Chapter 14

Composition Goes Online:
How a Small Pacific Island is Blogging into the Future

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2007, English faculty members at the University of Guam began researching the need for online education options that could be offered by the University. With the support of other English faculty, Merissa Brown proposed, created, and implemented the first fully online composition class and taught it in the spring semester of 2008. Michelle Bednarzyk took over the class in the fall of 2008. This case will provide a history of the course's development, insights from both instructors about the process of teaching this way within the diverse population that makes up the University's student body, and offer suggestions they have for future successes based on challenges they faced. Finally, this document will argue that students at the University are ready for more technology in their classroom environments and should expect the University to accommodate their requests in an effort to successfully prepare them for their careers.

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, Aldrin Wooldridge (2005) noted in *The Economist* that: "The death of distance is transforming academia just as radically as it is transforming business" (p. 1). He went on to write, "Mass higher education is forcing universities to become more diverse, more global and much more competitive" (p. 1). Examples of this movement can be seen all over the United States. Harvard introduced its first class online for the public in 1998 (*Gazette,* 1998). The University of Illinois refuses to be left behind the times and is currently implementing its plan for a "global campus" by offering several master's and bachelor's degrees and many certificates online ("Global Illinois," 2008). The University of Phoenix is widely recognized and continues its growth. Finally, in 2007, 10% of University of Guam (UOG) students were surveyed about online education. Of those students surveyed, 71% said they were inter-

ested in taking online courses offered by UOG; 70% also said they felt that high quality learning can take place without the face-to-face discussions of a traditional classroom. In the spring semester of 2008, after several months of research, proposal writing, class shaping, and committee meetings, UOG jumped headfirst into the technology era and offered its first fully online English composition course. UOG students are ready for more technology in their classroom environments and should expect the University to accommodate their requests in an effort to successfully prepare them for their careers. By exploring the creation of EN110 Online at UOG, and analyzing its trip-ups and triumphs, one will come to the understanding that UOG must continue its technological progress in order to remain relevant as an educational facility in the 21st century.

BACKGROUND

One of the most interesting parts about the development of EN110 Online is that it costs the financially strapped University nothing. In order to understand how this happened, it is important to learn a bit about the history involved. Former University adjunct instructor Merissa Brown secured a full-time faculty position in the division of English and applied linguistics (DEAL) that began in January, 2007. Before moving to Guam, Brown had taught for the University of Illinois as a graduate teaching assistant and for Robert Morris College as an adjunct instructor. Guam is the first place she ever came professionally face to face with a chalk board as the only readily available classroom media). Brown had been teaching composition and communication classes for the University since 2005 and had also been teaching online for the University of Illinois at Springfield. In her UOG classes, she always utilized whatever computer mediated communication tools she could reasonably expect her students to access. This included assignments due by email,

online grade books, and posting class documents on her Web site.

Christopher Schreiner, acting associate dean for DEAL and communication and fine arts (CFA), approached the newly hired instructor in early January about taking her experience and shaping it into something new for UOG. Brown began seriously looking at the resources available and what the demographically diverse group of UOG students desired, understood, and had real access to in the way of technology. A simple Google-search provided her with countless questionnaires that could be reasonably put to use. She was looking for a simple yes/no format consisting of multiple questions regarding technological skill sets, personal motivation, and access to reliable internet sources. Students would fill out these questionnaires in order to communicate as a group if distance education was really something that the University needed to make a priority or pool resources towards. Allen County Community College provided the best template (ACCC Student Skills Quiz, 2007) and a group of forty-six yes/no learning assessment questions were produced for a UOG specific survey (see Appendix A). Many of these questions involved explicit computer and internet functions and jargon that a student would need to understand in order to be successful in an online course. In addition, many questions discussed personal motivation factors that were also very telling about a student's ability to maintain their interest in a course that they would not have to physically attend.

In February 2007, a total of 327 students (roughly 10% of undergraduate students at that time) were surveyed in their composition, communication, English, and literature classes with the cooperation of the DEAL and CFA faculty. If students took the survey in one class and happened to be in another class where it was presented, they were asked not to take it again. The surveys were designed to take only about ten minutes of class time. It was imperative that students did not spend too much time considering any one yes/no ques-

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