

Chapter 17

A Kaleidoscope of Variables: The Complex Nature of Online Education in Composition Courses

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between composition courses and online education is complicated, and attempting to summarize that relationship in a blanket statement may be feeble or futile. As a field, composition faces the challenge of identifying best practices in online education at the same time that it struggles to identify standardized content for its courses. Assessment challenges also plague online composition courses. While other fields might assess student work with standardized methods or computerized scoring, the work of composition requires tedious and labor-intensive assessment methods difficult to delegate to software; indeed, a recent petition illustrates significant instructor opposition to computer scoring (Haswell & Wilson, 2013). This chapter illustrates the current state of challenging conversations within composition studies as a kaleidoscope of positions in which instructors using online education position themselves.

INTRODUCTION

With the exception of work done by Hewett (2001, 2010), Hewett and Ehman (2004), and Warnock (2009), little attention has been paid to the way writing instruction should work in an online environment. Unlike many of the disciplines represented in other chapters of this volume, writing studies does not have a unified approach to online education. At first, this may seem a significant oversight in its own right, considering the volume of students served by our nation's first year writing courses and the general push in the American education system to present more courses in a more cost-effective manner. However,

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the conversation that exists among writing scholars in place of conversations about online pedagogy suggests significant issues that are far deeper and far more fundamental than merely a lack of consensus about teaching online. The conversation (or lack thereof) about online writing instruction illustrates not only the turmoil within writing studies as a discipline, but also general misconceptions about the nature and capacity of online education in any field. By reviewing the discussion of online writing instruction, we hope to uncover striking assumptions about the benefits and potential of online education.

As we go forward, it is important to be transparent about our strategy, and our eventual thesis. Online education is based on a few components of traditional teaching and learning, but not all of them, and so is founded on only a partial understanding of how instruction and learning coexist. There are no rooms in online education, at least not in the way that on-ground learning leverages a shared physical space as its platform. And representations of students and teachers in online environments are only representations. Too many voices in the conversation about transitioning courses to online environments imagine that the space of the physical classroom and all its contents can be neatly shifted online, as though the move online is merely a question of delivery. Indeed, many institutional teacher-training programs purport to help “move a class online,” and many online Learning Management Systems (LMSs) provide tools to help instructors transfer content such as quizzes, assignments, and grading systems directly into the new system, reinforcing the perception that a class can be moved. The duplication-by-transfer approach has become standard practice in many distance-learning programs, including those that design online composition courses. It is our hope here to illuminate the path that first-year composition has taken—in both its on-ground and online evolutions—based on a history that repeatedly loses focus on pedagogy. We argue this history leads to a future for online composition which holds more promise for endless duplication than it does for reflection, creativity, and innovation—the central craft of composition.

In a conversation toward the beginning of writing this chapter, we discussed what we felt were the primary elements of the craft of composition. Composition, we surmised, is a movable thing, it must by its nature be distributable, it must find a home beyond the context in which it’s written, i.e., the classroom. This essay, not written in a classroom, but as part of an edited collection, must somehow find context outside the context of the book cover, outside the confines of the bookshelf and bookends. In essence, we ask that our readers read this chapter not as a chapter, but only as it *may be applied* off the page. For composition must have use, and this must always be at the heart of what it does, and how it is taught, online and off. And so, this chapter is both a history of pedagogy and, to be successful, must also be pedagogical, and must gesture beyond the physical page in which it sits.

Forming the backbone of this essay, then, is a keen critical approach. Not an article of reportage, rather the authors of this chapter intend to review a history of first-year composition (FYC)—both analog and digital—with an eye toward what future that history heralds. History is done, but it is also an artifact, and so available for critical analysis and contemplation. What has not yet been written is the future of the field, and it is only pessimism that would assume the future of online teaching (in any discipline) must resemble what it has looked like to now, or what it looks like today. The hope here (and there is hope here) is that a review of the past and present may lead us to better understand the future as we work to build it.

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