questions***

How are students navigating online discussions as sites of critical dialogue?

How do asynchronous online forums support and constrain the relational aspects necessary for students to engage in transformative education?

Each of the three articles contributes to my larger questions through different methods and theoretical frameworks, offering different angles of vision to the larger problem. The first study (Chapter 2) uses statistical methods to examine learning outcomes of upper-division college composition students in online and face-to-face contexts. Additionally, qualitative analysis regarding student perceptions of elements of the course that supported their learning provides additional insight into social interactions and learning in the online rhetoric and composition classroom. The second and third studies (Chapters 3 and 4) are qualitative inquiries surrounding dialogic learning potentials in the Online Writing classroom. The second study (Chapter 3) examines how critical dialogue of difficult and controversial topics can arise in any classroom activity involving discourse, and how such dialogue can be supported and constrained within online discussion forums. The third study (Chapter 4) examines relationships and learning potentials within the online, upper division, writing arguments composition course.

In the rest of this first chapter, I introduce the literature surrounding the interwoven themes of online education, social considerations, and critical dialogue in the online writing classroom. Following this literature review, I will provide a description of the research project and individual articles. A section on positionality and ethical concerns follows. The chapter concludes with a summary and significance of the research.

## **Literature Review**

Online teaching, in relation to the world's history of teaching and learning mediums, is comparatively new. Online writing instruction (OWI), due to initial resistance in the field of composition, is even newer. Further, online educational tools, purposes, and affordances continue to evolve with technological trends and advancements, making this topic both an exigent and continuing area of necessary research.

One issue regarding online learning is that teachers, educational institutions, and even students often look for and/or prefer a “one-size-fits-all” model. However, past research has demonstrated that online education strategies must shift depending on discipline, level, and technical modality (Hewett 2015; Rovai 2002; Stine 2004; Allen & Seaman 2016). Additionally, my eight years of teaching online and twelve years of being an online student have demonstrated that online education strategies *must* shift in order to correctly address varying disciplines and levels of instruction. As a result, this dissertation explores questions that examine and reflect on online education practices in a specific field, course, university, and timeframe: the upper-division college composition course at a four-year university across a timespan from 2014-2017. Furthermore, I utilized a variety of research methods in order to investigate questions about the teaching of writing online at the advanced college composition level. Asking different questions from different paradigmatic lenses has enabled the same topic to be investigated in new ways and with varying modes of inquiry. Consequently, the three separate studies have produced new and varied results that can be compared in order to make new meaning and gather more knowledge about how to teach and learn within these ever-evolving online spaces.

The demand for online education continues to increase each year (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Hewett & DePew, 2015). This rising demand for online instruction continues to incite the evolving need for educational research in online spaces that can lead to improved practice, theory, and policy regarding online education. Three main gaps in the current literature are addressed by this research. The first is that technology is continuing to expand, and research in every field needs to continue to examine the mediums, practices, and learning outcomes throughout this evolution. The second is that education across differing disciplines cannot and should not be applied in the same way in order to best address the affordances and constraints of



each field. Finally, this research addresses the gaps in the literature around critical pedagogy and co-construction of critical knowledge within the online writing classroom. These gaps are addressed within the literature below as I expand on the need for the research within each study.

### ***Online Education***

The creation and implementation of online education continues to impose a variety of affordances and constraints, which have consequently led to major shifts in the entire teaching and learning process. Though the scope of these changes can be difficult to synthesize and define, researchers and teachers can benefit from observing the nuanced shifts within specific fields and classrooms. The literature surrounding the current state of online education at the university level covers content across all disciplines and spans nearly 3 decades. Studies include large data findings that are often quantitative in methods and focused on outcomes (e.g., Allen & Seaman, 2016; Cavanaugh & Jacquemin, 2015; Johnson, & Mejia, 2014). Small-scale studies are usually mixed-methods (e.g., Atwood et al., 2017; Bettinger et al., 2015; DiRienzo & Lilly, 2014; Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010) or fully qualitative (e.g., Cunningham, 2015; De Wever et al., 2009; Hartman et al., 1991; Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005; Jaber, & Kennedy, 2017) and focus on more unique affordances and constraints regarding student learning processes and potentials. The vast number of studies suggests that research on this topic is significant. The diversity of approaches and fields that this research covers further indicates that there is not a ‘one size fits all’ solution.

One of the larger meta-quantitative studies in online education is the Babson Survey Research Group study (2016). In this study, data were gathered from the National Center for Education Statistics’ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to review and track online education in the United States. The report found that the number of students taking online

courses continues to increase each year and supports further research on distance education in order to continue to understand and enhance its delivery and success. Additionally, the study notes, “Public institutions command the largest portion of distance education students, with 72.7% of undergraduate and 38.7% of graduate-level distance students” (Allen & Seaman, 2016, p. 4). Further, the researchers explain that “the percent of academic leaders rating the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face instruction was 71.4% in 2015” compared to a rating of 57.2% twelve years earlier (Allen & Seaman, 2016, p. 5). These findings demonstrate the increasing demand, ratings, and learning outcomes of online educational spaces. This increased interest and implementation emphasizes the continuing need for research on online education, particularly in public higher education institutions.

In contrast, Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010) argue that “many [online education] studies are based on very small sample sizes and take place in schools or classrooms where individual educators are highly expert in particular uses of technology, and thus these studies may not be generalizable to other contexts” (p. 294). Small sample sizes are often necessary to examine in-depth processes, practices and specific courses. Because of this, there is an even greater need to repeat these studies in order to learn from as many examples as possible.

Both studies above suggest the spectrum of paradigmatic approaches that can be found within online education. The literature includes a long list of studies that demonstrate differences in questions, findings, and opinions regarding online learning across academia. Examining online education from both the perspective of rhetoric/composition and the education/research methods perspective provides a unique overlap of insight into the varying strategies, students, affordances, and constraints of any online educational space.

### ***Social Interactions in Online Learning***

Findings in the literature surrounding social engagement and perceptions of students in online learning spaces helped to shape many of the curricular implications and revisions made to the courses I taught throughout the research process. As a result, I have framed quite a bit of my research around social learning that supports classroom interactions that allow students to practice, consider, and reflect on their roles as agents of social change. The social considerations I am addressing include access and equity, social interactions that support learning and knowledge construction such as class discussions, and the role of diverse social identities in online writing environments. Current issues and demands surrounding access to education are becoming more important to universities across the globe. Online access to education can expand the possible reaches of knowledge to places where knowledge has previously been inaccessible. These inaccessible places include, but are not limited to, students living out of range to attend regular classes, working students, parenting students, and even incarcerated students. While affording access is still a constraint of online and on-campus educations, online coursework has taken the first step toward expanding educational access and reach.

Not only do educators want to expand their reach to a wider audience of students, but they also want the learning to be of high quality—to result in substantial learning and growth. As I discuss later in this section, social interactions are an important part of the learning process; however, these situations are becoming both rare and altered within the online classroom. As a result, social interaction becomes an important component for online learning and online writing instruction that I focus on throughout each of the three studies I have conducted. For teachers of writing, the question becomes: *How can we effectively teach composition and writing online when the social components are different?* The social construction of knowledge is a key

learning component to any classroom. This research project closely examines these efforts of teaching and learning to understand what is being accomplished as well as what potential opportunities may be afforded and constrained.

Other studies focus on the social consideration regarding the role of social interaction among students in support of learning. Smaller humanities courses often utilize the social components of writing workshop and face-to-face discussion; however, the online classroom presents new barriers and opportunities for these types of social engagements. Some studies within the online learning literature suggest that the effectiveness of teaching/learning in the online classroom is lacking due to the different nature of social exchanges that are naturally present within online courses (Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Rovai, 2002). On campus, students have real time, social engagements, whereas the social nature of an online course is primarily asynchronous. There have also been studies, especially from within the medical field, that have found benefits in online discussion forums created for patient use (Lee, 2017; Eriksson & Salzmann-Erikson, 2013). The affordances noted include social and emotional support as well as co-teaching and learning (Atwood et al., 2017; Zappen, 2005). However, there is a gap in the literature in terms of how online education and OWI can implement and benefit from discussions and collaborations.

Enqvist and Aarnio (2003) provide unique voices of perspective from within the educational technology and dialogic literature; however, even they state, “It is not easy to achieve a good level of participation and make a commitment to genuine dialogue in educational online learning settings” (Enqvist & Aarnio, 2003, p .2). Their work focuses on educational media and telecommunications, which overlap well with Online Writing Instruction (OWI) but do not serve to fill the gap of literature regarding OWI and dialogic learning. Further, Enqvist

and Aarnio (2003) present their findings on dialogue through mixed-methods where qualitative analyses of discourse and conversation were conducted only after lengthy quantitative measures were taken. While their research provides key insights into online dialogic learning and research, my research (especially in Chapters 3 and 4) seeks to examine these online interactions from purely qualitative, and even post-qualitative, perspectives. It is my belief that entering the research from this different perspective will lead to new and varied results.

The unique social dimensions of online learning also call attention to the role of identity, diversity, and culture within the online classroom. Jaber and Kennedy (2017) conducted a study involving identity and social learning in the online post-graduate education classroom. Their study examines various central themes involving online discussion, social interaction, and transformation potentials in ways that push the online education conversation in new and important directions. They found that implementing community trust and identity performance opportunities within the online classroom could create deeper social learning experiences, which translated to more effective online learning overall in their study. I used these notions as I reviewed and analyzed the data for Study 3 (Chapter 4). This is a valuable model that addresses problems with identity and social learning in the online classroom; however, there is not currently a similar study done in an online writing undergraduate classroom, so my research seeks to begin to address this important gap.

### ***Critical Considerations of Online Education***

The task of teaching social-critical consciousness involves learners practicing and understanding the societal systems and structures that produce and reproduce inequity and hegemony as well as systems and structures that challenge inequity and reach for a more equitable world. Additionally, there are currently many efforts for humanities work in building

critical consciousness in any classroom (Clifton & Sigoloff, 2013; Gurin et al., 2013). My concept of critical consciousness is derived from Freire's (1970) critical notions of conscientização, which emphasizes the sociopolitical understanding of systems, and structures that produce and reproduce and/or can disrupt and transform the social order. Critical dialogue, then, is the moment-to-moment "talk" and interaction among members of the learning community (students and instructors) that supports learners in naming hegemonic discourses or structures and examining how they serve to support inequitable or unjust systems or practices (Jennings et al., 2010). Many studies examine class activities in critical pedagogy, but do not look closely at the talk and interaction that shapes and reshapes critical knowledge, understanding, and expression. As my research extends toward more qualitative inquiries in Chapter 3 and 4, I attempt to add elements to this gap in the literature.

Building social critical consciousness is especially important within the rhetorical writing course, since it becomes necessary for students to be able to look past the 'sides' of any argument in order to focus on and learn from the structure of the argument (Freire, 1970; Allman et al., 2009). These goals also align with rhetorical composition courses because students are learning how to create critical understanding and knowledge while also learning how to express it through words and actions/interactions, verbally and in writing. Thus, in my dissertation I aim to conceptualize learning as expanding repertoires of meaning, language, and action (Jennings, 1996; Jennings & Pattenauade, 1998). Rhetorical writing explicitly interweaves all three. This work is difficult enough to do in a face-to-face classroom; however, it is equally as important to convey in the online setting. As a college composition teacher and education sciences doctoral candidate, I have come to value the potential transformational experiences that educational spaces can provide for students. Transformative education occurs when we take critical

pedagogy, critical dialogue (Jennings et al., 2010), and critical literacy and apply these tools responsibly within the classroom. The transformation that most interests me in the transformation of an individual toward a more critically conscious existence that includes a deepened understanding of how we are embedded in structures and systems of power and oppression. Morales-Doyle (2015), demonstrates that this type of critical learning can even take place in the secondary chemistry classroom (pp. 13-15). With this example in mind, translating this kind of work into the writing classroom seems to be an easier task, especially as we focus on writing arguments. Differences in opinion and perspective seem to thrive within a community, and bringing local (university, city, and state) issues into the classroom not only provides a diverse list of topics students could choose to write about, but it also provides the crucial element of applying work in the college writing classroom to real-life situations. I could find no published studies that address critical pedagogy in the online writing classroom.

The literature surrounding critical education demonstrates an ability to enhance the learning experience of a classroom while also providing opportunities for students to gain a more critical consciousness through transformative education. Brantmeier (2011) discusses the connection between critical peace education and critical social theory in his chapter published in *Critical Pedagogy of the Twenty-first Century*. Brantmeier (2011) emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive pedagogies and the political importance of education in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (especially in our present political climate in the US). I have applied these concepts within my research as I can see a clear gap in the connection of online learning and critical education, specifically at the college level; this is a gap that I hope to fill with this research. With the growth of online learning, I believe it is important to explore how we can bring critical dialogue and notions of engaged citizenship into the online humanities classroom in ways that

allow for more inclusive and equitable sociocultural agency and transformation. As a result, I have implemented these ideas into both Study 2 and Study 3.

My end goal is to use this new understanding of my classroom and students to further evolve my teaching strategies and experience to my goal in creating, “Critical citizens [who] participate conscientiously, compassionately, and actively in the day-to-day building of more equitable communities, be they classrooms, neighborhood, national, or global communities” (Jennings, 2010, p. 38). I hope to create in policy, practice, and theory the kind of classroom engagement that supports critical citizens. Further, this research demonstrates how the co-constructing opportunities for learning can support students in developing a critical consciousness (Freire, 2000). I believe that this research has and will continue to help me to “accomplish an inquiry that might produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, p. 635). As I completed each study, I needed to move forward and see beyond original findings, and in doing so I realized that, more than anything else I was doing as a researcher, I always hoped to be able to produce for myself new ways of seeing and being in the world, while also helping others to do the same.

### **Description of the Research Project**

Given the various possibilities for gathering and analyzing data, I have engaged in three studies that contribute to addressing the broader research question:

How are teaching and learning supported and constrained in online writing instructional environments?

How can social learning and interaction be implemented and facilitated in asynchronous online spaces of communication?



**Table 1.1**  
*Overview of the Three Related Studies*

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Research Questions	How do learning outcomes compare between online and face-to-face versions of the same course? What are students' perceptions of teaching and learning in their respective course environments?	How do online college composition students respond to asynchronous discussions that involve current and controversial topics? How are opportunities for engaging in critical dialogue supported and constrained through an online discussion forum?	How are students navigating online discussions as sites of critical dialogue? How do asynchronous online forums support and constrain the relational aspects necessary for students to engage in transformative education?
Research Methods Used	Morgan et al. (2012) SPSS statistical methods were used. Braun, & Clarke, (2006) Thematic Analysis.	Atkins & Wallace (2012) Discourse Analysis: Analysis of Classroom Discourse.	Pink (2011, 2017) Digital Ethnography  Kuttner et al. (2018) Arts-based research.
Participants	The data were collected from courses conducted in the Fall of 2015 and the Spring of 2016. There were 132 students with 64 being online students and 68 being on-campus students.	These data were collected from 23 on-campus students, and 18 online students from the Writing Arguments courses taught in the Fall of 2016. This course was taught with the same curriculum and at the same time to the two different group environments.	The class I analyze, in particular, was from the Fall of 2016. An online section of students with 14 females and 4 males made up the group; however, this study focuses specifically on 2 individuals in greater depth or order to better examine processes and practices of critical learning.

Methods of Data Collection	Point totals were collected from three major writing projects, smaller weekly assignments, readings journals, and discussion posts. End-of-semester student reflections were also gathered.	Data collected include collective conversations, online discussion forums, and self-identified information. Semi-structured interviews and field notes from participant-observations have also been collected.	Discussion forums, assignments, introduction videos, field notes, and images from student assignments were collected for analysis.
Methods of Data Analysis	Empirical tests including a simultaneous multiple regression and descriptive statistics were used within this study. Thematic analysis was also used in order to conduct the qualitative portion of textual data analysis of the end-of-semester student reflections.	Thematic analysis was used to code and categorize perspectives, language, and identity indicators. Instances of co-learning and co-construction of knowledge was also analyzed.	Ethnographic methods were utilized in the virtual environment in order to examine processes and practices of critical pedagogy and how they supported and constrained opportunities for critical learning. Additionally, arts-based methods were used to expand on the analyses.
Goodness/ Quality Criteria	Data comparison found to be a proportionately stratified sample. Data collection is done systematically across various means that are determined to crosscheck and validity potentials for error or unique circumstance.	Trent & Cho's (2014) list for evaluating qualitative research was used to check quality criteria.	Quality checks, such as triangulation and member checking, were conducted to the extent possible within this type of study and environment.

***Description of Each of the Three Articles***

This section discusses the research questions for each of the three publications with separate literature reviews and methods for each proposed article. Each article section states the purpose, intended journal and why that journal, and overview of the contents of the manuscript. I

received IRB approval to gather data for this program of research during a four-year window beginning in 2015. Originally the proposal was for a period of three years and was approved for an extension into the fourth year after that time. I have signed consent forms from all student participants to use the data for research and publication.

**Article #1**

<b>Title:</b>	<b>“Upper-Division College Writing Course: A Comparative Analysis of Variables between Online and On-campus Instruction”</b>
<b>Purpose of the article:</b>	To understand how student learning and performance are influenced by learning environments (either face-to-face or online instruction) as well as consider student perspectives on engagement and learning.

This study examines how upper-division writing students are influenced by their learning environment by comparing learning outcomes and performances through examining effects and correlations. This study compares student performance and perspectives of two sections of the same course being taught at the same time by the same instructor (myself) in two consecutive semesters in two different learning environments: face-to-face and fully online instruction. As the teacher-researcher, I intentionally implemented an increased number of social interactions in the online classroom (through discussion forums, video introductions, peer-reviews, and group assignments) in response to findings noted in the literature review above that stated students were dissatisfied with the lack of opportunities for interactions with other students and the instructor in online courses.

The research study is a mixed-methods design that includes a comparative design. Data were collected systematically across various means that are determined by crosscheck and validity potentials for error or unique circumstance. Empirical tests were used to analyze assignments and learning outcomes primarily in the form of grades. Thematic analysis was used to examine the perspectives of students through the comments they produced in the end-of-

semester course evaluation. The purpose of this research was to review and reflect on the ways in which learning outcomes and student engagement were perceived in both settings in order to learn what affordances might be capitalized on for future improvements. The main findings of this study suggest that 1.) online and on-campus environments receive comparable outputs in terms of grading scores throughout the semester and 2.) that online and on-campus student perceptions can provide several unanticipated advantages and opportunities for promoting dialogic learning in the online environment.

## Article # 2

<b>Title:</b>	<b>“Critical Dialogue in the Online Composition Classroom”</b>
<b>Purpose of the article:</b>	The purpose of this study is to examine supports and constraints to students’ co-construction of critical knowledge and critical dialogue in specific online discussion forums.

This study examines efforts to create critical dialogue in the online classroom for upper-division writing students. I focused on the use of particular online discussion prompts and students’ responses to examine the potential affordances and constraints of introducing critical dialogue to students in the online space. The purpose of this research was to derive both practical and theoretical applications for teaching critical dialogue in the online writing classroom. This study utilizes discourse analysis methods from Atkins and Wallace (2012) in order to specifically analyze the classroom discourse gathered as data.

In this study, I look particularly at the responses surrounding a discussion of the rhetorical situation regarding a current, controversial topic that took place in an online discussion forum. Additional facets of critical pedagogy were implemented prior to the discussion are taken into account. Personal communications, synchronous online conferencing, and interviews were also included in the data set. The larger implications and significance of the findings contribute

to the literature surrounding critical dialogue in the online learning environment, and more specifically in asynchronous discussion spaces.

### Article #3

<b>Title:</b>	<b>“Supporting and Constraining Critical Learning Through Critical Pedagogy: A Virtual Ethnography of the Online Writing Classroom”</b>
<b>Purpose of the article:</b>	The purpose of this study is to ethnographically examine a specific digital relationship between students in an online writing classroom and how their interactions led to transformative learning.

This study examines how individual students interact in relational and cultural ways within an online writing classroom. This study engages ethnographic and arts-based research methods. The data included content from discussion forums, assignments, student videos, and images posted/created by the students, with a particular focus on two individual students and the arc of their interactions with each other and other members of the class over the duration of the course.

The study utilizes digital ethnographic methods (Pink, 2017) and arts-based research (Kuttner et al., 2018) to focus on a few specific students and texts that specifically speak to the interplay between exerted power and knowledge construction. Over a period of nine days, these two students moved from defensively talking at one another to finding connection through their dialogue and sharing of personal experiences with each other and with the rest of the class. The results suggest that the co-construction and evolution of critical dialogue have the possibility to arise at any point of social interaction in the online classroom. It is my belief that if we can understand how students co-construct knowledge through sharing their experiences, that we can use these knowledges to practice participating in pro-social, democratic, and civically engaging discourse that can further students’ understandings of writing arguments. Therefore, choosing to

focus on a few, specific individuals who have exerted their power and knowledge has informed my theory and practice.

### **Positionality & Ethical Concerns**

Considering my position as a teacher-researcher is perhaps one of the most prominent ethical concerns in terms of bias quality measures. However, I also believe that this unique position provides this research with a lens from which to enter into this important topic from a new and unique perspective. Ethically, I must state that I do not believe my research is unbiased, though I made conscious efforts at every turn to question myself, member-check, and triangulate my analyses and results. I also know that there are infinite other possible findings both within the presented studies and more largely within the analyses not fully developed or realized within the scope and limitations of this project. I attempt to address these ethical concerns by positioning my research not as broadly applicable or as suggestions best practices approaches or policy revisions. This research is meant as a sharing of reflection and insight from one teacher to another, and as a possible form of inspiration for other teachers to reflect on their own courses in similar ways as there is much to be gained from this work. Selfishly, I found this teacher-research to be one of the most enlightening learning experiences for myself as I strive to continue becoming a more involved and capable teacher for my students.

Similarly, this research is limited to the scope and access to online learning that my university, and even more specifically my department, presently available to me and my students. My online courses do not require synchronous components within the larger group, though I do provide one-on-one video conferencing with students where we can share their paper on the screen and view one another as we talk. Otherwise, we are limited to the tools available within our learning management system (LMS) Canvas. Other universities across the country

and across the globe may find themselves in very different situations and with very different tools and cultural learning perspectives. Thus, these differences further support the need for more teacher-research to be conducted as we transition into these new technological learning spaces. My positionality shifts across each study as I entered a new researcher role with accompanying methods, theoretical framework, and questions. However, there are also a few constants that are imposed across all modes of inquiry and studies proposed. As a doctoral student in the Education Sciences program, I have taken 30 credits of research methods courses. I have learned that research itself can be subjectively, positionally, and interest-oriented from taking this wide array of research courses. In some cases, these motivations can obscure or favor differing modes of inquiry and outcome: a phenomenon that this research is oriented to address.

Researcher positionality has a strong place within this project as I hold many roles within the context of the online classroom community that are necessary to address before understanding the purpose and interpretations found within this study. Having been an online student for the past twelve years and having taught online courses for the past five years, I have had a large variety of online learning and teaching experiences. This experience as an insider has conditioned me to the familiarity of the space and the rhythm of the online classroom: in terms of how communities are formed, how communities work throughout the semester, and then how they cease to exist after final projects are submitted.

I am also familiar with common practices and policies of online educational spaces. This knowledge helped me to interpret the classroom culture from an empathetic perspective; however, this knowledge also had to be put aside when making the familiar strange in order to gain new insights regarding the happenings of the online classroom. These insights also helped me to realize that I have privileged access as an instructor. I also gain access as I relate with

students, meet online or in person, email, etc. Some students give me more access, while others give me less. Grades, though, often require that I am given some type of access to students as they share a lot of themselves in their writing whether consciously or not.

Not only was I seen as a figure of authority, as the teacher, as “other;” I was also positioned as the researcher. These positions of authority are perceptions that I try to dismantle in any classroom whether I am the researcher or not. I hope that this creates a relationship where I am less perceived as an authority and more able to make connections with students that can enhance their learning outcomes. As a result, I work to dismantle my own identities that may influence my role as a teacher-researcher by sharing with students that I am also a student, allowing students to engage in the creation of classroom policies, and attempting to exert less authoritarian control and power over students wherever possible.

As I am simultaneously a teacher, a student, and a researcher, I am aware that these roles complicate my positionality in a way that affects all the research I undertake. My acknowledgement of this unique situation is important to address within all the studies I write, as these positions influence every aspect of inquiry, analysis, and interpretation that I make. I hope that readers see these positions as a distinctive affordance to my work as each role allows me unique access into the spaces I wish to investigate and explore.

Lemke (2005) wrote in his book *Textual Politics: Discourse and Social Dynamics* that, “We see the worlds our communities teach us how to see, the worlds we make always a bit uniquely, within and sometimes just a bit beyond what we’ve been taught” (p.4). I was taught, prior to my graduate coursework, that research is about inquiry. Education in my culture and from my perspective has taught me that research is about inquiry and learning; the type of inquiry I chose to embark upon for this dissertation is one that includes how I have been taught



to approach inquiry as well as how I have chosen to take it just a bit beyond what I have been taught in order to make new meaning for myself.

### **Summary and Significance**

This section summarizes how the three proposed articles build on one another. Additionally, I discuss how this project contributes to practice and theory beyond my own work. These articles build on each other mainly in terms of teaching progression and research methods. Chronologically, the data were collected from earlier courses I taught to more recent ones. When I taught the course and collected the data for Study One, I was at the beginning of my educational research journey; each additional study includes the building of my knowledge of both research and teaching practices. This progression from Study One to Study Three also marks the depth of inquiry as I zoom in further through each successive study. The goal of building upon each proposed article was to reconsider the significance of online learning from various angles in ways that allowed for nuanced observations that could encompass as much of the conversation surrounding the topic of Online Writing Instruction as possible.

From the synthesis I perform in the concluding chapter, I expand upon the types of inquiry, data, and results that are gathered and found when examining the same topic through various research paradigms. The implications help online writing instructors to continue to evolve the research procedures within this discipline more specifically. Online writing instructors can also learn new ways to observe their own courses, implement new content, and consider knowledge construction. Additionally, implications from this dissertation could extend to other fields, as modes of paradigmatic research could be beneficial to compare in multiple other topics and genres. The larger implications and significance of my studies contribute to the literature surrounding technology implementation in the classroom (and most specifically in the online

classroom). I hope that these studies help other instructors to gain knowledge about the learning occurring in the online classroom, and that this project contributes to issues regarding theory, practice, and policy in a few different ways.

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## CHAPTER 2

### UPPER-DIVISION COLLEGE WRITING: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VARIABLES BETWEEN ONLINE AND ON-CAMPUS INSTRUCTION

#### **Introduction**

I began teaching composition courses in 2010. During that time, negative assumptions surrounding online learning were still thick in the air, especially regarding the teaching of writing. As a student of online learning since 2005, I have never quite understood the initial pushback; my online learning experiences had been transformative, engaging, and enlightening. However, I also understood that traditional teachers who had been in the classroom for years and sometimes decades, the proposition of online learning and teaching remained daunting. As a result, I wanted to examine what affordances and constraints online learning produces and how those differ from on-campus learning. To do so, I began to teach the same course, simultaneously, in both online and face-to-face settings in order to compare and contrast the students, the learning structures, and interactions of both environments.

From the beginning, I knew I wanted my research to be student-centered, but I needed to create a foundation quantitatively before I could move into more specific qualitative modes of inquiry. I needed to ensure that my teaching was not more or less successful in either of the two environments in order to begin analyzing the quality of the learning taking place. As a result, this study looks specifically at student learning outcomes by examining the completed assignments, grades, and student surveys through a mixed-methods approach. First, I looked at correlations within student grades in order to assess and compare learning outcomes across environments. As each major assignment focused on a different variety of learning

outcomes, this assessment allowed for an understanding of which outcomes were learned and implemented successfully in each environment. Second, I analyzed student written feedback in end-of-semester surveys in order to qualitatively consider student perspectives and experiences of their writing instruction in both online and in the face-to-face classroom.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how student learning and performance are influenced by learning environments (either face-to-face or online instruction) as well as consider student perspectives on social engagement and learning in both settings. Before I could begin planning and collecting my own data, I needed to review the literature in order to determine the specific needs and the course of action that would be more suitable for the teaching of writing in online spaces.

### **Literature Review**

The growing body of online education literature has expanded greatly in the last decade with studies spanning across all levels, disciplines, and research methods. Larger-scale online education studies tend to suggest that online students achieve lower learning outcomes and retention rates with additional claims that traditional lectures do not translate well for online learners (e.g., Riffell & Sibley, 2003; Skylar, 2009; Wang & Newlin, 2001) due to the inability to ask questions in real time, clarify confusion, and discuss the content. Smaller-scale studies examine student perceptions and engagement in the online classroom (e.g., Yang & Cornelius, 2004; Young & Norgard, 2006) where social interactions between instructors as well as other students were noted to have an effect on student perceptions and course engagement. While online educational research is plentiful, the lack of comparative analyses within upper-division writing courses allows my research to fill an important gap in the present literature. Online educational research is typically conducted by an outside researcher observing someone else's



classroom. Though there are limitations presented with teacher-research validity and bias, I felt that my genuine desire to teach all my students well regardless of environment helped to mitigate some of the most common biases within this type of research. I also knew that addressing these concerns early on in my research planning and data collection would be a necessary step to conducting this study as ethically as possible. One affordance that this teacher-research provides is the consistency across delivery, purpose, and intent. In most online educational studies, comparisons are typically made across many sections being taught by different instructors, at different times, and for different time lengths. As such, the unique situation of my research and course design provides an opportunity for a more controlled comparative environment.

The debate over online education's ability to meet the same standards and outcomes of face-to-face education has been prominent throughout all fields of education since online instruction was introduced. However, the fact remains that whether it parallels on-campus learning or not, it is in high demand. With the rising costs of facilities, increasing numbers of students (especially nontraditional students), and technology's prominent growth and influence in our culture, the demand for online courses continues to increase (Allen & Seaman, 2016). As online course numbers continue to climb, the emphasis has begun to shift away from the debate over which mode of education is better. Instead, the debate now focuses on the affordances of each medium and how they might improve one another as well as how can we use all of our resources to best educate the students of the future (Hewett, 2015; Atwood et al., 2017). As such, academic performance and outcomes should be observed before further online implementations can be considered.

## *Academic Performance*

Numerous studies report the learning and teaching constraints associated with online educational environments (Gundlach et al., 2015; McCutcheon et al., 2015; Tichavsky et al., 2015; Rabe-Hemp, et al., 2009; Stine, 2004). Constraints include increased student procrastination, decreased completion of assignments, lower over-all grades than on-campus peers, and an over-reliance on internet and technology tools (Appleton et al., 2017; Rabe-Hemp et al, 2009; Stine, 2004).

Rabe-Hemp et al. (2009) included measurements of grades and self-reported gains of order to assess time spent on course activities, student engagement, and higher order learning outcomes. Their results suggested that the autonomous learning components of the online course highly correlate with student success and satisfaction, meaning that higher grades were associated with students who perceived the course as enjoyable and found it to be academically stimulating. However, t-tests showed that online students reported their experience as being less positive overall than their on-campus counterparts (online  $X = 2.76$  (SD = 0.723), traditional  $X = 3.14$  (SD = 0.714),  $t = -2.505$ ,  $p = .013$ ). Additionally, their study found that online students had fewer interactions with faculty but did rate their interactions with peers as higher than their on-campus counterparts (online  $X = 1.69$  (SD = 0.788), traditional  $X = 2.73$  (SD = 0.886,  $t = -5.749$ ,  $p = .000$ ). This study of student perceptions helped me to understand what I might be facing from students in the online classroom.

Gunlach et al. (2015) compared three different environments (online, face-to-face, and a flipped-classroom) of an upper-division statistical literacy course. This study found that statistical differences affect, and perceived easiness were higher with the traditional students,

meaning that online and flipped-learning environments were perceived to be more of a challenge for students. However, no statistical differences were found in graded categories or performance. Curriculum transfer is a prominent concern among the online teaching and learning literature. Jaggars and Bailey (2013), experts in educational research from Columbia University, believe that some online learning discrepancies may be due to incorrect or insufficient pedagogical adaptations. They explain that “rather than developing approaches to teaching that would take advantage of the capabilities of computer-mediated distance education, instructors in many cases simply transfer their in-class pedagogy to an online format” (Jaggars & Bailey, 2013, p.2). Many instructors attempt to record lectures or actual class sessions to post them on their online sections; however, the results indicated that these strategies were not successful in achieving student learning outcomes, retention, or satisfaction. Jaggars and Bailey’s research asks online instructors to consider new and innovative teaching strategies within this technological space such as less lecture videos and more activities that allow students to interact with one another as the practice the concepts being taught.

Measures of student performance can be accompanied with student perceptions similar to the framework used in the Gundlach et al. (2015) study. Gundlach and colleagues compared student performance and perceptions of online an on-campus statistics courses. They found that students performed better in the on-campus environment and perceived the course to be easier than did their online counterparts. The performance outcomes are similar to my own 2013 Program Evaluation that found on-campus students to score 7% higher in final grades than their online counterparts in composition courses (Welker, 2013). These studies suggest that online delivery may be more complex than previously assumed, thus hindering the learning process for certain students. This performance-centered framework informs the first phase of my research

study: to compare online and on-campus student learning outcomes to determine if both environments have similar learning outcomes and potentials for teaching and learning.

### ***Humanizing Online Education***

Some studies within the online learning literature suggest that the effectiveness of teaching/learning in the online classroom is lacking due to the different nature of social exchanges that are naturally present within online courses (Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Rovai, 2002). On campus, students have real time, social engagements, whereas the social nature of an online course is primarily asynchronous and remote. However, studies (mostly from within the medical field) have used and found benefits in online discussion forums created for patient use. The affordances of online discussion forums include social and emotional support as well as co-teaching and learning (Atwood et al., 2017; Zappen, 2005). However, there is a gap in the literature in terms of how online education and OWI can implement and benefit from discussions and collaborations, which supports the qualitative data and analysis within my own study.

Student engagement and social interaction are the two areas of online learning that have proven problematic for students and instructors. Without knowing the instructor, engaging with peers, and participating in collaborative efforts, online students miss a key component of learning—the social component. The introduction of web conferencing software has enhanced the learning potential of the online environment. In the last few years, many advances to web conferencing software have been made, which has furthered the success of online communication, and as a result, online education.

The social component of any learning space is necessary for the social construction of knowledge. Student interactions are often important learning moments as they question and converse with one another about readings, assignments, and one another's writing. For any

workshop-style, the social construction of knowledge is especially important and further connects to the notions of social engagements and interactions. In writing courses, a workshop-style classroom involves a lot of peer-reviews, instructor prompts and feedback, and extension process work. The importance of social knowledge construction in the online classroom is further supported by Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, which states that students can often grasp concepts better when taught from someone whose level of knowledge is similar to their own as opposed to an expert on the topic (Nordlof, 2014). As such, it seems especially important to investigate these social interactions for learning, teaching, and engagement in the online writing classroom.

One way to examine social interactions is to consider the variety of methods available within the online space. Jones and her colleagues at Eastern Kentucky University specifically investigate how videos and web conferencing can support online learning. Their findings state:

The challenge in planning and designing online courses is in planning for interactions and humanizing the online learning experience [...] by humanizing the course and planning for immediacy, the instructor not only influences the learner's sense of belonging, but also establishes presence, including social, teacher, and cognitive presence. Presence creates an environment where the learner feels part of a learning community. (pp.164).

This literature indicates how learning to use technology that will enhance course instruction as well as specific disciplinary content can be exciting for instructors and revitalize the teaching experience. I considered these ideas as I designed my study and developed my online curriculum.

## Study Overview

As the literature suggests, learning outcomes and engagement tend to be lower within the online classroom compared to face-to-face classrooms. Additionally, the literature suggests these challenges may in part be due to the lack of social components and interactions available to students online. The social construction of knowledge is particularly important within the writing workshop classroom, yet online these interactions are both rare and altered. I knew that one of the challenges I would face in the online classroom was the lack of social interactions beyond discussion boards. As I strove to bridge this gap within my own teaching, I implemented online video introductions and video-conferencing within my online writing course. Even with these innovations, I hypothesized that my on-campus students would score higher overall in learning outcomes and would have more positive comments in the end-of-semester survey reports due to the literature noted above. As such, my research questions include:

How do learning outcomes (student grades) compare between online and face-to-face versions of the same course?

What are students' perceptions of teaching and learning in their respective course environments?

I addressed these research questions through a mixed methods design including two methods. First, causal comparative statistical analysis analyzed the grades on various assignments and projects that students completed in order to demonstrate the learning outcomes as defined in the course syllabus. Second, qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) examined student perceptions of learning via an end-of-semester open-ended survey given to all students.

## **Methods**

The quantitative portion of this study utilizes a comparative design. Morgan et al., (2012) statistical analysis methods were used to guide the data collection and analyses for this study. Data were collected systematically across various means that are determined by crosscheck and validity potentials for error or unique circumstance. Empirical tests were conducted to analyze graded assignments and learning outcomes primarily in the form of grades. The purpose of this research was to derive practical applications that instructors can implement within their online and on-campus writing classrooms in order to capitalize on the learning opportunities supported in each environment. Empirical tests including a simultaneous multiple regression and descriptive statistics are included within this study in order to examine patterns of academic performance in both learning formats. Data comparisons were from a proportionately stratified sample. The procedures and data for this study were planned according to article examples provided in the literature above.

The qualitative portion of this study utilizes Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis to examine student perceptions of the course as expressed in the comments sections of the end-of-the-semester course survey. The process of thematic analysis required familiarization with the data texts and transcripts before separating the data into categories of initial codes that focused on student perceptions of learning and engagement. After coding was complete, the data were further extracted into themes and sub-themes. These themes were then reviewed, defined, and named in order to map the importance and significance of the data as it applies to student learning and engagement in online and on-campus environments.

The data from this article were gathered from upper-division writing students from a resident-instruction, land grant university. This study compares two sections of the same course

being taught at the same time by the same instructor (myself) in two consecutive semesters in two different learning environments: face-to-face and fully online instruction. It is important to acknowledge the question of reliability due to the nature of teacher-research here, as a commonly held belief is that teachers are likely less reliable in their observations due to unconscious biases. I do not wish to say that I have no unconscious biases, but that this research was mainly conducted for my own reflection and learning motivations. This work has informed the continued evolution of my curriculum and pedagogy in both environments, and I hope it can offer helpful insights to readers as well as encourage them to conduct their own teacher reflections and research. My purpose is to enhance my own teaching strategies and experiences, not to dictate how others teach.

The data were collected from 6 courses (3 online and 3 on-campus) conducted in the fall of 2015 and the Spring of 2016. The total of 131 students yielded a large enough sample to make the data comparison a proportionate stratified sample (McDavid et al., 2006, p. 247). One of the online students dropped out of the course before its completion. All on-campus students completed the course and, therefore, provided data for the entirety of the study. The participants were given the same textbooks, schedule, and assignments in both classroom environments. IRB approval was obtained before the courses were taught and any data were collected. The assignments are quite different and are not meant to test the same skills. The final percentage of their grades takes all of student knowledge into consideration; therefore, it is not essential that their performance remain consistent throughout all assignments. Since there is only one rater, the teacher, consistency should be assumed to be higher than if more than one rater were assigned to different grades; however, an inter-rater reliability system would be more desirable for confirming the reliability of the consistency among the ratings provided. When I present myself



to students as a researcher, I do so from the beginning. Students encounter the online module where they can sign the consent form when they first encounter it in the online space. Additionally, students are made aware that participation will not influence grades in any way. Students tend to sign this consent form and likely do not have many reminders that this is also a place under study. I believe this helps students to minimize the research aspect, which can make them less likely to act in natural ways than if an outside researcher were constantly lurking in the online classroom—creating a more realistic classroom setting. I often discussed some of the differences of each setting with students both online and on-campus to show students more about my research goals and questions. These strategies, though not flawless, helped to ensure that students did not feel coerced in their participation or non-participation in any way.

As the teacher-researcher, I intentionally implemented social interaction engagements in the online classroom in response to findings by multiple studies that students were dissatisfied with the lack of opportunities for interactions with other students and the instructor in online courses. As a result, this study utilizes a mixed-methods approach that allows for both a quantitative comparative analysis of learning outcomes and a qualitative, thematic analysis of open-ended student responses in the course survey.

### ***Setting & Participants***

The participants of this study were mostly junior and senior level students working towards various degrees. The data were collected from courses conducted in the Fall of 2015 and the Spring of 2016. Participants were taking a required upper-division college composition course with the same instructor, during both semesters, in a setting of either online or on-campus. There was a total of 131 students; the online (n=63) and on-campus (n=68) students did not statistically differ in the size of course or dispersal among environments. The participants were

given the same textbooks, schedule, and assignments in both classroom environments. The total of 131 students, which included 68 on-campus students (52%) and 63 online students (48%), yielded a large enough sample to make the data comparison a proportionate stratified sample (McDavid et al., 2006, p. 247).

Participants in both classroom environments were provided with the same syllabus, textbook, assignment rubrics and guidelines, and the same timeline to complete each project and the course overall. Student assignments to either online or on-campus classroom environment was based on their own preference regarding location, schedule, work, family, etc. All participants were provided 3 major essay assignments along with weekly reading journals, discussions, and smaller weekly assignments. The three major assignments occurred in the following order (with due dates spaced every 5 weeks) and included the Annotated Bibliography (worth 100 points), the Convincing Argument Essay (worth 100 points), and the Final Project (worth 100 points). These major assignments were designed to help students learn and practice the learning objectives for the course. Each assignment was geared towards specific learning objectives that build on one another as students move through the course content. Learning objectives for these three major assignments are as noted below:

**Table 2.1**  
*Learning Outcomes for Major Assignments*

<b>Annotated Bibliography</b>	Hone strategies for generating ideas. Read and discuss theoretical texts from rhetoric, discourse studies, communication, and related disciplines Learn skills to break apart and understand complex arguments Define critical thinking and reading Explore the rhetorical contexts of academic and public argument by reading about key issues in rhetoric. Understand and practice various modes of argument.
<b>Convincing Argument</b>	Hone strategies for generating ideas, revising, editing, and proofreading texts in disciplinary/professional/specialized discourse. Critique your own compositions and the compositions of others. Control textual features such as style, syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

	<p>Read, practice, and consider various modes of argument composed for a variety of contexts and audiences.</p> <p>Compose effective arguments in different genres (such as academic and public media)</p>
<b>Multimodal Essay</b>	<p>Select, evaluate, and integrate appropriate evidence for multiple genres, modes, and rhetorical situations</p> <p>Compose multiple drafts in different genres and different modes</p> <p>Compose effective arguments in different modes (such as alphabetic, auditory, and visual modes, as well as multimodal texts that combine these strategies)</p> <p>Analyze texts reflecting disciplinary/professional/specialized discourse</p> <p>Reflect on the synthesis and communication of knowledge in alternate modes of composition</p> <p>Anticipate and address audience questions and objections</p> <p>Adapt content and style to respond to the needs of specific audiences and rhetorical situations</p> <p>Focus and sustain arguments in different modes using effective arrangement</p>

Additionally, smaller weekly assignments, reading journals, and discussion posts were worth between 10-20 points each. Students’ final grades were based on a 1,025-point total for the entire semester. While IRB approval was sought before the study, there were no intentional interventions in either group as the purpose was to see how similarly the groups might perform. Participants in both classroom environments were provided with the same syllabus, textbook, assignment rubrics and guidelines, and the same timeline to complete each project and the course overall. Student assignments to either online or on-campus classroom environment was based on their own preference regarding location, schedule, work, family, etc.

At the time this course was developed, I had only familiarized myself with the online learning literature that largely emphasized the lack of student interactions, community, and connection. Therefore, I worked closely with TILT and CSU Online to integrate some community-building strategies in the online course. The strategies that we included online were:

**Weekly online discussions** that required two due dates (the first due date was for an initial post and the second due date was for responding to a specified number of

peers). Additionally, each initial post and all responses had to be a certain number of sentences in order to avoid the “yes” or “I agree” responses typical of new online students. Finally, the weekly discussions were introduced within the first week of class in order to provide a framework of expectations and rules to guide successful learning and communication within the online classroom. These expectations can be found in Appendix A.

**Video Introductions** were required during the first week of class. Students were asked to create a video of themselves answering a list of questions in order to get to know more about one another. Students were then asked to respond to at least 3 of their peers. The template for this discussion can be found in Appendix B.

**Online Video Conferencing** through WebEx was required for all online students. These conferences took place in the middle of the semester and provided students the chance to meet with me synchronously online to discuss a draft of their second major assignment. This conferencing software allowed us to view and comment on their drafts simultaneously while also using the video-chat function that appeared in the top right-hand corner of the screen.

It is important to note that both introductions and weekly discussions were also part of the on-campus versions of the course during face-to-face class meetings, as these are regular practices for traditional writing courses. Additionally, on-campus students meet with me in my office to discuss their drafts one-on-one. Students in both setting completed all of the same assignments: 7 smaller weekly writing assignments, 10 weekly discussions, 3 major writing assignments, and 12 reading journal assignments.

### **Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

### *Statistical comparison of performance measures*

For the quantitative data analysis comparing grades on major assignments that demonstrated specific learning outcomes in both classroom formats, I used descriptive statistics to check all the categories of grading being considered in order to ensure that they are approximately normally distributed. The research question these data help to answer is research question 1: How do learning outcomes (student grades) compare between online and face-to-face versions of the same course?

From my exploratory data analysis (EDA), I was able to examine the data for errors and checking assumptions. The descriptives test indicates that out of a total of 131 students, only 120 students were considered valid as having completed all three of the major assignments for the course. While students in either environment were not considered valid for comparison if they did not complete the major assignment being tested, it is also important to note that the validity is up for debate as there are important stories to be told from considering those outliers. Overall there were a total of six online outliers and four on-campus outliers; however, the number of online students was lower than the number of on-campus students to begin with (63 online and 68 on-campus). This means that 10% of online students did not complete at least one major assignment, while only 6% of on-campus students participated similarly. Additionally, participation levels dropped for both courses as the semester went on. Beginning with the Annotated Bibliography, only 95% of online students completed the assignment, while 99% of on-campus students submitted their final Annotated Bibliographies. For the second major assignment, the Convincing Argument Essay, 92% of online students and 97% of on-campus students submitted their final drafts. Finally, for the Final Multimodal Project, 90% of online students and 94% of on-campus students completed turned in their final assignment. Though

these outliers do not produce statistically significant differences, it's important to note that while the trend of a raising number of students not completing major assignments rises in both environments as the semester progresses, the online students in this study, did so at a higher rate. With these important considerations in mind, I moved forward with the descriptives statistics in order to examine them for appropriate testing methods.

**Table 2.2**  
*Descriptive Statistics*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
Total Points Overall	131	12.50%	99.15%	86.0029%	15.72501%	-2.930	.212
Annotated Bibliography	127	61%	97%	88.24%	6.921%	-.952	.215
Convincing Argument Essay	124	67.00%	100.00%	88.6210%	8.52122%	-.593	.217
Final Project	121	60.00%	100.00%	93.5124%	7.81997%	-1.349	.220
Valid N (listwise)	120						

From the descriptives, one could expect that there were no significant differences between the groups for either variables. Upon further examination, it was found that two variables were not skewed (the annotated bibliography grades and the convincing argument grades) while the other two variables were skewed (the final multimodal project grades and the overall total points). As a result, two types of tests were run: a t-test for the parametric or non-skewed variable data and a Mann-Whitney U for the non-parametric or skewed variable data.

A t-test was run for the variables that were approximately normally distributed and the other assumptions of the t-test were not markedly violated. Further the independent variables of

environment (online or on campus) were analyzed. An independent samples t-test was conducted for the dependent measures of bibliography grades and convincing argument essay grades.

**Table 2.3**  
*Group Statistics*

	Environment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Annotated Bibliography	Campus	67	88.91%	6.575%	0.803%
	Online	60	87.48%	7.268%	0.938%
Convincing Argument Essay	Campus	66	89.1667%	8.98132%	1.10552%
	Online	58	88.0000%	7.99781%	1.05016%

**Table 2.4**  
*Statistical Comparison of Approximately Normally Distributed Variables*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff	Std. Error Diff	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig						Lower	Upper
A B	Equal variances assumed	.08	.77	1.16	125	.248	1.43	1.23%	-1.00%	3.86%
	Equal variances not assumed			1.16	119.69	.250	1.43%	1.24%	-1.02%	3.87%
C E	Equal variances assumed	1.07	.30	.759	122	.449	1.17%	1.54%	-1.87%	4.21%
	Equal variances not assumed			.765	121.97	.446	1.17%	1.52%	-1.85%	4.19%

\*AB= Annotated Bibliography, CE= Convincing Essay

Regarding the Annotated Bibliography assignment, the mean for campus students equaled 88.91% and online student mean equaled 87.48%. Therefore, the annotated bibliography showed there was not statistically significant differences between online and on-campus learning environments, ( $t=1.162$ ,  $df=125$ , and  $p=.248$ ). The means for the Convincing Argument essay were 89.17% for campus students and 88% for online students, and there were not statistically

significant differences between online and on-campus learners' scores on this essay, ( $t=.759$ ,  $df=122$ , and  $p=.446$ ). No significant differences between online and on-campus for either one of the dependent measures were found. This means that students in both environments scored similarly regarding the learning outcomes for those particular assignments (the annotated bibliography and the convincing argument essay), and the effects size was small according to Mogan, Leech, Gloeckner, and Barrett (2013). However, it is interesting to note that on-campus students had a slightly higher (1.43%-1.17%) overall percentile for both of these assignments. Though not statistically significant, this was an important difference for me to note from an instructor's perspective.

The final project and the total overall grades were two variables that were skewed. The grades of final multimodal project and overall total grades were also dependent variables that were ordinal in measure and the variance of the environments were unequal or nominal in measure. As a result, a Mann-Whitney U test was utilized in order to compare the two environments of online and campus learning.

**Table 2.5**  
*Mann-Whitney Test*

	Environment	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Total Points Overall	Campus	68	66.71	4536.50
	Online	63	65.23	4109.50
	Total	131		
Final Project	Campus	64	68.95	4412.50
	Online	57	52.08	2968.50
	Total	121		

Table 2.5 above shows the mean or average scores for online and campus students on each of the four dependent variables. For the final overall grades, the on-campus students have higher mean ranks (66.71) compared to the online students (65.23). Again, there are not statistically significant differences between the two environments, but as an instructor, it was important to



note that online students scored slightly lower in the final overall grades than their on-campus peers.

Similarly, online students ranked lower (52.08) than the campus students (68.95) for their multimodal project assignment, indicating that there is a statistically significant difference between the two environments. When comparing environments for the final project grades, there is a significant difference for means at .005. This signals that there is a fairly small likelihood of getting these results by chance. There is a typical or medium effects size at .3 ( $r = .063$ ) which demonstrates that there is 6% of variance. These results indicate that on-campus students scored higher than the online students and about 6% of that variance in scores can be explained. As the comparisons in of the other point totals began to tell a slight story of difference, the Final Project scores indicate that online students were less successful in demonstrating their understanding of the learning outcomes associated with the Final Project. Considerations about these similarities are further explored within the results section.

### ***Thematic Analysis of Student Perceptions of Learning and Engagement***

At the end of each semester, students are assigned an end-of-course survey that allows them the opportunity to reflect on the course and provide suggestions and feedback to the instructor. Throughout the semester, I had anecdotally taken notes of assignments and interactions that I observed as having unfolded in varying scopes, depths, and outcomes when compared to the online or on-campus environment. As a result, I tailored the survey reflection questions to focus on those themes as well as allow for more open-ended ideas and opportunities to allow students to touch on concepts I may not have noticed. The course reflection survey asked students the following:

*Please share a few meaningful lessons you have learned this semester. Reflect on your experiences and opinions of the course overall. What aspects did you find more and/or least helpful regarding your learning experience? What suggestions might you have for improving the learning experience for future students taking this course?*

Overall, 61 of the 68 on-campus students completed the end-of-course survey, while 62 of the 63 online students completed the survey. With a 95% completion rate, I was provided with a significant amount of data to use in order to further learn and reflect upon the similarities and differences between the two course environments. Braun & Clark's (2006) methods of thematic analysis involve open and focused coding to construct themes. I focused my analysis on student comments regarding their perceptions of opportunities for learning through social interaction: peer-reviews, online discussions, and online assignment guidelines.

## **Results**

The results section is divided into two major sub-sections in order to fully outline the separate outcomes of both the quantitative and qualitative components of this study.

The quantitative results will be presented first, followed by the thematic analysis results of the course surveys.

### ***Quantitative Results***

The outliers of the data provided some of the first pieces of evidence for examination as online students appeared to be dropping the course at higher rates than their on-campus peers. Though these numbers were not significantly higher, ending with 94% completion for on-campus and 90% completion for online, their differences became important for me to examine as a teacher. Though 90% completion rates are not necessarily bad, the fact that 10% of my students were leaving without demonstrating all of the learning outcomes for the course (whether they

passed the course or not) did not feel acceptable for the teaching goals I had set for myself. From my research, I knew that retention rates were lower in online learning environments, and it was difficult to see this reflected in my own courses. I knew that in order to counter decreasing retention rates, that student engagement and classroom interactions were going to need further examination and implementation in future studies.

The first two assignments were run through a t-test (the Annotated Bibliography and the Convincing Argument Essay). While there were no statistically significant differences between the two environments, one could feel confident in the nearness to equality between these scores. However, as an instructor, I noted the slightly lower means percentages of the online students for both of these major assignments as something to consider in future studies. Because these results were similar for both assignments, I felt that those similarities were important to consider and be aware as a teacher working to serve students equally across both online and on-campus classroom spaces.

Additionally, the findings indicate that on-campus students scored significantly higher on their final project grades than their online peers. This finding led to further examination of the learning outcomes that were intended for each assignment. The differences suggest that online students performed lower on the learning outcomes for the multimodal project which included:

- Select, evaluate, and integrate appropriate evidence for multiple genres, modes, and rhetorical situations
- Compose multiple drafts in different genres and different modes
- Compose effective arguments in different modes (such as alphabetic, auditory, and visual modes, as well as multimodal texts that combine these strategies)
- Analyze texts reflecting disciplinary/professional/specialized discourse
- Reflect on the synthesis and communication of knowledge in alternate modes of composition
- Anticipate and address audience questions and objections

- Adapt content and style to respond to the needs of specific audiences and rhetorical situations
- Focus and sustain arguments in different modes using effective arrangement

Achieving similar learning outcomes across the online and on-campus environment is the ideal goal for instructors moving their course content online, and this was a welcome finding.

However, results do indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in multimodal project grades across the online and on-campus environments.

Further research will need to be conducted to see if all or specific learning outcomes from this assignment did not translate to online learners through assignment differences and student experiences. A few differences were noted between the online and on-campus processes in regard to this assignment. The multimodal project grades may have been higher on campus than online due to the peer-review process taking place in class versus online. This in-class process asked students to walk their audience through their project rather than letting them review the project from a distance on their own. The social element and conversation of the on-campus peer-review allowed for more people to engage with the project whereas online students had 2 independent reviewers only.

### **Qualitative Thematic Analysis Results**

Student course surveys provided textual evidence of student preferences and perceptions of their online and on-campus writing course experience. After collecting and analyzing these texts, two important themes were compared in order to consider practical implications for future teaching and learning writing within online and on-campus environments. Students in both settings repeatedly mentioned that peer-reviews and discussions were areas of learning or difficulty for them. Additionally, as an instructor, these were two types of assignments where I noticed important differences when comparing the online and on-campus setting. Interestingly,

both peer-review and discussions require social interactions; the very concept that was lacking and focused in on recent online education literature.

**On-campus students: value of peer reviewer perspective.** Peer reviews are an important part of both my online and on-campus writing course. Peer-reviews serve as an opportunity for students to view other student drafts, provide revision suggestions, and receive comments from their peers on their own writing. In both the online and on-campus section of my writing course, students were asked to complete peer-reviews for each of the three major essay assignments. Peer-reviews consisted of providing feedback for two peer drafts, either in class for the on-campus section or through a discussion board online and receiving feedback from two peers. Following peer-reviews, students were given an opportunity to make any changes before submitting their final drafts to the instructor for evaluation.

Within the student reflections, 19 students discussed peer-reviews as either a more or a less helpful learning experience. Eight of the online students noted that they found peer-reviews to be specifically helpful, while eleven of the total number of on-campus students noted particular frustrations or difficulties with their peer review experiences. Further, no online students commented that they were dissatisfied with peer-reviews or that they were not helpful. When face-to-face students commented on peer-reviews, their responses were unanimously negative in terms of their benefit and learning potentials. In this section, I consider first on-campus student perceptions of lack of quality and value of peer-reviewed feedback, then online student perceptions of the quality and value of peer-reviewed feedback. I then analyze the feedback from students in both settings to better understand how to develop peer-review structures and processes that can better serve students in both traditional and online settings.

**On-campus critique of peer reviewer quality.** The quality of peer-reviews may also have been a product of my facilitation. Though students were given the same criteria and questions to review in both environments, perhaps my expectations were diluted in verbal, visual, or other cues in the face-to-face classroom that were not present in the online setting for peer-reviews. Many face-to-face students expressed that peer-reviewers did not provide full or in-depth responses to their work. Additionally, a number of face-to-face students described how critique, if it was present, could be portrayed incorrectly, and also how they would have benefitted from more constructive criticisms overall. The comments indicate that in-class peer-reviews often left a lot to be desired. In general, it is apparent that students did not take the time to read and/or comment thoroughly on the work of their peers. Seven on-campus students specifically made comments that in-class peer-reviews lacked the amount of time or energy necessary for gaining productive and critical comments. Many of the on-campus students felt the in-class format of peer-reviews left them without much constructive feedback to work with as they revised their essays before submitting final drafts. Several students commented that they would like to receive more feedback and further explanation about the comments that were left on their drafts.

Another common thread woven throughout the on-campus student comments regarding peer-reviews was that students worried about being perceived incorrectly or reading the comments of their peers incorrectly. The lack of critical voice in peer-reviews was also a comment. Examples of this include:

*“I think people have a hard time actually critiquing other people’s work (myself included) and people seemed hesitant to give direct constructive feedback so it limited how helpful the comment actually were.” --F2F Student 9*

*“Participating in peer reviews was an overwhelming task for me. Evaluating other people’s work, without sounding nit picky, harsh, or clueless, was too challenging for me.” --F2F Student 18*

*“I wish people would feel a little more confident in providing kind criticism. Often we err on the side of kindness and support.” F2F Student 24*

The above comments indicate both sides of this issue regarding peer critique. Some students do not want to be perceived as “harsh” or are “nervous” about their ability to critique another’s writing. This may be due to previous writing experience, self-esteem, and/or other personality traits specific to those students. The other side of the spectrum presents students who wish they had received constructive feedback in order to learn more about their writing and to make greater revisions to their work.

Had I only analyzed the on-campus student comments. On one hand, I might have concluded that the peer-review prompts were not well instructed or that the students needed more guidelines and structure regarding peer-reviews. However, on the other hand, when I reviewed the online students’ comments regarding peer-reviews, I found that even though they had the same exact prompt and assignment, their perspectives of peer-reviews and their benefits were starkly different. These perspectives included description of the value of peer-review perspective, the quality of peer-review feedback, and the structures of effective feedback.

**Online students: value of peer reviewer perspective.** Five online students specifically referenced the concept of gaining another perspective or opinion as being a helpful part of the writing and revision process. This was an unexpected commonality, as it was not an element of focus in the review instructions and had not been mentioned at all in the on-campus student comments. Examples of this perspective or opinion reference include:

*“I appreciate peer reviews as the outside looking in always helps me see things I didn’t see on my Own.” --Online Student 13*

*“The most helpful part of peer reviews was to get an outside opinion and critique of my work, especially when I was stuck and did not know what else to do with my project.” --Online Student 10*

*“It was good to get another's perspective on the issue [during peer-reviews]. The more feedback the better.” --Online Student 4*

In sum, multiple online students indicated the value of peer-reviewers’ comments on drafts that the original author had not yet considered. These comments helped the author to see their work from a new perspective and to further understand other opinions. Not only were authors able to see their work in a new light, but they were able to appreciate and/or apply these new perspectives into the revisions. This is the type of deep work that peer-reviews strive to achieve, and it was surprising to find that these comments were repeated across five separate students in the online environment.

**Online students: value of peer-reviewed comments.** Online student comments in course surveys implied that peer-reviews were engaging and that they received helpful perspectives and ideas. A few examples include:

*“Peer reviews were helpful because we had the experience of showing our projects to others and getting critiques and for me to experience doing that for others.” -- Online Student 20*

*Sometimes if my points were a little confusing [my classmates] could tell me to make it clearer. Also they could tell me what parts I should add more information to or what parts were good to go.” --Online Student 4*



*“The most helpful part of peer review was getting the second and third eye on the project, it’s difficult to fully review something on your own because in the eye of the person creating it, you know what it’s supposed to mean and stand for but that’s not always true.”--Online Student 15*

*“I feel like peer reviews really helped me add crucial aspects to my project and I tried to use all the comments I received to better my project.” --Online Student 7*

From the above comments, online students seem to appreciate the comments their peers left them in regard to their writing. Online students note the shift in perspective that occurs when they consider their text from another vantage point. The repetition of these comments online and the absence of negative online comments for peer-reviews, leads me to the assumption that something within the online peer-reviews is working well for students as they work to consider their audience and the overall writing process.

**Structuring peer-review interactions for effective learning.** I had noticed throughout the two semesters of teaching these sections that comments were more substantive in the online course reviews, but after reviewing these surveys I went back through peer-reviewed drafts of these students to take a closer look. I related patterns of quality/lack of quality of peer-reviewed feedback with student statements in the course surveys. Three factors might have contributed to the length, number, and depth of comments received online versus those noted on face-to-face student drafts. The first was that on-campus, students worked with printed drafts and pens or pencils. This format may have hindered students in terms of the space available and the level of difficulty and time necessary to make hand-written comments. Comments that indicate that space and length might have been a factor include:

*“A lot of the comments just said good or bad next to the topic instead of going into more detail, which would have been nice.” F2F 10*

*“Many of the comments were a bit vague (not only with just mine but I noticed comments for others’ projects as well were similar)” --F2F Student 21*

The second factor was the time constraints of the on-campus classroom. When we peer-review in class, we divide our 50-minute session into two chunks to allow for two readers on each draft. The time is often cut even shorter due to time taken to provide instructions, unprepared students, and odd numbers of present students, requiring more time-consuming triads of peer-review groups rather than pairs. In contrast, online students do not have a set time to complete their reviews (though constraints from outside of class may limit them in other ways). Online students can return to a discussion to add thoughts later, save a draft to complete at a later date, or take multiple days to complete the peer-review assignment. One face-to-face student, for example, commented on time being a factor:

*“Many of my peer-reviews seemed like the responders did not completely review my drafts at all. I appreciate when people are honest and make suggestion or let me know when I am on the right track. I don’t appreciate when people seem like they just rushed through it and did not respond honestly.” --F2F Student 13*

And finally, the third factor indicates that students might benefit from the relative anonymity of online peer-reviews. On-campus students noted that they felt uncomfortable giving constructive feedback or wished that their peers had felt more comfortable to provide more constructive feedback. These comments were not present in the online student surveys, and one assumption of this difference could be that students feel less comfortable having an in-person conversation with a peer about their writing, since criticism could be viewed as confrontation. However, online

students do not experience that same pressure, and look at the text as a stand-alone piece as opposed to a person or peer. Comments from on-campus students that support this idea include:

*“The least helpful parts of peer review were that a lot of them just told me that it was good, I wish they’d have told me what didn’t work well or what was maybe confusing.” --F2F Student 11*

*“For me, the comments were mostly supportive and that was nice. I wish people would feel a little more confident in providing kind criticism. Often we err on the side of kindness and support.” --F2F Student 24*

*“I think people have a hard time actually critiquing other people’s work (myself included) and people seemed hesitant to give direct constructive feedback so it limited how helpful the comment actually were. Many of them were generic and vague.” --F2F Student 2*

*Evaluating other people’s work, without sounding nit picky, harsh, or clueless, was too challenging for me.” --F2F Student 18*

These data suggest that students online, in general, felt that peer-reviews were more helpful and successful than their on-campus counterparts. The above comments from students have provided ideas for improving peer-review in writing courses for both environments. If anonymity and time allow for more helpful and in-depth feedback, then implementing online peer-reviews for on-campus writing courses might be a strategy to consider for future courses. Additionally, adding a few more guidelines for online peer-reviews can help address some of the tone and interpretation difficulties that students noted about written comments in both environments. Online students also were found to have a similar theme regarding online discussions.

### ***Online Discussions***

Students in both course formats also commented on the quality and value of course discussions. Because much of the online education literature speaks to the need for improved social engagement in the online learning environment (Zappen, 2005; Rovai, 2002; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Atwood et al., 2017), I had expected more positive comments from students in the face-to-face section than the on-line section on class discussions. As such, I was surprised to find that students commented positively on the online course discussions. While 17 total students commented positively on aspects of online discussions, the following four students underscore online discussions as a favorite class activity that offers the opportunity to engage with other students:

*“The discussion board conversations were great. This is one of my favorite parts about online classes. I think the topics were very good and I enjoyed doing the discussions. I also enjoyed the responses and getting into discussions with my peers.”*

*Online Student 2*

*“I do like the conversations as they give you the ‘class feel’.” Online Student 21*  
*“The discussion boards were one of my favorite parts of this course. It was a fun way to gain insight to the other students and their perspectives. It allowed us interactions with each other although this is an online course and interaction can be difficult without being in a classroom.” --Online Student 6*

*“I generally always enjoy the discussion boards because of the way that it brings us back to feeling like we are actually in a classroom. I don’t know about other students, but I sometimes need that experience because I am an all online student.” --Online Student 17*

The above students note the benefits they saw within online discussions as helping to create a classroom environment online that is often different within this new learning space. The additional notes of respect, enjoyment, and interest help to encourage continued implementation of online discussions as well as support a need for more in-depth future research regarding discussion topics, instructions, affordances, and constraints. The notion of social engagement and classroom community can further connect with student retention and increase the need for more understanding of online discussions, especially within writing courses where students benefit from additional rhetorical and compositional practice. Online discussions provide an opportunity for more significant consideration of potential audiences as the perceived permanence and potentially unlimited sharing capacities differ drastically from a comment made in an on-campus classroom setting.

Engaging in discussion through asynchronous forums further differs from face-to-face interaction in that participants are able to take time to compose and revise their messages before sending them. Similarly, Schrire (2006) found that, “Writing provides a powerful mediating technology, enabling the group as well as the individual writer to make real progress in knowledge building” (p. 54). This is apparent as students begin writing their responses and seem to almost shift in their beliefs and ideas as the process their own thoughts. Schrire (2006) demonstrated these learning processes in the findings section, which further support that there are many intricate and complex components at work within these asynchronous discussion spaces.

While the examples regarding peer-reviews and discussions seem to be the opposite (in supporting the opportunities of online learning), this alternative finding suggests that face-to-face environments may afford students with more space to co-construct knowledge and gain a greater

understanding or fuller picture of a concept, topic, or theme. It was helpful to see that not only have students let me know this was an issue for them, but a few of them took it a step further to provide possible solutions. This may be due to their previous experience in an online course where instructors implemented discussion boards on major assignment guidelines, or it may have been an individual thought the student had made with connection to the benefits of other types of discussion boards. Either way, I do not know that I would have produced this solution on my own to include a discussion board with assignment prompts. I would have thought that a video of my talking over the instructions would suffice. However, future interactions of the course will include both.

## **Discussion**

The key findings of this study were connected to the intentionally developed social interaction tools that were brought into the online classroom to create a similar social environment to on-campus courses. Even with this effort, I still assumed that the on-campus class would outperform the online class because of the opportunity for weekly face-to-face social interactions through class discussions and face-to-face peer review. I had not expected that there would be no difference quantitatively regarding performance. Nor had I expected that students in the online classes would point to structures of social interaction that I already had in the online course, before adding the video introductions and video instructions. In fact, qualitative examination of student comments on course surveys regarding their views on learning processes led to some surprises – that the online peer review and online class discussions were generally viewed by a number of online students to be valuable for learning whereas face-to-face students' comments on these processes were generally negative.

These notations collected regarding the value of peer-reviews might imply that online peer-reviews—whether due to format, space, time, etc.—afford greater potentials for this type of deep learning to occur. Further research will need to isolate and investigate what elements of the online peer-reviews allowed for this learning to take place and how to replicate this experience for learners in both environments.

The data and analysis above indicate that there are a variety of affordances and constraints presented within the varying learning environments. The accountability of online tools has become helpful for on-campus learning instruction. The tools in the online class were more effective and provided more opportunities for in-depth learning. This was not visible to me before. The implications could help both face-to-face and online writing instructors to continue to evolve the research procedures within this discipline more specifically. Online writing instructors could learn new ways to observe their own courses, implement new content, and consider knowledge construction. Additionally, implications from this study could extend to other fields, as modes of paradigmatic research could be beneficial to compare regarding specific topics and genres.

The larger implications and significance of my studies will contribute to the literature surrounding technology implementation in the classroom (and most specifically in the online classroom). I hope that these studies will help other instructors to gain knowledge about the learning and expression occurring in the online classroom. This project will contribute to issues regarding theory, practice, and policy in a few different ways.

### ***Practical Implications***

My results may not provide a list of ‘best practices,’ but my results will evolve who I am as a teacher and researcher and thus have the potential to change and benefit my students, my readers, and their students. Because the online environment for learning is new, changes will likely occur and should be expected to continue to evolve as our teaching strategies and technologies continue to evolve. This in turn will affect practice in both general and specific ways. While I don’t aim to solidify ‘best practices’ for online writing instruction, I do believe that this research can help provide insights into where we are now, where we have come from, and a solid ground from which we can start to push the envelope for further enhancing the teaching and learning of writing online.

In the final reflections for both courses, I asked students what aspects were the most helpful to their learning, what components of the course were least helpful to their learning, and what changes they would suggest for enhancing the experiences of future students in the course. The responses were largely centered on peer-reviews for both the online and on-campus sections in terms of what was helpful/unhelpful for learning. For the online students, many of their comments also centered around the discussion board posts that were not related to peer-reviews. Additionally, there was a final group of comments that helped me to gain valuable insights on future practices to implement or observe. Many students were online students, and their experiences in other courses seem to spill over into this one. I appreciate that their ideas were taken from other successful learning experiences they had previously had. This was one way for me to gain more knowledge on a topic that was just beginning to come into the literature.

### ***Theoretical Implications***



Some research attempts to quantify online discussions through social network analyses without relating them to identity creation (De Wever et al., 2009; Tirado et al., 2012). I think this does a disservice to the ways we can think about, participate in, and learn from these types of discussions. I am motivated to demonstrate the benefits of the co-constructed knowledge and learning that takes place within the college composition online discussion forum as well as how this co-construction is organized by the students through their socially and personally constructed online identities. De Wever et al. (2009) conducted a study of online discussion forums concludes that, “The implementation of asynchronous discussion groups is based on the notion that social dialogue is important to trigger knowledge construction” (p.516). Likewise, I have found that asynchronous discussions are typically more fruitful than synchronous, face-to-face discussions. This may be for a variety of reasons: group dynamics of each class, dynamics of individuals in online versus on-campus courses, that time in asynchronous discussions allows for drafting, editing, responses over multiple days, and extended time which allows for (and asks) that each student submit three contributions. I seek to better understand how learning processes are supported through online social learning engagements in my research.

In an online learning environment, we are still socially constructing knowledge through online forms, but it differs from face-to-face learning contexts. The findings here suggest that online and face-to-face learning contexts are not necessarily in and of themselves better or worse for teaching and learning. Instead, it is important to more fully understand how the different social interaction contexts encourage or inhibit learning and self-expression. I was surprised with how much students that are more open were discussing critical and controversial topics in my online course discussion forums than their peers in the same face-to-face classes. I hope that my research will contribute to enhancing current online teaching and research practices. I know

that my research will also help me learn from the critiques I receive as a result of conducting this type of research. I believe Lather and St. Pierre (2013) would agree/have inspired me to go forth with my research purpose as being driven by the need to “accomplish an inquiry that might produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (p. 635). In doing so, I will move forward with the goal of producing new knowledge for myself while also producing knowledge for others in new ways.

One thing that I have learned from this study is that methods are important, but theory becomes necessary in many ways as well. I have taught the same course, but due to the differences in the individual students, the groups they form together, the learning environments under which they work, and various other situational elements including time and space, these methods do not always translate into the same outcomes. In order to make productive decisions within any teaching environment, one must “think with theory” in order to develop in-the-moment opportunities for learning and growth. Therefore, the course content and purpose can stay the same, but the methods of delivery shift depending on the environment, the group, and the perceived outcomes. This shifting of methods, then does not become a generalizable application for online and/or face-to-face teachers to follow. Rather, it creates a theoretical notion of continual research, reflection, and conversation on which to base future and in-the-moment decisions regarding pedagogy and learning outcomes.

### **Future Research**

The original goal of this study was to determine if there were differences in student performance between online and on-campus students. No significant differences were found in the eight courses that were compared in this study. Though there are no significant differences between the two groups, this does not mean that writing instruction online and on-campus are

equivalent to one another. There are multiple areas to check for in further testing: inter-rater reliability as the grades in this study could be similar due to having only one person look at them in a similar fashion, a larger group of participants would help to further discern the statistics, and data collected over time (longitudinal) could also lead to findings that are different from or further elaborate on the results of this study. For now, the results indicate that there is congruence between the environments, and that students in either environment will have similar learning outcomes. These findings are supportive in terms of the similarities reaching across both courses. If improvements were to be made simultaneously to both course environments, it could be assumed that both groups would benefit.

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## CHAPTER 3

### CRITICAL DIALOGUE IN THE ONLINE WRITING ARGUMENTS CLASSROOM

#### **Introduction**

Teaching rhetorical composition in an upper-division writing arguments course often leads to conversations on controversial or difficult topics. These conversations are difficult to navigate in the traditional classroom, but online they can become even more challenging. As an instructor of English, I was presented with the task of developing an online version of writing arguments with rhetorical theory. I knew that it would be an important learning opportunity for myself and my students and decided to conduct teacher-research of my online course in order to further reflect upon and revise the rhetorical concepts and argumentation that I teach in the online environment. I wanted to examine how the online environment supported and constrained critical dialogue, which I define as difficult conversations about controversial topics among students. I further needed to learn what types of interventions were helpful or necessary on my end as the teacher, and how students responded in these situations.

There are a variety of ways to conceptualize critical dialogue, and my definition is a bit broader as it relates to rhetorical theory and composition. Freire (1970) would see it as dialogue that examines our own lived situations and helps us understand the socio-political nature of our lived experiences and become liberated from them and/or recognize our own oppression, and then be able to engage in some kind of individual or social action to alter that situation. In critical pedagogy, critical dialogue is seen as any dialogue that is seen to deconstruct and make meaning of socio-political inequity and hegemony (Allman et al., 2009). Similarly, critical literacy and critical media literacy focus on how texts and media can construct hegemony. These theories



emphasize the importance of being able to recognize and deconstruct social inequalities through developing a critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is understanding of hegemonic social systems, being able to see one's own experiences in those systems, along with some awareness of what individual and social actions could alter systemic inequities. My work is inspired by all of these notions and their definitions are what made me feel comfortable and capable of wading into the waters of critical pedagogy as I continued to develop myself as a teacher and scholar. This study serves as my first attempt at bringing critical dialogue into my classrooms (I did this online and on-campus at the same time). As a result, I bring in one topic of inequality and socio-political action regarding what was at the time a current event and connect its topic and exigency to a weekly reading and discussion. The results are not as dramatic or transformative as much of the work in critical pedagogy; however, these theories served as my motivations for beginning this work and testing the waters. For me, it was important to start small when bringing such important work into the classroom in order to gauge my facilitation skills and abilities as I practiced this new method of teaching and learning.

As part of the task of preparing online students for difficult conversations and argumentation, I implemented a variety of readings, guidelines, and concepts into the curriculum design. I modeled these interventions after current research in rhetorical theory, critical dialogue, and online writing instruction. To establish these connections, I considered Crowley and Hawhee's (2009) work regarding ancient rhetoric and how these concepts might apply to modern students. I used quotes from their text to help frame online discussions by reminding students that, "The fact the rhetoric originates in disagreement is ultimately a good thing, since it allows people to make important choices without resorting to less palatable means of persuasion—

coercion or violence” (Crowley & Hawhee, 2009, p. 2). Framing disagreements rhetorically helped me to implement and facilitate critical dialogue within online discussion forums.

Next, I had to teach the course and observe. While all discussions and communications were respectful and productive, one particular discussion was worthy of further investigation. This discussion was the result of a current event serving as an example of a rhetorical situation. The event included a referendum for LGBTQ+ rights in Seattle, Washington, and the discussion included a video and song compilation that helped provide examples and context for students regarding the referendum. As students worked through this online discussion prompt regarding current and controversial events and rhetorical situations, they wove in and out of critical dialogue. In this article, I examine how critical dialogue was supported and constrained through this discussion forum.

The research questions were designed with the following purpose in mind: how can I use this data and analysis to better design instructions, classroom context, and prompts, and to model language within online discussion forums that can further encourage co-construction of critical knowledge and learning within the online discussion forum space? This focus on critical knowledge and learning through critical dialogue is deeply embedded in my teaching philosophy as I strive to connect rhetoric, humanity, and social justice through dialogic learning in my Writing Arguments courses. As a result, my research questions include:

How do online college composition students respond to asynchronous discussions that involve current and controversial topics?

How are opportunities for engaging in critical dialogue supported and constrained through an online discussion forum?

The purpose of this study is to examine supports and constraints to students' co-construction of critical knowledge and critical dialogue in specific online discussion forums. I focus on the use of particular online discussion prompts and students' responses to examine the potential affordances and constraints of introducing critical dialogue to students in the online space.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Critical Dialogue in the Traditional Classroom***

Appropriate integration and response to critical conversations is especially important within the rhetorical writing course, since it becomes necessary for students to be able to look past the 'sides' of any argument in order to focus on and learn from the structure of the argument (Friere, 1970; Allman et al., 2009). These goals also align with rhetorical composition courses because students are learning how to create critical understanding and knowledge while also learning how to express it through words and actions/interactions, verbally and in writing. Thus, in this dissertation I aim to conceptualize learning as expanding repertoires of meaning, language, and action (Jennings, 1996; Jennings & Pattenau, 1998). Rhetorical writing explicitly interweaves all three actions.

In order to understand persuasion, critical thinking, critical theory, and social justice, we must first examine how words, attitudes, images, sounds, layout, title, discourses, etc. shape an argument. It is only when we can take this crucial step back to view arguments in terms of their language that we are able to make inferences that are otherwise invisible. Creating space for student to explore critical dialogue and literacy as a type of rhetoric provides an opportunity to gain a broader understanding of their reflective capabilities in order to realize a fuller awareness of these important concepts. It is my goal that students will come to recognize how arguments and words help us get at these invisible structures and systems—my goal was to test the waters

with critical topics that I might not otherwise have brought into my courses for fear of facilitation issues and the unknown. As a result, it's important to note that the end goal of critical consciousness was not my end goal at the time of this study, but rather I wanted to see if critical consciousness might be possible to achieve after some practice while still aiming for sufficient growth and learning through this process. I wanted to help students examine the sociopolitical controversy of this situation in order to help them broaden their sociopolitical understanding of this topic in a way that they could translate to their own semester topics and arguments. I created this assignment in order to engage students in this discussion around, not just a controversial topic, but one that could really help them grapple with and make meaning of the kinds of sociopolitical discourses that can surround any given topic. In this example, I wanted to help students see how the artist was shaping a particular discourse and for them to examine this larger sociopolitical discourse and how they are engaging with it and understanding it. As a result, one student shares her knowledge of the history and terminology of the topic and helps students empathize and understand the topic in ways that they might not have been able to before.

In the end, my goal is to create, "Critical citizens [who] participate conscientiously, compassionately, and actively in the day-to-day building of more equitable communities, be they classrooms, neighborhood, national, or global communities" (Jennings, 2010, p. 38). I hope to create in policy, practice, and theory the kind of classroom engagement that supports critical citizens, and I believe that such opportunities for learning should also be extended to the online student, especially in a rhetorical arguments course (Freire, 2000).

One study that does focus on multicultural conversations in the online classroom provides helpful insights into the importance of conducting this difficult work (Brantmeier, 2011). This study examined asynchronous, threaded discussions of a graduate-level, multicultural education

course. While researchers found that asynchronous discussions supported critical teaching practices, they note the need for additional research to further this important work (Brantmeier, 2011).

Critical dialogue and critical pedagogy are well-defined and practiced across various disciplines and levels of education; however, there is a lack of research examining critical pedagogy and communication within the online classroom. This lack of research may be due to the fear of the online space as being permanent and more tenuous than the face-to-face classroom. Online teachers may feel uncomfortable or unsupported in implementing critical elements within their teaching strategies, materials, and conversations. Further, teachers who do bring critical notions into their online classrooms are even less likely to allow a researcher to participate or even observe the inner workings of this type of deep and unpredictable learning. It is with hesitation that I present the inner workings of my own class as a learning opportunity. Though ripe for criticism, this important work needs to be examined, shared, and discussed.

### ***Critical Dialogue in Higher Education***

Critical dialogue in higher education is a well-established teaching practice, especially within the humanities. Freire's (1974) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was one of the most influential texts informing my initial teaching philosophies. Freire continues to be a key pillar in my work as a student and teacher as he connects the importance of dialogue to critical consciousness and humanizing education. Though an advocate for this work, Freire also served a fair warning for its difficulty when he wrote, "Teaching the purely technical aspect of the procedure is not difficult; the difficulty lies rather in the creation of a new attitude—that of dialogue" (Freire, 1974, p. 48). Though these words were written nearly half a century ago, the difficulties of dialogue remain today.

There are many prominent figures that support critical dialogue in higher education. A few of these figures that have most inspired my work include Giroux, Shor, and Bakhtin. These educators and authors have instilled the importance of my role as a teacher and the conscious and unconscious ways in which my position and pedagogies contribute to the production of knowledge. Giroux (1992) believes, and I agree, that “the principles of diversity, dialogue, compassion, and tolerance [...] are central to the teaching of English” (p. 319). Shor (1992) agrees that critical dialogue is especially important within the writing classroom and that research on critical dialogue becomes equally important for teachers: “Student participation [in critical dialogue] feeds the teacher’s research on how student think and learn. Such knowledge is the foundation on which dialogic teachers build successively deeper levels of thematic inquiry” (p.90). This notion of the ‘dialogic teacher’ as an ever-learning, ever-evolving researcher aligns with the overall purpose of this study.

More specific examples in the literature can also be found to support both the difficulty and the importance of critical dialogue as an educational tool. In 2013, researchers at the Multi-University Intergroup Dialogue Research Project conducted a study that observed a traditional classroom as inter-group dialogue was constructed and observed. Inter-group dialogue in this study was defined similarly to critical dialogue in that students were asked to consider and discuss structural inequalities and social justice. Findings indicated that students were able to connect, empathize, and enhance overall communication with others. In the English classroom specifically, Clifton and Sigoloff (2013) support the addition of critical topics and conversations in the writing classroom. Their research reports that writing becomes an important opportunity for practicing and refining ideas and topics before entering into a larger discussion. The authors note that the writing classroom is “a genre capable of calling people from different social,

cultural, and economic positions into productive dialogue to discover and deliberate issues of shared concern” (Clifton & Sigoloff, 2013, p. 74). These works inform my study both in terms of the development of the course as well as the integration of critical pedagogy in my online classrooms.

### ***Online Discussion Forum Affordances***

The current literature surrounding online discussion boards is scarce, and mostly focuses on online forums involving medical topics (Erikson & Salzmann Erikson, 2013; Atwood, et al., 2017; Appleton et al., 2017). These studies are typically conducted by outside researchers who analyze discussions for health-related topics and benefits. While this body of literature supports the benefits that asynchronous online discussions can afford, they are not specific to the unique criteria necessary for online educators.

Educational studies related to this topic attempt to quantify online discussions through social network analysis (De Wever et al., 2009; Tirado et al., 2012). These studies examined social knowledge construction in online discussion groups. Though De Wever et al. (2009) use different methods, their study of online discussion forums concludes that, “The implementation of asynchronous discussion groups is based on the notion that social dialogue is important to trigger knowledge construction” (p. 516). These texts support educational online discussions quantitatively, but do not provide qualitative analyses.

Few studies have qualitatively focused on asynchronous discussions as learning tools. One such study, which examined an education course, agrees that, “Writing provides a powerful mediating technology, enabling the group as well as the individual writer to make real progress in knowledge building” (Schrire, 2006, p. 54). Schrire’s study looks more qualitatively at the role of written discourse in classroom learning but does not address the more critical components of

dialogue that I face within the online rhetorical arguments writing classroom. As a result, this study will serve to fill the gap within the current literature as an in-depth examination of critical dialogue in the online writing classroom.

### **Study Overview**

Research regarding online critical conversations is virtually non-existent. Current literature examines either the affordances of online discussions in general or the benefits of critical dialogue in the traditional classroom. Based on the literature, one could assume that due to the benefits of critical dialogue in the traditional classroom and the notable affordances of online discussion potentials, that combining these two curricular innovations would provide beneficial learning opportunities. As such, this study will use discourse analysis to examine a particular critical conversation that students had in my online writing arguments classroom. This approach to analysis of critical classroom dialogue follows the work of Atkins and Wallace (2012). This methodology allows for an analysis of common and typical patterns of interaction that occurred throughout the week-long online discussion. Reviewing these patterns provides insights into future amendments and innovations in policy and practice that can enhance the teaching and learning that take place within these online spaces.

### **Methods**

The overall research design for this study integrated intentional practices into an existing online course to spring-board critical discussion on controversial topics. I collected data across the semester and found one online discussion to be of particular significance in making visible affordances and constraints to critical dialogue in online discussion forums. I used Atkins & Wallace's (2012) structure for analyzing classroom discourse for this particular discussion forum



in order to fully examine how critical learning (meaning, language, and actions) was supported and constrained through this asynchronous discussion.

Data collected for this study were from an initial data collection period that spanned from 2014-2016. The specific course being analyzed was an online section of Writing Arguments, an upper-division, rhetorical theory and composition course. IRB approval had previously been granted and consent forms for students were explained within the first module (for week 1). I presented consent forms and introduced my work as a doctoral student. I explained that the purpose of my research was to improve the teaching and learning in that particular course. I told students that they were in no way required to participate and their participation would not affect their grades in any way. Further, I told students to email me their consent forms so that there was not a submission or “grade-like” feel to participation/non-participation.

### ***Participants***

The participants of this study included all students taking an online writing course for a total number of 18 students. The course included mostly juniors or third year students, though I did have a few sophomores and seniors (3 sophomores; 1 senior). Nearly half of the students were non-traditional students, eight of which were from outside the state. At the beginning of the course, students were asked to complete a brief (1-3 page) response regarding their ethics and values (an assignment I created in order to help me better gauge the diversity of the classroom and prepare for certain topics and feelings appropriately). Through this ethics response, and with the data provided by my course roster, students shared with me a variety of voluntary information. Online students presented a broad range of political and religious backgrounds, though religion was not discussed at identifiable lengths in the online setting. Additionally, students were of varying ethnicities and sexual identities. I found that this group of students were

comfortable in sharing personal beliefs and identifiers. I do not wish to give more specific demographic information about this class of students in order to protect their confidentiality. The general demographics of the university are 70.3% White, 11.6% Hispanic or Latino, 3.55% Two or More Races, 3% Asian, 2.34% Black or African American, 0.45% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.163% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders; however, online students make up only about 10% of the population. Specific demographics for online students at this campus are not available.

### ***Course Context***

The types of interventions that were implemented this semester were made in relation to previous research conducted on courses that I had previously taught (Welker, 2019). I had developed practices intended to support social engagement and community building in the prior course and incorporated those practices into the course at the center of this study. Weekly discussions, video introductions, and video conferencing also took place online. The semester that these data were gathered, I added a variety of interventions into my online Writing Arguments course in order to systematically examine whether and how the online environment posed opportunities and constraints for engaging students in critical dialogue and co-construction of critical knowledge. These interventions included:

**Week 1:** Students were asked to complete the Social Identity Wheel to begin discussions in the first week of class (both online and on-campus). The Social Identity Wheel helps students to consider the many different aspects of themselves that may be different from one another, and that will likely lead to differences in perspectives and experiences. After students complete the wheel, they are asked to share a few answers they are comfortable sharing with 1-2 classmates. I end the exercise by sharing my own answers and a few

experiences that connect to specific misinterpretations of writing samples in the past.

This activity was tied to rhetorical considerations and stakeholder conversations that were incorporated at this time and referred to later in the semester. In understanding various identities, students can start to practice communicating with various audiences as they learn about shifting values and beliefs that may be different from their own.

**Week 1:** Community Learning Guidelines (Appendix A) were posted in the syllabus and before each online discussion. Community Learning Guidelines remind students that the online space is more permanent and less forgiving than traditional classrooms, but that we can also remain aware that we are all human and mistakes are inevitable. These guidelines remind students to revise their writing before they post it for appropriate content and to email the instructor if there are any comments of concern or discomfort.

**Week 1:** Students completed an image identity assignment that asked them to provide images of parts of themselves that they valued as a visual argument.

**Week 2:** I had students read “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by McIntosh (1988) in the second week of class to frame perspectives and to home in on the importance of the Community Learning Guidelines and introduce differences in experience.

**Week 6:** Students participated in a critical analysis and dialogue regarding LGBTQ+ rights. This assignment integrated Bitzer’s (1992) concept of Rhetorical Situation to Macklemore’s (2014) *Same Love* song that addressed current referendums for LGBTQ+ rights.

I focus analysis on the discussion forum for Week 6, a discussion that drew on the prior weeks’ activities listed above. Students were asked to read and respond to Bitzer before

listening to the Macklemore song and a video, which outlined the timeline of the song's release in conjunction with important voting dates. In Week 6, students read Bitzer's article "The Rhetorical Situation," and then read/listened to the lyrics from Macklemore's song *Same Love*. A video that I created depicts the current situation surrounding the topic of same-sex marriage being voted on in Seattle (the birthplace of Macklemore) 1 month after the song debuted. This video also includes quotes from Bitzer's article that demonstrate how this song was composed and how it enters a specific rhetorical situation. Students were then asked to engage with the discussion as follows:

**Part A:**

How would Macklemore's song have been perceived if the rhetorical situation were different? Referendum 74 provides a platform for this discussion.

How would this song have been interpreted had this platform not existed? Do you think the song would have been as popular? Why or why not?

Bitzer says, "[T]he world really invites change—change conceived and effected by human agents who quite properly address a mediating audience" (45). In what ways does Macklemore properly address his "mediating audience"?

**Part B:**

Respond to at least 2 peer posts: How and why are your answers similar and/or different? How do differing answers and ideas help you to consider varying audience interpretations?

My analyses focus on the responses surrounding the Macklemore discussion in the online classroom setting. I refer to the other implementations in order to

demonstrate the many events and discussions leading up to this critical conversation.

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### ***Data Collection & Analysis***

My online discussion forums and threads are ripe with unrealized potentials and opportunities for transformative learning. Therefore, I have chosen to analyze one such fruitful conversation in order to reflect on possible differences, similarities, revisions, remarks, interjections, passive moments, and both conceived and failed potentials. The data I collected from this discussion were gathered with the intent of further understanding how online critical dialogue leads to and/or hinders new knowledge construction. The primary set of data analyzed for this article include the collective information from previous interactions through discussion forums and emails as well as information provided by students throughout the particular asynchronous discussion forum used in analysis. The discussion took the space of 18 full pages when copied into a document for transcription. The typical length of discussion responses is 10-15 sentences long for original posts and 5-10 sentences for response posts (though some are longer and shorter). Students tend to respond to the earlier posts more frequently, since they appear first within the format of the learning management system, Canvas. Earlier posts typically included 2-8 replies, while later posts that were located at the bottom of the forum received 2 or fewer replies. Emails and previous discussion threads were not analyzed, though the information likely influenced what I knew and assumed about specific students and interactions.

I tried to maintain an open perspective throughout the process of data collection as I participated in observation and coding. I continually reminded myself as I collected the data to try to look at the familiar context of online discussions (familiar to me as an online educator) in a new light. Bringing in the critical dialogue component to this discussion topic was the first step in displacing the familiarity that I felt with asynchronous discussions as it allowed new perspectives to enter the conversation in new and unexpected ways. Though the prompt for this discussion was implemented before I knew I would analyze this discussion specifically, I was careful to participate in the conversation in a way that differs from my usual presence as an instructor in the online classroom. I felt that limited and delayed participation would help to keep collectable transcripts open to all possibilities. This was another uncomfortable and unfamiliar process within my data collection as it left me vulnerable to criticisms as a teacher and facilitator. My limited and delayed participation in this conversation could be viewed negatively as I largely relinquished control over the directions the conversation took.

Discourse analysis methods were used to analyze the data gathered for this study. In particular, the methods of discourse analysis as outlined by Atkins and Wallace's (2012) *Qualitative Research in Education* that provides a clear structure for analyzing classroom discourse in order to explore interactions and power relations. A transcript was created to include all posts and threads that occurred over a one-week online discussion topic. The transcript was then read with the following two questions in mind: What patterns of communication and interaction can be extracted from the dialogue; and how are the power relationships within this extract of dialogue made apparent? (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, pp. 183-184). Instances relating to either of the prompts were separately extracted from the transcript and were further categorized

into four cohesive patterns: Description and Interpretation, Co-Learning and Co-Teaching, Identity Disclosure and Creation, and Negative Non-Uptake.

## **Findings**

It is important underscore that my purpose behind this discussion prompt was to help students learn to engage with a topic rhetorically rather than from their personal perspectives or opinions. Rather than focusing on the topic of argument (LGBTQ+ rights), students were asked to focus on the elements of the rhetorical situation and how it was created by the various events that occurred at the same time. Students struggled with this difference and many students reverted to their personal ideas and beliefs. Students were responding to the Macklemore song and the video compilation including Bitzer's ideas regarding the rhetorical situation and the referendum. This topic was controversial at the time, because opposing views did not support same-sex marriage due to personal beliefs; however, in order to consider the rhetorical situation Macklemore was entering into, students needed to consider how his words would have been received at different times, in different places, and without the current referendum. Additionally, students were asked to consider various audiences, both intentional and unintentional, as well as the ways in which audiences consumed the message (song). The examples I provide below are not intended to represent students who successfully addressed the rhetorical considerations of the text and situation, but who in order to do so, demonstrated other important areas of critical dialogue that can take place within the online discussion forum and that can help to inform future theories and practices. The findings section is organized into four themes including description and interpretation, co-learning and teaching, identity disclosure and creation, and negative non-uptake.

### *Description and interpretation*

Nearly all students engaged with the rhetorical situation regarding the genre, the date, the political events, and the location in varying ways. Few students failed to address the rhetorical consideration, while others discussed it without demonstrating full understanding of the connections. The general kinds of discussions that occurred also led to many assumptions about student beliefs regarding the topic. It appeared that over half of the students were in support of the referendum, a few may have been against, and the rest did not take a particular stance. As such, these beliefs seemed to overshadow the rhetorical considerations that I repeatedly tried to get students to return to.

The students were asked to post one original reply to the discussion thread as well as to respond to at least three of their peers. All but two students participated in the minimum requirements of the online discussion. Eleven students completed the minimum requirements for this discussion. Five students participated more than the required amount. It is important to note that for other discussions, most students did not complete more than the minimum requirement. The kinds of discussion that took place represented a spectrum of beliefs, rhetorical considerations, historical information, and additional context. The varying ways in which students interact throughout the weekly forum demonstrate varying perspectives, familiarity with the current events, and understanding of the rhetorical course content. I found student contributions to be confusing, at times contradictory, and not at all what I had expected.

Taylor (1979) considered the necessity of new educational frameworks due to ‘new information environments’ that technology would present. Taylor was ahead of his time when he discussed how problems with online environments could present issues with information imbalance, information literacy, and the need to maintain human connection. Throughout the



process of analysis for this study, I was continually reminded of his idea that, “the meaning of a situation for an agent may be full of confusion and contradiction; but the adequate depiction of this contradiction makes sense of it” (Taylor, 1979, p. 35). The online conversations I collected represent just that: confusion and contradiction (especially when considering the online space and time). The lack of intonation, emotion, and positioning further impact the murky waters of analyzing online text. In my analyses, I found many frames and themes, but below I have included concepts that contradicted my assumptions and troubled my understanding of what it means to support critical dialogue in the online writing classroom. My depiction of this discussion aims to show these many contradictions and varying potential interpretations. I did not choose to locate themes of repetition, but instead I focused on making visible online social interactions that supported and constrained critical dialogue and critical learning. The sections below address four types of interactions: co-learning and teaching, identity disclosure, and negative non-uptake.

### ***Co-learning & Co-teaching***

I define the terms co-learning and co-teaching as instances of learning that take place among peers in the classroom. A co-teacher is a student whom informally co-teaches content with me in classroom discussions if and when they are willing and knowledgeable on a topic. There are many instances where students have extensive experience with topics we address throughout the semester. This co-teaching does not take place upon request but occurs spontaneously as discussions evolve throughout the semester. Co-learning is a term I use to describe the learning that takes place when multiple students appear to take up a new concept and apply it together or separately after having obtained this new knowledge together as a class.

The interactions below provide an example of two students who appear to be acting in response to the tone, word choice, and ideas that the other posts. These two women, whom I refer to as Tara and Paige, perform an exchange that demonstrates how students can become co-teachers and learners within the online discussion space. In this specific conversation, Paige began the responses by posting quickly after the module opened-up to all of the students. Paige wrote in a tone that was mostly supportive (yet also uninformed) about the topic, as seen in this excerpt:

*If Referendum 74 had not been in place, I think that Macklemore's song would have been seen as outrageous or "out-of-the blue." [...] This song shows that Macklemore supports gay-marriage, and he is not afraid to sing about what he believes in. He wanted a change and he brought other artists with similar standings into the song [...] The song may have even started a movement.*

It appears that Paige's tone is mostly supportive yet uninformed regarding this topic. While she says that the song is popular and that "it may have even started a movement to legalize [same-sex marriage]" and that Macklemore is "not afraid to sing about what he believes in," she demonstrates her unfamiliarity with this topic, as she is unaware of the movement that has been in the making for centuries. Paige also uses the term "afraid" which indicates that she views this topic as one that others fear and/or would hesitate to discuss for various reasons.

Paige then goes on to say that "[Macklemore] wanted a change and he brought other artists with similar standings into the song." This statement is important because it can be interpreted a few different ways: the term "similar standings" might be construed as having similar beliefs or being pro same-sex marriage; however, those who know the song are aware that Lambert, a lesbian singer-songwriter, has produced this song with Macklemore. It can be

assumed that because Paige is unfamiliar with the topic, she assumes Lambert is a singer with similar views as Macklemore regarding same-sex marriage. Those who are familiar with the singer and the movement may interpret Paige's use of the term "similar standings" to mean that she herself is not in similar standing regarding this topic.

I had originally viewed Paige's comments as being supportive of same-sex marriage, even though it was clear she was unfamiliar with the topic. However, Tara (who self-identified as lesbian in previous assignments and conversations) responded in a way that complicates my original interpretation of Paige's post. Tara is the second student to enter the online conversation, and her tone suggests that she felt she has differing views than Paige regarding this topic. Tara's original thread, which appeared directly below Paige's post, seemed to reply passively to Paige's comments. Had Tara chosen to use the "reply" feature in the discussion forum, her post would have been indented underneath Paige's original thread as a direct response to what Tara wrote:

*I remember when Referendum I (this would have granted and made legal 'domestic partnerships' for same-sex couples, so not marriage but it was something nine years ago) failed to gain a popular vote in Colorado in 2006 there was still a very quiet and hushed public attitude about same-sex partnerships. I remember not feeling comfortable in public with my significant others and having to be very guarded about how I expressed myself up until a few years ago. I wonder if a song like 'Same Love' had been popular on the airwaves if that could have swayed the vote enough to have made Ref I pass, or if because of the overall momentum of the LGBT equal rights movement we have seen over the last 15 years it all culminated to a level of widespread (not total) acceptance of same-sex marriage.*

Tara's post serves as one of authority and knowledge as she provides multiple facts and that demonstrate her familiarity with this topic. She connects her own experience with a similar referendum in her own local context. Her tone remains informative and friendly as she responds to the original discussion questions for Part A; however, she also appears to subversively respond to Paige's post by addressing the dates and timeframe, repeating the terms 'same-sex' throughout, and by offering reminders that she has previously identified with the LGBTQ+ community. These strategies position Tara's remarks as credible evidence and information and provide an important opportunity for others in the course to learn from her experience and examples. Additionally, because Tara is the second person to post, her response sets the tone for the rest of the discussion, which maintained a supportive tone and appropriate dialogue throughout its entirety. In subsequent discussions on this same topic, students in other courses did not always maintain this disposition.

Paige revised her post after having read and responded to Tara's discussion posts later in the week. Paige demonstrates that from Tara's posts, and others, that the term 'gay-marriage' may not have been the most appropriate choice and replaced her use of 'gay-marriage' with 'same-sex' marriage when she edited her original response 3 days after she originally posted it: *"This song shows that Macklemore supports same-sex marriage."* This revision suggests that Paige had read Tara's posts as well as other comments using the same terms and decided to change her language to match other students, who demonstrated their knowledge of the topic by responding with more text and more confident terms.

Tara's response to Paige's first reply post appears underneath the first thread and is viewed when students expand Paige's original post and/or respond to it. It reads:

*I agree with you Paige, I think that without some of the social movement towards LGBT equality the song 'Same Love' would have been outrageous or 'out of the blue' and would not have been on the radio. I think that if the song came out in the mid-2000s, it would have only been popular within the LGBT community, and would not have had widespread mainstream success, but it makes me happy that it became so successful and launched the career of a really cool LGBT artist (Mary Lambert). Good job on your analysis on this assignment!*

Here, Tara asserts her knowledge of this topic through the language she chooses to use, such as 'LGBT community' and 'the social movement towards LGBT equality' (note that this course took place before the 'Q' was added to LGBT). Tara further asserts her knowledge through her comment about Mary Lambert, which was not a part of the discussion prompt. Tara corrects Paige while "agreeing" with her and giving her credit for her post, which seems to make Paige more receptive to these corrections. Tara is unique in her capacity to express ideas of contradiction in a tone that suggests curiosity and approval. However, the most subtle text carries a tone that this is a personal topic to her, and that she believes that the LGBTQ+ movement for equal rights has done the majority of the work regarding the vote, and that the song was merely furthering what had been long in the making. In considering the rhetorical lesson I was attempting to teach, I also learned from Tara and Paige; in future semesters I will provide more historical equal rights information in regard to this prompt.

Paige appeared receptive to Tara's remarks due to the edits that she made to her original post regarding terminology. Additionally, two other students respond to Paige's thread after Tara's reply and these other students chose to use the term "LGBT community" that Tara has

provided. Although these two students may have used the term independently, it appears that they were following suit from Tara's example.

Students posting after Tara's above contribution also chose to use similar terms and attitudes in their responses to her post and others. Tara provided an example by drawing on her personal knowledge, confidently and consistently implementing certain terms and knowledge as she entered the conversation. In this example, Tara is not just teaching about terminology, but she's pointing to structural and historical inequities and bringing them into the discussion early on. She is thus prompting her classmates to consider the systemic nature of the social issue they are discussing and deliberating about, not solely looking at individual level bias. However, it is also possible that those students with dissenting arguments or views would be less likely to express them in either face-to-face or online knowing that one of their classmates identifies with the LGBTQ+ community. This example of co-teaching and student authority provide important lessons to consider as a teacher for future discussion prompts, guidelines, and teacher-responses to students within an online discussion. These posts demonstrate the subtle but powerful ways that students can teach and learn from one another, as they are able to view the text words, reply over time, and revise what they have said. On-campus course discussions that are in real-time and face-to-face do not afford these same opportunities for asynchronous deliberation and revision.

### ***Identity disclosure and creation***

In my experience, identity disclosure and creation in the online classroom take place much differently than in the on-campus setting. Identity disclosure online is largely up to each individual student as students can choose to remain identified only by their name, or they can choose to include pictures and additional information about themselves in their discussions,

assignments, emails, and other communications. Similar to on-campus students, my online students tend to disclose more of their identities as the semester goes on and they have more opportunities and feel more comfortable as they get to know their peers. However, the online classroom allows students to be more selective as they can choose what images, if any, of themselves that they share, whereas on-campus students share their appearance, attitudes, and other artifacts (including clothing, hairstyles, beverage choices, stickers, laptops, etc.) every time they attend class. Many online students choose not to share any personal information, while others feel compelled to share major portions. Though perceptions of identity and chosen disclosure influence the ways in which students view and respond to other students, it is interesting to note the power that comes along with disclosure in the online setting.

Tara's post also serves as an example of student identity disclosure and creation. Tara first disclosed her sexual identity in the first week of the semester when the class engaged in an activity using the social identity wheel. In this activity, students are asked to consider their identities in an individual writing prompt. Afterward, students are asked to share with a partner 2-3 of the identities that they feel comfortable sharing and talking about. In Week 6, during the Macklemore discussion, Tara shared more of her identity and experiences in her original post. Tara reminded her peers and me of her identity, when she stated:

*I remember not feeling comfortable in public with my significant others and having to be very guarded about how I expressed myself up until a few years ago.*

Tara chose to self-identify within her comment above. The way Tara frames the comment reminds her peers of previous conversations and seems to instill a sense of trust and community as she signals to the shared history among her and her classmates. Though Tara did not mention

this in her post, she continued to provide information about her identity and experiences as she shared her extensive knowledge and opinions about this topic in her second response to Paige:

*With the song being closely tied with the vote on Ref 74 I do believe that it may have kept people thinking about it when they went to the polls, maybe people would not have voted on it because they wouldn't have known what it would have done, but because of the song, because of the publicity it created a grassroots awareness campaign. Without this platform who knows how it might have been interpreted, there is a good chance it would not have been on the radio as much as it was because of all of the national attention on the marriage equality debate. But, I believe it would have resonated within the LGBT community, because for many of us in the community we were really excited to hear a song that was so compassionate and openly demanding equal rights... by a heterosexual hip hop artist! Macklemore addressed the audience by making a stand for an often marginalized community, and even risked his own popularity in the hip hop circuit which is in fact very anti LGBT.*

Again, Tara asserted her authority as a co-teacher through her knowledge of this topic. She also positioned herself as part of the LGBTQ+ community using the term “us” when describing this community. Tara began to discuss the constraints of the artist, the audience, and the rhetorical situation as defined in Bitzer’s article, but still largely focused on her own positionality within the LGBTQ+ community. It is important to consider how online classroom environments can best support students in safely asserting their identities—particularly marginalized identities.

### ***Negative Non-uptake***

Negative non-uptake is a term I am using to describe a negative comment that is not taken up or engaged with by peers. While differing views within this conversation would be



expected, I found that only one student, whom we will call Bryan, chose a more negative spin on his response to this discussion prompt. What is even more interesting is that all of the students in this course (some of whom responded 3-4 times to other students and well over the requirements for the assignment) chose not to engage with this particular student in this discussion thread, they had done so in other discussions. Bryan entered into the conversation on the last possible day (4 days after the original posts discussed above). Due to the structure of peer-reviews in my online course (see Appendix B), students had another 3 days to read original responses and complete their replies in order to receive credit. Another important factor is that Bryan also did not return to the discussion to respond to his peers (or at least there is no evidence of a reply post from him). Bryan's contribution included the following quote:

*In my opinion if the referendum hadn't become such a rising issue in both pop culture as well as an impact on society as a whole this song would not be given the attention it had received. In the case that the referendum was not a present issue this song could have been deemed as irrelevant or just a cry for attention potentially.*

Bryan may not come out and state his beliefs specifically, but his language choice gives some hints regarding his perception of the rhetorical situation. Using the terms "rising issue" in regard to its "impact on society" seem to state that he has negative feelings as issue is typically seen as a negative term similar to problem, concern, or dispute. His further statement that the song could have been seen as "irrelevant or just a cry for attention" also suggests negative feelings towards the subject of LGBTQ+ rights overall. Whether or not Bryan was familiar with the associations between the term "cry for attention" and mental illness, his statement could be seen by others in the course as insensitive to this topic.

The non-uptake of this negative comment surrounded by other supportive comments seems to suggest that the students have created a space or culture that reflects the dominant belief of the class that supports LGBTQ+ rights. This non-uptake reminds me of the concepts that, “A (...) culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members” (Geertz, 1994, p. 11). Many of the students from the sections above had to adjust their terms and content in order to operate within the mannerisms acceptable to the larger class culture. Many of those same students also balanced responses that did not alienate others, but at the same time did not respond to comments that were too far outside the prescribed-by-example-mannerisms in tone and terms that the other students had collectively decided to take up. However, it is also unfortunate, especially in a rhetoric course that there was no uptake of engaging in dialogue across difference. An important goal of this work is about supporting dialogue across diverse perspectives and learning how to deliberate and share diverse views. An important question to consider for future research will focus on how I could further ensure that online discussions encourage different points of view and earnest discussion of these different perspectives.

## **Discussion**

This study offers both theoretical and practical implications for supporting critical dialogue for online teaching in general and online teaching of rhetoric and composition in particular. Examining in-depth the discourse of specific online discussion threads informed my understanding of how critical knowledge and critical dialogue was supported and constrained. I was able to observe that the language that students use, the frequency that they post, the way their tone and voice shift, can all play important roles in how a critical conversation is taken up in the online discussion.

However, this knowledge is also contextual, and may vary in different situations, with different students, and at different times. For example, Tara brought to the class discussion pointed pieces of context and knowledge that helped students gain a more critical perspective on the sociopolitical topic of same-sex marriage. It was important that the students and I co-constructed a safe, brave of co-teaching and co-learning, one where Tara could draw on her identity and positionality as a minoritized person, speak her mind, and share her experience. At the same time, I think, what if Tara had not participated in the conversation, what knowledge would the class have missed? In a space of co-teaching and co-learning, it is important to consider additional pedagogical moves that I could have taken to more effectively facilitate critical online discussion. Whether in face-to-face or online classrooms, instructors grapple with how much to weigh in on class discussion and when to allow the students to drive the discussion. I learned from analyzing this discussion thread that if a student is not providing critical knowledge about systemic inequities, as Tara did as a co-teacher, then I can and I should. . Instructors who want to engage critical dialogue in their online writing classrooms need to be prepared to encourage that critical perspective and make sure that they are guiding it specifically or offering more information (interjecting in classroom discussions more, or adding more information into the assignment and pointed questions and context) to help students see past the situation and into these invisible forces and structures at work.

### ***Practical Implications***

The findings of this study inform my practice in that I will be changing the assignment guidelines and rubric involving student discussions in multiple ways. First, I will provide a rubric and readings to introduce students to the purpose and methods involved in online discussion forums as well as increasing and specifying how much content each student should contribute.

Second, given the richness of these asynchronous conversations, I will implement online discussion forums in my on-campus courses. Doing so will provide a different context for students to grapple with difficult conversations, providing them more time to compose and edit their thoughts and responses. Third, I will provide more background information on critical topics and events in order for students who are unfamiliar with the content to enter the conversation more readily. Finally, I will make these discussions worth a greater percentage of student grades to encourage further participation.

The findings have also informed my practice in terms of how I will enter into ongoing online discussions, how I may include further critical topics that relate to the course content in assignments and discussions, and how I will put more emphasis on the discussion forums as learning and teaching tools. The knowledge I acquired from this project can be used to the ends of how I choose to discuss this topic with other students in the next semester as well as how others might choose to use terms or implement discussion on these topics. Additionally, it is important to consider the limitations of the critical dialogue in this online class. For example, Bryan interjected a unique and contradictory perspective, which we should welcome in critical dialogue. However, students did not take up Bryan's points, either to debate them or agree with them. The reasons for this non-uptake are unclear – it may be because Bryan's post was later in the discussion thread or perhaps because they did not want to engage in controversy or critique. It then becomes important to think about what pedagogical moves could help to create spaces where students are willing to engage in dialogue across difference. For example, I may encourage contradictory perspectives by setting up assignments for students to have to entertain multiple points of view. Additionally, I could prepare students for the discomfort they might feel by addressing those feelings in the course guidelines. It will be important to add these ideas both

into specific assignment instructions as well as at the beginning of the semester when we discuss the course community guidelines.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

The larger implications and significance of these findings contribute to the literature surrounding critical dialogue in the online learning environment (and more specifically the writing classroom). Examining one particular section and a few specific dialogues, I was able to observe that the language students use, the frequency that they post, the way their tone and voice shift can all play important roles in how a critical conversation is taken up in the online discussion. These shifts and differences helped me, and other instructors gain knowledge about the learning and expression that occurred in that space. However, this knowledge is also contextual, and may differ in different situations, with different students, and at different times. Had Tara not been present in the course, students likely would have missed a lot of historical context that was necessary to fully consider the rhetorical situation.

However, it is also important to note how the space was created where Tara could bring forward this voice. My students and I had a hand in the creation of this space and classroom culture that allowed Tara to bring forward this knowledge and information in the ways that she did. Looking back at the progression of classroom culture, the first two weeks seem particularly important as that is where the stage can be set for the rest of the semester. In weeks one and two, I asked students to create video introductions of themselves, write an ethics and values response, and review readings and concepts regarding social identities. The continuation of discussion each week in addition to peer-reviews helped students to remain in contact and get to know one another as they practiced non-critical dialogue and the co-construction of knowledge. It is important for us to create online spaces where voices like Tara's can come forth. Pervious

conversations and activities had allowed individual identities to be shared before Week 6 when the Macklemore discussion took place; therefore, it was not a new or surprising topic for students to address within the course. These classroom activities, as well as all student participation, afforded this opportunity for the dialogue to become a critical dialogue where Tara could bring up her own experiences and perspectives. However, there is room for me (and any instructor) to be more present in encouraging other views that might support this dialogue in undertaking a more in-depth critical nature.

### ***Future Research***

Future research would benefit from comparing the new Learning Management System (LMS) discussion feature that provides the option for instructors to select “Users must post before seeing replies” which means that students cannot view their peer responses until they have posted their original reply to the discussion. This new tool feature may change the ways in which students engage in online discussions and critical dialogue as it could prevent one student from setting a tone that others follow. In the case of this study, it would have been interesting to see how students would have responded if they had not viewed Tara’s post as one of the first posts to consider as they drafted their own replies.

Additionally, future research will also need to explore how more instructor guidance in terms of historical and political context helps point the students in the right direction of having more critical conversations such as the one in this study that Tara helped to create. Had I presented that material, as opposed to the student presenting it, might that have changed the outcome? In this case, I was able to see how that type of information helped students to co-construct new knowledge, definitions, and understanding; however, if Tara had not been there, it is unlikely that students would have gained as much. In the future, it will be important for

instructors to understand how much context and what kinds are appropriate and helpful to include before students embark on these important learning experiences.

Because rhetoric is all about constructing and understanding persuasion and argumentation, it contributes to knowledge about critical dialogue in online composition courses. As a result, I find importance in continuing research on critical dialogue in the online writing classroom and how that research might apply to other fields. Though these data were gathered from an online writing course, the findings can be applied to online courses in other disciplines as well as on-campus or hybrid courses that include online discussion forums as homework.

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## CHAPTER 4

### A VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN THE ONLINE WRITING CLASSROOM

#### **Introduction**

As online education continues to expand, so too does the need for researching and implementing new and productive modes of teaching and learning within this digital educational environment. Education theories dating back to the beginning of the 20th century have emphasized the importance of social interactions as key elements of learning (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978; Bakhtin, 1986). Present research focuses on the necessity for productive digital relationships within the online classroom (Lu et al., 2017; Ruey et al., 2010). Online social interactions and relationships thus become an important topic of examination for digital educators of the 21st century.

Past methods are expanding to incorporate the new elements of digital education. Virtual or digital ethnography is one such method that has evolved to be a productive tool for analyzing digitally mediated spaces, relationships, and communities. As such, this method becomes an essential tool for online educators seeking to observe, examine, and reflect on the digital learning taking place in online classrooms. This study outlines one example of social learning and transformation within an upper-division online writing course. In this study, two students were successful in constructing an important and transformational learning experience through their performance of relationship throughout their varying interactions in the online classroom. An in-depth examination of these students' online exchanges on a controversial social topic – what I

refer to here as critical dialogue – provides insights into how online platforms can promote social interaction and learning.

With the goal of expanding curricular implementations for enhanced and productive learning in the online writing classroom, the following questions guided this study's data collection and analysis:

How are students navigating online discussions as sites of critical dialogue?

How do asynchronous online forums support and constrain the relational aspects necessary for students to engage in transformative education?

The purpose of this study, then, is to examine a specific digital relationship between students in an online writing classroom and how their interactions led to transformative learning. This paper recognizes the capacity of two students to engage in a difficult, critical dialogue where they could express their disagreement with each other and do so with respect. These students were able to address a social issue extensively and produce learning for themselves and other students who viewed their dialogue. In this paper, I examine how certain pedagogical moves in creating community in an online classroom culture may have contributed to their effective critical dialogue. While my earlier research examined how a particular assignment supported critical dialogue (Welker, 2019), this study focuses on how two students in particular navigated critical dialogue in a discussion forum that was not intentionally designed to create critical dialogue. The focus here is more on the relational aspects of critical dialogue in terms of how students establish relational aspects of trust and intimacy in order to support a classroom culture where spontaneous critical dialogue could be supported.

The purpose of this inquiry was to consider the relationships the online students form through their digital interactions and how the digital interactive spaces they constructed

supported effective engagement in critical dialogue. The wealth of interactions, knowledge, experience, and diversity in the face-to-face classroom enlightened my previous notions that online communities were similar. Online classroom communities are similar to face-to-face classroom communities in that they consist of students who are learning a subject and being evaluated; however, the differences in an online classroom community impact the ways in which students enter the space, participate, communicate, co-construct knowledge, and learn. As I began to look more theoretically into the discourse happening within the online discussion, I found that each student brought something unique with them into the space that influenced other responses and shaped future discussions. The web that was woven as a result created a community, which is at once similar and drastically different from any other online classroom culture. As such, the purpose narrowed further to examine in-depth how various layers of communication occurring in my online classroom both supported and constrained relationship-building and critical learning.

### **Literature Review**

Current qualitative literature in online education focuses largely on the social dynamics within the online classroom. The social components of education have long been viewed as essential to human learning, and the shifts that technology creates for relationships, interactions, and co-learning are worthy of deep reflection.

#### ***Creating Online Classroom Cultures That Support Critical Dialogue in Online Environments***

Online classrooms as cultural spaces can be understood through virtual ethnographic theories and methods. Classroom communities have previously been viewed as small microcultures where norms and expectations, roles and relationships, rights, and obligations are constructed in the moment and over time through communication and interaction (Jennings,

2015; Green & Dixon, 1993). These classroom cultures also support and constrain how and what forms of knowledge are constructed. In examining an online classroom community, I am particularly interested in how a classroom culture that supported critical dialogue was constructed through classroom activities, assignments, discussion board prompts, and the students' own interactions with each other. Classroom ethnographies examine how members of a classroom culture interact to create communities that support and constrain certain types of learning. For example, Jennings (2015) examined how fifth-grade bilingual students co-constructed social and academic practices that supported critical learning. Additionally, Jennings and Mills (2009) examined how a culture of inquiry was constructed by teachers and students at a public magnet school and how each classroom community constructed practices that supported learners as inquirers. Most studies of classroom culture focus on PK-12 settings, and this study addresses that gap by examining both university classrooms as well as online classroom culture.

The digital selves that students bring into the online classroom community are perhaps some of the most thought-provoking and unintentionally lasting presentations of self that exist due to both the nature and permanence of preserved images and texts. Fernback (1997) describes the individual's effect on the collective in virtual cultures as being an agentive tool that is at once an opportunity and a constraint. Fernback states that "through our creation of digital selves within our unique digital spaces we compose something tangible yet still virtual, and through this construction we build who we are as a result of the information revolution" (p. 37). As such, Fernback explains that these opportunities and constraints can lead to assumptions on the part of the composer and audience in attempting to interpret and make meaning of the individual values and beliefs that can connect or disconnect to others, thus leading to a plethora of relational

interactions. Discussion boards in the online classroom provided the most abundant and heavily reviewed space for relational exchanges.

In this study, I consider how discussion boards in the online classroom provided opportunities to build classroom relationships that support and constrain critical dialogue through virtual media. Brantmeier (2011) describes the value of perspective-taking, a process whereby students reflect on their own lived experiences and share those reflections and understandings with each other. He illustrates how this process can lead to greater empathy and humanity. Similarly, Holland et al. (2001) suggests that sharing identity and lived experience with others can enhance agency and learning opportunities for all involved. I am particularly interested in how the space of online discussion boards plays a role in these humanizing, critical, communicative processes.

Communication and social interactions within the online learning environment became a focus point for educational literature in the last decade. As demand for online education grew, researchers began to focus on ways to enhance the learning that took place within these new digital classrooms. Many studies focused on the importance of interaction for productive and successful learning (Jyothi et al., 2012; Luo et al., 2017; Ruey et al., 2010). This body of research acknowledges the affordances of ready-made transcripts that become available within the online discussion forum. Never before were educators privy to such a variety and amount of dialogue taking place in the classroom. Research on these digital communications focused on the connections between social interactions and learning potentials, increased engagement, increased retention rates, and overall student satisfaction (Jyothi et al., 2012; Ruey et al., 2010). Additionally, these studies typically combined qualitative and quantitative analysis to measure learning outcomes via grades and interactions numerically (Jyothi et al., 2012; Luo et al., 2017).

This leaves a gap in the research for more in-depth qualitative examinations of learning taking place within these digital student exchanges and furthers the need for connecting this research to appropriate digital methodologies.

### ***Virtual Ethnography***

Virtual or digital ethnography incorporates the traditional notions of ethnography as being “direct and sustained contact with human agents” within the context of the online classroom. Kozinets (2010) first coined the term *netnography* as “a form of ethnographic research adapted to include the internet’s influence on contemporary social worlds” (p. 1). Scholars from various fields have also referred to this internet-based spin on ethnography as virtual or digital ethnography (Boellstorff, 2012; Gatson, 2011; Kozinets, 2010). Further, virtual ethnography provides insights into new roles and communication performances taking place between two specific students throughout the course of one semester.

As online spaces continue to multiply, so too do research methods for examining these spaces. Virtual or digital ethnography has recently entered the realm of qualitative inquiry literature, though largely within the health care field (Lee, 2017; Eriksson & Salzman-Erikson, 2013). These studies analyze discussion forums where participants engage in certain health-related topics either with or without a medical professional present. Insights from these investigations demonstrate the capacities for co-teaching and learning to take place within these online discussions. Further, Pink (2016) notes the benefits of *copresence* or communication between individuals working across various times and spaces that would previously not have been able to occur. While these studies provide guidance for outlining the methods of virtual ethnography, they do not focus specifically on writing, education, or transformation; as such, these are gaps in the literature that my research seeks to address.

## Study Overview

This study builds on earlier studies of my classrooms (Welker, 2019) where I created a new curriculum for a Writing Arguments course that was taught both online and on campus. The original goal of the research was to try and understand how to best support online learners and evolved to further examine critical engagement in both classroom settings. For this study, I focused on how online classroom practices supported two students as they engaged in a form of critical dialogue midsemester—they disagreed on a social issue and had an extended online discussion about this. The conflict was at times uncomfortable to observe as the instructor, and I thought about how to best facilitate this public argument. In the end, this conversation seemed to represent a productive outcome of critical dialogue. I am interested in the online classroom practices that supported and constrained these two students' engagement in online critical dialogue.

Sarah and Justin's conversation for their virtual argument discussion lasted over a period of 13 hours. During this window of time, these two students moved from defensively talking at one another to finding connection through their dialogue and their sharing of personal experiences with each other and with the rest of the class. Understanding how students co-construct knowledge through sharing their experiences in online settings can inform efforts to practice participating in pro-social, democratic, and civically engaging discourse. As a teacher-researcher, I hope to further students' understandings of not only the purpose of the course (writing arguments), but also more broadly how to begin and/or productively contribute to past, present, and continuing dialogue across difference. Therefore, choosing to focus on the online critical discourse of a few specific students can inform theory and practice. Further, the decision to focus on two individual students is due to the intricate negotiations present within each student



and their interactions with each other and the rest of the class. The succession of interactions between the two students provides insights into how students perform and learn from the relationships they build within the online platform.

The lived experiences that I examined occurred within a collective online class of students taking an upper-division Writing Arguments course. The data gathered were from an initial research collection spanning from 2014-2016. This group of students worked together in weekly discussions throughout the semester as they workshopped their drafts, discussed topics, and considered various current arguments.

## **Methods**

This section will begin with an overview of the methodologies that were utilized within this project. The methodologies combine virtual ethnography and arts-based research. Following the methodology, I provide information on the settings and participants. The section concludes with a description of data collection and analysis.

### ***Methodology: Virtual Ethnography and Arts-Based Methods***

Pink's (2016) principles and practices of virtual ethnography provide a framework from which to analyze the digital relationships that form within the online classroom. Key constructs from Pink's (2016) framework include copresence, intimacy, power negotiations, agency, and transformation. Engaging with these constructs guided me to focus the data collection and analysis on the digitally mediated relationship between these two students as they engaged in critical dialogue through online discussion boards within the context of an online classroom community.

Additionally, I enlist arts-based research methodologies for gaining new and unique vantage points from which to consider the digitally gathered ethnographic data. I utilized

concepts borrowed from cartoon-based research and poetic-based research as analytic tools to enter into the social context of the online classroom and the particular lived experiences of two individual students.

Pink's (2016) concepts of the shifting visual, spatial, and virtual interplay that net-ethnographers encounter provides key insights for the types of data I chose to analyze within this project. Pink's research led me to attend to the spatial potentials of the online course and to a more aware and interested position regarding the agency students have in sharing, constructing, and maintaining the spaces within the online classroom. With this new knowledge came the desire to learn more about the visual data that I had collected throughout my research process.

The visuals were deeply personal, and even though I had elicited permissions from students to use their work and course contributions within the IRB processes, I felt it was important to show participants which of their images I planned to use in my research. However, I was unable to get back in contact with one of the participants in order to gain their permission for the ways in which I've presented and analyzed the data. These ends—specific consent to use visual images and member checking—would have been ideal; however, because it was not possible, I took additional steps to conceal the identity of this student. In doing so, I did not want to lose any of the visual affordances that these students provided in the images and videos they posted throughout the semester. As a solution, I turned to arts-based research and comic-based research (CBR) specifically in order to fully utilize the potentials of the visual while also protecting the identity of my participants.

### ***Methodology: Comics-Based Research***

Researchers, educators, and cartoonists including Kuttner et al. (2018) argue that CBR is not a singular method for certain uses, but that it is “rooted in a range of disciplinary,

methodological, and epistemological approaches” (p. 401). As such, I found CBR to be an important practice to fold into my already present theories and methods within this article. I will instill the creative affordances of visual arts-based research methods using scholarly comics (Kuttner et al., 2018). As a result, I have turned to the use of comics to depict the visual settings and importance of the images and symbols in a way that helps to further conceal the identities of the individual students in this study.

Kuttner et al. (2018) agree that comics can be used as “launchpads for exploring participants’ stories” and “can serve as a form of analysis” (p. 397). They describe comics as multimodal affordances for “scaffolding the analyst’s cognition,” (Kuttner et al., 2018, p.397), which I appreciate as a teacher of multimodality and critical thinking. Not only do I want to practice this method in my research, I want to perform learning through comic creation in order to see what can be applicable for student learning through comics as multimodal tools for critical inquiry. Their chapter, published in Leavy’s (2019) *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*, also notes that comics “provide a frame through which to think and think differently, about objects or findings of research” (Kuttner et al., 2018, p. 399). I found that reimagining the visuals that I had collected into comic format provided me additional space and time to gather information about the participants in new ways. Drawing each artifact of an image allowed me to look for details, consider placement, and complete a more in-depth visual analysis of the ways in which clothing, hairstyles, home décor, time of day, computer placement, etc. were all specific messages students were sending about themselves as they allowed the classroom community into their homes and lives. Using comics allowed me to dive more deeply into the affordances and constraints of arts-based research methods as they expand my understandings of virtual ethnographic work in the online classroom.

### ***Setting and Participants***

This study centers on an online class community of an undergraduate writing course at a university in the Rocky Mountain West of the United States. In this course, students worked together in weekly online discussions throughout the semester as they workshopped their drafts, discussed topics, and considered various current arguments. The class totaled 18 students, including 14 females and four males. All students present as European American, but they never explicitly identified their ethnic or racial identities. Most students were psychology majors, as this was the first semester opening this required writing course for online students working toward a fully online bachelor's degree in psychology. Most of the students were nontraditional students returning to school after some time. Four of the participants were traditional, college-aged students.

The data focus on two specific students, Justin and Sarah (pseudonyms). The younger female student, Sarah, was of traditional college age. She was simultaneously serving in the military and was married with a young child. Her political views and beliefs stated throughout the course were liberal. The male student, Justin, was of nontraditional college age, having entered early retirement due to an acquired disability. He had previously worked for the government and expressed conservative political and religious views.

### ***Data Collection & Analysis***

Discussion forums, assignments, student-produced introduction videos, field notes, and images from student assignments were collected for analysis. I decided to focus analysis on the interactions of two students, Sarah and Justin, because they had unique interactions that began the first week of the course. Both students had strong personalities and were fully engaged in the course. They chose to interact with each other in most discussion settings, though there were

many other students they could have chosen to converse with. Further, their discussions often went above the minimum requirements as they conversed back and forth on multiple occasions.

The pinnacle of these conversations occurred in the Week 12 discussion forum where their interactions afforded themselves, their classmates, and myself as the teacher researcher an opportunity to further explore how identity construction in the online classroom can play an important role in the ways in which students engage and express critical knowledge in this space. In Week 12 of our 17-week semester, students were asked to create a visual argument for their semester topic. This visual argument was assigned in the form of an online discussion in order to enhance the rhetorical considerations of multiple audiences and interpretations. Students were asked to create a visual with minimal text that would present and support the argument they had been focusing on within our larger class research and writing assignments. Arguments were student-selected, and students had conducted extensive research and written an essay on the topic before this Week 12 assignment was given. Students were asked to create their visual argument (as opposed to copying prefabricated images from other sources) and to post their created visual to the online discussion board in their original response thread for that week (a discussion format that students were familiar with, having participated in this type of forum each week of the class). For the second part, students were asked to respond to two of their peers in 5-10 sentences. Responses were intended to help the authors of the visual argument further enhance their image (see Appendix A for specific assignment prompt and guidelines).

Additional data collected included four online discussions that took place over four nonconsecutive weeklong periods of time across a 17-week semester (Weeks 1, 2, 6, and 11). The discussion topics included their personal introductions, identity work in the form of visual identity essays and the social identity wheel, their critical discussion in Week 7, and the Week 12

visual argument assignment (included within a discussion-sharing format). Additionally, I collected three assignments: a visual rhetorical argument, a personal essay, and a rhetorical analysis. In Week 9, I also held one-on-one conferences with all students in the class and took field notes on the conferences I had with the two focal students. These conferences were between 30 minutes and an hour long, and they focused on revising drafts of the current argumentative essays they were working on. In total, I have 36 pages of student writing from the two focal students and researcher field notes.

Data analysis occurred in three phases. First, I examined Sarah and Justin's online interaction in Week 12 by reviewing the data from the discussion transcript as well as the email communications I had with both students. I paid particular attention to the ways in which Sarah and Justin's contributions related to power, intimacy, and transformation or change in opinion and/or understanding. Next, I examined their interactions leading up to Week 12 to better understand how they built their relationship as students over time throughout classroom interactions. Finally, I examined the first week's assignment – their video introductions – to see how they positioned themselves and shared parts of themselves verbally and visually. This led me to consider how the assignment and other classroom practices in the first week played a role in constructing a classroom culture that supported and constrained their interaction throughout the course, particularly in Week 12.

## **Findings**

The findings include two larger themes regarding relationships and transformation. Within relationships, critical dialogue and intimacy become important concepts to consider as affective constructs of one another. Transformation considers how students change their minds, share and create new knowledge, and transform their perspectives through their communicative

acts. The findings are also chronological, as they move from the first assignments and interactions in class to the Week 12 discussion. This chronological layout demonstrates the development of these students' relationships within the course as they were unfolding.

### ***Establishing Classroom Relationships: Intimacy and Positioning***

The selves students bring to a classroom environment are often different than those they bring to other environments of both professional and casual stature. Interactions and relationships continued to evolve throughout the entire semester, influencing how students shared their identities. Throughout various assignments, students consciously and unconsciously shared parts of their identity with their audience of peers and instructor.

When considering academic learning in an online classroom, the importance of the introduction discussion in the first week of class might not be a point of interest, as students are not necessarily addressing or practicing course objectives. However, in order to understand the shaping of the relationship between students, and these two focal students, it is important to consider their first interactions within the online space. Students were asked to create a video introduction of themselves addressing the following questions:

Who are you?

What is your background?

Why are you taking this course?

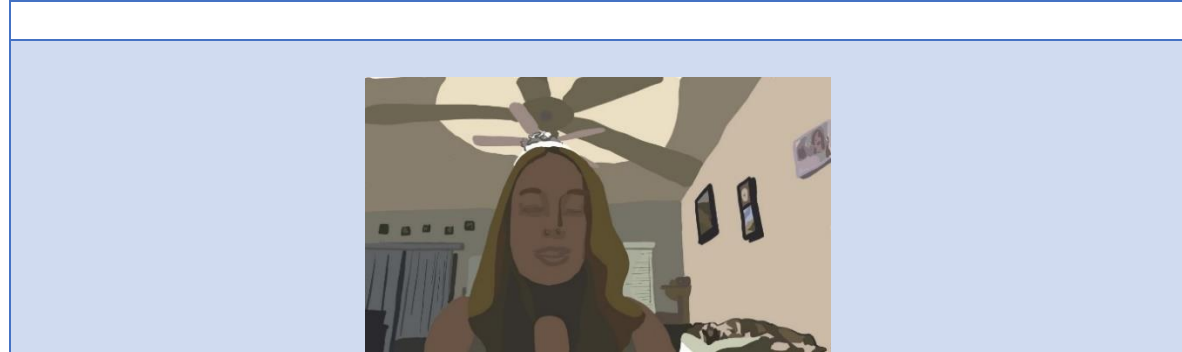
What are your long-term career goals?

What is something interesting about yourself?

These prompts are simple, yet they were effective in producing rich responses that influenced the creation of classroom relationships. From this relational perspective, the elements of intimacy, positioning, and power negotiations became immediately apparent. Sarah was the first student to

respond to the introduction discussion board, which means she was the first to enter and participate in the creation of this online space. Sarah’s video provided the following content:

*Hello, my name is Sarah. I’m currently living in Texas, but I’m from the mid-west originally. I’m a Psychology major. I hope to learn how to think more critically and form arguments better because debating is a hobby of mine. Um, my long-term goals would include getting into graduate school and getting into clinical psychology. That is my area of interest at the moment. Something interesting about myself would be that I speak Russian and I studied in Ukraine for a while. I just joined the military to escape right out of high school I’m looking forward to this semester, and I hope you are too!*



**Figure 4.1**  
*Sarah’s Video Introduction Transcript*

Sarah’s text tells us her location, her interests, and a bit about her past. She notes “escaping” from high school, joining the military, and living in Ukraine. None of what she chose to share verbally connected to the visuals that were either consciously or subconsciously present behind her image. The visual that Sarah chose to share of herself as well as the artifacts of her surroundings create an opportunity for peers to learn more about her in ways that are more intimate than student introductions in face-to-face classroom settings. Though I see my traditional students at least three times a week, I don’t get to see where they live or gain this much information about their lives. In using comics-based research methods (Kuttner, et al., 2018) to render this image, I can, while protecting confidentiality, identify artifacts this student included in her photograph that seem to be heavy with meaning: a cat lying behind her, a cat climbing structure in the corner, an old-fashioned wooden wall clock, pictures of her baby girl, and other small decorations hanging on her walls. Here Sarah is sharing a glimpse of her



homelife that includes more than just the brief verbal information. Viewers feel drawn into this homelife, like she has invited us into her intimate space.

Justin did not post until a few days later. His video is separated from Sarah's by four other student videos that are presented in the order that students submit them. Justin is an older student returning to college after a long career. He is also a Colorado native, which may or may not have provided him with similar experiences that Sarah has had from living across a variety of states and countries. Their personal experiences and histories likely weigh heavily on the decisions they made when creating their videos as well as the topics and ideas that they bring in throughout the semester.

*Hi my name is Justin, and I am um an Econ major here at the university, and I'm also a former police officer. I'm currently in the process of medical retirement thanks to one too many um knee injuries. The reason I'm taking this course is [that] there is an interest in learning how to form and write better arguments... Something interesting about me would probably be like a I may have OCD when it comes to a clean house and everything's got to be exactly where it should be and I can't stand having a mess for very long so I'm pretty OCD about cleaning the house so um that's pretty much me in a nutshell.*



**Figure 4.2**  
*Justin's Video Introduction Transcript*

Justin's verbal comments align with his chosen setting more than Sarah's did. He introduces his past career, his reason for returning to school, and a self-diagnosis of his psychological state (though it is unclear how accurate this self-diagnosis is). Justin has entered a

space—the online undergraduate classroom—where participants are typically considered peers in terms of knowledge, place in life, etc. Since he is not a traditional student, he includes information about himself that indicates that he has passed a few milestones that other students have not. Justin’s repeated mention of law enforcement throughout various responses to peer posts may lead viewers to assume that he wants to be an authoritative figure within the classroom. In any case, this intimate information seems to give him an authoritative position within his relationships in the class.

The visuals that Justin provides include a three-pronged decoration, which displays American flags and colors. The blanket hanging on the back wall depicts police officers going into fire/smoke, helping a dog, and riding a motorcycle; a police car; and an officer or person on top of a rock. His police hat hangs high above his head, which brings into question whether this expanded lens angle was intentionally constructed to include the hat specifically. He seems to have chosen this background carefully, methodically; however, this decision may have also be unconscious. Degrees, plaques, glass trophies, and possible honors are on the walls and file cabinet. His desk is behind him, which makes viewers question why he chose to sit in this location for this video. Throughout the various visual cues presented in this video, viewers can gain a more intimate understanding, and thus relationship, with this student.

Justin’s words and visuals seems to work together or confirm one another with evidence of the claims being made. Sarah’s visuals do not obviously connect to her verbal expressions in the same way, but instead provide more information than she would have given if she had chosen to write her introduction only. While the settings of both students are not similar in their alignment to the verbal, they are similar in that they are both inside the students’ homes: a place that teachers and peer students don’t usually get to be a part of. This unique virtual assignment

creates a new kind of relationship between the participants in an online classroom that may lead to different kinds of interactions. These relational aspects provided me the opportunity to approach the critical interaction between Sarah and Justin in a way that I might not have known to do in an on-campus classroom.

### ***Critical Dialogue***

Critical dialogue in the online classroom was an area of interest regarding teaching argument rhetorically; however, I was not expecting critical dialogue to take place in the forum or in the way in which it did between Sarah and Justin. The assignment below outlines a discussion prompt that I have practiced in my on-campus courses often. On campus, students typically draw visual arguments in class, and a few students will share their work before turning them in for instructor feedback. Asking online students to create and share their visual argument in the discussion forum created another opportunity for students to learn more about one another and to interact in authentic ways. The discussion prompt was as follows:

### Instructions

For this week's Discussion Assignment: Part A is due before Wednesday at 11:59pm (worth 10 points). Part B is due before Saturday at 11:59pm (worth 5 points).

Read Chapter 8: "Visual Arguments" in your Perspectives textbook and J. Anthony Blaire's article "The Possibility and Actuality of Visual Arguments" in RAW before completing the weekly discussion for this week.



*Image depicts a camp set up with blankets, umbrella, and some garbage nearby.*

**Part A:** For this week's discussion, I would like for each of you to take or create an image related to your topic for this unit that adheres to the following criteria for creating a visual argument. Depending upon the mode you have chosen to deliver your argument, your visuals may vary. Viewing visual arguments in Chapter 8 of Perspectives will help you to get ideas that would best fit your particular topic and mode of presentation.

For example, if you have chosen to create a video game, your visual might be the characters since they will likely be a visual representation of part of your argument. If you are creating a podcast, your visual might be an image of yourself, which will need to express to your viewer that you are an authority on the topic. Graphs and charts can also serve as visual arguments for consumers of texts. Please email me with any questions you have regarding the how visuals relate to your particular topic and mode of delivery. Images can be drawn or taken but need to be originally designed by you (not taken from Google, etc.).

1. Upload your image to the discussion board, and provide an explanation for how it meets the following goals:
2. Communicate quickly and have immediate and tangible effects on viewers.
3. Invite viewer identification and establish common ground through shared values.
4. Engage the emotions of the viewers.
5. Juxtapose materials from different categories so that the viewer will make new links and associations.
  6. Employ familiar icons that prompt immediate, appropriate responses from viewers.
  7. Present visual symbols that viewers can easily interpret.
  8. Include only materials that viewers should focus on and omit everything else.
  9. Invite unique interpretations from viewers through visual subtleties that do not

### Figure 4.3

#### *Week 12 Discussion Prompt*

I carefully constructed these guidelines with a set of expectations for creating a visual and providing information to support the author's choices. However, as in any classroom culture,

students will comprehend the limits and conditions intended by the teacher differently, resulting in varying degrees of responses from students that both satisfy the intentions of the instructor regarding learning outcomes while also serving to challenge the teacher's purpose as well as peer responses. Below I describe how Sarah's response to Justin's social image provoked a critical dialogue between them after first reviewing students' responses to Sarah's social image.

***Peer dialogue in response to Sarah's social issue image: Not critical.***

Below is the image that Sarah posted as a result of the assignment prompt:



**Figure 4.4**  
*Sarah's Visual Argument*

In re-artist-ulating this visual artifact by means of comics-based research (Kuttner et al., 2018), I observed and recreated many details about the image that I had not consciously considered when first viewing Sarah's post. This visual shows Sarah nursing her baby in what appears to be an unmade bed with ruffled pillows, sheets, and blankets. Her blue eyes match the blue in her shirt, which also includes stars displayed along a white band. Her tattoo, though unidentifiable, is colorful and takes up all of what is visible of her lower arm. Her baby is wearing a diaper and no

shirt. Numerous messages are suggested within this visual artifact, messages that potentially play a role in defining identities and cultures in this particular online classroom.

Sarah is arguing for the normalization of breastfeeding, and she has chosen to take a picture of herself nursing her young daughter. This breastfeeding image may be problematic for some, perhaps warranting trigger warnings for online discussions or simply a list of appropriate versus inappropriate images, language, etc. However, this image also serves to demonstrate the Sarah's agency in choosing, creating, and sharing their perceived identities as well as the overall culture of the online classroom. (This student agency is not absolute, as the teacher also has agency and ultimate authority in what content is shared on class discussion boards). Sarah is presenting her identity primarily as a nurturing mother. Additional identities are presented through Sarah's choice to present herself breastfeeding and the appearance of her tattoo, both of which may be viewed as radical presentations of self to some audiences. Sarah further complicates this construction of her identity with her choices of location (an unmade bed) and attire. Her decision to post this image in the course discussion, for all class members (myself as instructor included) to view, indicates that she is attempting to co-construct the overall culture of the classroom. I define this as an attempted co-construction because Sarah believes that this post is acceptable within the classroom culture that has previously been established up until this point in the semester. Her post requires responses of approval, disapproval, or both in order to verify that in fact this concept is viewed as appropriate by others in the course who agree or disagree with this assumed classroom culture. Peer responses to Sarah's posted visual image further work to co-construct and define the culture of this online space and class community:

### Student responses to Sarah’s visual image post

**Zach:** “Such a good topic with awesome kairos! I have never publicly seen this be an issue as much as it is said to be online, but I don’t doubt there are some feelings that float around today’s society ‘about-tit.’ An in-public photo would have communicated the message about the issue better, but I still think this is a powerful picture and I knew immediately what controversy you were speaking to.”

**Ashley:** “I think this is a great picture! As a mother, I may be a bit more conditioned to these images than others, but when you consider a picture like this next to some of the other photos of breasts in public these days, I don’t see where the shock comes from in relation to breastfeeding. Including this picture of yourself makes this argument more personal as well as boosts your ethos on this topic!”

**Gram:** First of all, you are brave! Way to stand for what you believe in and put yourself out there to do it! I do have some suggestions just to help the focus stay on your intent. I love tattoos, but yours kind of distracts me from your intent of this photo (your tattoo is awesome though). Also, I think this picture would be more effective if you were able to have someone else take it so that it looks more “raw” than “posed.”

**Kammy:** “I agree that the image would be more powerful if it were taken in public. However, I don’t think it’s a necessity. In fact, posting this image online makes it “public” because even though you’re in your home, the image is outside of your home. Putting an image like this on the internet may be considered offensive or taboo, similar to how others might respond if they say you feeding your baby in public. The sweet and caring image takes away the sexuality associated with breasts and brings it back to their purpose: to feed our babies!

#### Figure 4.5

##### *Threaded Replies to Sarah’s Visual Argument*

The responses above focused on the rhetorical questions noted within the discussion prompt; however, I had assumed that this image would have sparked more critical conversations. Students who responded seem to support and encourage Sarah in her agency and choice of imagery and issue. They also include some mild disagreement with her choices (including her tattoo, taking a selfie rather than posing for another camera person, etc.). There is no real disagreement here, and thus no extended debate about what could be viewed as a controversial issue. Perhaps some students did have an opposing viewpoint but chose not to engage in it here. It is interesting to note that Justin did not respond to Sarah’s argument or any part of the replies that followed.

## *Transformation*

Sarah did respond to Justin’s visual argument, which led to an extended online dialogue and eventually to transformation. Justin’s example of a visual argument, which he created using PowerPoint, presents a lived experience worth further reflection:



**Figure 4.6**  
*Justin’s Visual Argument*

The image above depicts two different scenarios: mass shootings on top of the question “what scares you more?” and militarized police officers below. While this was an exigent topic for students to discuss at the time, the visual of gun violence may be considered, for reasons different than Sarah’s image, inappropriate. Although some instructors might have been concerned about the appropriateness of both Sarah’s and Justin’s social images, I supported their agency in posting them. Whereas Justin did not respond to Sarah’s image, Sarah was the first to respond to Justin’s image and the text he included below it in response to the assignment prompts:



Justin's original discussion post (11/22/16 @ 9:07pm):

**[Includes image shown above]**

What topics are you interested in?

The Militarization of America's Police Departments

What are 3 controversies surrounding your topic?

1033 government procurement plan

Are lines between military and law enforcement being 'blurred'?

Is militarization threatening the Civil Liberties of citizens?

3 questions people may ask about the controversies:

Why do law enforcement agencies need 'tactical' equipment and weapons?

How will this keep us safe?

Why do law enforcement need tactical/military training?

**Sarah (11/22/16 @10:39pm):**

My opinion is: "They don't."

Research indicates that the militarization of the police force is a really bad idea.

Police are not supposed to be running around playing urban commando in

American suburbs. There is evidence to indicate that the old adage 'if you give a

boy a hammer, everything looks like a nail' is absolutely relevant here. Evidence

also suggests that police in military gear are more threatening, imposing,

intimidating than normal police gear, and it can whip angry crowds into rioting

mobs due to the perception of threat and injustice. The best way to increase

safety is to form a bond with, rather than intimidation of, the community. If the

military is needed, call us. The soldiers who will be called in will know more

about what they are doing on that equipment that cops do, and people are less

likely to get hurt. Personally, I feel like the better question is whether or not law

enforcement agencies need tactical equipment/weapons. Reading the question, it

feels like your bias is in favor of them needing tactical equipment/weapons in

the first place. I'm not saying it is a problem if you're biased, but asking 'why do

they' rather than 'do they' feels like putting the cart before the horse.

This is just what I learned over the past year. It's been all over the media, but

I'm sure research will turn up the specifics pretty easily considering all of the

attention it's gotten lately. Good luck!"

**Figure 4.7**

*Justin & Sarah's Week 12 Dialogue: Justin's Original Post & Sarah's First Reply*

Sarah curtly and explicitly states her opinion in response to Justin's "3 questions people may ask about the controversies," all questions related to the use of tactical equipment and military training for law enforcement agencies. Sarah's direct opinion is that such equipment and training does not "keep us safe." Sarah engages in other tactical moves as she offers evidence, suggesting where she sees Justin's "bias." Her response was unusual in the course in terms of its emotional

strength and disagreement, and my initial reaction was that it might not be appropriate within our online space.

It is important to note that Sarah emailed me, the instructor, after her initial response. She was concerned she had gotten too upset and wanted me to review her post. Since I had previously video-conferenced with both Sarah and Justin on multiple occasions, I felt that I had built a trusting relationship with both. I believed that Sarah's response was important and appropriate considering the topic and told her to leave it as it was for the time being. Next, I decided to email Justin in order to prepare him for Sarah's response. In this email, I asked Justin how he felt about the post and if he would feel comfortable responding. I explained that I knew his intentions were different than Sarah's assumptions because I had spoken with him about them previously. Justin responded in an email that said he would be happy to reply and felt up to the task of following the classroom guidelines. I then responded to Sarah again to let her know that she could expect a reply from Justin. I reminded both Justin and Sarah of the discussion guidelines for civil behavior and told them that I knew both were up to the task. Justin then responded, and the two of them engaged back and forth for several posts over the course of 13 hours, with other students likely reading their discussion but not participating in it:

**Justin (11/22/16 @11:42pm):**

After Sarah's reply, I think I should clarify what my topic is since there might be some confusion. My topic should be The 'Perceived' Militarization of Law Enforcement Agencies in the United States. The notion of U.S. law enforcement running around like Gestapo is false, and although there are people across the country [that] believe that, the point of my paper will be to dispel that notion. Sarah, if I can address something in your response. I'm not bias by suggesting that police need tactical equipment/weapons, I'm stating an absolute fact that they do. How many times in recent history has the military been called in to Aurora Colorado for an active shooter situation, or to a hostage or shoot out situation in LA? None. (I'm not trying to belittle the military by any means, I'm making a point that they are not the police, and they have a completely different role in keeping us safe). Police absolutely need assault weapons and armored

vehicles to effectively handle those types of situations. The old adage “don’t bring a knife to a gun fight” is even more relevant here. Officer Snuffy with his .40 cal hand gun can’t do a whole lot to stop Joe Blow bad guy with a shot gun or assault rifle.....

**Sarah (11/23/16 @ 7:17am):**

I’m not saying that they don’t need any sort of police-grade tactical equipment. You are talking about the militarization of the police force and mentioned the government’s procurement plan. Police do not need military-grade weapons and technology, especially not the armored personnel carriers, etc. Evidence and statistics are not in favor of your argument, but it is your argument, so you will frame it how you wish regardless. I was just trying to point out a perceived flaw in how you chose to approach it. You are starting with a warrant that many of us may not share, so your argument will not reach as broad an audience if you start with the assumption that we do.

**Sarah (11/23/16 @ 7:23am):**

I feel like the comment about the police running around like the Gestapo was aimed at me even though you mentioned that being an opinion of others in the country, and if it was, that was a gross exaggeration of my position. In fact, I would probably call it a straw man. The urban commando comment was a reference to soldiers fighting urban warfare, which makes sense in context, but using the Gestapo, the secret police of Hitler who ran around assassinating people and rounding up minorities, does not. Saying that my position thinks that the police are running around like the Gestapo is a simple emotion-evoking strawman. I don’t want to assume that was the intention, but I want to point out that it was insulting regardless of who it is aimed at.

**Justin (11/23/16 @ 8:56am):**

Sarah, you are reading WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAY too much into things. If you scroll back up to my post, you will see that it was divided into two sections. The clarification of my topics, in which the Gestapo is mentioned as a way to illustrate how many in America see LE [law enforcement] especially after the Ferguson riots, and the second was where I addressed my issue with a comment you made. The two are separate. The gestapo comments were not aimed at you, I’m fully aware that you used the phrase urban commando. There are numerous places/articles where the term gestapo has been used to describe LE. And you’re right, it is an insulting comment, especially to a former cop, but that is one of the terms being used, so I used it in my example. Don’t read too much into it.

**Sarah (11/23/16 @ 10:22am):**

Justin,  
Oh, I see. I apologize for assuming that was what the implication was. It just seemed in context like the Gestapo comment was aimed at me in light of my criticism of the argument. I know that some people go overboard in their criticism of the police force. The way I read it was that you were grouping

everyone who is critical of the militarization of the police force into the “cops are modern day Gestapo” camp. Thank you for clearing up the confusion.

**Sarah (11/23/16 @ 10:31am):**

In regards to your response, I wasn't trying to have an argument about the topic itself. One of the things we were supposed to do was post our opinion. I don't want to come across like I'm attacking your post by arguing about it before you even to do your final project. I like your clarified goal of dispelling myths surrounding the perceived militarization of the police force better than the original topic question. It cleared it up for me to know what your focus would be, even if I don't agree with your stance. It makes more sense to me to approach it from that angle. By the way, just on a personal note, I'm sorry that people compare police to Gestapo. Believe it or not, there are still people who call us [military personnel] war criminals and baby-killers, even to starry-eyed airmen fresh out of basic, so I know how close to home that gets.

**Figure 4.8**

*Justin & Sarah's Continued Conversation Week 12 Discussion*

The above discussion demonstrates relational clashes that can culminate in moments of disagreement or misinterpretation; the two students who have subtly been in opposition throughout previous moments of discussion have now decided to confront one another in order to understand why their views on this topic are so different.

In this case, the discussion prompt was not intended to be fuel for critical dialogue. However, what is most interesting is that the depth of the continued back-and-forth dialogue that took place as long as both students were willing to participate. Similar to a game of Jenga, the students took turns focusing in on specific blocks (certain parts of the discussion) and rearranging them (or adding new information and sharing experiences). Jenga typically ends when one player causes the tower to collapse; as a teacher, I felt like I was watching these students continue to take risky blocks from unstable parts of the building. However, in the end, Justin and Sarah chose to complete their turns, build the tower as high as they were willing to make it, and then call it a day.

One risky block that Justin discusses in his post was his reference to Gestapo. In analyzing those references of the conversation, we can see ways in which these students socially construct the critical culture of the classroom in various forms. Justin's statement, "the notion of U.S. law enforcement running around like Gestapo," is one place where students begin to socially construct critical knowledge surrounding the often-casual use of this term without full understanding of the actual definition. Though Justin may or may not have intended this statement as informative (or even known the true definition), the term prompts Sarah to provide this explanation in her response. Sarah responds by defining the term *Gestapo* to mean "the secret police of Hitler who ran around assassinating people and rounding up minorities [...] it was insulting regardless." Further, the building of this critical knowledge extends in Justin's response when he states, "There are numerous places/articles where the term Gestapo has been used to describe LE [law enforcement] . . . And you're right, it is an insulting comment, especially to a former cop, but that is one of the terms being used, so I used it in my example." At this point in the conversation, previous discussions and topics have led these two students to assume the culture of the classroom allows for this type of dialogue and that they have agency in sharing parts of their identities to help further define how their previous knowledges will either advance or dissolve into new knowledge and understanding within this space of their learning.

This situation could have gone in many different directions. First, Sarah could have chosen not to respond and allowed Justin's authority as a police officer to dominate this conversation. However, Sarah established her identity as a military officer from the first week of class, and this position of authority likely supported her in choosing to critique Justin's visual as well as ask questions about it. Would a student lacking the presumed authority of a police or military officer have felt comfortable responding to Justin's post? No other students did

respond to this thread. However, many students posted original threads and responded to others below this one, which creates the likely assumption that students did view this conversation and chose to either not respond or scroll to the next post for other reasons.

Here we have an example of two students constructing their understanding of this topic based on their experience, knowledge, and position. Sarah is in the military and her knowledge and position is different than that of Justin's as a police officer. By continuing their conversation, providing their own experiences and knowledge, and asking questions, the two students are able to successfully co-construct their understanding of this situation for themselves and their peers in the class, thus further defining the classroom culture as a place that can have room for both of these perspectives.

The above conversation could have ended many times or gone on quite longer than it did; however, the way in which it ended signals a shift in the understanding of the participants. This shift occurs in Justin as he chooses not to respond to Sarah again. Justin's shift could be defined in many ways and could be signaling defeat, acceptance, approval, denial, etc. Alternatively, Sarah demonstrates her ability to evolve or more simply to change her mind/perspective/ understanding when she responds to Justin's last comment by stating, "Oh, I see. I apologize for assuming that was what the implication was. It just seemed in context like the Gestapo comment was aimed at me in light of my criticism of the argument." And further, "on a personal note, I'm sorry that people compare police to Gestapo. Believe it or not, there are still people who call us [active military] war criminals and baby-killers, even to starry-eyed airmen fresh out of basic, so I know how close to home that gets."

### *The Value of Online Class Discussions for Offering Time and Space*

Sarah was upset in her initial response to Justin's visual argument, however, she had time to recalibrate her engagement in the online dialogue over the ensuing thirteen hours. Though some responses occurred more rapidly than others, and we have no way of knowing what took place in these time lapses, Sarah clearly had time to consider, reflect, research, and prepare her response if she chose to do so (something that a face-to-face classroom would rarely allow or provide for). This time and space to reflect, self-edit, and think through one's contribution is seen as a potential affordance of the online classroom and/or discussion regarding critical dialogue and the construction of classroom culture.

It is important to note that Sarah is a unique individual. It is unlikely that other students would come to these same revelations in a similar manner, if at all. I wish I could say that I had played a part in this evolving sense of critical and cultural consciousness. I do believe that this co-construction of critical-cultural space, as initiated by me as the teacher, is part of the overall tone set for this particular corner of the online classroom. "Fernback argues that online space is 'socially constructed and re-constructed [and] is a repository for collective cultural memory—it is popular culture, it is narrative created by its inhabitants that reminds us who we are, it is life as lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts'" (Gatson, 2011, p. 528). With each prompt, thread, and response, the relationships within this discussion are continually renegotiated. Each reconstruction demonstrates new considerations based on the knowledge and/or experience gained from communication with and reflection upon this communication with others.

### **Discussion**

This study examined how two students contributed to the construction of an online class community that supported the building of trusting relationships and critical dialogue. As the

instructor, I had an important role to play in developing both course content and activities to support community building. I also worked to facilitate students' participation in class dialogue, including critical dialogue. Although there were multiple times students did not take up the opportunity for critical dialogue, I played a role in navigating the critical dialogue that Sarah and Justin engaged in. Though at times I could have chosen to censor or monitor students' choices of images and discussions of those images, I supported their agency and helped them navigate their differences of opinion. This critical dialogue is important to support and nurture in any classroom and particularly university courses on written arguments:

Such discourse patterns provide opportunities for students to closely observe, name, question, and talk about their lived worlds; to support and celebrate each other as learners; to challenge ideas and each other in constructive yet critical ways; to play active roles in shaping and reshaping classroom practices; to draw upon multiple languages and cultural resources in sharing and extending knowledge; and to safely struggle with and discuss powerful ideas and responsible social actions. (Jennings & Green, 1999, pp .i).

Sarah and Justin were able to engage in discourse that questioned and challenged one another in constructive ways. They allowed their ideas to be shaped and reshaped with each question and reply they received. Their dialogue included specific examples of lived experiences where Justin connected to his work and perspective as a police officer and where Sarah was able to share her experiences and perspectives as someone in the military. Both students used what they knew about their identities and experiences in order to share and extend the knowledge of themselves, their classmates, and their instructor. As their instructor, I was able to support and celebrate the learning they undertook and constructed.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Implications for practicing critical dialogue in online classrooms support the importance and transformative nature of such conversations. Providing and preparing for opportunities where students may practice engaging in critical dialogue becomes an important consideration



for online instructors. Though I prepared a lesson as described in the study earlier, critical dialogue is not always taken up when it may have been intended to or assumed regarding certain topics. Similarly, critical dialogue may occur in spaces where such conversations were not expected. Therefore, it is productive and important to intentionally design curricula in composition classrooms, rhetorical argument classrooms, and all university classrooms that introduce the concepts of respectful communication and welcome critical dialogue from the very beginning of the semester. It can be helpful to consider setting up a course for critical dialogue that is both planned and unplanned by introducing readings, guidelines, and examples in the very first week of class. Early introduction and preparation for critical learning and dialogue to occur can help to create an expectation for successful interactions that are conducted with mutual respect.

In addition to these guidelines and activities, it can be helpful for instructors to set a tone of inclusivity that welcomes differences in opinion and perspective. This attitude can be modeled in public responses to students within discussion forums, in video lectures and announcements, and even in individual responses to assignments and emails. It is important for instructors to work at constructing a classroom space online where students feel comfortable bringing up experiences, raising questions about their own and others' understanding, and listening to new ideas. The online learning environment supports students and teachers in doing this work, as the format can require that all students contribute to the discussion in some way and that students can spend more time in an online conversation than in traditional classroom dialogue.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

The results of this study highlight the many potential affordances of online learning regarding social engagement and critical dialogue. In this study, Justin and Sarah's social

engagement went beyond that of traditional students due to the time and space they had to work through their differences in perspectives and ideas. The online nature of the course also provided me time and space to consult with each student individually to prepare a course of action that felt manageable for us all. As the instructor, I also had the ability to mute the discussions (though I did not choose to do so). These affordances worked together to create a space where I felt safe and able to support the continuation of a difficult conversation that I hoped would lead to learning and growth for all involved. These affordances can also lead to important considerations for critical pedagogy and the potential for critical dialogue to move to online spaces whether students meet in person or not. The benefit of online discussion forums for educational purposes is that they are private spaces dedicated to students of a course. There are few other places where students will have this type of practice, space, and opportunity. The time and space allotted for all students to participate and engage with one another in the online space of discussion forums can increase the opportunities students have to engage with critical topics, practice critical dialogue, and work toward their own personal growth and critical consciousness.

This research also provides implications for methods of virtual ethnography and comics-based research. Regarding virtual ethnography, this study connected the methodologies and theories of ethnography, virtual ethnography, and critical dialogue in ways that highlighted the connections that links these methods to topics of critical dialogue. The relational aspects provided in Pink's (2016) virtual ethnographic concepts provided a key link to the relationships between Sarah, Justin, me, and the other students as well as the overall culture of our online classroom. Implications for methods of comics-based research include using this method for helping to protect the privacy of participants without losing the richness of the visual data

collected. Comics-based research is a relatively new concept to arts-based research, yet it provides an opportunity for analyzing virtual data in new and important ways.

### ***Future Research***

I hope that future research will continue to be conducted on critical dialogue in virtual spaces of education for educators to continue to learn and build these important skills for our students. Additionally, I hope that instructors will continue future research by conducting a virtual ethnography of any available online course or educational platform to see what can be learned from looking at specific educational settings through this lens. Reflecting ethnographically in any part of our lives can open us up to new interpretations, new experiences, and new realities, all of which help us to be more empathetic and successful communicators in the classroom, in society, and online.

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## CHAPTER 5

### SYNTHESIS & IMPLICATIONS

#### **Introduction**

The final chapter of this dissertation is a synthesis of all three studies. This synthesis provides an opportunity to delve deeper into the combined meaning of how the online learning environment in writing courses both supports and constrains productive, critical, and humanizing education in the online writing classroom. One limitation that this type of research inevitably faces is that education is a constantly moving target. Further, the definition of *an educated individual* continues to shift and grow and change shape with each passing day in our modern, technological society. Even as I conducted this research across a four-year period, the changes were apparent across the literature, capabilities, software, access, and culture of online learning. This study began back in 2015 with simple and straightforward questions:

How are teaching and learning supported and constrained in online writing instructional environments?

How can social learning and interaction be implemented and facilitated in asynchronous online spaces of communication?

In working through each study chronologically and then circling back and returning to them again and again, their individual purposes become blurred, and the output of their final meaning symbolized, for me, the always present power of the group in creating new knowledge and shaping the ways in which we can learn with and through interaction. These studies have informed my ideas about my classroom pedagogies, curriculum, teaching practices, and overall philosophies. I have used this research opportunity as a tool to build upon my current

understanding of the learning that takes place in my classrooms both online and on campus. I have accomplished my end goal of applying and continuing to use this new knowledge of my scholarly work to further cultivate my teaching and learning strategies and experience. Additionally, this work contributes to interdisciplinary knowledge and practice in multiple ways that I will address later in the chapter.

As my work evolved over the past four years, my research questions evolved for each of the three studies:

***Study 1 Research Questions***

How do learning outcomes compare between online and face-to-face versions of the same course?

What are students' perceptions of teaching and learning in their respective course environments?

***Study 2 Research Questions***

How do online college composition students respond to asynchronous discussions that involve current and controversial topics?

How are opportunities for engaging in critical dialogue supported and constrained through an online discussion forum?

***Study 3 Research Questions***

How are students navigating online discussions as sites of critical dialogue?

How do asynchronous online forums support and constrain the relational aspects necessary for students to engage in transformative education?

Each of these questions helped to guide my data collection and also stemmed epistemologically from the methods I was practicing at each given phase of my graduate courses. Combining these



three studies into one larger text established a sense of structure that guided my overall research in new and critical directions. It is also important to note how the progression of questions, from the first study to the last, became more open-ended in nature. The pointed questions in Study One, I was met with specific answers that guided me in the directions of the second and third studies but that were much less helpful in terms of what I wanted and needed to know as an instructor of online writing. As the research questions became more qualitative, I saw them as moving through the positivist, constructivist, critical (and also into the postmodern) paradigms of educational research. Exploring the continually evolving educational landscape of online writing instruction from various paradigmatic perspectives has allowed me to be aware of my continual becomings as a teacher as the definition and repertoire of an educator continues to evolve each day and with each new technological advancement.

By including these three connected studies of data that span across multiple semesters, this dissertation becomes an examination across time and space of how I have continued to consider and adjust my definitions of learning outcomes, pedagogy, and curriculum to more productively include critical, humanizing education into online writing instructional spaces. This type of persistent research has resulted in a meta reflection that enables the possibilities of productive and transformative education to occur within the continually evolving techno-educational landscape.

### **Major Findings**

I utilized a variety of research methods in order to ask questions differently about the teaching of writing online at the advanced college composition level. Utilizing varying modes of inquiry from different paradigmatic lenses enabled the same topic to be investigated in new ways. Consequently, the three separate studies produced new and varied results that can be

considered on a continuum in order to make new meaning and gather more knowledge about how to teach and learn within these ever-evolving online spaces.

Findings across the three articles are at once similar and different from one another. Similar themes focused on important differences across the two different learning environments regarding student interactions and discussions. While learning outcomes in terms of grades were not found to have statistically significant differences for online and on-campus students, there were important differences in terms of the ways in which these learning outcomes were constructed, practiced, and reflected upon. Had I not conducted Study One, the implications for discussion and interaction might not have been a topic of focus within the overall scope of the teaching writing online research that I embarked upon. Additionally, having the overall learning outcomes present as successful across both environments, the directions of the research could trend to more qualitative paradigms. These qualitative analyses have allowed me to gain deep insights into my pedagogy, research, and curriculum.

I had originally assumed, due to the attitudes and literature regarding the teaching of writing online, that there would be much to learn in terms of enhancing the online experience to make it more compatible with the on-campus educational style. However, one of the major findings when looking across these three studies is that there are many opportunities that the online classroom affords that can be implemented into the on-campus classroom. Online discussions and online peer reviews have been two specific examples of beneficial online tools that I have since implemented into my on-campus courses. While further studies need to be conducted on these topics, I am consistently reminded of the rewards students receive when participating in online discussions and peer reviews within both my online and on-campus courses.

Preparing for events to take place in the classroom (both online and on campus) has been another major takeaway from these studies. When I prepare for events, I am recalling instances of argument, triggers, questions, and confusion that had taken place in previous semesters. Conducting this research allowed me to reflect on these moments more thoroughly and to develop plans that can help students prepare for or avoid such events. One example is that I spend the first week of class discussing rules for dialogue both in the classroom and online (the results of this application will need to be tested in future studies; however, they have been helpful to remind students of and serve as common ground when we do find ourselves in positions of discomfort). Preparing for events can also mean preparing for confusion or questions that can arise in assignment prompts (mostly online) as students are not able to ask questions in real time in that learning environment.

As a result, I have prepared videos and additional instructional materials that students can reference for assignments. I have also changed the format of online assignments to include a discussion board where students can ask questions of myself and their peers about the criteria. And finally, preparation for events includes warnings of possible “hot” topics that may be difficult for some students to engage with. These warnings provide enough context about the topic for students to either prepare themselves for the conversation or to remove themselves from the conversation if they so choose. This is something that applies to both my online and on-campus students, as both can leave the physical room or discussion board space if they are not able to participate in a topic or conversation. Preparation has applied to many topics and has been one strategy that has helped my students to consider the content of our course in deeper and more meaningful ways.

Aligning each study to the original two overarching research questions provides key insights for practical and theoretical significance.

**Study 1.** Within the first study, teaching elements were supported through peer reviews, as online students noted that reviews were particularly helpful. Students also liked discussions and wrote (practiced communication) more than on-campus students who would have similar in-person conversations that were less in-depth and shorter in length with fewer voices contributing due to the constraints of the face-to-face classroom. The facts that supported these findings were the student surveys, as they helped me to gain an understanding of student perspectives, needs, and desires.

Teaching was constrained in the online writing instructional environment in that student retention was decreased in the online environment in comparison to the face-to-face environment. This means that I was able to successfully teach and pass fewer students in the online space. Additionally, those that did complete the course online completed fewer assignments than their on-campus counterparts. This may be because of the lack of in-person accountability, knowledge of technical tools, and self-directed learning motivations often required for online learning. Another consideration may even include personal biases on my part as the instructor for having more knowledge of students in my presence and feeling like I knew them and their overall learning on a more personal level than my online students.

Construction of social engagement online was not critical from the start, but it was marked as an important component lacking from most online courses and desired by many online students (as per literature). Therefore, the first study looked at how social engagement was constructed and how it could support learning and dialogue. Surveys found that it supported learning through peer reviews. Peer reviews also were noted as places where students practiced

writing and enjoyed dialogue with one another, though dialogue was not critical at this stage in the research.

**Study 2.** Within the second study, teaching was supported through the space and place of student learning. Online, students are able to view content alone rather than watch/hear reactions of peers, which means they are less persuaded by others when it comes to their own reactions and responses. Online students also have opportunities to think for themselves, for whatever length of time they need before responding. It is important to remember that our learning management system (LMS) was not capable of hiding student responses until replies were posted at the time of this study, so there is an element of persuasion if students come in and read peer responses before they contribute; however, it is much less significant than in a face-to-face classroom with limited time and response opportunities. Additionally, students can draft and revise their answers before and even after sharing them with the larger class. However, teaching was also constrained in this environment, as online I was unable to be present for entire conversations since the discussion forum was open for seven consecutive days in order to allow students with various work schedules, family responsibilities, and time zones to participate in the conversation and learning within the week's window. As a result, I was not always able to intervene at the right time or steer the conversation when needed, which could also be seen as a benefit.

Supports for co-construction of knowledge occurred within the online learning environment, as space was allotted to students to share knowledge and/or experiences with one another and to communicate and solidify knowledge without as much teacher interference as might be present in the campus classroom. When I did intervene, it was to support this construction and validate ideas. The online learning environment posed constraints on learning

within this study as well. Dominant and/or majority voices can silence others online in the same ways that occur on campus as a result of who is in the class, what knowledge and experiences they have, and how much they are willing to share.

The construction of social engagement helped to support critical learning in this study through learned vocabulary, earned minority history, practiced communications, and revisions. The construction of social engagement also supported critical dialogue, as students were given opportunities to practice conversations that allowed them to enter into the experiences of others, share their own experiences, ask questions, and consider new opinions and perspectives. In both Chapters 3 and 4, students practiced these types of sharing to varying degrees with some participating more and others less or not at all, which mirrors the in-person classroom in some ways but still allows for more voices to contribute and more sharing to occur overall. In this second study, in particular, there was not a huge shift or transformative critical consciousness that occurred as a result of the topic and conversation, however, the experience of having conversation topics and guidelines of this before, in this setting, or with such varying and unknown audiences.

**Study 3.** In Study 3, the online learning environment allowed me to visualize, save, and reflect on the conversation in ways that were previously unavailable to me in the on-campus classroom, which further allowed me to learn and grow from the experience. The online environment also supported teaching and learning of this nature, as I was able to check in with each student involved individually to gauge their feelings and make a plan to move forward in a productive manner. However, similar to the second study, I was unable to monitor the discussion at all times. As a result, I became very aware that students can say and do anything within the online environment. In the campus classroom, a look or interjection may help to prevent a

conversation from going too far; online students may push and prod one another until an instructor, or another peer observes and steps in. This reality solidified the need for guidelines, pointed questions, health regulations, and lots of practice. Further, this study taught me that critical dialogue may be initiated at any time and result from conversations and assignments that were not intended to be spaces for such critical dialogue. The benefits of this are that these experiences model real-world situations. Student learning was also supported, as these conversations and online discussion forums give students agency in their learning, self-development, and growth. Students also learn a great deal about argumentation through their participation and/or observation of such interactions online.

The online environment constrains students in these discussion forums, as they are unable to hear the tone and see the facial expressions of their peers while they are conversing (which may also be a good thing if emotions are not perceived to be running as high). Critical learning is supported by the online environment, as the online space provides students with time to reflect, revise, consult, respond, and reconsider the words and ideas of their peers and themselves. Through guidelines, the opportunities increase online for all students to participate and to have more time and space to do so. Critical dialogue in the online classroom allows students a greater opportunity to prepare responses and digest the prompts. Social construction becomes important to cultivate so that critical dialogue can occur. Critical dialogue cannot occur online without social dimensions. In my classroom, these dimensions were built and practiced through video introductions, weekly discussions, peer reviews, and continual communications among peers and instructor. Guidelines and prompts also help to create these spaces, though undoubtedly more can be done.

## **Overall Significance**

The overall significance of this research can help online writing instructors to continue to evolve the research procedures within this discipline more specifically. Online writing instructors can also learn new ways to observe their own courses, implement new content, and consider knowledge construction. Additionally, implications from this dissertation could extend to other fields, as comparative modes of research methods could be beneficial to multiple other topics and genres. The larger implications of my studies contribute to the literature surrounding technology implementation in the classroom (and most specifically in the online classroom). I hope that these studies help other instructors gain knowledge about the learning and expression occurring in the online classroom and that this project contributes to issues regarding theory and practice in a few different ways.

The significance of these three studies in terms of practice and theory pertains to both education and rhetoric and composition. For example, completing discussions and peer reviews online could allow for a more hybrid model of course delivery to ensure that students are devoting the same amount of time per credit to a course each week. Additionally, in-class time may also be enhanced with longer class periods that allow for in-class writing, questions, and collaboration. Further research is needed to learn more about these possible changes and how they might provide opportunities or constraints for learners in various situations.

### ***Implications for Practice***

These results do not provide a list of best practices, but the results transformed who I am as a teacher and researcher and thus have the potential to change and benefit my students, my readers, and their students. Practically, this project has the potential to change the ways in which college composition instructors teach and research online writing. Because the online



environment for learning is new, changes will likely occur and should be expected to continue to evolve as our teaching strategies and technologies continue to evolve. This in turn will affect practice in both general and specific ways. While I do not aim to solidify best practices for online writing instruction, I do believe that this dissertation can help provide insights into where we are now, where we have come from, and a solid ground from which we can start to push the envelope for further enhancing the teaching and learning of writing online.

This research, in its entirety, has revolutionized the way that I teach in any environment as well as how I think about the time commitments involved in facilitating and maintaining an online educational space. Currently, learning management systems do not offer a “time-out” function that prevents students from posting at certain times of the day. This would defeat the benefits of access that many online students count on in order to complete their schooling with full-time jobs, families, illnesses, etc. This also means that a course is “live” at all times, which creates extra pressure and responsibility for instructors as they monitor learning spaces and student interactions. This research has highlighted both the benefits and the dangers of social online learning. Chapter 2 demonstrated the need for online social interactions as well as examples of where those interactions can afford new possibilities for learning in all environments. However, as I attempted to bring in more social experiences for students, I also was met with unanticipated situations that could negatively impact the learning experiences of many. With the polarities of these affordances and constraints, I began to search for a compromise. As a result of this research, I have begun to implement new structures of dialogue, community, and classroom expectations throughout my course. These changes are found within the syllabus and are discussed on the first day of class. Reminders are then repeated within every online discussion forum, peer review, and group project. More research will need to be

conducted regarding the results of these curricular implementations, but thus far they seem to help prepare students for interacting in ways that I had not previously thought to teach and discuss. Overall, this work fits rather seamlessly within humanities courses, and I find the connections to be both helpful and necessary.

### ***Implications for Theory***

This study was conducted at the point in my degree when I began to realize that reality was subjective. In this study I have tried, for the first time, to consider and include multiple possible interpretations as well as acknowledge that my limited views and experiences have shaped the way I engage with and collect the data, the individual students, the course overall, and the types of analyses I pursue. It is strange to think back now, but at the time it was new and even difficult to acknowledge that my perspective was unique to me and that I no longer belonged to any side of one argument, but that I could understand them all; I developed the ability to see full circle and accept reasoning for both sides as neither good nor bad but as something to be valued by the individual for differing reasons based on experience. This new ontology forced me to think about the components of the online classroom in new ways; we all share the course as a part of our realities (as something real to be fulfilled/achieved/accomplished /completed) that involves “real” money and “real” time, etc. In another form, we also co-construct the reality of the space of an online classroom as we interact with one another and make specific and unique decisions about the ways in which we engage and perceive and respond to one another. This is especially purposeful, as students (and teachers) have the ability to draft, revise, edit, and even delete their submissions within an online course. The reality of the course is constantly changing, being added to, and being interpreted in new ways according to new, differing, and developing realities; this realization added an entirely new dimension to the

research I conducted. It was now more fruitful, more mysterious, more complex, and more interesting. As a teacher, this realization forced me to deeply consider and examine the importance of my facilitation, design, participation, and engagement. If the instructor does not set particular intentions from the beginning of class with consistent reminders and expectations throughout, students may be more inclined to test the cultural norms of the online space (especially if they are used to participating in spaces with dominant cultures and norms). Even when the instructor facilitates expectations carefully, the instructor's continual participation and engagement with the course can help students who may unknowingly slip into patterns and behaviors that can shift the culture of the classroom if not addressed and discussed.

Theoretically, I hope that my research will contribute to enhancing current online teaching and research practices. My research has helped me learn from the critiques I received as a result of conducting this type of research. I believe Lather and St. Pierre (2013) would agree/have inspired me to go forth with my research purpose as being driven by the need to “accomplish an inquiry that might produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (p. 635). In doing so, I will move forward with the goal of producing new knowledge for myself while also producing knowledge for others in new ways.

### **Limitations**

The most obvious limitation to these studies is that the researcher was also the teacher. This positionality can lead to issues with perspective, bias, and outcomes. While various methods were used within each of these studies with the intent of minimizing potential issues with quality, it is important for readers to be aware that teacher research varies quite a bit from research conducted on a teacher other than oneself. Honan and Sellers (2006) describe this difference well when they state, “we cannot ever forget that we are teachers ourselves, and our memories of

those teaching days hang like dark clouds over the lines of flight we take through sets of data we collect as researchers” (p. 2). However, being aware of this predicament allows researchers to acknowledge and move beyond it in the most productive ways possible. Because of the time span of these articles and data collection in combination with the speed of technological advancement, my findings for each study have been interpreted continuously across the evolving landscape of this topic. At the beginning of this research, back in 2014, the climate regarding OWI was very much still being debated. Today, in 2019, an acceptance of online learning regarding the teaching of writing specifically, and education overall, has led to more support and nuanced research on the topic. I believe the progression of my articles parallels the questions and findings as they shift from “are learning outcomes compatible between the two environments?” to “what online affordances can be implemented into campus classrooms to enhance the learning outcomes?” Similarly, the learning management tools have also progressed. Canvas now has the option to hide posts until a student has posted an original thread/answer to avoid them restating others’ work or avoid doing the original assignment.

Each study was unique and could have been taken in infinite other directions. The routes that were chosen in the end were largely situational and unpredicted. Though limitations applied, I would not choose to do this research on another teacher. Teacher research, for me, is necessary for my evolution as a teacher and is something that I need to engage in in order to learn more about myself and my students and become better at the important work that I do. I would love to conduct this research with a co-teacher and coresearcher in order to provide the opportunity for more reflective dialogue and sociocultural practices and interpretations.

## Final Thoughts

The collective meaning of these articles represents the need for acknowledgement and support of educational research as it continues to dance across the online realms and compositional realities of our shifting modern technological times. In the conclusions of this research, I am looking at learning outcomes beyond a paper or a grade. I have found new and meaningful ways to reach and teach students important lessons in online spaces. I have re-defined for myself the kinds and types of learning that I value and that I believe are necessary for educating the persons of our future society. Further, these three articles combine to create an overall contribution to the fields of rhetoric and composition *and* education in similar and important ways.

In writing this final chapter, changes have continued to occur regarding online education, online writing instruction, writing instruction pedagogy and curriculum, and learning management systems. This fast-paced change has taught me what seasoned teachers have probably always known; the best practices for learning and teaching represent an ever-moving target in need of continued and constant reflection and change. The insights that I have gained regarding this dissertation project are many; however, the one that seems to be most prominent is that there may always be more questions than answers within the realm of online teaching and learning. We may never perfect online learning, on-campus learning, or hybrid learning, but this does not mean we will not find success. Some of the most important lessons I have gained as a teacher are the direct result of engaging in teacher research, as it allows my students and me to engage in sharing, teaching, and co-constructing knowledge. Through this research, I have learned as much from them (if not more) than they have learned from me. One of the most rewarding aspects of research is finding new ways to look at and understand some object of

inquiry—seeing a concept with new eyes, understanding it in different ways. This is what my research has helped me to see and to appreciate thus far, and this is what I hope to continue to do within my future work as an educator and scholar.

### **The End as a Beginning**

Though this chapter serves as the conclusion for this research, it is also just the beginning of my research journey on these topics. These three studies demonstrate the many nuanced, interesting, unique, and transformative potentials of online learning for both distance and residential students. Additionally, this research has provided new insights into possible affordances and constraints of online learning, specifically for the upper-division composition classroom. While the focus of these studies narrows from the second to the fourth chapter, so too does my understanding of critical and dialogic learning in the online environment. Critical dialogue can be a challenging topic to facilitate in any environment, but we cannot hope to address or improve conflicts without practicing, modeling, and encouraging critical dialogue in the classroom. As such, the importance of instructor engagement and interaction can provide students with a space to realize, practice, and understand their roles within the sociocultural space of online learning. It is with this mission that I have continually evolved my teaching curriculum and pedagogy studied within this dissertation. Whether I avoid critical conversations, implement them, or guide students through them as they spontaneously arise, critical conversations are an inevitable part of learning spaces. As such, it becomes my obligation as a teacher to study and reflect on the most productive, inclusive, and transformative ways in which to engage with students as they navigate these interactions and work to learn and form a diverse and transformative classroom culture. This does not mean that my work will be perfect, and this does not

mean that I do this work without fear. Publishing this research is a daunting task, as it highlights my mistakes; however, these mistakes have been valuable lessons. I hope that in sharing these examples, others can learn from my mistakes and consider sharing theirs as well. It is from such connections and conversations that we can continue to move forward and continually work to shape the culture of online education within our country and across the world. Though this dissertation presents the conclusion of my current research, this is just the beginning of literature surrounding critical dialogue and sociocultural transformations in the online classroom.

## REFERENCES FOR CHAPTER 5

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## Community Learning Guidelines

*Discussing the rhetorical components of arguments can help us gain a deeper level of understanding of our writing assignments and of our world. Please use the following guidelines as we engage in any discussions and communications throughout the semester:*

- Listen respectfully to other opinions.
- Encourage others to participate.
- Be open to new and different perspectives.
- Speak from personal experience: use "I" statements.
- Be present.

**Confidentiality.** We want to create an atmosphere for open, honest exchange.

**Our primary commitment is to learn from each other.** We will listen to each other and not talk at each other. We acknowledge differences amongst us in backgrounds, skills, interests, and values. We realize that it is these very differences that will increase our awareness and understanding through this process.

**We will not demean, devalue, or "put down" people for their experiences,** lack of experiences, or difference in interpretation of those experiences.

**We will trust the people are doing the best they can.** We will not try to 'freeze people in time' but leave space for everyone to learn and change through our interactions with one another.

**Challenge the idea and not the person.** If we wish to challenge something that has been said, we will challenge the idea or the practice referred to, not the individual sharing this idea or practice.

**Speak your discomfort.** If something is bothering you, please share this with the group. Often our emotional reactions to this process offer the most valuable learning opportunities.

**Be aware of how much you are contributing to discussions.** Try not to silence yourself out of concern for what others will think about what you say. If you have a tendency to contribute often, give others the opportunity to speak. If you tend to stay quiet, challenge yourself to share ideas so that others can learn from you.

**Keep in mind that we are all still learning and are bound to make mistakes in this setting,** as anyone does when approaching a complex task or exploring new ideas. Be open to changing your mind, and make space for others to do so as well.

*The Program of Intergroup Relations, "Multipartiality Chart," University of Michigan, 2014.*

## Weekly Discussion Guidelines

**Weekly discussions required two due dates in order to simulate the types of conversations that occur in the traditional, on-campus classroom.** While Canvas does not allow for two due dates to be set, it will be your job to keep track of the notes and dates for original posts and responses highlighted within the discussion prompts as well as in the course calendar found in our syllabus. To help avoid confusion, weekly discussions will maintain the same format each week: original posts are due before Wednesday at 11:59pm (MST). Responses to your peers will be due before Saturday at 11:59pm (MST).

**PART A:** This first component of the discussion will be due on Wednesday of each week. Part A will include your initial response to the discussion prompt, questions, or assignment. Each discussion will be different, and it will be important to read through the instructions for length requirements and questions posed. You will create your original response in a new thread that other students can reply to for Part B.

**PART B:** This second component of the discussion will be due on Saturday of each week. Part B will include your responses to a specified number of peers. To respond, you will reply to the original post in order to keep the conversation organized and easy to follow. Peer responses will also differ in terms of the number of peers you should respond to, what questions you should address in your response, and the length minimum required for a sufficient conversation.

Weekly discussions are an important part of our learning process as we share and build knowledge with one another. Additionally, this type of engagement is also missing from the online classroom, and it will be important for everyone to participate in order to gain the most from these social spaces.

Please review the Community Learning Guidelines each week to ensure that conversations are entered into from an appropriate tone and form. These conversations differ greatly from those we are used to on social media platforms, and it will be important to **REMEMBER OUR PURPOSE and AUDIENCE in this space!**