

Online Writing Instruction: No Longer a Novelty

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— Scott Warnock**

As the Internet and new technologies permeate every aspect of our lives, teaching is no exception. “More and more people are looking to find ways to teach writing online that are effective, make sense, and are as good if not better than on-site classes,” says Scott Warnock, assistant professor of English, director of the Freshman Writing Program at Drexel University and author of *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why*.



Scott Warnock

What Is It?

Online writing instruction (OWI) includes both distance learning, in which every thing that is taught and learned is done online, and also what are called “hybrid” classes, in which part of the writing instruction is done online and part is done in a classroom, or face-to-face (f2f).

In either distance or hybrid classes, online writing instruction students might use message boards to critique one another’s writing, a wiki in which they can collaborate on a single piece of writing, or video/digital writing that includes images, video and music. While many of the tools are different, the goal in OWI, as in f2f, is to help students become analytical readers and writers and critical thinkers.

OWI is distinguished by a very reading- and writing-intensive environment, says Beth Hewett, adjunct associate professor of writing at the University College of the University of Maryland and coauthor, with Christa Ehmann Powers, of *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes*. Hewett suggests that one cannot always directly translate writing instruction methods from f2f to online without considering the great differences between receiving instructions aurally versus in writing.



Beth Hewett

“It’s different to write about how to make a thesis clear than it is to talk about how to make a thesis clear,” says Powers, who has served as the vice president of education at Smarthinking.com since that online tutoring company was founded in 1999.

“We need to take into account that students are learning through reading, especially instructional reading,” says Hewett, who is also author of a forthcoming book, *The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors*. “Our responsibility is to provide clear and direct instructional writing.”



Christa Ehmann Powers

Powers has observed that the most effective way to instruct clearly is to both embed comments in students' writing and to provide feedback in a separate document, such as a letter, which includes specific subject headings that help students easily find the passages in question. In addition, Powers has found students can quickly become overwhelmed by too much feedback; she says that providing a feedback document of no more than one- or one-and-a-half-pages with between three and six embedded comments, depending on the length of the student writing, has proved most effective.

In his book, Warnock addresses the need for clear communication by describing in great detail the level of instruction he gives his students. For example, his instructions about what constitutes a valid response on a message board includes six main points addressing what constitutes a post, how posts will be graded, and what the other students' responsibilities, with regard to the message board, are.

Warnock also encourages instructors to use a very detailed syllabus, which becomes a kind of contract with the students. The syllabus should spell out details such as when the instructor will be checking email and when to expect a lag in response as well as what identifier students should use on the subject line. For example, each assignment might need to have a different subject line subhead so threads can be followed easily and the instructor can stay organized.

Meanwhile, because the class is online, there are some issues that will arise in OWI that don't arise in f2f. Some of those issues instructors should ponder well before the first "meeting," says Warnock. For example, instructors need to figure out what their online persona will be. Will it be formal ("Dear members of English 101")? Or chummy ("Hi everyone")? How about the use of slang and instant messaging shortcuts (LOL, IMHO)?

Online writing instruction also differs from traditional instruction in the sheer volume of student writing, since virtually every communication is written. In addition, being online enables students to easily comment on each

other's postings, read and edit one another's writing, and engage in conversations asynchronously. The asynchronous aspect of the course is one of the major differences between online writing instruction and f2f.

OWI vs f2f? "That Train Has Left the Station"

While it's tempting to compare and contrast online writing instruction with traditional or f2f writing instruction, that may not be a useful exercise, Warnock and Hewett agree. The two approaches are just different tools, or modalities, to achieve the same end: to enable students to organize their thoughts, develop thesis statements and supporting material and otherwise become better writers.

Besides, it is not really a question of which is better or worse.

"That train has left the station," says Hewett, who first became interested in whether online writing instruction worked when she was a graduate student in the 1990s.

"Online instruction is a natural outgrowth of our technological world and we need to work with it."

Because technology is a part of our society, teachers of composition would do well to

incorporate some digital technology into their instruction, says Troy Hicks, who teaches college-level, preservice teachers about digital tools they can use in their K-12 classrooms.

"Let's face it, the whole process of being literate and what it means to be literate is changing," says Hicks, assistant professor of English at Central Michigan University and director of the Chippewa River Writing Project. Hicks points out that all kinds of writings, from science lab reports and writing on demand to memoir, can be enhanced with digital tools.

"I think we need to stop seeing digital tools as 'this is one more thing we have to do' or 'this isn't my job,'" he says. "We really need to start thinking about integrating technology across the curriculum and see where opportunities for digital writing exist."

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Troy Hicks

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"I would never expect every teacher to be an expert in every technology," adds Hicks, "but if, for instance, you had a unit on family history in your fourth-grade class and you could show your students how to do a digital story that might include video, still images, podcasts or music in an mp3 file, then, more power to you. You don't have to feel like you have to do everything, but just try one thing."

In addition, notes Hewett and others, if one stays centered on principles of pedagogy and helping students become better writers, then there is no need to panic.

"The road ahead may be foggy but if you think in terms of principles, you won't get off track worrying about things like whether to wiki, blog, or message board, and instead can stay focused on 'How does any given tool support writing instruction?'" says Hewett.

"You don't want to force online writing instruction on teachers," adds Warnock, "but you can ask 'what do you do well and how can we migrate that on to an online environment that makes sense for you?'"

Pros & Cons

There are many aspects of OWI that are particularly beneficial: students too shy to speak up in class might end up being very comfortable in the written environment and be the most verbal online; those who have auditory processing issues, likewise, may thrive in an online setting; and those students whose work or family schedules make attending class at a regular time difficult benefit from the asynchronous nature of OWI.

Warnock also likes online writing instruction because students write so much more.

"In a writing class students should do lots of writing," he says. "Between message boards, blogs and other activities my students do an enormous amount of writing."

He describes one student who wrote 9,000 words on message boards and another 9,000 in her online journal. That total does not even include formal writing assignments.

"Message boards, by their very design, provide a complexity of audience: students are writing not just to the teacher but also to each other," says Warnock. "They aren't just writing to please you; most writing teachers are familiar with that sense of writing indifference.

"If you haven't used the simple technology of message boards, prepare to be amazed by the kind of work your students can do in this environment," adds Warnock. "The

semi-formal writing my students produce on message boards is often astounding."

In addition, says Warnock, OWI is a very public environment. If something one student writes isn't clear, the other students will say, "I don't know what you mean," which is different from hearing it from the teacher. OWI encourages this more student-centered dynamic, in part by allowing extensive student discussions. An online discussions can also move in several different directions simultaneously in a way an f2f class cannot. The students overwhelmingly liked this aspect of the hybrid OWI classes Warnock teaches at Drexel.

The asynchronous one-on-one conferencing between teacher and student also is an enormous benefit to OWI, adds Hewett.

Moreover, at least in Warnock's OWI classes, there are so many graded writing assignments (Warnock grades between four and seven posts per week per student), the students feel more comfortable occasionally taking some risks in their writing, since the stakes are not so high.

A side benefit, but a critical one in today's world, is that students learn how to communicate depending on their audience. So, for example, one of Warnock's goals is to teach students to put a useful and very clear title in the subject line rather than writing, "Yo dude," as sometimes happens.

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Logistics

Moving even part of one's writing instruction course online can be time consuming at first, and difficult to do well. However, Warnock notes there are also benefits, with regard to course management issues.

For example, he notes that physically handing papers back and forth between teacher and students can take a week or more out of a 10-week term. With online instruction, papers, comments and more are available at the touch of a key. This saves significant time, he says.

Obviously, OWI is no panacea for the myriad of challenges faced by teachers of writing. Like any other tool it must be used well to provide benefit. And OWI can sometimes not be the best tool, for example, for those with visual impairments or those who are weak readers.

And for every teacher who loves online writing instruction, there is one who finds the workload of reading and writing excessive. In her experiences, says Hewett, OWI is far more time consuming for an instructor, especially if, as

often happens, administrators enroll more students, rather than fewer, in an online course versus an f2f one.

Although Warnock does not find the workload significantly greater compared to a traditional class, he does agree that it takes time to incorporate this, or any, new approach in a class and that teachers really need release time or some other way to learn how best to use OWI for their students.

Best Practices

At the 2007 NCTE Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Annual Convention, a committee was appointed to investigate best practices for OWI. Since then the members of that committee, including Hewett, who is chair, have conducted fieldwork to determine what, precisely, people mean when they talk about online writing instruction. That research looked at online writing instruction at traditional colleges and universities as well as at community colleges and for-profit institutions.

"People consider lots of things as OWI," says Hewett. "We looked at all the ways people are teaching writing using online technology."

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The committee prepared a report on their findings and subsequently developed a survey to determine best practices. Once the survey is approved at the NCTE Annual Convention in November, it will be sent nationwide. Based on results of the surveys, the CCCC committee will next identify best strategies for OWI in both hybrid and distance classrooms; identify best practices for using various online media and pedagogies, such as networked classrooms, Internet-based conferences and peer-re-

viewed papers; identify both best practices for writing instruction of English language learners and for training and professional developing of OWI instructors.

Hicks, who has been a member of NCTE since he was a junior in college, and encourages his own students to join, applauds NCTE for its efforts in the survey, the policy briefs and Web seminars addressing technology.

"Online writing instruction technology is no longer a novelty," he says. "It's been around for 20 years. We don't have to adopt every technology wholesale, but we can ask, 'might this new tool be useful and how?'"

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