NCTE

The Rise of the Online Writing Classroom: Reflecting on the Material Conditions of College Composition Teaching
Author(s): June Griffin and Deborah Minter
Source: *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 65, No. 1, SPECIAL ISSUE: The Profession (September 2013), pp. 140-161
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43490811
Accessed: 10-05-2020 02:15 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

JSTOR

*National Council of Teachers of English* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *College Composition and Communication*

This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

June Griffin and Deborah Minter

# The Rise of the Online Writing Classroom: Reflecting on the Material Conditions of College Composition Teaching

This essay examines the current state of online writing instruction in light of changing technologies and everyday literacies in order to understand their impact on access to higher education and on the material conditions of teaching writing.

*You have to know and say your course goals out loud and clearly so all students have a chance to succeed as writers and thinkers. Online teaching requires professors and educators to constantly think about tone and the importance of follow-up. You also have an intimate chance of getting to know your students through their ideas and not just who raises their hand or speaks first. . . . Everyone's ideas are what we see first and foremost—not where you grew up or what you're wearing. . . . As a reluctant online teacher, I have been immensely gratified by my involvement with a broader (students are from all over the nation and the world) learning community.*
—CCCC OWI Survey 39



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

In her Conference on College Composition and Communication Chair's address, Cynthia K. Selfe called on the field to "*pay attention* to how technology is now inextricably linked to literacy and literacy education in this country" (411). She argued that those linkages, left unengaged and unexamined, would directly contribute to worsening educational and social inequities in the United States when they might, instead, be used to address such inequities. Now, fifteen years later, with more than 6 million postsecondary education students taking online courses (Allen and Seaman), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) being widely discussed by politicians and journalists, and machine scoring of high-stakes exams drifting from future fiction to present reality, we cannot help but pay attention. Composition scholars have been heeding Selfe's call and adding their voices to it in the field's journals, professional statements, and websites. This essay joins those efforts by paying close attention to the state of online writing instruction (OWI) at a moment when the field seems poised to pivot, along with the rest of higher education. We place the results of the CCCC's survey of online writing instructors into the context of important shifts in literacy and technology in order to formulate key questions about access as well as the material conditions of teaching writing in a digital age.

## Digital Literacies and Emerging Technologies

Less than a decade ago, Kathleen Blake Yancey described digital literacies as "textured literacies," as "the ability to comfortably use and combine print, spoken, visual, and digital processes in composing a piece of writing" ("Using" 38). This definition helps to mark how much has changed. In the years since 2004—the year Facebook and Flickr launched—we have begun to read, write, and compose more collaboratively than ever before. Wikis and real-time collaboration software like Google Docs not only facilitate collaboration but also alter it in fundamental ways so that now you may not even know the people with whom you collaborate as you alter the same text—even the same sentence—at the same time. We collaborate in less deliberate ways perhaps with greater frequency: we write with friends on each other's "walls," comment on their blogs, retweet them, and engage in "words with friends." Social media has made reading a more collaborative activity, too, because not only can readers comment on much of the text they read online or quote and link to it in their own sites or blogs, but they can also share it in countless ways (links on Twitter or Facebook, Instapaper, Zotero, etc.), curate it for others by using tags or



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

hashtags, annotate it with apps like Diigo, or rearrange the text by "modding" it—giving it a thumbs up or down to affect where a comment appears or even if it appears at all. Nearly all engagements with text online hold out the possibility for interaction and a fluid passage between reading and writing so that our literacies (at least our nonschool literacies) blur a boundary that had once seemed clearly marked, making the roles we inhabit—reader and writer—a single role defined not by activity so much as by textual connection to or interaction with others.

We can imagine the shape this may take in our classrooms. Some instructors worry about the implications of social reading on their students' habits: will students read assigned texts if they can review the passages most often highlighted by other Kindle users? But others are eager to turn acts of reading into class conversations; they believe sharing annotations enables them to draw their students' attention to aspects of a text and encourages students to share ideas and ask and answer each other's questions in the marginalia as they read. This kind of practice is not limited to high-profile projects that invite readers' annotations on scholarly editions like Stephen Duncombe's *Open Utopia* or *My Dante* at Georgetown. Classes can use tools such as Diigo to share annotations on webtexts or, with a little more effort and time, mark up a common text held in a class drop box using annotation software.

**There are a growing number of people using technology in their classes not just to simplify or speed practices they have long used, but also to situate their own and their students' inquiries directly in that softened boundary where the movement between reading and writing is most fluid.**

Social reading assignments make reading more writerly; other assignments embed reading within writing and composing. There are a growing number of people using technology in their classes not just to simplify or speed practices they have long used, but also to situate their own and their students' inquiries directly in that softened boundary where the movement between reading and writing is most fluid.[1] This is true of Daniel Anderson's assignments and of the screencasts he and his students created to reflect on "what we did in our class" as published in the first issue of *CCC Online*. This collection of screencast portfolios simultaneously reads and recomposes the class's writings and their mashup assignments to, in their terms, "perform learning." Gardner Campbell describes a student project that enacts this kind of read-write literacy in his keynote at Open Education 2012.[2] Campbell's student Erin used XtraNormal to create an animated movie picturing a conversation between Marshall McLuhan and Scott McCloud and another between Bill Viola



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and Ivan Illich that used quotations from their works to discuss themes from a short story, offering a composed performance of the texts that demonstrated deep and new understanding of the works as she literally put them in dialog with one another. There are many tools available that may be said to walk the line between reading and writing: Diigo, VoiceThread, thinglink, Pinterest, Popcorn Maker (to name but a few). These tools allow users to gather, share, and comment on resources for group or individual projects and can enable (although won't necessarily produce) deep interactive engagement with an assigned text. We can see it, too, in some collaborative assignments where writers do not merely divide a composition into sections but write together, in a wiki or other collaboration software, to answer a question, solve a problem, or understand a term or concept. In these assignments, the difference is not necessarily in the final project but in the way the students work together, reading and writing within and across composing spaces to create something together.

**But new forms of collaborative writing, social reading, and the softened distinction between reader and writer are still only a piece of what has changed in the meaning of literacy.**

But new forms of collaborative writing, social reading, and the softened distinction between reader and writer are still only a piece of what has changed in the meaning of literacy. In her 2004 CCCC chair's address, Yancey described three literacies—oral, print, and screen—and seeing the screen as a medium with direct parallels to print or speech made an easy kind of sense then. But now we interact with screens—or some of our screens—differently. Screens no longer simply display what we type on our keyboards or move with our mice; now we touch, swipe, pinch, and press them, and they respond.

Touch screens have been around since 1965 (Cohen), but only fairly recently have they found a place in education via smart phones and tablets. According to a study released by the Pearson Foundation in March 2012, one in four college students have tablets—an incredible number given that iPads were first released in April 2010. These numbers will continue to increase dramatically in the coming years, particularly since many K–12 school districts across the country have been purchasing iPads at unheard of rates (Catalano) and Apple's CFO has said they sold more than twice as many iPads as Macs to the education market in the quarter ending in June 2012 (M. Campbell).

We need to think—and think fast—about how we might best redesign our pedagogy for the touch screens of cell phones and tablets. The rise of mobile technology affects the way we teach writing in at least two ways. First, students can sign in to a class site from any number of devices via any number



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

of platforms. This is a significant concern for instructors who make heavy use of learning management systems (LMSs) and their own course sites, but it is absolutely critical for online writing instructors who need to make sure that the resources they post and tools they deploy will work across a range of devices. Second, we need to accommodate a shift to tablets that, as the cliché goes, are better for consuming than composing. The dramatic increase in the number of students using tablets (perhaps in place of laptops) and the likelihood that some students will access course sites primarily through their phones and may even compose primarily on their phones will put new strains on all writing instruction. Such changes may strain OWI even more acutely because it is more difficult for students and instructors to recognize they are having different experiences when they cannot see what the other sees. But as with all technological change, it is neither all good nor all bad. Although it is true that mobile devices do not accommodate the composing practices we have come (in a comparatively short time) to accept as ideal,[3] they also come equipped with technologies that will no doubt change our composing practices.

One telling example is the radical improvement in dictation software. Now one can buy an inexpensive mobile application that does a reasonably good job transcribing speech and improves over time as it "learns" to recognize a particular voice. It may well be the case that this kind of composing strategy makes it possible for many students to generate a draft with less difficulty than they might have had typing in a word processor. While it is now (as we write this) a challenge to revise a lengthy text on the small screen, it is easy enough to imagine swapping "cut and paste" for a more robust "mark and move" that displays in ways that make it easier for people to see and sort sections of text. One mobile app rumored to be on the way by Scrivener will likely include the desktop version's ability to manipulate stretches of text as virtual index cards on a cork board. This kind of application will make composing and revising long texts on tablets and cell phones easier.

There are already several apps that make it easy to create, manipulate, and share images and videos; there are many that make it easy to write blog posts that incorporate multimedia. There are, in fact, so many different apps that we must develop ways to teach composing strategies that are independent of application, device, and platform. And if this is not challenging enough, we must be mindful not to overload our students' bandwidth as many wireless networks will soon follow the lead of cellphone providers in charging people for data usage, and we may inadvertently limit access as we are attempting to increase it.

All this ignores the man behind the curtain, the code literacies that make



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

digital reading and composing possible and that many believe are the literacies of power, but which we have as a field, with some notable exceptions, set aside as not within our purview.[4]

To be clear, online writing courses do not, inherently, represent cutting-edge technology. Indeed the results of the CCCC Committee on Best Practice on Online Writing Instruction's "Survey on Fully On-Line Distance Based Courses" (hereafter CCCC OWI survey) suggest courses are more likely to be built around fairly traditional text-based assignments.[5] However, the proliferation of online classrooms raises the field's stake in emerging technologies not only for the impact of those technologies on course design and students' literacies, but also for their capacity to help us see more clearly changes on the horizon for our profession and to mine those changes for opportunities to improve student learning.

**However, the proliferation of online classrooms raises the field's stake in emerging technologies not only for the impact of those technologies on course design and students' literacies, but also for their capacity to help us see more clearly changes on the horizon for our profession and to mine those changes for opportunities to improve student learning.**

## Teachers and Learners in the Online Classroom

In a mostly hopeful op-ed, David Brooks asks: "Will online learning diminish the face-to-face community that is the heart of the college experience?" Although this concern is frequently raised, the literature suggests that productive technologically mediated writing communities are certainly possible with careful planning, pedagogical expertise, and good institutional support.[6] Equally important, however, is the acknowledgment that who we encounter in these writing communities and the institutional arrangements through which we encounter them are changing, and with these changes come new challenges and opportunities. Jane Blakelock and Tracey E. Smith's 2006 sampling of attitudes and experiences among thirty-seven faculty teaching online writing courses across the United States found that "nearly half . . . are tenure-line faculty, and slightly more than 25% of these tenured or tenure-eligible faculty members teach at schools awarding baccalaureate through doctoral degrees" (145). Of the 158 respondents to the CCCC OWI Survey, 44 percent identified themselves as tenured or tenure-track faculty. In addition, 9 percent indicated that at least one of their jobs was at a for-profit institution, and 7 percent identified themselves as working at a fully online institution. These figures reflect new institutional contexts for writing instruction. In short, the profession is comprised of teachers at institutions that are two-year, four-year, public,



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

private, nonprofit, for-profit, exclusively brick and mortar, exclusively online institutions, and institutions that offer a mix of online and face-to-face writing courses. This wider range of institutional missions likely results in a wider array of employment arrangements, admission criteria, and institutional support for the teaching of writing, making it increasingly challenging for associations such as CCCC to serve the needs of all its constituents and promote practices that support student learning in such a broad range of contexts.

If the kinds of institutional profiles represented in the field of composition are expanding to include for-profit and fully online institutions in small but perhaps rising numbers, demographic analyses of postsecondary degree-seeking students suggest that, increasingly, writing classrooms will see greater numbers of underrepresented populations, English language learners, and students with disabilities. With each passing decade, a greater portion of the student body includes members of racial or ethnic minority groups, from 21 percent in 1990 to 30 percent in 2000 to 36 percent in 2009 (Quinterno 10). At the same time, the number of English language learners in K–12 classrooms (children ages 5–17) increased from 10 percent to 21 percent between 1980 and 2009 ("English Language Learners"), suggesting we will soon see a similar increase in ELL student enrollments in higher education, particularly given the Obama administration's focus on increasing college access.

One of the benefits of online instruction is that it can alleviate some of the practical challenges of getting to class that often lead "at risk" students to drop out of face-to-face classes (e.g., irregular work schedules, unreliable transportation, lack of childcare, other familial obligations). It also poses challenges that may be less visible to instructors but just as much outside their ability to help or manage: irregular access to reliable computer equipment or Internet connections, limited knowledge and experience working with the technologies needed to navigate and work within and beyond the course shell. Further, far too little is known about the ways different types of access affect developing literacies: that is, wealthier students typically have multiple types of access to the Internet (desktops, laptops, and tablets at home and school, cell phones) from an early age, whereas students in lower socioeconomic communities tend to have more limited access on older equipment in their schools and libraries, and the only home access, if at all, is via cell phone. According to the Pew Research Center, "Among smartphone owners, young adults, minorities, those with no college experience, and those with lower household income levels are more likely than other groups to say that their phone is their main source of



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Internet access" (Zihkuhr and Smith). This type of access is not necessarily bad, but it is a difference we need to understand with a greater degree of granularity.

Online writing classes can amplify the challenges underserved or ELL students face in traditional classes in other ways, too. Although the Department of Education's 2009 meta-analysis suggested superior learning outcomes for fully online courses over face-to-face classes, Shanna Smith Jaggars and Thomas Bailey's reassessment of the data found that "without additional supports, online learning may even undercut progression among low-income and academically underprepared students." Anna M. Harrington identifies more potential problems for ELL students in hybrid classrooms, problems that are as or more likely to factor into fully online writing classes: they may have trouble keeping up in an especially text-rich environment, and they may be more likely to "self-mute" due to self-consciousness regarding their written English skills and their knowledge of or comfort with cultural codes.

Recently, Di Xu and Jaggars studied the correlation between student attributes such as gender, age, previous academic performance, and ethnicity and students' ability to adapt to online classes. They found that students in general have trouble adapting to online classes, but that "[m]ales, younger students, students with lower levels of academic skill, and Black students were likely to perform particularly poorly in online courses relative to their performance in face-to-face courses" (19). Of particular interest to readers of *CCC* is that the analysis of student adaptability by discipline demonstrated the greatest negative effect for persistence and course grade in English classes (20). This is especially troubling given that one of the touted benefits of OWI is increased access for historically underserved students. Although there has been considerable scholarly attention focused on developing effective face-to-face pedagogies to serve such students, that same attention needs to be focused on meeting students' needs as online learners. Writing teachers need instructional development time and the support from their institutions in order to better address students' needs and build on their strengths as writers and learners in digital environments.

**Although there has been considerable scholarly attention focused on developing effective face-to-face pedagogies to serve such students, that same attention needs to be focused on meeting students' needs as online learners.**

We can begin to imagine practices that might serve ELL students by following the lead of projects like eGo ESOL at West Thames College, London. EGo ESOL uses mobile technologies to augment an English speaking and writing



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

class for nontraditional ELL students: digital photos and videos taken by the students become writing prompts or the subject of Skype conversations with peers; students record descriptions of places and people in their lives with their cellphones and share them with classmates. Researchers report that students who had been hesitant to speak in introductory ELL classes become more comfortable when their own materials replace textbook prompts (Savill-Smith, Chopra, and Haure 134) and that these practices help shift the direction of classroom communication from 'hub and spoke" teacher-led communications to student-led peer-to-peer communications. Designed for face-to-face ELL classes, these activities could be usefully reworked for online writing instruction, but the activities would have to be flexible enough to allow for the variety that comes with bring-your-own-device (BYOD) course arrangements.

A second and equally important gap in the field's understanding of students' needs as online learners concerns students with disabilities. The stakes are unquestionably higher in online classrooms where, if a course shell is not universally accessible, a student may literally be unable to participate. The data regarding college access for people with disabilities is grim: "Only 30% of high-school graduates with disabilities enroll in college, as compared with 40% of the general population. One year after high-school graduation, only 10% of students with disabilities are enrolled in two-year colleges, and a paltry 5% are enrolled in four-year colleges" (Lazar and Jaegar). The potential to improve access through technology in general and through online courses in particular is high, but only if we make deliberate efforts to design courses that are fully accessible. George Williams offers insight into questions about accessibility, arguing that educators must conceptualize compatibility not only in terms of desktop computers, laptops, smart phones, and tablet devices, but also in terms of "such tools as refreshable braille displays, digital talking book devices, screen reader applications, and screen magnification software" (204). Issues of access in online courses are, strangely, simultaneously invisible and extraordinarily pronounced; it may be harder for instructors to identify and respond to the potential needs of students without visual cues to guide them, but the impact of our failure to improve access through universal design and to improve learning potential in online classrooms by developing pedagogies that make best use of emerging literacies is extreme: students drop out. They can enroll in online writing classes in ever-greater numbers, but if we want students to learn, we have to retain them.



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

## The Material Conditions of Teaching Writing in Increasingly Digital Learning Environments

Writing in 2001, Patricia Webb Peterson recounts ways in which distance learning could be seen as challenging some aspects of the teaching role as it has been traditionally conceived. She points to published critiques of distance learning as the harbinger of "unbundling," the practice whereby pieces of the educational experience are broken into modular units with each element of the process carried out by a different individual (content experts, course facilitators, etc.), often in the name of lowering costs. Although the recent CCCC-OWI survey presents a complicated picture of course design, it suggests that nearly 70 percent of respondents were working at institutions where online course design was "unique to individual instructors." "Unbundling"—at least in terms of separating course design from the teacher—does not appear to be an institutional reality for a large majority of the survey respondents. The warning remains forceful nonetheless because, as Joyce Magnotto Neff and Carl Whithaus make clear: "The progression toward corporatization of higher education is especially pronounced in distance learning" (10).

Two educational trends that have been much discussed this year heighten these concerns: flipping the classroom and massive open online courses (MOOCs). Both make plausibly present the kind of scenario Chris Anson described in 1999 when he imagined a college student of the future watching a multimedia lecture by a "world-famous historian (now living overseas)" and attending a recitation in which she and seventy-five other students on her campus meet with students at two other locations in a discussion led by a "recitation coordinator (a non-tenure-track education specialist)" (51). More than the arrangement of the class, it is also the way that assessment—particularly writing assessment—is accomplished that undercuts a critical pedagogical activity. In one of the first humanities MOOCs, "Internet History, Technology, and Security" taught via Coursera by Charles Severance at the University of Michigan, student writing was peer-graded. The assignment itself was difficult for many of the students (approximately 62 percent of whom Coursera believes lived outside the United States) and accelerated attrition: the course went from 11,000 students before the assignment to 6,000 students afterward.[7] After such extreme losses, Severance decided to rework the assignment structure so that the essay was optional (Kolowich "Learning"). As of this writing, the first writing MOOC, Coursera's "English Composition I" taught by Denise Comer at Duke, has only just begun; the expectations outlined in the course



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

description ask for less-polished writing than most online writing classes (a total of ten pages over four assignments), and all feedback and assessments are completed by peers. Students can take a free version of the course, or for a reduced introductory price of $39, they can enroll in the "signature track" and "Earn official recognition from Duke University and Coursera for [their] accomplishment with a verifiable electronic certificate" ("Earn a Verified Certificate").

**Given widespread interest in this kind of educational innovation, the labor of teaching seems especially vulnerable to the kinds of restructuring experienced in other sectors of the economy.**

Although it is too soon to do more than speculate on what this or other writing MOOCs to come might mean for the profession, those who hope to learn more about learning, writing, revision, and peer assessment practice might be outnumbered by those who worry about how credit-bearing MOOCs could impact already beleaguered humanities programs. This latter view has been in ascendancy since California state senator Darrell Steinberg proposed Senate Bill 520 (Gardner and Young), which would systematize acceptance of transfer credits for online courses (including some MOOCs) in order to ease California's overburdened system.

Given widespread interest in this kind of educational innovation, the labor of teaching seems especially vulnerable to the kinds of restructuring experienced in other sectors of the economy.[8] Although statements by professional organizations such as the AAUP's 1999 "Statement on Distance Education" (with its focus on classroom materials as intellectual property) and the 2004 "CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments" (with its focus on human readers as a requirement of assessment) might be read as responding to specific, disconnected exigencies at different points in time and for different professional organizations, it seems equally possible to link these earlier moments via a fast-moving technological landscape and a political milieu eager to reduce the cost of education. Moving forward, the field will need to step up its efforts to advocate for the expertise of writing teachers and their role not just in developing "content" but in 1) structuring a literacy learning experience based on the unique strengths and goals of the particular students in the course; 2) structuring occasions through which a group of students learns to work productively together on writing and responding to writing across the span of the course; 3) making productive use of available technological and pedagogical tools; 4) responding to writing; and 5) assessing student learning. Given the ways in which instantiations of



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

teaching are changing with the rise of online learning, the profession will need to continue to press for the writing teacher's crucial and integrated role in all areas of the educational experience.

Among the enduring pressures on the profession as online writing instruction becomes more prevalent is the need for high-quality training, not simply in technological tools but also in the teaching of writing in digital spaces. In summarizing what it terms "the state-of-the-art," the CCCC Committee on Best Practice in OWI found that "theory and practice specific to OWI has yet to be fully developed and engaged in postsecondary online settings," and it links this finding to shortcomings in available training. "In most cases," the committee reports, "it appears that 'writing' and how to achieve strong writing and identifiable student results are left out of online writing instructional training" (7). While position statements have called for institutions to provide faculty "ready access to diverse forms of technical and pedagogical professional development before and while they teach in digital environments" ("CCCC Position Statement"), survey data suggest that instituitions have responded with training in particular platforms and software. The most frequently identified form of training available to respondents to the CCCC OWI survey was, for example, "ongoing workshops on various aspects of a Content Management System (e.g., Blackboard)." Indeed, 79 percent of respondents indicated workshops in the institution's course management system were available to them at their institutions, but they tended to rank the helpfulness of such sessions lower. If we are going to live up to the potential of teaching writing online, we must convince our institutions to offer and support the training that teachers need and want.

If the overall conceptualization of the teacher's role and expertise and the availability of adequate professional development are two important aspects of the material conditions of teaching, a third is workload. As the move into digital learning environments accelerates, teacher effectiveness and student success will depend now more than ever on reasonable course caps and serious reconsiderations of technology's impact on notions of "class time." As early as 2009, Amy C. Kimme Hea countered the unqualified optimism surrounding online learning and its promise of flexibility:

> Hyped by wireless initiatives, perpetual contact between students and teachers creates an expectation of constant, continual engagement. This anytime, anywhere position carries risks of exploitation, especially for part-time, nontenure-track faculty, and working students. Security and privacy issues must also be addressed to help both teachers and students negotiate the new roles of being mobile teachers and learners. (215)



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Hea's formulation infuses CCCC-OWI survey respondents' discussions of the challenges they encounter teaching in online environments. One respondent writes that it "requires a lot of intense email communication in the evenings" (17). Responses like these prompt the committee's summary: "One aspect of time that emerged is the extra written communication that is necessary when teaching online" (17).

While "anytime anywhere" instruction impacts workload, so, too, does class size. Although existing field-specific professional statements on distance learning do not directly reference enrollment caps, the issue surfaces repeatedly in OWI research. Blakelock and Smith, for example, were encouraged that roughly 40 percent of their respondents taught online courses approaching CCCC recommendations for class size (twenty students max), while acknowledging that these numbers may be falsely encouraging as a large subset of respondents indicated that enrollment caps at the time of the survey had evolved from institutional pilot projects focused on networked classrooms with low student-teacher ratios. The authors note that "a third mentioned struggling to articulate—or to find a sympathetic audience for—the argument for a lower cap, and cited a gradual creeping upwards of course enrollment limits" (149). More recent OWI survey data show that although 71 percent of respondents think enrollments for their online writing courses should be capped at twenty, 53 percent reported actual enrollment caps of twenty-one or higher. When asked what respondents thought was most needed in a statement of best practices for online writing instruction, the committee reported receiving 113 written comments, one theme of which involved workload: "Specifically, respondents reported that engaging in OWI is far more time consuming than face-to-face courses. . . . [A] best practices statement [should] include guidelines for class sizes that take account of overall instructor workload, number of courses taught, and other duties" (40).

**Although references to the workload of teaching composition are legion, the profession will need to redouble its efforts at attending to teacher *and student* workload as more writing courses move online—not only for the purposes of ensuring fair labor conditions for teaching, but in service to student learning and retention.**

Although references to the workload of teaching composition are legion, the profession will need to redouble its efforts at attending to teacher *and student* workload as more writing courses move online—not only for the purposes of ensuring fair labor conditions for teaching, but in service to student learning and retention. At the 2012 CCCC conference, we presented the results of



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

preliminary research comparing the "literacy load" (the quantity of text to be read or written) of online writing classes to that of brick and mortar classes. To make our point that the material conditions of teaching change when classes move online, we offer one finding from this research. Comparing the amount of reading required of students in two first-year writing courses governed by the same course guidelines (albeit with different instructors and different syllabi), the reading load of the online classes was more than 2.75 times greater than the face-to-face classes.[9] These initial findings lead us to worry that the literacy load of online classes as they are often configured can overtax students, particularly academically underserved and ELL students. This is all the more reason for the field to advocate strongly for adequate academic support for students in online courses. On this issue, the findings of the CCCC-OWI survey are alarming: No more than 45 percent of survey respondents indicated that students in their courses had online access to a writing center tutor. No more than 57 percent of survey respondents indicated that students had online access to a librarian (either real-time or asynchronous). This lack of academic support shifts some additional burden to teachers and reduces students' opportunities for success and growth.

**As our research on the potential literacy demands of online courses suggests, the record made possible by online courses offers a wealth of information about writing instruction and student literacy that was not available in the past and that promises to reveal a great deal about both teaching and composing.**

One of the most potent changes to the material conditions of teaching brought about by the move to online instruction is how the digital classroom record can be mined for information. As our research on the potential literacy demands of online courses suggests, the record made possible by online courses offers a wealth of information about writing instruction and student literacy that was not available in the past and that promises to reveal a great deal about both teaching and composing. While the field has long advocated for the intellectual work that transpires, for example, in ephemeral face-to-face classroom conversations, this work might be more easily documented now that online classrooms have the long memory of the digital. Further, the capacity to analyze large data sets holds tremendous promise for writing program assessment. Susan Lang and Craig Baehr, for example, recount their writing program's inquiry into seventeen sections of first-year writing with failure rates of 30 percent or higher. Drawing on their first-year writing database, which included all student writing, instructor commentary, assignment grades, and attendance records, the authors were able to trace students' failing grades very specifically to late



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and missing assignments and to propose solutions accordingly. Similarly, Anne Ruggles Gere et al. at the University of Michigan were able to conduct programmatic research that would not have been possible without access to digital versions of student writing and tools to analyze them: they assessed their redesigned directed self-placement procedure using a combination of rhetorical analysis and an analysis of students' lexical choices conducted with concordance software.

**Already we are beginning to see how large-scale data analysis across institutions might help us better serve students.**

Already we are beginning to see how large-scale data analysis across institutions might help us better serve students. The research by Xu and Jaggars referenced earlier drew on data from thirty-two institutions. Among their many important findings was the suggestion that there might be a discoverable tipping point for student achievement. As they explain,

> regardless of a particular student's own adaptability to the online environment, her performance in an online course may suffer if her classmates adapt poorly. English and social science were two academic subjects that seemed to attract a high proportion of less-adaptable students, thereby introducing negative peer effects. (24)

Their quantification of "negative peer effects" prompted discussion on the WPA listserv about what it might mean to be able to identify a "minimum critical mass of prepared, invested learners," as E. Shelley Reid described them: it would enable WPAs to manage course enrollments in ways that might increase the likelihood of success for the greatest number. But she and others on the list voiced concerns about the use of this kind of information even as they imagined its usefulness. Reid went on to ask if this "kind of 'profiling' [is] too limiting of faculty and student potential?" Do we tell instructors which of their students are at risk? Do we instead tell them the number of at-risk students in their classes (and suggest ways to support them)? Do we manipulate enrollments to get an ideal ratio of at-risk to "prepared, invested learners" and thus bar some students to open seats in our classes?

The ethical questions we need to answer proliferate when we choose to view students as sets of data points. Of course, whether or not we choose this view, students—and we instructors—already are being treated as such. The traces students and instructors leave in course management systems and other institutional databases (e.g., card swipes at tutoring centers and other campus sites) are sources for campus information about how a student is progressing



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and an instructor is performing. As Marc Parry recently observed in his investigation of several "data-driven" initiatives to improve retention and graduation rates at postsecondary institutions across the country: "Now colleges, eager to get students out the door more efficiently, are awakening to the opportunities of so-called Big Data" (A4). It is hard to say whether the more serious threat is the conflation of "learning" with overly narrow outcomes as measured by keystrokes (and on a massive scale) or equating teaching effectiveness with specific data points in a course management system, but both are embedded in the promises BlackBoard Analytics makes on its website: "Get answers to your most important questions" about students (e.g., "What student activities are correlated to desired outcomes like grades and course completion?" and "How can I easily find students who are at-risk?") and instructors (e.g., "Who are the most innovative instructors?") ("Products"). These questions read like Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit: what you see when you read them depends on your perspective at the moment, but really both ducks and rabbits are there.

As the questions enticingly posed on the Blackboard Analytics website suggest, the move to digital learning environments and the rise of big data threaten to eclipse more substantive approaches to assessing the quality of writing instruction. Although earlier professional statements advocated for the value of digital pedagogy (and rightly so), recent surveys suggest that the legitimacy of online teaching may be gaining ground in the academy. In *Conflicted: Faculty and Online Education*, I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman report on surveys of faculty and administrator attitudes regarding online education, including the adequacy of institutional support and rewards. While opinions diverged on many points, there was some agreement among faculty and administrators surveyed that—at least in terms of tenure and promotion decisions—technology-intensive teaching was valued by their institutions (23). Beyond this point, however, there was greater disagreement among faculty and administrators, and faculty expressed considerable ambivalence about measures of quality (and fair pay) where online teaching is concerned. Overall, only a quarter of the faculty surveyed reported that their institution has "good tools for assessing online instruction" (22). Thus, although our profession has historically worried about the valuing of teaching in digital environments, we may now need to focus greater attention on improving methods for assessing the quality of teaching in digital environments. CCCC OWI survey respondents expressed this sentiment in calling on the organization to develop a statement of best practices (81 percent) and publicize the need for training (59 percent). Certainly, meaningful formative and summative assessments of teaching are



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

challenging to design and institutionalize for face-to-face as well as online contexts. Although it is true that some habits of mind (reflectiveness, for example) might be legitimate regardless of classroom context, other elements of face-to-face course evaluation lose effectiveness if simply "migrated over" to online contexts. For example, online course evaluations should pose questions to students that are specific to the online learning environment. Course assessments (again, online and face-to-face) need to go beyond student evaluations, but they also need to take forms suitable to the format and on a scale that is implementable and replicable. This is in part why the promises of big data seem so compelling to top-level administrators. Still, the profession will need to have compelling alternatives to the often limited technological solutions regularly sold as "answering our most important questions" about literacy instruction and learning.

## Closing Tags

In this essay, we have argued that developments in technology have sparked changes in literacies and that these changes—combined with recent shifts in the organization of higher education—have important implications for the material conditions of teaching and learning. When Cynthia Selfe warned the field more than fifteen years ago about the risk of perpetuating social and educational inequalities by failing to attend to the critical interconnectedness of technology, literacy, and literacy education, she was evoking the organization's historic role in addressing the material conditions of teaching and learning. If we are to be successful in delivering on the promise of expanding access to meaningful literacy instruction, the field will need to do more than pay attention. Because advances in technology make digital records easier to capture and make possible the automation of some kinds of textual and data analyses, teachers must retain crucial and integrated roles in all aspects of the literacy learning experience: including course planning and design, tool selection, and assessment at the student, course, and program level. Teachers need professional development opportunities that integrate bare-bones instruction on how to use available tools with sound instruction in writing pedagogy focused on new literacies. Equally important, instructors must have time and support to develop and share pedagogical practices that

**Because advances in technology make digital records easier to capture and make possible the automation of some kinds of textual and data analyses, teachers must retain crucial and integrated roles in all aspects of the literacy learning experience.**



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

do not merely mirror face-to-face practices but leverage the affordances of emerging technologies. Finally, institutions' claimed commitments to expanding educational access should be measured, at least in part, by the extent to which they observe reasonable class-size limits and provide teachers with the kinds of support and compensated responsibilities outlined above.

By the time this article appears, the committee that conducted the OWI survey will have released a new CCCC statement on effective practices for online writing instruction; the very first principle addresses the need for universally inclusive and accessible practices. Encouragingly, concerns for access are equally prominent in "A Bill of Rights and Principles for Learning in the Digital Age"—a recent statement addressing online learning that also asserts students have "the right to own one's personal data and intellectual property."[10] It is well worth holding these shared principles in our minds as we critically engage with the sometimes unreflective embrace of technology we see in our institutions. As Chris Anson remarked about forecasts regarding higher education's future, "None of this is necessarily bad, but it's a sea change, and it's clear that what we're seeing right now is its beginning. And we urgently need a voice in the conversation" (Anson, "Duke's English"). It's not enough to simply pay attention: as committed literacy educators we must raise our voices and act.

## Notes

1. Many of our classroom practices can at best be described as transitional: using commenting features in word-processing programs to conduct peer review or even using collaboration software for that purpose maintains long-standing notions of literacy. The same is true of having students keep blogs (particularly when they are kept within the confines of a course site and available only to the writer and the instructor) as a place to hold writing that is not a full assignment (reading responses, free writing, reflections on completed assignments).

2. Gardner Campbell's description begins forty-five minutes into the video.

3. George Williams discusses this point within his compelling argument about the need to create digital projects that meet universal design standards: "To those of us who are more or less comfortable with the existing dominant model of using computers, anything different, like a fast screen reader, seems alien, and the potential shortcoming of our familiar model of some combination of keyboard, mouse, and visual display remain invisible to us. We classify some software and hardware tools as 'assistive technology'—sometimes the term 'adaptive technology' is used instead—because they have been designed specifically to assist those people with 'special needs.' We might consider, however, that there is no 'natural' way to interact



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

with the 1's and 0's that make up the data we are interested in creating, transmitting, receiving and using; there is only the model we have chosen to think of as natural. All technology is assistive in the end" (204).

4. Cf. Douglas Ruskoff on code literacy as power. For a rich range of perspectives on the place of learning to code in our field, see "Program or Be Programmed, the 2012 Computers and Writing townhall (Reider), or Annette Vee's "Ideologies of a New Mass Literacy."

5. With roughly 158 teachers responding to the survey, 151 respondents identified "Submission of assignments in which text is the primary mode" as "frequently used" when asked to indicate the extent to which each item in a list of several virtual tools and online teaching strategies were used in their writing course(s). In contrast, "submission of multimodal assignments" was identified as "frequently used" by only 16 respondents.

6. Cf. Hewett; Warnock; Committee on Best Practices, Annotated Bibliography, http://www.ncte.org/cccc/committees/owi .

7. Attrition was extraordinarily high: according to *Inside Higher Ed*, 45,000 signed up, 23,000 logged in, 11,000 persisted until the first writing assignment, and then 6,000 remained after it.

8. See, for example, *Wall Street Journal*'s contributors John Chubb and Terry Moe's "Higher Education's Online Revolution," which argues, "The substitution of technology (which is cheap) for labor (which is expensive) can vastly increase access to an elite-caliber education."

9. We caution readers to see this data as illustrative of what it *can* mean to "migrate" a writing course online (to borrow Scott Warnock's term) rather than representative of all writing courses. Our sample size was small as we were interested in developing and exploring a methodology for measuring this aspect of a course. Our research also showed considerable differences in writing load, but we will present those results in a different venue where we can explain them more fully.

10. Many have voiced concerns about this statement having been orchestrated or called for by Sebastian Thrun, the founder of MOOC-making Udacity and about aspects of the document, including its initial draft and controlled release, which Stephen Downes called "top-down and manipulative" (Kolowich "Authors").

## Works Cited

Allen, I. Elaine, and Jeff Seaman. *Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, 2011*. Babson Survey Research Group. Nov. 2011. Web. 6 June 2012.

Allen, I. Elaine, and Jeff Seaman, with Doug Lederman and Scott Jaschik. *Conflicted: Faculty and Online Education, 2012*. Joint Project of the Babson Survey Re-



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

search Group and *Inside Higher Ed.* June 2012. Web. 14 July 2012.

Anderson, Daniel, et al. "This Is What We Did in Our Class." *CCC Online* 1.1 (2012): n. pag. Conference on College Composition and Communication. Web. 20 Feb. 2012.

Anson, Chris. "Distant Voices: Teaching and Writing in a Culture of Technology." *College English* 61.3 (1999): 261–80. Rpt. in *Computers in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Michelle Sidler, Richard Morris, and Elizabeth Overman Smith. Boston: Bedford, 2008. 46–63. Print.

———. "Duke's English Composition I MOOC." Message to WPA-L. 21 Mar. 2013. E-mail.

"A Bill of Rights and Principles for Learning in the Digital Age." *Chronicle.com. Chronicle of Higher Education* 23 Jan. 2013. Web. 22 Mar. 2013.

Blakelock, Jane, and Tracey E. Smith. "Distance Learning: From Multiple Snapshots, a Composite Portrait." *Computers and Composition* 23 (2006): 139–61. Print.

Brooks, David. "The Campus Tsunami." *New York Times*. New York Times, 3 May 2012. Web. 21 June 2012.

Campbell, Gardner. "Ecologies of Yearning." Open Education Conference, Vancouver. 16 Oct. 2012. Keynote. *YouTube*. Web. 5 Feb. 2013.

Campbell, Mikey. "Apple's iPad Education Sales Double, Outperform Mac 2-to-1." *AppleInsider.com*. Apple Insider, n. p. 24 July 2012. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.

Catalano, Frank. "When Technologies Collide: Consumer, K–12 and Higher Ed." *MindShift*. Natl. Public Radio and KQED, 17 Apr. 2012. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.

Chubb, John E., and Terry Moe. "Higher Education's Online Revolution." *Wall Street Journal* 30 May 2012. Web. 21 June 2012.

Cohen, Nicole. "Timeline: A History of Touch-Screen Technology." *National Public Radio*. Natl. Public Radio, 26 Dec. 2011. Web. 6 Mar. 2013.

Committee on Best Practices in Online Writing Instruction (OWI). "The State-of-the-Art of OWI." *Conference on College Composition and Communication*. National Council of Teachers of English, 12 Apr. 2011. Web. 14 Apr. 2012.

Conference on College Composition and Communication. "CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments." *Conference on College Composition and Communication*. National Council of Teachers of English, Feb. 2004. Web. 10 May 2013.

"Earn a Verified Certificate." *Coursera.org*. Coursera, n.d. Web. 18 Mar. 2013.

"English Language Learners." Fast Facts. *National Center for Education Statistics*. U.S. Dept. of Education, n.d. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.

Gardner, Lee, and Jeffrey Young. "California's Move toward MOOCs Sends Shock Waves, but Key Questions Remain Unanswered." *Chronicle.com. Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 Mar. 2013. Web. 14 Mar. 2013.

Gere, Anne Ruggles, et al. "Local Assessment: Using Genre Analysis to Validate Directed Self-Placement." *College Composition and Communication* 64.4 (June 2013): 605–34. Print.

Griffin, June, and Deborah Minter. "Placing Practitioner Knowledge Vis-á-vis the Expert Claims: Learning about Online Writing Instruction in American Colleges." CCCC Convention. St. Louis. 23 Mar. 2012. Presentation.



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Harrington, Anna M. "Problematizing the Hybrid Classroom for ESL/EFL Students." *Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language* 14.3 (2010): n. pag. Web. 10 Apr. 2011.

Hea, Amy C. Kimme. "Perpetual Contact: Re-articulating the Anywhere, Anytime Pedagogical Model of Mobile and Wireless Composing." *Going Wireless: A Critical Exploration of Wireless and Mobile Technologies for Composition Teachers and Researchers.* Ed. Amy C. Kimme Hea. Cresskill: Hampton P, 2009. 199–222. Print.

Hewett, Beth L. *The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors.* Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2010. Print.

Jaggars, Shanna Smith, and Thomas Bailey. "Effectiveness of Fully Online Courses for College Students: Response to a Department of Education Meta-Analysis." Community College Research Center, July 2010. Web. 6 Mar. 2013.

Kolowich, Steve. "Authors of 'Bill of Rights' for Online Learners Face Criticism." *Chronicle.com.* Chronicle of Higher Education, 25 Jan. 2013. Web. 26 Jan. 2013.

———. "Learning from One Another." *Inside Higher Ed.com.* Inside Higher Ed, 30 Aug. 2012. Web. 30 Aug. 2012.

Lang, Susan, and Craig Baehr. "Data Mining: A Hybrid Methodology for Complex and Dynamic Research." *College Composition and Communication* 64.1 (2012): 172–94. Print.

Lazar, Jonathon, and Paul Jaegar. "Reducing Barriers to Online Access for People with Disabilities." *Issues in Science and Technology Online* Winter 2011: n. pag. Web. 11 Aug. 2012.

Neff, Joyce Magnotto, and Carl Whithaus. *Writing Across Distances & Disciplines: Research and Pedagogy in Distributed Learning.* New York: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2008. Print.

Parry, Marc. "Degrees, Designed by the Numbers." *Chronicle.com. Chronicle of Higher Education,* 18 July 2012. Web. 3 Aug. 2012.

"Products." *Blackboard Analytics.* Blackboard Inc., 2012. Web. 31 Aug. 2012.

Quinterno, John. "The Great Cost Shift: How Higher Education Cuts Undermine the Future Middle Class." *Dēmos.org.* Demos, 3 Apr. 2012. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.

Reid, E. Shelley. "Critical mass for success." Message to WPA-L. 6 Mar. 2013. E-mail.

Reider, David, et al. "Program or Be Programmed: Do We Need Computational Literacy in Computers and Writing?" Computers and Writing, Raleigh. 19 May 2012. Town Hall. *Vimeo.* Web. 10 Aug. 2012.

Rushkoff, Douglas. *Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age.* Berkeley: Soft Skull P, 2011. Print.

Savill-Smith, Carol, Rekha Chopra, and Octavia Haure. "The Use of Mobile Technologies as a Bridge to Enhance Learning for ESOL Students." *Innovations in English Language Teaching for Migrants and Refugees.* Ed. David Mallows. London: British Council, 2012. 131–39. Print.

Selfe, Cynthia L. "Technology and Literacy: A Story about the Perils of Not Paying Attention." *College Composition and Communication* 50.3 (1999): 411–36. Print.

"Statement on Distance Education." *AAUP.org.* American Association of University Professors, 1999. Web. 26 Oct. 2006.

Vee, Annette. "Ideologies of a New Mass Literacy." CCCC Convention, Las Vegas. 14 Mar. 2013. Lecture. *Vimeo.* Web. 17 Mar. 2013.



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Warnock, Scott. *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why*. Urbana: NCTE, 2009. Print.

Webb Peterson, Patricia. "The Debate about Online Learning: Key Issues for Writing Teachers." *Computers and Composition* 18 (2001): 359–70. Rpt. in *Computers in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Michelle Sidler, Richard Morris, and Elizabeth Overman Smith. Boston: Bedford, 2008. 373–84. Print.

Williams, George. "Disability, Universal Design, and the Digital Humanities." *Debates in the Digital Humanities*. Ed. Matthew Gold. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2012. 202–12. Print.

Xu, Di, and Shanna Smith Jaggars. "Adaptability to Online Learning: Differences across Types of Students and Academic Subject Areas." CCRC Working Paper No. 54. Community College Research Center. Feb. 2013. Web. 12 Mar. 2013.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key." *College Composition and Communication* 56.2 (2004): 297–328. Print.

———. "Using Multiple Technologies to Teach Writing." *Educational Leadership* 62.2 (2004): 38–40. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 10 Aug. 2012.

Zickhur, Kathryn, and Aaron Smith. "Digital Differences." Pew Internet & American Life Project. 13 Apr. 2012. Web. 20 Mar. 2013.

## June Griffin

June Griffin is an associate professor of practice in the Department of English and faculty coordinator of the William H. Thompson Scholars Program, a learning community for students receiving a need- and merit-based scholarship. She has published articles on textual coherence, student revision practices, and electronic portfolios and is currently working on developing composing heuristics for new literacies.

## Deborah Minter

Deborah Minter is associate professor of English and associate dean of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln's College of Arts and Sciences. She co-edited *Composition, Pedagogy and the Scholarship of Teaching* (Boynton/Cook, 2002) with Amy Goodburn. Her work has also appeared in several edited collections and such journals as *Pedagogy*, *College English*, and *Literature and Medicine*.



This content downloaded from 73.199.46.151 on Sun, 10 May 2020 02:15:33 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms