# Critical Examinations of Distance Education Transformation across Disciplines

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# Chapter 3
# 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, 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.

## BACKGROUND

## Origins of Composition Courses

Whereas Goggin (2000) provided a thorough overview of the formation of American writing

courses, a brief overview shows why composition as a field has always been focused on pedagogical concerns. The venerable FYC course started at Harvard University as an experiment "in curtailing the supposed swell of illiteracy" when, as they claimed, secondary schools failed (ibid, p. 19). In effect, FYC began as a remediation, designed to bring deficient students up to par with "college writing."

In the 1870s and 80s, Harvard University attempted to fix the perceived problem of incoming students' deficient writing abilities as instruction began favoring written products instead of oral recitations. Along with the shift toward emphasizing writing in classes, Harvard implemented a written entrance exam in 1872. Within twenty years, a committee at that school published a report bemoaning students' lack of preparedness for the new admission requirement (Goggin, 2000; Brereton, 1994). Harvard established America's first composition course in a context of a critique: incoming students couldn't write, and Harvard set out to fix the problem.

With Harvard leading the charge, classical rhetoric became reconfigured as composition. It did not carry on the tradition of rhetorical education in a broad sense. Rather, rhetoric became truncated and composition "became a site in which to demonstrate proficiency in mechanical correctness" (Goggin, 2000, p. 18). How did this happen? Harvard's Adams Sherman Hill, Assistant Professor of Rhetoric, created the first composition sequence (English A) which was offered at the sophomore level along with four years of rhetoric courses. In 1885, composition was moved to the first year and has remained there ever since.

In the first six years of test administration, fewer than one-third of the students taking Harvard's entrance examination in written composition passed it; therefore, a committee was assembled to study why this happened (Goggin, 2000, p. 20; Adams, Godkin, & Quincy, 1892). By the end of the study, composition had been re-envisioned as a "temporary stopgap" to improve student

literacy until the secondary schools could do a "more adequate job" of preparing students to write (Goggin, 2000, p. 19). Anyone familiar with the challenges of today's secondary-level English courses laughs at the notion of a *temporary* solution to the problem. Even then, Harvard's course was attacked as an inappropriate response to literacy problems; Adams, Godkin, and Quincy (1892) pointed out that the test students were failing was flawed, and that students needed continual practice in writing (and especially in new kinds of writing) to be proficient. These criticisms were largely ignored; composition remained and spread "quickly and securely throughout the country in just one generation" (Goggin, 2000, p. 19). At the same time, rhetoric courses gradually disappeared, so that now we have a system that has morphed from one highlighting rhetoric as central to intellectual excellence to one positioning composition as a one- or two-semester sequence intended to "fix" the problem of student literacy (Goggin, 2000, p. 18-20).

In the 1950s, many of the faculty who had been teaching first-year composition became interested in studying writing, and learning more about how to better teach writing. Prior to this, English departments had assumed no training in or study of writing was necessary—essentially, that writing and the teaching of writing were not intellectual activities. This attitude slowly began to change with the formation of conferences, journals, doctoral programs, and the publication of books and articles on the teaching of writing (Goggin, 2000, p. 29).

The first Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) was held in 1949, though North (1987) argued that several important papers presented at the 1963 CCCC really marked the beginning of the professionalization of composition. Also in 1963, Braddock, et al.'s *Research on Written Composition* was published, marking another important milestone in the professionalization process. In 1965 Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric For The Modern Student* was published,

"motivating a number of writing teachers to reassess the value of teaching rhetorical invention as a means of guiding students' thinking" (Nystrand et al., 1993). Subsequent work in composition studied texts within their rhetorical contexts, considering writing as a decision influenced by audience, purpose, rhetorical constraints, etc. Nystrand, et al. (1993) argued that the 1970s were an especially important decade in the professionalization of composition. This decade saw important research on the composing process (Flower & Hayes, 1977) and the emergence of a "writing research community." At the end of the decade, the first three doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition were established at Carnegie Mellon, Purdue, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. During the 1980s, three refereed journals were founded (*Journal of Advanced Composition*, *Rhetoric Review*, and *Written Communication*).

As composition became professionalized, the field moved toward more explicitly understanding and studying writing and teaching people to write—toward "writing qua writing" (Nystrand, et al., 1993, p. 270). At the same time, an increasing number of underrepresented students were entering the academy. Composition programs and instructors gained an additional challenge: to determine how best to help these new students succeed in the academy. This concern was evident in the work of individuals like Mina Shaughnessy (1977), as well as in the documents of professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (i.e., *Students' Right to their Own Language*, 1974). The "writing across the curriculum" (WAC) movement (Bazerman, 1991; Durfee, et al., 1991; Fulwiler & Young, 1990; Jones & Comprone, 1993; Maimon, 1990; McLeod, 1987 & 1989; Russell, 1991) targets success in the academy through familiarity with its various discourses. WAC focuses attention on the writing students do in their disciplinary courses and how teachers across the university can help students write more effectively (i.e., Anderson, et al. 1990; Audet, et al., 1996; Ault & Michlitsch, 1994;

Cohen & Spencer, 1993; Madigan & Brosamer, 1990), as well as help them use writing to learn (i.e., Ackerman, 1993; Anson & Beach, 1990; Hill, 1994). In short, composition researchers studied how their courses could be used to benefit their students in situations outside the context of the courses themselves. Discussions of what composition courses should do focused on what students need and how best to improve student skills, rather than how to preserve a discipline.

In brief, composition as a discipline formed in response to the specific (and also somewhat arbitrary) choices made by Harvard in the late 19th Century. Composition formed in response to its courses, rather than as a discipline growing out of a pre-existing field. To state it plainly, composition was originally meant to be a course, not a field at all. The discussion of online composition courses, thus far, focuses almost entirely on first-year composition, the only directed instruction in composition that most undergraduates will receive. This point cannot be made too clearly. Rather than discuss the field and teaching of physics, or the field and teaching of anthropology—disciplines for which it is assumed only a curriculum's worth of courses can provide any real understanding— FYC is both foundation and capstone for many students. Deeply important to our argument, and a view of this history, is that first-year composition courses arose without a field, in an effort to fix a perceived problem. Several authors have written more extensive reviews of the formation of this discipline (Brereton, 1994; Connors, 1995; Goggin, 2000), so we will not indulge in a more detailed recounting here.

## Negotiating Purpose in Composition

Since its inception, FYC has been subject to a series of renegotiations as members of the composition field have attempted to define the purpose and best practices for these courses. As composition instructors work to better understand how to teach their material, composition courses become

increasingly focused on production or implementation and less on remediation. Through teaching, instructors formed a new discourse, and found it necessary to renegotiate purpose (or, more aptly, negotiate toward a purpose). These renegotiations took and continue to take the form of a series of disciplinary debates that have incrementally focused FYC. These debates have shaped FYC into a course about making informed, conscious decisions, rather than a course about a specific skill set. Gone, or going extinct, are pedantic quizzes and lectures on grammar and punctuation (Noguchi, 1991); today's FYC classroom is a place for debate, argumentation, persuasion, research, and invention. It is the incubator for young academics and their prose.

Today, efforts to reform first year composition curriculum tend to follow one of two major fronts: teaching students to be writing scholars (as highlighted by Downs and Wardle, 2007) or teaching students to be rhetoricians using today's multimodal composition tools (as highlighted by contributors to Lutkewitte, 2014). The introduction of online learning, and now widespread distance FYC teaching, both opens up possibilities for widespread instruction and lays bare the real dilemma of teaching composition. New modalities raise old questions about the purpose of FYC, the facility of it within digital environments, the contentious issue of teaching tools versus teaching methods. Abruptly, rather than instilling a sense of excitement and opportunity in composition pedagogues, the movement toward the digital re-enlivens dialogues and debates that had not yet reached any conclusions.

And ultimately, the debate over what to teach has come at the expense of attention paid to how to teach, and rightly so—there would be little sense for our field to seek a unified approach to (distance) education in the absence of agreement over content. This scenario differs greatly from the situation in the hard sciences, where it is generally understood what content should be included in, say, a first-semester calculus course. Agreement

on content, whether actual or perceived, allows educators to direct their attention toward the best means of using online technologies to teach that content. After a decades-long process of moving away from skills-based writing courses, computer technologies threaten to move composition courses back to emphasizing skills as the members of the field struggle to keep pace with the changing skill-sets needed for today's computer-based writing.

But what of a curriculum that is based on, as we've said, distributable artifacts—creations roused by reflective critical thinking, and that must be evidence not of knowledge but of scholarship? Can these skills be so easily assessed? Can a skill as universally applicable as writing be presented as content in a standardized and distributed course? More importantly, can the use of a tool as flexible as writing be meaningfully taught through any single course, regardless of the distance among students and instructors?

Important questions like these suggest that the search for a descriptive history of distance education in composition first requires us to determine what composition purports to teach and whether online learning is capable of teaching it. Online education also arose without a field, in an effort to take advantage of a perceived opportunity. Yet neither FYC, nor online education is capable of achieving its respective intended purpose as it has been imagined.

## Technologies of Composition

Writing is a tool. We use it, somewhat as an extension of our abilities with spoken language, to facilitate the distribution or documentation of ideas and information. At a very basic level, we use writing as a tool to do a job, one that we normally could do with speech. Writing is also a technology. It was created by humans as a cutting-edge development, meeting its share of luddites, of whom Socrates became the first poster child. New technologies bring with them new resistance, as people attempt to determine

how their practices and perceptions fit in with the new developments. Because change runs counter to familiarity, new technologies encourage skepticism from a portion of any population, and the rapidity of technological advancement means such changes happen with increasing frequency. As with any modern creation, writing technology advanced and changed over time, becoming more complete, more efficient, more flexible, more accessible, and more configurable to our varying needs. The movement of an instrument against a medium changed the way that writers engaged with thought; and as technologies for capturing the written word evolved, so did the thinking behind what was written.

Haas (1996) argued that writing and technology are so inseparable that writing requires technology to support it while it also serves as an ever-developing technology itself. When related technologies allowed writers to move from letters etched in stone to words drawn on papyrus, the new tools of writing allowed for lowercase letters, which themselves get their name from the technology of the printing press, being the letters stored in the lower drawer, or case, of a typographer's letterpress collection. In a very real way, these letters were a tool used by those who manufactured text, and they altered the way writers considered what could be written, and how. The creation of pencils, erasers, white-out, and typewriter correcting tape allowed for a new conception of revision that need not involve a complete rewrite of content. Suddenly, the page was less permanent, more flexible, and so writing could happen faster and in more instantaneously iterative ways.

Technologies of learning grew up alongside writing technologies, and as we moved from pen and paper, chalk and chalkboard, and toward more distant education, the nature of instruction altered. Within education, scholars have been corresponding in writing for centuries, but the first documented offering of a correspondence course using distributed print as the medium of

exchange was an advertisement in the *Boston Gazette* in 1728, nearly three hundred years after the invention of the printing press. Correspondence courses (via handwritten letters) became more prevalent in the mid-1800s, giving rise to learning that was more autonomous and less immediately collegial than that found on university campuses (Holmberg, 2005, p. 13–16).

Learning changed further in the 1930s and 40s with the advent of radio and television programming that offered public education outside schools, inviting them to learn in regularly-scheduled, but altogether voluntary and free, "classes" that could take place in students' living rooms or offices (Reiser, 2001, p. 55–57). The British Broadcasting Corporation started adult-education radio programming in 1928 but "saw it as a means for individuals to improve their lives by increasing their knowledge," rather than earning degrees (Mood, 1995, p. 2). The United States and Australia saw radio as a promising medium for education due to the expenses of distance in those countries making in-person meetings sometimes difficult. Like the missed opportunities of graphic-design developments in the early 1900s, radio and television provided new ways of reaching students but were often misunderstood or misused as simply a new version of existing techniques.

As learning left behind traditional academic environments and found its way into private spaces, the technologies used by students and educators also moved closer and closer to home.

And then came word processors.

With the advent of desktop computer technology and the Internet, writing and learning changed yet again, becoming something much more facile, storable, transportable, and distributable. As with previous manifestations of writing technology, educators began exploring how these systems could be used to help them teach classes.

Research into online education took hold as instructors began questioning the role of email and other asynchronous communication methods on the nature of student interactions. As email took

hold in professional circles, scholars recognized its potential within composition courses because it allowed written communication among distributed participants asynchronously, something truly new to the classroom paradigm. Conversations about using email and other asynchronous communications systems highlighted the features of computer technology that corresponded to the way we teach our students (Cooper, 1990; Cooper, 1999; Hawisher & Moran, 1993; Hawisher & C. Selfe, 1991; C. Selfe & R. Selfe, 1994): networked computers facilitate conversation and afford a new dynamic of personal identity portrayal (Hawisher & C. Selfe, 2000). Email communications were the first to capture the research interest of scholars who studied computers and writing. Since then, one technology after another has been subjected to scrutiny through descriptive or comparative articles that all too often triumph the latest feature set or conclude that no significant difference exists between its use and more traditional tools or methods (Russell, 1999).

As teachers began to put their syllabi on the web, and experiment with "paperless" classes and other hybrid pedagogies, asynchronicity became a prevalent, acceptable substitute for synchronous learning. Online chat and digital "office hours" were generally too logistically complicated, and so gave way to the discussion forum. Online learning took a lesson from the annals of instructional design, and began an all-too-quick move into platforms that would allow for learners to complete coursework in their own time, without ever immediately interacting with other classmates or the instructor. The benefits to non-traditional students were obvious—those who were previously unable to attend on-campus classes now had the opportunity to pursue higher education, and students employed full-time, or occupied with families and child-rearing could participate any time of day. Unfortunately, the discussion of how best to teach digitally seemed to stall with the advent of asynchronous platforms, leading to questions about the quality of education these

non-traditional (and, increasingly, traditional) students received online.

What we have as a result is a pervasive belief that "online education" consists of an LMS hosting discussion boards, quizzes, and modules. As the LMS (such as Blackboard, Moodle, or D2L) gained popularity, conversations stayed focused on mimicking the traditional classroom experience in a new format. Dozen of studies compared on-ground courses with their online equivalents in an effort to determine which was more effective; the majority concluded that no significant difference existed (Russell 1999), and the literature housed inconclusive comparisons of course effectiveness based on delivery mode. At first no attention was paid to the other capabilities of the web-based learning and instruction, the possibilities that digital networks permitted. Instead, most efforts at this point worked to show how certain, quantifiable components of classroom instruction (such as lecture, discussion, and assessment) or elements of correspondence courses—could more or less be duplicated online (Saunders & Weible, 1999; White, 2000). Yet those components bear little resemblance to the typical content of on-ground courses: synchronous, full-group discussion, small-group collaboration, responsive, spontaneous interaction among participants... What McMillan (2002) called a "mutual discourse" among equal participants. The hollow halls of the LMS leave few creative alternatives open to instructor and student. Learning now is solitary, imitative, latent. In short, education bears little resemblance to itself once the word "online" appears in front of it.

What's most important here is not the failure of the LMS, though, but the failure of the educational techniques that led to it. The LMS and every other online learning design, up to and including most MOOCs, were based on those components of education deemed most relevant to learning at the time. If, instead of lectures and quizzes and lackluster discussion, critical thinking, invention, and play had been the most visibly relevant compo-

nents, an entirely different platform may have been designed—*would* have been designed—to bring learning online. The LMS is the red flag we need to recognize that we've been touting the wrong things when we discuss teaching and learning.

As a field, writing studies has always been extremely pedagogically minded. The field exists because a course needed to be taught, and so composition pedagogy has, appropriately, focused on the composition—the interplay of component parts—of the course itself. The field of composition has resisted online education because the typical structures of online courses does not provide the features required for effective composition instruction, which relies on dialogue, feedback, and situational awareness. While these components are possible in an online course, the mediation of human interactions often becomes too disruptive.

Around the time social media gained popularity, composition researchers started drawing attention to the democratization of the web and the ease of modern publication. Blogs, tweets, and crowd-sourced content warehouses uprooted the traditional roles played by established institutions like the nightly news and the venerable encyclopedia. The "old guard" of mass-media publication gave way to instant publication for anyone with a connection; online technologies allowed authors the ability to directly disseminate information. As technology advanced and videos created on smartphones could be uploaded to YouTube as easily as text could be posted and distributed, it became clear not only that our text-centric definition of composition was inadequate for the modern condition of communications: instant, responsive, and media-rich. The influx of media in the social lives of students and educators brought multimodality to the forefront of discussions about pedagogy and student production (Anderson, et al., 2006; Takayoshi and C. Selfe, 2007). After a while, it was insufficient to refer to the multimodality of assignments. Students' lives occupied a liminal space between online and offline existence, and

this multimodal life began to challenge and inform both our field's identity and our course design.

We started to explore how online social interactions could motivate a course. Shortly thereafter, the massive open online course (MOOC) was born.

The first MOOCs were specifically about connectivist learning, including the proto-MOOC, "Connectivism and Connective Knowledge/2008" (CCK8), designed by Downes and Siemens. In 2012, two Stanford Professors, Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig, designed their "Introduction to Artificial Intelligence" course, which enrolled more than 160,000 students. The field exploded quickly, and by mid-2013, there were millions of students enrolling in MOOCs. At first, most of these massive courses were designed around STEM subjects, as these topics seemed most easily taught both online and in more automated ways to massive audiences. However, because there are so many sections of FYC offered across the country, MOOCs had the writing course in their crosshairs from early in their evolution.

The Holy Grail of massive online learning was the humanities-based course over which written assignments, research, and critical thinking held sway. Online learning seemed to have solved the problems inherent in teaching these courses digitally (though in truth it had done no such thing), and so it seemed natural to try to make humanities-based courses work in MOOCs. The MOOC, as a form, offers the potential for a consideration of collaboration at a massive scale, and an exploration of issues germane to the study of writing and composition, such cross-cultural literacy, translation, and second language studies. By the end of 2013, there were over a dozen MOOCs from almost every major MOOC provider covering beginning composition, rhetoric, digital writing, and publishing (Porter, 2014, p. 26).

However, the MOOC format overall presents little in the way of innovative online pedagogies, attempting rather to scale up the most basic (and often most banal) approaches to teaching writing online. The MOOC became a site for mining big

data, and the focus of research into these courses quickly reverted to the original discussion of how online and in-person education differs. Rather than embracing students' multimodal lives, most MOOCs revert to the most simplistic of course designs: content, quiz, and score—the approach that composition studies had worked hard to avoid.

After calls for contextualized assessment (Manion & R. Selfe, 2012; Ball, 2012) with explicit expectations (Katz & Odell, 2012), discussions in the field drew attention to the disparity between the kinds of writing we teach, the kinds of writing we assess, and the kinds of writing we do. In fact, even a drive-by shooting by digital writing demonstrates that the standardized forms of writing—the five-paragraph essay, the expository and narrative forms, the generic research paper—not only differ from real-world writing by form, they also differ by process, requiring students to learn to write in artificial ways. Rather than writing for an audience, students working within the constraints of traditional forms learn to write for an imagined ultimate authority: an instructor who simultaneously knows everything about the subject matter and wishes to hear what students know, challenging them to prove themselves worthy. Customary classroom writing prepare students to write *in the classroom*, a goal at odds with the purposes of FYC and unhelpful in other contexts. Students who write to a form specifically for an instructor develop writing skills that cannot relate to or transfer to other situations.

The idea of transfer connects to our idea that composition must be distributable: writing must find context beyond the context in which it's written. Current research into transfer shows the difficulty of creating relevant writing courses (Nowacek, 2011; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Roozen, 2010; Rounsaville, 2012; Wardle, 2007): even when we explicitly teach writing-related concepts designed to provide students with a flexible understanding of the writing process, we find students struggle to apply this understanding to non-academic (or perhaps even non-classroom)

writing. The role of transfer in writing education brings to a point the challenges of online writing instruction: it relies on skills and strategies that apply in the LMS and nowhere else, despite having easy access to a rich environment of examples and perspectives from the open Internet.

## The Writer and Her Tools

Throughout the history outlined above, the nature of writing remained rather constant. Only the way writing was taught that has seen significant reform. For the better part of a century following Harvard's first English A course, the process of writing saw little change, except for the increased prevalence of the typewriter following the start of World War II. With the move to processed, electronically edited text came a fundamental change to the drafting process. Whereas handwritten revision involves striking through discarded text and typewritten revisions generally involve manual comments and re-typing, word-processed documents go through multiple revisions before being printed or published in any way. Indeed, web-based text can be altered and re-published at any time, and database-driven text can be compiled on an as-needed basis—in both cases, allowing up-to-the-moment content and changes between reads (or page refreshes, as the case may be).

Until recently, writing studies did not emphasize the technology being used; the standard pen and paper were so ubiquitous, so unassuming, and so natural that they warranted no discussion. The advent of word processing irrevocably changed the situation, completing the activity system by drawing direct attention to the role of computers in composition.

*When using a pen or a typewriter, writers usually think out the entire sentence before committing it to paper, [Leslie C. Perelman] notes. "Otherwise, you end up crossing out a lot. It gets very messy. But on a computer, no one does that. People will start a sentence and then go back and move things*

*around, because our computer screen is elastic. Therefore, the composing process has become very elastic. (Leibowitz, 1999)*

Indeed, the role of computers in composition is sufficiently pronounced as to justify multiple journals devoted to the relationship, a critical sourcebook of seminal texts, and an established committee at CCCC aimed at best working with those relationships. Approaching the subject with an interest on the writer perhaps more than the writing process, Haas (1996) explored the relationships that exist between the writer and the writer's tools, mapping "the materiality of literacy." Haas employed Richard Lanham's (1995) distinctions between looking "at" versus "through" technology, and both authors encouraged greater awareness of our surroundings and our actions by looking at our technology more carefully. By taking a more deliberate stance and critically examining the technologies we employ while writing, we are better able to identify the effects of our technologies on our procedures and thinking. Selfe, in her 1998 CCCC address, connected the dangers of looking through technology with current challenges in education:

*When we take technology for granted, when it becomes invisible to us, when we forget technology's material bases — regardless of whether or not we use technology — we participate unwittingly in a system that distributes educational resources horribly inequitably. (1999a, p. 12)*

Haas also wrote that "viewing technology as transparent encourages the belief that writers can use computer technology without being shaped by it, and therefore discourages any examination of how technology shapes discourse and how it, in turn, is shaped by discourse" (1996, p. 22). Writing and its technology are inseparable, and that to teach writing without addressing its technology is to teach but half a subject. Writing has evolved in lock-step with technology, and in

order to understand that relationship, we need to explicitly evaluate our use of technology as a tool and not limit our students to a blind use of technology, believing it to be transparent. "Whatever is supposed to precede and inform writing, whatever is supposed to escape play or be primary or be present in its own right always turns out to operate just like writing. Writing, in other words, created the West, not the other way around" (Neel, 1988, p. 118). Our technologies are anything but transparent; they have been shaped by our writing practices and expectations throughout history.

The lock-step connection between advancing tools used for composition and the changing practices or rhetorical considerations for composition courses means that writing instruction has been in constant flux as the pace of change in modern computer technology continues to accelerate. To treat computers as a tool added on to composition instruction is to make an error of omission: computers and writing are inseparable. Yet, computers cannot teach writing any more than writing can be learned by rote. As a result, writing studies has paid little attention to the matter of online education. Instead, the field has attended to better understanding the ways in which technology has influenced the subject matter.

Because discussions of course content remain unresolved, and because assessment expectations vary from site to site, common practice in program design involves creating what Manion and Selfe (2012) called a "local, situated approach to articulating disciplinary learning outcomes that emphasize the relationship between knowing, doing, and composing" (pp. 28–29). Overall, if our goal is to teach students to participate in the academic discourse surrounding our field, we must establish and understand the connection between being a member of the field and using computers in the field. Then we must give our students opportunities to experiment with computer use appropriate for an apprentice in the field. Manion and R. Selfe (2012), strongly in favor of participatory expectations, said that "if we want students to

be invested in our disciplinary values, we need to prepare them to put these values to practice and to become practitioners in their own right" (p. 43). Indeed, this ability to participate in the social act of writing provides legitimacy for the field:

*[First-year composition], and perhaps the writing profession at large, owes its institutional status to the sophistic triumph of technē over the less manageable notion of rhetoric as naturally embedded in understanding and experience. (Petraglia, 1995b, 98)*

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It comes to this: writing studies has not had a clear research agenda for studying distance education within the field. This is not due to a lack of keen interest; instead, it's because online education supports a limited subset of traditional teaching methods—a subset that does not approximate the complicated and multivalent nature of classroom teaching—while composition has long since eschewed the lecture-discuss-test instructional model and continues work toward a richer, more transferrable pedagogy. Distance education is at odds with composition instruction because the latter expressly requires intimacy between the learner, the writing situation, and the content. Intimacy has never been on the agenda of distance education, and so before composition courses can effectively transition to online course delivery, the affordances of online education must change.

*There's a divide between those who know how to use technology to reimagine learning and those who simply use technology to digitize traditional learning. We take a chalkboard and we digitize it. We take a text book we digitize it. We take a boring linear lecture and we make digital boring linear lectures. And my fear is that if we continue on this trajectory, very soon we will have successfully replicated in digital format exactly all the traditional teaching methods that we use today. What we should be doing using technology to do entirely new things that simply were not possible before. (Culatta, 2013)*

For compositionists, future research must include finding ways to harness the source material and sample writing that is essentially limitless online. We must work to better understand the changes in the writing process brought about by continuing developments in authorship in online environments. And we must find ways to give students opportunities to create and engage with online writing communities, helping students harness the unique affordances of digital composition as a means to understanding and improving their writing.

Writing must also be seen as a permeable, fluid, public act. Composition today is no longer composition for print (and should never have been composition for classroom reading only); composition today is an act of connecting words with use to responsive audiences—audiences who will carry the compositions of today's students into new and unforeseen markets and fora. By the reckoning of writers like Goldsmith (2011) and Morris (2012), what is written today not only intrinsically has life, but also often has a life of its own. Morris (2012) wrote, "As our writing practices become more and more digital, we discover that immense collaboration is possible [...] But it's communities we don't subscribe to, those we're unaware of, who will be the ones to come upon the wreckage of our work, turning our treatises into trifles, our essays into dross." The student of writing is not practicing rhetoric, she is applying rhetoric, making rhetoric happen in the world. This is vital writing, not latent, and even in its germination must aim to find context outside of the context in which it's written.

But most importantly, we must change our approach to digital learning and align it with a philosophy inherent in composition itself. As Katz and Odell (2012) reminded us, "Even our best,

most rigorously thought-out understandings are subject to ongoing revision." The digital world is an expansive one, and only as predictable and stable as the latest app. Revision is become not an act of refining what's already created, but a creative act, a generative and iterative one. At the level of writing, this means a willingness to revisit work, to collaborate, to append and curate. At the pedagogical level, it means encouraging students to think of writing as a fluid practice, one that's less focused on a final product and more on the ideas behind that product; it means reconsidering notions of authorship and collaboration, and preparing students to work together immediately and cohesively both in-person and virtually. And at the level of imagining an online education that works, it means remaining open to teaching and technological solutions that may not always look like the classroom, but that look a lot more like the Internet.

The problem with online learning today is that it tries too hard to resist its own nature. To be online is to be connected, networked, and to subject one's personal expression to the mediation of whatever media has been created to house that expression. Writing online, then, diverges in important ways from traditional composition, and must if it's to have any relevance or value. For this, we don't turn to the mainstays of online education. Instead, we need to turn to each other, to the communities at the heart of the digital—even to a kind of collaborative, constructive peer review—a building together instead of building in silos, because without this, there are no satisfying examples of online learning.

## CONCLUSION

*A modest proposal: one outcome for all writers is the ability to use many kinds of technologies for their intended purposes and for other purposes, as needed and as imagined. Or: writers use technology rhetorically. (Yancey 2004, p. 319)*

Our challenge then, as teachers of writing courses, is to find commonalities, connections, or access points for our students so they can become informed, aware, and conscientious writers. We must give our students the ability to navigate and evaluate rhetorical situations they may encounter in the future. To do this, we must ourselves become aware of and exercise within those access points, we must cultivate our own abilities to navigate and evaluate rhetorical situations—both lived and written—so to better understand the landscape our students tread.

Our challenge, as online educators, is to reflect on our disciplines more carefully than we have done, and teach ourselves (and then our students) to utilize the most creative tools available for digital instruction in the best ways possible. This means, as a start, reimagining online learning beyond the LMS, beyond the lecture-discuss-test methodology—as a place of agency, not beholden to technological systems.

Our challenge, as the authors of this article, is to move composition beyond the history narrated here, and toward its future. Our challenge is to move this discussion past the pages of this collection, indeed, beyond the discussion of writing studies and online learning itself, and to leave readers with the knowledge that what we have taken for granted as warranted, trustworthy online instruction is, in fact, only a dim, ineffective practice that barely verges on what is really possible. Just as writing has changed, and writing instruction must change, online, so must every discipline examine its presumptions about how online teaching occurs. This is the bargain we struck at the beginning of this chapter: to excuse this writing from the book itself, and to make it distributable and moveable, the way the best compositions are—and the way the best online instruction is also distributable and moveable.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Blended:** A mix of online and on-ground course delivery formats, often replacing "seat time" in a face-to-face class with asynchronous or self-paced online components.

**Connectivism:** A learning theory based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, asserting that students learn by connecting what they know with new material presented by others.

**First-Year Composition (FYC):** A standard component of American higher education conceived to address perceived shortcomings in college students' writing abilities. Actual pedagogies in FYC have proliferated in recent years to include a wide variety of approaches and content.

**Hybrid:** Often conflated with "blended," a hybrid course reimagines the place for learning as flexible, adapting to the needs of the content or learning community.

**Learning Management System (LMS):** An online software platform providing tools and resources for content delivery.

**Massive Open Online Course (MOOC):** An experimental type of course designed for enrollment in the thousands and openly available on the Internet.

**Multimodal:** Thoughtful incorporation of various media in a composition (as opposed to using only traditional, linear/alphabetic modalities).

**Online Learning:** An educational environment in which students interact or access course content using Internet-based tools.

**Pedagogy:** teaching praxis, the recursive intersection of educational theories and practices; the principles that guide a teacher's decisions when interacting with learners.

**Transfer:** The ability of concepts learned in one situation (or class) to apply to, and actively be used in, another situation (or class).