WHAT TO EXPECT AS A FIRST TIME ONLINE COMPOSITION INSTRUCTOR

AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ADVISING FACULTY

By

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Abstract: First time online composition instructors face many unique situations in their inaugural term, including challenges such as appropriately implementing technology, enabling effective communication between themselves and students, and ensuring steady access to the internet connection necessary to stay on top of their duties as instructors. However, these new instructors also experience advantages that stem from teaching online, including a heightened level of flexibility in their teaching and communication with students, and the potential for reduced overall costs. In light of the many unique situations that first time online composition instructors face, educational institutions should assign each of their new instructors an advisor who can offer expertise, resources, and guidance to these new instructors to support their endeavors and help them in avoiding burnout.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Technology is progressing at rates the likes of which have never been seen before in human history. One area in which technology has played and continues to play a huge part is education, specifically within the realm of higher education. Over the past decade, the prevalence of online courses has increased, and as such there have been many forays into research within this area. As a result of said research, several recurring themes have emerged in the literature concerning online courses, and specifically online composition classes. There are a great number of commonly utilized technologies within these online classrooms, as well as a defined set of both challenges and benefits, not to mention the high expectations and responsibilities that are placed upon the instructors in said courses. As such, it is crucial that first time online composition instructors understand these concepts in order to teach effectively. In addition to recognizing and applying these concepts, instructors must be aware of the toll that an online course workload can take, and should take steps to mitigate the negative impact of said workload.

In order to help new instructors fully realize their potential as teachers, many institutions offer teacher training to first time instructors. This training, however, can
oftentimes completely overlook situations unique to online composition teachers. Faculty in charge of training online writing teachers can leave said teachers unprepared for the situations they will encounter when teaching their first courses. The article “Anyone Can Teach an Online Writing Course,” states that people often underestimate the amount of effort and preparation needed to effectively teach an online writing course, and therefore teachers can be thrown into online writing instruction without the proper training, leaving them to fend for themselves as they strive to do right by their students. As such, it is imperative that educational institutions place faculty advisors in a position to train these new instructors in the concepts and ideas needed to successfully teach an online writing course without becoming overwhelmed or burnt out.

As a writing instructor myself, the first three courses I taught were delivered in the online asynchronous format. I taught two 16-week classes in a spring semester, and the third over the 8-week summer term. While I made the transition to teaching in-person composition after that summer course, the experiences I had stuck with me. The semester prior to teaching my first ever courses, I shadowed the instructor of an in-person composition class, and while I was able to apply one of that instructor’s strategies to my online courses, namely weekly discussion posts regarding the assigned readings, most of my first semester teaching was spent independently researching then implementing various strategies in my own instruction. I discuss several of the successfully implemented strategies throughout this paper, but there were many that I discarded either due to difficulty of implementation or because they simply would not have helped my students to become better writers. In the same semester that I shadowed the in-person instructor, I took a first year composition preparation course with other instructors new to
teaching composition. However, this course was aimed at those who would be teaching in-person, and therefore I was faced with the same issue I encountered when trying to glean information from my shadowing experience: The suggested teaching strategies did not translate to online writing instruction. If I had an advisor in that first semester teaching, someone to offer their own experiences as a resource, I would not have felt the pressure of scrambling to independently find effective online teaching strategies while simultaneously making sure I stayed on top of the typical work that comes with teaching a writing course. While I was able to navigate these gaps in my preparation for my first time teaching, I do not wish the stress of that experience on anyone else. As such, I hope this paper will be of use to first time online composition instructors as they select the strategies they would like to implement in their first online teaching experience, and can help alleviate some of that stress. Additionally, I hope my writing will serve as an additional motivation for educational institutions to implement programs with advisors to lend their expertise to new online composition instructors' first online teaching experiences and guide said instructors through their first term teaching.

It is important to recognize the opportunities that online instruction brings for three main reasons, the first of which is a reality that seems to have become a residual part of life: COVID-19. The existence of this virus and the resulting reaction to it demonstrate that online classrooms have a vital part to play in society. While educational institutions have returned in full force to traditional brick and mortar classes, the impact of the time American colleges and universities spent online due to the virus is apparent. Even now, four years removed from the initial outbreaks and subsequent mass migration to online courses, there are still instances of Covid cases. Thus, while the world en masse
may not experience another collective lockdown, the possibility of a temporary move back to online coursework within a campus community does exist. Therefore, it is important to understand the prevailing notions about online courses, both generally and specific to composition, in order to make that potential transition as smooth as possible.

Faculty in charge of training first time online writing instructors have a responsibility to help new teachers understand these concepts. Secondly, even if higher education never reverts to online classes en masse, it is certainly helpful to establish a baseline of acceptable best practices for those who find themselves teaching courses online.

Investigating and implementing existing research into the most advantageous ways to conduct online courses enables instructors to build their classes accordingly, ensuring the highest success rate for their students. Additionally, recognizing the best methods for online teaching can ease the minds of first-time online writing teachers, and training faculty can aid these teachers in discovering these methods. The third reason it is important to study these categories is because computers and technology have been fully accepted into the world of composition classrooms, so it is imperative that they continue to be incorporated at every step. Without an understanding of how technology has been implemented within online composition classrooms over the past decade, progress will be much more difficult. After all, while new online composition instructors may feel overwhelmed by the pressure of teaching an online course, there are resources that they can learn from, and steps they can take to avoid burning out. These instructors can be assured in the knowledge that they are not alone in needing to implement technology in a responsible way, and mentoring faculty can share the experiences of other online writing instructors to aid in this assurance.
Now, before a discussion of technology within online classrooms can begin, there is a distinction that must be drawn between what are known in the online instruction world as synchronous courses and asynchronous courses. A synchronous course is an online course that requires the students and their professor to attend virtual meetings concurrently at regularly scheduled class times during the school term. The synchronous method provides for a sense of similarity to a brick-and-mortar class, as these meetings are where the bulk of the learning is designed to take place. Asynchronous courses, on the other hand, are courses in which the instructor uploads the necessary materials for learning to a platform where the students have common access. Students are expected to go through and learn the material at a time that works best for them. There is a third method of teaching that many consider to be a form of online course: the hybrid course. However, the hybrid class model does require that its class meet half of the time in-person, which allows for the instructor to make up for any technological deficiencies on the in-person meeting days. This means that the use of technology is not as imperative for the hybrid course's success as it is within the realm of online synchronous or asynchronous courses. Therefore, for the sake of this paper’s focus on technology, the discussion will carry on without the inclusion of the hybrid class model.

Additionally, another line needs to be drawn before discussing technology and its use in online composition classrooms. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and online concurrent enrollment are excluded from the conversation, for similar reasons. MOOCs, while set up like institutional online courses, are too broad for inclusion within this specific conversation. They are open to thousands of students at a time, and as such the challenges, benefits, and expectations are quite different from more traditional sized
online courses within higher education institutions (Mooc.org). Likewise, online concurrent enrollment comes with a set of challenges, benefits, and expectations separate from general online courses as the students enrolled in these courses are still high school aged, and as such the material must be adapted to best serve them. These two categories of online courses are, of course, still worthy of examination, but to attempt to include them in this specific discussion would be to do them an injustice.

In a similar vein, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a hot button topic both in society as a whole and in academic circles. The question of how to encourage and enforce ethical use of the rapidly developing capabilities of AI is a question that is still undergoing debate, and the potential ramifications of such technology in education are manifold. Some argue that this technology poses a severe threat to academic integrity, and while it certainly does make turning in writing that is not their own easier than ever for students, the conversation surrounding AI in the classroom is too broad to do it justice in a paper focused on the essential elements of teaching an online composition course. Thus, first time online composition instructors should strive to stay abreast of the developments in AI and how the technology may affect their work as teachers, as well as their academic institution’s policies surrounding its use, but a full exploration of AI’s influence on academic integrity in an online composition classroom requires its own dedicated discussion outside the scope of this paper.
CHAPTER II

TEACHING ONLINE COURSES IN GENERAL

With these limitations and parameters in mind, online courses on a general level utilize many technologies in their construction, and they come with challenges and benefits, along with clear-cut expectations for instructors. Even in 2011, it was acknowledged that “In higher education today, for a variety of reasons, distance education in the form of online or Web-based delivery has taken root as a popular, cost-effective, and pedagogically sound process of teaching and learning” (Lin 3). These online courses continued to prosper over the next decade, and as they sustained their position as useful methods of teaching, those in charge of teaching said courses established a well-rounded canon surrounding best practices. Although the information discussed in the below sections is not specific to online composition courses but is instead geared toward online courses in all disciplines, new online writing teachers can certainly glean vital knowledge from said broad material, and faculty in charge of guiding new teachers in their roles can use these points to help their charges step into their full potential as instructors.

Frequently Utilized Technology in General Online Courses

There are a plethora of technologies that are applied within the context of online courses, in fact too many to list. The 2013 book Motivating and Retaining Online
Students: Research-Based Strategies That Work indicates the broad expanse of tech available to those in an online course, stating, “Because of the proliferation of innovative technologies available today, students can learn any way they want. For example, students can take an online course that may include using a smartphone, a tablet, a computer, a personal digital assistant, a global positioning system, a smart TV and so on” (Lehman and Conceição 10). Among the key technological tools that exist in many online classrooms, course management systems deserve special recognition. These systems are what hosts the online class, and they include sites such as Blackboard, Moodle, and Canvas. No matter the system selected, students are impacted by the system’s ability to host any other technologies that instructors may wish to utilize within a given online course (Lin 4). Over the past decade, these systems have added new tools to their programming, as well as made continuous improvements in the realm of their already existing technologies. Instructors are able to utilize the technological tools contained within the learning platforms, meaning that as these platforms have improved, students are able to learn more effectively over time. Instructors can set up opportunities for engagement with course content by including interactive videos, wikis, discussion boards, and links to outside sources to aid in students’ academic pursuits in the online course curriculum (Thornburg et al. 96). These varied technologies enable first time online instructors to cater to students with different learning styles and needs, as well as to present the information in diverse ways. Advisors, being already familiar with an institution’s chosen course management system, can guide their advisees through the process of navigating the system and fully utilizing its capabilities.

In addition to utilizing technology present within an online learning platform,
instructors in online courses also utilize programs such as Zoom and Google Meet, which give teachers the ability to conference and hold class with their students without necessitating a face-to-face meeting. These programs also have chat features, which students can employ to ask questions of the professor as well as their classmates. Screen share is a staple of these online meetings, enabling professors to present in an online class just as they would in a brick-and-mortar classroom (Thornburg et al. 96). Professors have the option to record their class sessions for students who either missed class or who want to rewatch a lecture after its initial presentation. In sum, the technological avenues by which online course instructors can teach their content are many in number and are not limited to those listed above. The number of technologies available to those teaching online courses may seem overwhelming for a first-time online composition teacher, but one should remember that it is not a requirement to utilize all available technological tools. Instead, a new online composition instructor should simply be open to learning about any freshly developed technologies so that she can consider implementing them within her class framework. Those in charge of training new instructors should assist new online composition instructors in learning these technologies, either through sharing their own experiences or helping to locate tutorials that teach users how to effectively utilize the technology.

**Challenges in Teaching Online Classes**

Of course, online courses do have their difficulties, especially when it comes to the use of technology within them. After all, “Like any tool, information technology can be less effective, or even damaging, if used inappropriately. This is more likely to happen if we have unrealistic expectations of technology or do not understand how different
technologies affect process and communication” (Lin 11). One such challenge that stems
from technology is the lack of a personal connection that can arise in a course where
there is no face-to-face interaction. Professors may struggle to get their students to
interact with the material or to complete assignments. Even in synchronous classes, “... students likely feel less oversight from their professors and less pressure to respond to professors’ questions” (Bettinger et al. 2873), which can prompt said professors to feel as if they are not able to teach effectively online. In an online course, one cannot look
students directly in the eyes and stress important points when teaching, and a certain level
of communication via body language is lost as well. Additionally, it is important to
consider the fact that since online courses include an increased level of text-based
communication, some students may struggle to communicate their questions and
comments effectively in this medium. As stressed in the 2011 book, Advancement in
Online Education: Exploring the Best Practices, “To some students’ disadvantage, in a
Web-based course virtually all communication must pass through the portal of the written
word” (Lin 16), which can prove a stumbling block for students who appreciate and are
used to asking questions before, during, or after class. Admittedly, this is more of an
issue with asynchronous classes that have no set synchronous meeting times, but the
problem of non-verbal communication still exists within synchronous classes. Professors
who are new to online teaching should know going into the term that they will need to be
prepared to combat this lost sense of classroom community. Some may argue that this
break in communication is insurmountable, and therefore online courses are subpar
methods of teaching, but advisors can act as a sounding board for new instructors to
bounce any ideas to regain that sense of community off of, and these advisors can help
their advisees brainstorm ways to overcome the perceived communication hurdle.

Another challenge professors teaching online courses can easily run into is the issue of placing more importance on the technology implemented within an online course than on the course content itself. There is often a fine line between using technological tools to supplement learning and turning a course in any subject into a course about the technology itself. This line must be found and drawn as early on as possible. As explained in *Advancement in Online Education: Exploring the Best Practices*, “Although it is possible for online education to be rigorous, challenging, and comprehensive, it is important to realize that to focus on technology is insufficient when including it within one’s classes. The primary focus has to be on the teaching, and any decisions should be pedagogically rather than technically driven” (Lin 11). In other words, online professors must pay special attention to the way in which they structure their courses in order to avoid overwhelming their students with technological tools and sacrificing the subject matter in the process. Advising faculty should offer advice and resources in striking that balance so that instructors are not left feeling overwhelmed themselves.

An additional challenge that comes with technology in online courses is the fact that there are two basic needs that must be filled in order to effectively learn in and teach a web-based class. Professors must have a reliable computer, as well as steady and secure internet access to be able to be available to their students (Bettinger et al. 2873). Without said access, it is all but impossible to successfully teach an online course. One cannot expect to be able to post coursework and class materials, respond to students’ questions, or even grade submitted work without a working computer and stable internet connection. When I taught an online asynchronous composition class for a summer term,
I was without a solid internet connection for nearly half of the term due to poor planning on my part. I had to visit coffee shops and use my phone’s wifi hotspot to access my course, students, and their submitted work, and while I managed to teach the course successfully, I did have several days where I was unable to do much more than check my email, as my connection speed would not allow me the necessary bandwidth to view and grade assignments. As such, new online composition professors need to ensure that the two basic needs of reliable internet and a working computer are and will continue to be met throughout the entire term before they begin to teach.

Of course, if an instructor were to find herself in a position where she needed to teach an online course for a term, but was not sure if she would be able to maintain a steady internet connection or if her computer was up to the task, she would not be without hope. She could frequent cafes or public libraries with wifi connections or could use a wifi hotspot, like I did. Additionally, most, if not all, higher education institutions offer help to students who need help maintaining access to the technology necessary to help them finish their coursework. Similarly, there are resources available to instructors who need assistance with accessing technology, and while these resources vary campus to campus, one only needs to ask one’s administration and colleagues for information on these often under-advertised programs. For example, Oklahoma State’s Institute for Teaching and Learning Excellence provides resources for instructors learning to utilize technology effectively in their classrooms, including training webinars and course management system tutorials (“Institute for Teaching and Learning Excellence”). The responsibility should not, however, lie on the new instructor to hunt down those training resources. Rather, those in charge of training online writing instructors should share the
available resources with new teachers before the term starts in order to ensure that these teachers go into the term feeling well equipped to handle their first term teaching.

**Advantages of Teaching Online Classes**

While there are certain challenges to teaching online courses, those new to the enterprise should not be intimidated. Instead, they should be pleased to learn of the benefits of teaching online courses. A short and incomplete list of such perks is as follows: “...better access, convenience, flexibility, efficiency, creative risk, community building, connection with others without boundaries, and a green environment” (Lehman and Conceição 10). Of course, several of these points may appear to be geared toward the students more so than the professors in an online class, but that does not mean the list means nothing to professors. Instructors can also partake in the benefits associated with a class that is not restricted to the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom; they should feel emboldened by the possibilities presented to them in this mode of teaching. In fact, as touched upon in the *Handbook of Research on Developing Engaging Online Courses*, many of the challenges that one faces when teaching in an online class setting can be somewhat balanced out by the advantages of teaching online (Thornburg et al. 101). For example, in teaching my own online classes, I found I was able to devote more time to crafting assignments and grading papers than when teaching in-person courses, since I was not spending time commuting to and from campus, finding parking, and contending with the sometimes-faulty classroom technology. New online instructors should take comfort in the positive experiences that online instruction offers, and should anticipate the experience of teaching online with excitement. Faculty in charge of training new instructors should lean into this excitement, and should encourage it. They should be sure
to point out the positives of teaching online courses, and should share in any anticipation that their advisees have for the term ahead in order to help new teachers maintain that excitement, and thus the motivation to finish teaching assigned courses.

In particular, one important perk of teaching an online course is the added level of flexibility. Communication within the context of the class does not require the professor and her students to be in the same physical location, be online at the same time, or even speak directly to one another (Lin 5). In some cases, such as within an asynchronous class, all contact between a professor and her students may be done only via text based communication such as through direct messaging apps or email; personally, I only used email and the messaging system that was built into my university’s course management system. The fact that communication is not limited by physical, temporal, or modal constraints means that the flexibility of online courses is a thing to be appreciated, and new online professors should revel in the knowledge that they and their students can communicate in the manner that most benefits them on a personal, individual level.

Another important positive aspect to teaching an online course is the potential for reduced costs. As stated in the article “Virtual Classrooms: How Online College Courses Affect Student Success,” those who teach solely online classes do not have to spend money on transportation costs to-and-from campus, nor do they have to pay for any parking permits associated with their position at the institution where they teach (Bettinger et al. 2873). While springing for an internet plan with more bandwidth, or purchasing a better, more powerful computer may be an initial strain to the wallet, the money saved on transportation and parking can help balance that out. In addition, the value derived from higher quality internet and faster computers does not end at
education; instructors also have the ability to use their upgraded technology outside of their teaching jobs. To certain instructors, this may not seem like a huge victory, but for those who live on a tight budget, the savings associated with not being required to commute in order to teach their courses can make a big difference.

**Online Course Instructor Responsibilities**

Of course, as with traditional brick-and-mortar courses, online courses require professors to fulfill a set of expectations associated with the method of class delivery. For those new to teaching online courses, one of the primary responsibilities they have is to firmly, perhaps more so than one might expect, direct their students toward fulfilling the course’s learning goals. As is the case with in-person classes, an online instructor’s main goal is to ensure that their students learn the material they signed up to learn when they registered for the course in question (Lin 13). The difference, however, lies in the fact that technology can be a distraction for some in the online environment. In light of this, professors are in charge of ensuring their students are focused on the end goal and subject matter of the class itself. *Motivating and Retaining Online Students: Research-Based Strategies That Work* asserts that “With so many available applications, students can easily become distracted and overwhelmed and may lack motivation to accomplish course tasks. With proper direction on how to manage these ubiquitous technologies and focus on learning, students can be successful” (Lehman and Conceição 3). In other words, the responsibility lies with the instructor to ensure that students are properly applying themselves to their studies through utilizing specific instructions and strong leadership. Technology cannot be relied upon to replace or even to reduce the importance of the professor in an online classroom, and in fact, “It does not matter to what extent
technology is sufficiently smart to adapt to context to meet learners’ needs, instructors’ presence, facilitation and guidance are still inevitable components required to ensure that learners achieve their goals” (Thornburg et al. 101). Essentially, technological tools can only serve to assist with education within online courses, and the instructor must still be responsible for directing students’ learning. Those new to online teaching need to come to the virtual classroom with the mindset that they oversee their students’ learning, and as such they must strongly direct said students to meet the course’s learning goals. While the responsibility to direct student learning will always lie with the instructor of record, those training new online teachers should ensure that their advisees are equipped to keep students on track to meet a given course’s learning objectives. One way in which advisors can aid new online instructors in meeting this responsibility is by demonstrating how to construct and convey clear instructions to students so that said students can learn the material they are expected to grasp with minimal distraction.

Additionally, professors teaching online courses have a responsibility to ensure that they adapt their teaching strategies for in-person classes to the online course environment. There is a lamentable inclination among first time online instructors to copy-paste their methodology from a traditional classroom without making any changes, but this is almost always in error. Because new technological tools are being developed for implementation in virtual courses on a regular basis, online professors must be prepared to “… rethink how they teach and adapt to the demands of this changing environment” (Lehman and Conceição 86). This may seem to be an intimidating situation for first-time online teachers, but the transition is not as daunting as it appears. For example, instructors can still give quizzes to check understanding, but these quizzes can
be given through the course management system, or even through platforms such as Google Forms, as opposed to being given in a physical classroom using pen and paper. In making shifts such as these, professors teaching online classes can make moves toward adjusting their methodology to better fit the online classroom. Of course, some instructors can still feel trepidation about making these changes. Fortunately for these wary teachers, it has been demonstrated that teacher preparation programs have and will evolve to ensure that faculty can “…become comfortable in modeling effective, student-centered learning that incorporates technology in appropriate ways” (McCombs 58). Therefore, as online learning continues to be a staple within higher education, the opportunities for understanding how to effectively adapt one’s teaching methods to the online classroom will only increase. New online instructors can and should take solace in this important fact. Their advisors, however, should take steps to make new instructors aware of any current resources concerning adapting teaching methods, such as Purdue OWL’s Remote Teaching Resources (“Remote Teaching Resources”). Advisors should also keep their students abreast of any plans for further resource development both within the educational institution and without.

Professors also have the responsibility to provide accurate and helpful feedback to their students. This may come across as an obvious statement for the uninitiated online instructor, but while it is a notable aspect of traditional brick-and-mortar classes, instructor feedback and responsiveness within online courses are absolutely paramount to students’ success and satisfaction (Rapchak). Within online courses, professors must be able to conscientiously provide their students feedback that will enable said students to continue learning effectively. Moreover, professors have the responsibility to take any
feedback they get from their students and apply it to their teaching methods.

“Collectively, faculty who are willing to assess their own practices and listen to feedback from each student about the personal effectiveness of these practices can learn how to optimize the socially mediated context and experience” (MeCombs 68), meaning that online instructors who are open to receiving feedback and criticisms from their students and who then implement any necessary or suggested changes are more likely to have a successful online course. Recall the introduction, where I admitted that I fell behind in my grading because of a lack of access to a strong enough internet connection over the summer; my students critiqued that misstep, and I took their feedback in stride and adjusted my plans for the summer accordingly which allowed me to keep up with grading through the rest of the term. In other words, new online teachers should be prepared to both give constructive feedback as well as receive it. Additionally, they should remember to not take any feedback personally; after all, even the harshest of criticisms can be learned from, and adjustments can be made to one’s methods to become a more effective online instructor. Advising faculty can and should share their own experiences with new online teachers, so said teachers can potentially learn from others’ mistakes before they have to learn from their own.
CHAPTER III

TEACHING ONLINE COMPOSITION COURSES

While discussing teaching within the context of general online courses is a valuable method for determining common streams of pedological thought at a broad level, first time composition instructors can benefit from taking a more in-depth look at what the challenges and benefits of online writing instruction are, as well as at what the expectations of the instructor are in these classes. New online composition teachers can anticipate all of the previously discussed intricacies of teaching online, but they must also equip themselves with the knowledge contained in sources that deal with online composition instruction primarily. Similarly, training faculty should be sure to incorporate information specific to teaching online composition as they help instructors prepare for their first term teaching an online composition course.

A significant advantage to examining the content of online composition specific works is that one can glean information specific to teaching both asynchronous and synchronous online writing courses. Although there is some overlap, as previously discussed, each method of instruction has its unique technologies, challenges, benefits, and instructor responsibilities. These individual concepts are addressed in the 2015 book *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction*, but there is also valuable
information that applies to both asynchronous and synchronous online composition courses found within other sources (Hewett and DePew). New online writing instructors and advising faculty alike should be sure to reference both the general information on teaching online courses in the preceding sections and the following information specific to teaching online writing classes.

Frequently Utilized Technology in Online Composition Courses

The primary purpose of any technology used in an asynchronous course is to enable communication without requiring every participant to be online at the same time. As such, these asynchronous technologies include recorded audio and/or video, emails, discussion boards, and social networking sites, among others (Hewett and DePew 238). For example, in an asynchronous writing course, instructors can record lectures either via simple audio recording or with the addition of video for their students to view at will, and discussion boards enable students to communicate about and comment on each other’s ideas and writing without needing to be online at the same time. Instructors can also have their students read linked external sources and subscribe to social networking channels as an added method of conveying writing strategies. In my own asynchronous composition courses, I implemented YouTube videos, linked external sites and webpages, and uploaded PDFs for my students to respond to via discussion boards. These are only a few examples of how to utilize technology in a way that enables asynchronous writing instruction, of course. There are more possibilities, and new online writing instructors can and should experiment in order to find methods that work well for them. Advisors can help brainstorm additional methods, and should help their advisees to determine which technology uses will most benefit them as they teach their first online courses.
While the technology that is utilized in asynchronous and synchronous online writing classes converges at times, and much of the technology that can be used in asynchronous classes has a place in synchronous classes as well, some technology is better suited to use in a synchronous online class versus asynchronous. Synchronous writing courses can utilize some or all of the asynchronous technologies, but they can also implement tools such as “live chat, live document sharing, live audio or video conferencing (both one-to-one and one-to-group) meetings in virtual worlds, and white board sharing” (Hewett and DePew 238-239), which are invoked when students and their professor are meeting concurrently. These technologies can help students in an online synchronous writing class communicate their ideas about writing with their fellow classmates without needing to be in the same room, which of course is the point of any technology implemented in a synchronous class. New online composition instructors should be aware of these key technological tools in order to create their course in a way that can effectively serve their students, and advisors should lend their advice and experience as well so that new instructors can build effective courses.

**Challenges of Online Writing Instruction**

The challenges of an online writing course are often at the forefront of a professor’s mind, and for good reason. Both asynchronous and synchronous modalities have their difficulties, and new online composition instructors should be aware of them so that they can take steps to mitigate potential negative effects. Asynchronous courses can come with obstacles such as a loss of social presence, increased levels of reading and writing as opposed to synchronous and in-person classes, and less verbal discussion. Additionally, since most asynchronous communication happens via text, communication
issues arise when students and instructors alike do not read messages carefully. Tone can be difficult to convey via text communications, so instructors need to pay special attention to the way that they frame answers to student questions in order to avoid unnecessary conflict. For example, there was one case in which I sent a response to a student who had asked for clarification on an assignment, and upon receiving their reply, I realized that my wording came across as harsh. I of course apologized to that student and reassured them that my intention was not to shame them for asking for clarification, but if I had paid more attention to the tone of my initial response and how it might be taken by someone who does not have the benefit of knowing how I speak in real life, the situation would likely have been avoided.

A few main factors complicating synchronous writing classes include the fact that media and software for online courses may be costly, and both student and instructor access to said technology can be difficult to achieve, especially when it comes to camera and microphone capacity and quality (Hewett and DePew 238). Without working cameras and microphones, instructors run the risk of bringing the learning experience of their students down a notch. Trying to listen to an instructor with a broken microphone can wreak havoc on students’ ears, and poor camera quality makes it difficult to engage students’ attention, as the ability to create the impression of eye contact falls off when students cannot even make out where their instructor’s eyes are, let alone if they are making eye contact with the computer screen. These pitfalls of online composition courses are not fatal, as there are resources that can assist with the cost and access to the necessary programs and equipment. For example, Oklahoma State’s library has technology available for checkout including laptops, recording equipment, and even
studio lighting, all of which can aid in the quality of teacher-student communications (Hilley). New professors must be aware of technological concerns so that they can have a chance of preempting any issues that may arise. Advisors can ensure that new teachers are aware of any available programs to borrow, rent, or purchase at a discount, quality equipment that can help smooth the online composition course experience for students and instructors alike.

Although situating technology in any online course poses a challenge, within the context of an online composition class the matter becomes even more important. Professors in these courses, whether synchronous or asynchronous, must be sure to keep the online writing course a place of writing instruction, and not one of technology instruction. The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)’s online writing instruction principles from 2013 warn of that very issue, stating, “An online writing course should focus on writing and not on technology orientation or teaching students how to use learning and other technologies” (“A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction” (OWI)). It is a simple enough mistake to inadvertently make; professors who do not know any better can easily get so excited by the technology they have the opportunity to implement within their online course that they forget the main purpose of their class, which is to teach their students writing. After all, “Technology needs to have meaning in the classroom; according to students, all too often, teachers will use a technology without having a particular pedagogical reason to employ it” (Marshall 40). It can be easy to forget that the course one is teaching is a composition course, not a computer course, so instructors should be careful to ensure that the promise of shiny technology does not distract them or
their students from the course objectives. As I experimented with my online composition courses, I had to make sure that I restricted my use of technology to how it could enhance my students’ experiences, instead of using a given technology just for the sake of using it. New online composition instructors will benefit from acknowledging that technology can unnecessarily take center stage, and that in order to teach effectively they need to ensure that they use technology responsibly. Again, advising faculty can lend their own experience to aid new professors in finding the balance between too much technology and too little in an online composition course.

Online composition courses also pose a concern when it comes to the level of support students need. While most, if not all, instructors can agree that students enrolled in any class require support in order to succeed, studies have shown that online writing courses require an increased support structure to ensure student success. In the book *Best Practices in Online Teaching and Learning across Academic Disciplines*, a chapter entitled “Composition and Writing: Embedding Success: Supplemental Assistance in Online Writing Instruction” definitively states this, explaining that

…online students need as much support as face-to-face students and perhaps even more, since evidence suggests that many students traditionally considered “at risk” struggle with aspects of online writing coursework. Yet even as the number of online writing students grows, many campuses are, for a variety of reasons, reducing or eliminating basic or remedial writing courses, leading to a much wider range of academic preparedness in students enrolling in online sections of first-year composition. (Harris et al. 25-26)
The decline in learning institutions’ investments in their online composition students’ success can be alarming, leading some to question if it is even worth it to have online composition classes as an option. However, professors should not despair. Proposed solutions for increased support within the context of online writing courses include such concepts as online writing labs, contact with available IT assistance, and awareness of writing tutors outside of the class confines (Harris et al. 26). These resources are often provided through campus programs, though they can be woefully under advertised, which means that students often do not know of their existence. Fortunately for the concerned online writing professor, the information necessary to access these support services can be shared via the internet connection they have with their students. Advisors should ensure their advisees are provided with a list of student resources that they can pass on to said students at the beginning of the semester, as those resources may vary from institution to institution. With this information in mind, new online composition instructors can head off the problem of low support for their students before it even becomes an issue of note.

**Advantages of Teaching Online Composition Courses**

There are certain advantages that come with teaching online composition courses, but the fact of the matter is that these benefits do not differ much from online courses in general; as a reminder, those benefits include “...better access, convenience, flexibility, efficiency, creative risk, community building, connection with others without boundaries, and a green environment” (Lehman and Conceição 10). However, the explicitly detailed differences between asynchronous and synchronous online writing courses contained within the book *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction* deserve an
overview for the sake of new online composition instructors (Hewett and DePew). These instructors will appreciate knowing that asynchronous courses have five main advantages, which are as follows: “… (1) higher levels of temporal flexibility, (2) increased cognitive participation because of the time allowance for amplified reflection, (3) higher potential to use the increased allowable time for processing information, (4) multiple opportunities to write and read, and (5) the existence of an archival record for transactions conducted in the environment” (Hewett and DePew 238). Ultimately, these advantages boil down to more flexibility for the students and the professor alike, since both parties can take their time reading, digesting, and responding to information within the context of the course. Instructors are able to offer more thought out feedback, and students can complete their writing assignments at a time that is most convenient for them.

Synchronous benefits for online composition courses are not as easily summarized, but they include the fact that students enrolled in synchronous writing courses report that they felt more connected to their peers, and as such were more satisfied, learned more effectively, and were less likely to drop out of the course (Hewett and DePew 239). There is also the ability to more easily “…avoid miscommunications and to address problems when miscommunication has occurred” (Hewett and DePew 239) within an online synchronous course versus an asynchronous one, as instructors have the ability to communicate with their students and field questions in real time as opposed to creating and posting clarification materials. In sum, new online writing instructors should acknowledge the differences in benefits between synchronous and asynchronous modalities and should plan their courses accordingly in order to create an
effective learning environment for their students. Advisors can assist in clarifying the
differences between the modalities, and can help their advisees to determine which
strategies will work best for a given instructor’s teaching style.

**Online Composition Instructor Responsibilities**

Just as new online writing teachers should be aware of the benefits to teaching
online composition courses, they must also be aware of their responsibilities for both
asynchronous and synchronous modalities. Those teaching asynchronous classes must
arrange to go online often, likely more often than their students must, and they have to be
sure to leave clear feedback for their students to receive and implement (Hewett and
DePew 238). Synchronous course instructors have an additional responsibility to set up
consistent class sessions (Hewett and DePew 239), although this matter is often taken
care of by the administration of one’s institution decreeing synchronous courses’ meeting
time. However, the responsibility still lies with the instructor to “enforce” those meeting
times through hosting online class sessions. New professors should take heed of these
responsibilities, as they can make or break the online writing course experience for
students and professors alike.

It may seem to some new to the online composition teaching world that they
should first become experts in the use of technological tools before endeavoring to teach
online writing courses. However, this is not the case. In fact, the CCCC proclaims the
opposite, stating, “It must be clear that OWI [online writing instruction] teachers and
students alike do not need to be technology experts, computer programmers, or Web
designers to accomplish the instructional purposes of an OWC [online writing course]”
(OWI). In other words, instructors do not need to know all the ins and outs of the
technologies they want to implement in their classes before starting the term. Of course, that does not mean that a new online writing instructor should go into her first class blind to any technological tools at her disposal, but she should not feel pressured to be a master of any and all technology she plans to make use of in her course. After all, there are a lot of possible technologies to implement in a writing classroom, and the ways to implement those technologies in a given writing course is also expansive.

With that said, professors new to online writing instruction have responsibilities specific to their position as composition instructors in a virtual classroom. They must remember that “Even where basic pedagogies can be applied [sic] across instructional settings, they invariably will need to be adapted [sic] to suit the new context” (Hewett and DePew 183). In other words, professors must acknowledge the fact that their preferred methods of teaching may not translate directly to an online setting, and in fact online writing instruction takes dedication and a general understanding that teaching an online course is not the same as teaching in a brick-and-mortar setting. New online composition professors must be willing and able to adapt any pre-existing methods of teaching to an online writing course. For example, an ice-breaker at the beginning of the term that requires moving from one area of the classroom to another will not translate directly to an online setting, and will need to be adjusted to the classroom environment. Advising faculty should make themselves available to answer any questions or concerns that new instructors may encounter in making this transition.

One way in which online composition professors might potentially adapt their methods is within the context of discussion boards. This method of teaching and checking understanding is reviled by many students, but discussion boards are an often-utilized
part of online courses nonetheless. A large part of the resistance to this teaching method stems from the fact that online writing professors have a tendency to post prompts for their students to complete simply because they want their students to write something, anything, even if all it amounts to is busy work. To combat this unfortunate abuse of an important asset, “…discussions need to be carefully designed in order for learning to take place and that instructor presence is crucial in developing valuable student discussions. Quality discussion does not simply happen because instructors expect it; the focus of the conversation and the directions to follow must be thoughtfully crafted to achieve the kind of results instructors seek” (Thomas-Evans et al. 41-42). In other words, online composition professors have the responsibility to ensure their discussion prompts feed the purposes of the course and stimulate conversation that will aid students in their learning. Additionally, “…the use of discussion boards is likely the primary focus for community-building in online courses in professional writing, language, and literature” (Thomas-Evans et al. 40). Essentially, discussion boards can create a sense of community that, as previously discussed, is often lost in an online course. I used weekly discussion boards primarily to check comprehension of the assigned readings, but I also incorporated fun and lighthearted questions that did not require strict academic responses. The takeaway here for a new online composition instructor is that discussion boards are a valuable resource for creating a conversation around course topics and for community building alike. However, she should be cautious about her use of them, and should be sure that she is not simply posting a discussion in order to fulfill the desire to feel like she is making her students be productive through giving them busy work. The same can be said for any teaching strategies that new online instructors choose to implement; they should employ
caution and ensure that they are not just using a given teaching strategy as a way to fill
students’ time with no learning objective in mind. Advisors can assist instructors in
evaluating the efficacy of implementing and adapting methods to online teaching, as well
as in the actual implementation of those revamped methods in the class.
After the preceding discussion of what to expect in one’s first foray into online composition instruction, it is normal to feel stressed even before the term has begun. There are a lot of things to keep in mind, and the idea of trying to juggle teaching writing as well as managing the technology that is necessary to teach online can be overwhelming. In fact, consequences of an unhealthy relationship with online instruction include increased levels of antisocial behavior, declining physical health, loneliness, and increased risk of suicide (Reely). This stress can set an instructor up for a rough semester, but there are ways to manage one’s mental health as classes progress. Jennifer Sheppard’s 2021 article titled, “Pandemic Pedagogy: What We Learned from the Sudden Transition to Online Teaching and How It Can Help Us Prepare to Teach Writing in an Uncertain Future” summarizes a few complications of online teaching that instructors encountered in the forced shift to computer based classes in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic. While not an exhaustive list of the issues that instructors can face, the highlighted concerns pose a strong threat to the mental well-being of teachers and students alike. While Sheppard does an excellent job of identifying these issues, as well as naming possible solutions for instructors to implement, there is an underlying discussion of burnout and the self-care and grace necessary to combat it. Although Sheppard did note
the fact that the respondents to her survey faced burnout, and provided an overview of possible ways to avoid spreading oneself too thin, the topic deserves more attention than Sheppard was able to afford within her article.

The increased workload that first time instructors face when teaching online courses may be unexpected, even with prior preparation. Though mentors and fellow instructors with experience may have shared tips and tricks for success prior to the term’s start date, new online teachers are still susceptible to the pitfalls of burnout and overwhelm in their first foray into the world of online composition instruction. Each instructor should be aware that they will need to pay special attention to their relationship with their work, since “without being tied to a physical classroom or designated time of day, the ubiquitous nature of online education and its demands can seem to flood the instructor’s available time and energy, making a healthy work-life balance difficult to attain” (Hansen and Gray). It is easy to approach one’s first online teaching experience with lofty goals and aspirations, which is completely understandable, but one should take care to put in place the proper safeguards to be able to maintain good mental health and to avoid overextending oneself at any point in the semester.

**Setting Boundaries for Students and Oneself**

In her article, Sheppard discusses the consideration that must go into managing the workload in an online composition class. She notes, “Students and instructors often have unrealistic expectations about availability and response times, adding to a sense that the work is never done” (63). Instructors can easily fall into the trap of responding immediately to student emails in order to feel like they are being a supportive teacher and aiding their students’ success, but Sheppard warns that it is important to outline and
maintain clear boundaries for when students can expect a response. I fell into that mindset, that I needed to be available to my students around the clock, in the first few weeks of my first term teaching. I very quickly realized that was unsustainable, and took steps to draw boundaries with myself and my students as far as the times I would be online and accessible. In other words, the temptation to always be available for student questions and concerns can be great, but one can set boundaries both with students and with oneself in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the perceived need to be accessible around the clock.

Communicating clear and set boundaries at the beginning of a semester is incredibly important for an online composition instructor's mental health. As one article titled, “Creating Boundaries within the Ubiquitous Online Classroom” states, “Setting boundaries on your work time, personal time, family time, and time for other things that are important to you, including self-care, combats the temptation to be online 24 hours each day, seven days a week, and it provides nonwork time during which you can relax and focus on your other priorities without guilt” (Hansen and Gray). For example, instructors frequently face situations in which students need more assistance on an assignment than what is offered in the normal course instruction, whether said instruction is online or in-person. However, while the in-person instructor can answer student questions in short conversations after class, the online instructor is limited in their methods of quickly communicating answers to questions. In other words, a question can be fully answered and any follow-ups addressed as well in less than five minutes after an in-person class ends, but an online teacher may spend days exchanging correspondence with a student who has the same question and follow-ups. As such, the online instructor
is much more likely to feel the mental strain of this student’s inquiry hanging over their head. This teacher may think to herself, “What if my student has emailed me with a follow up question, and I don’t see it until tomorrow? Will they hold it against me? What if my student only has time to work on the assignment tonight, and without my prompt answer, they’ll turn in incomplete work?” She may feel the pressure to check her email obsessively, which can impede her ability to focus on completing other teaching duties such as grading and preparing upcoming units, as well as on activities outside of her job such as hobbies and spending time with loved ones. This constant stress can easily distract online teachers, and can wreak havoc on their mental health. I should know; I had that exact experience in my first few weeks teaching online composition courses.

In order to offset this stress, a first time online composition instructor should be intentional in setting students’ expectations for when they can expect a response to their messages. Including a timeframe for when the instructor will respond to messages during syllabus day not only provides students a clear guideline for students of how soon they should contact their instructor with questions or concerns in order to get a response, but it also serves as a reminder to said instructor as the semester progresses that he does not have to immediately respond to his students’ inquiries. Setting this boundary at the beginning of the semester will not necessarily prevent students from emailing a question at 10:30 PM about an assignment that is due at 11:59 PM, but it will prevent them from being able to reasonably expect an answer in the hour and a half before the deadline, since the boundary has been established with the entire class. The boundary timeline can vary from instructor to instructor, and it is important to remember that there is not a one-size-fits-all timeframe, but a good place for first time online composition teachers to start
is with a 24 hour response time for attempts at contact, whatever that method of contact may be. That was the time frame I implemented with my students, and it enabled me to stay on top of all messages I received, both from students and from my educational institution. This timeline can be amended to exclude weekends if one chooses, but by checking one’s email once a day at a set time, students’ expectations for communication can be easily met.

Even after setting clear expectations and boundaries with students, it can be easy to ignore those boundaries in the moment, and to still find oneself too-frequently checking for messages from students. To aid in the time management necessary to avoid this, online composition instructors can set repeating reminders and schedule times throughout the day to respond to emails and messages, to grade papers and other assignments, to prepare the next module’s material, to perform administrative tasks, and to take care of any other tasks that come with teaching online classes. Having a designated and dedicated amount of time to focus on a particular type of task can help instructors to avoid being overwhelmed by the number of things they are responsible for, and can help them strategize productivity so they are able to finish the day’s work in a reasonable amount of time. Instructors will differ in how they feel most productive working, and this should be taken into consideration when using time blocking. For example, online composition teachers who are most productive in the mornings and working for long periods of time may devote 30 minutes early each morning to answering any messages from students, colleagues, and the institution, then spend the next handful of hours attending to grading, preparing for upcoming classes, and any other necessary tasks before breaking for lunch and wrapping up any lingering tasks in the early
afternoon. Alternatively, an instructor who prefers to work in short amounts of time throughout the day might devote 30 minutes at a time to messages, grading, prep work, and administrative tasks throughout the entire day. No matter what one’s preferred productivity timeline, it is important to remember to give oneself grace, and to be willing to experiment with different methods of time management until one finds a method that works well for their individual teaching experience.

The Advisor’s Role

Those advising first time online composition instructors should be involved enough in their advisees’ lives as teachers to ensure that these teachers are maintaining mental wellbeing and are not getting overwhelmed by the stress that comes with being an online composition instructor. An advisor should make sure to check on every new teacher she is responsible for, not only at the beginning of the term, but periodically as courses progress. She should equip her advisees with the tools to set and maintain boundaries with students before courses start, but she should also make sure that these tools are being implemented. Regularly scheduled check ins with each advisee, even for 20 minutes once per month, can help a new online writing instructor feel supported in their role, while also allowing an advisor to identify any areas where they can offer their own guidance and expertise.

Advisors should also advocate for their advisees with the educational institution, if necessary. For example, if during one of those regularly scheduled meetings an advisor realizes that the new teachers he is responsible for all voice similar concerns about the expectations that the institution has for them, and that it is affecting these teachers’ ability to teach effectively, he should push this concern up the chain of command so that a
positive change can be implemented for his advisees’ sakes. The advisor, as someone who likely has more experience and pull with the people in charge of setting expectations for online writing instructors at a given institution, is able to put concerns in front of the best people to make a change for the better, and therefore has the ability to take some of the mental load off of his advisees’ plates so that they are able to focus more completely on their students.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In summary, new online writing instructors have an obligation to understand the technologies typically used within online courses, as well as the challenges, the benefits, and the requirements of their new position. They must be sure that they possess at least a basic comprehension of the details of their role as educators if they wish to create courses that enable their students to effectively learn writing in an online setting. From placing proper focus on the subject matter over the technology in a course and supplying clear direction, to providing support to students and willingly adapting their teaching methods, new online writing professors must be prepared to construct their classes in ways that will benefit their students. Additionally, instructors should remember to take stock of their own mental health as they teach, and should afford themselves the proper grace when necessary to avoid getting burnt out and to continue guiding their students. Of course, these responsibilities should not lie solely on these new teachers. Instead, in order for first time online composition instructors to get the support they need in their first term, educational institutions need to designate specific faculty members to advise and mentor new instructors. These advisors can offer valuable wisdom and experience, as well as resources available to new teachers that are specific to a given educational institution. These advisors are a necessity in easing the mental burden on new online writing
instructors, and educational institutions should afford ready access to advisors to all those who are teaching an online composition course for the first time.

Of course, as new technological tools become available to those teaching online composition, the information contained in the pages above is subject to change, but this ought not cause concern for instructors teaching online courses or their advisors. Rather, first-time online writing professors and advising faculty alike should embrace the fact that they are in a field that is under constant improvement and look to any future progress with hope and anticipation. Doing so will allow these instructors to flourish in their role as educators and will confirm their ability to teach successfully online. In sum, navigating the world of online courses from the position of a writing professor is a valuable opportunity to be a contributing author in the evolving story of online composition courses.
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