

# The Evolution of Online Composition Pedagogy

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## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of composition pedagogy from teacher-centered instruction to writing workshop and successful practices in online courses has been dramatic (Gerard, 2006; Hawisher & Selfe, 1998; Mahiri, 2004; Prensky, 2001). However, the teaching of writing often gets left out of discussions about online education even though English/writing teachers are rapidly increasing their use of Internet and computers to improve the communication and composing skills of their students at all levels (Vinall-Cox, 2005; Gerard, 2006; Doherty, 1994). Traditional composition pedagogy has been embedded with rigorous and parochial attention to classical forms. In their formal education, novice writers have been subjected to the archaic practices of rote memorization, strict grammatical exercises, and stringently subjective assessments of what is right and what is wrong with their composing skills.

Prior to this digital age, many students were deficient in written expression due to the nature of instruction. More importantly, students completing levels of education that should predict adequate writing skills had minimal ability to produce prose (Atwell, 1998; Ede, 1989; Graves, 1994; Hillocks, 1986; Moffett, 1983). With access to writing instruction online, new and better ways of using writing workshops, peer review, synchronous and asynchronous discussions for brainstorming, editing and collaboration are showing promise for strengthening the rhetorical skills of a new age of literacy. Instructors no longer question computer use. Instead, a writer can have many respond to her/his work through the development of the dialogic classroom (Hawisher & Selfe, 1998). Prensky (2001) claims that students today are “no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach.” He describes the discontinuity between educators and students with respect to digital technology and the different thinking patterns and learning experiences with which these “digital natives” are equipped. Indeed, “...at the dawn of the twenty-first century, debates over ‘e-learning’

have decidedly shifted from whether it works to how best to take advantage of it” (Mahiri, 2004, p. 213). Researchers at all levels are examining how pedagogy, critical thinking, composing skills, and development of style differ as students become more proficient writers through online deliveries (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2004).

Additionally, any discussion of online writing must take into account the “digital divide” that separates the “haves” from the “have nots” in our educational system. As the use of computers improves student writing skills, we must remember that many children have no access to home computers. Many schools have a paucity of technological equipment and services. We must thus strive to provide adequate technology to all students and continue to investigate how the changing nature of learning through technology affects the composing skills of young writers.

## BACKGROUND

Early classical education in this country gave little attention to *how* students would learn to write. Later, as the opportunity for education increased to include more students, and as schooling became a “right” instead of a “privilege,” the early beginnings of composition pedagogy allowed for the process of teacher-student communication through “...correction and revision to improve student composition” (Squire & Applebee, 1976, p. 25). As the wave of change inherent in this “new” approach to rhetoric has given way to new and more appropriate approaches to writing instruction, the development of the writing workshop introduced a more collaborative approach. In theorizing about learning to use language, Moffett (1983) points out that all communication requires human response. Thus “one cannot escape the ultimately social implications inherent in any use of language” (p. 191). Graves (1994) reminds us that “writing is a social act.” Writing should

not be a “lonely process” (Ede, 1989) which requires an individual route to success.

As scholars began separating the various aspects of composing, they also defined the stages novice writers needed to address their work. Introducing and examining a concept, providing examples, working with an activity, and final evaluation (Graves, 1994) became “the *writing process*.” Hillocks, Jr. (1986) introduced revision as essential to drafts, and activities to enhance these concepts became common. The recursive nature of composing is the cohesiveness of the writing process, and scholars began to afford students the opportunity to “double back” on their writing, revise pieces and bits, “redo” parts in a non-linear way. In discussing the value of revision, Faigley and Witte (1984) stress having students “discover what, exactly, they have to say...to distance themselves” from their writing, and “to see their texts with new eyes...”(p. 107).

As the writing process was accepted, and as “audience” became an essential factor in addressing the requirements of the text, teachers began to broaden their students’ readership to include classmates on whom editorial responsibilities were assigned. Writing workshops thrived in the late eighties and nineties. With the introduction of computer-based learning, a natural partnership has developed between writing and technology, and the transfer of writing activities to online models has thrived. This practice has been especially productive since many students come to the academy already prepared with sophisticated computer skills.

Three decades ago, when the concept of the writing workshop exploded onto the pedagogical scene, teachers of composition embraced this new way of teaching as an alternative to the teacher-based, artificial rhetorical forms that earlier controlled the teaching of writing. Nancie Atwell (1998), following Donald Graves’ model of writing process, introduced the concept to her middle-school students, and then to school teachers as a way to bring the realities of the composing process into the classroom. Teachers converted classrooms into workshops where students could collaborate, evaluate, and improve the writing of their peers and themselves. They became critics, editors, and developers of rhetorical forms.

The National Writing Project (NWP) founded in 1974, presents teachers with the opportunity to become writers themselves. Teachers come together to share ideas, issues, techniques and activities that work to benefit writing instruction at a variety of levels. Teachers

form authentic methods of composing, assessing prose, and providing assistance for others who also aspire to become writers. Teachers thus become writers, and writers do not focus on grammar and spelling!

As schools became better equipped, access to computers increased from one or two in the school library to numerous stations within each classroom. Happily, computers are now well placed in writing curricula, and students and teachers see them as an important tool with which students compose. More and more, teachers, described by Prensky (2001) as “*digital immigrants*” are coming closer to their “*digital native*” students, and they are learning new ways to teach through this new dialogic system. Prensky points out that the “digital immigrants” today struggle with teaching a population that speaks a different language from what they have been familiar with throughout their teaching careers.

## **TRANSFORMATION OF THE WRITING WORKSHOP AND OTHER COMPOSING ACTIVITIES**

The revolution in composition pedagogy stemming from the writing workshop concept has given way to new and accessible ways to create writing communities through online deliveries. This trend has created exciting new possibilities not only for students who cannot attend the traditional face-to-face class, but also for those students not readily willing to contribute honest critiques to their peers. Email, electronic bulletin boards or conferences, asynchronous discussions, and electronic postings are all activities which have proven successful in the English class (Gillis-Bridges, 2008). Further, through online writing courses, students contribute to peers directly and in useful ways so that they themselves become good critics of writing. Online writing has become a successful practice for students at all levels of instruction. Evidence of the facility with which “digital natives” utilize technology from specialized courses at the graduate level to the remedial needs of basic writers is impressive.

English (2002) looks at online writing instruction from an entrepreneurial perspective. Though distance education is often seen as a “money maker” from an administrative point-of-view, this concept is often anathema to the principles of the professoriate. Courses are sometimes constructed after the “lecture hall model” where the professor delivers her/his lesson to the entire

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