

The Benefits of Face-to-Face Interaction in the Online Freshman Composition Course

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Abstract

This article recommends that instructors of online freshman composition courses incorporate actual or simulated face-to-face meetings and one-on-one conferences into their curriculums in order to improve the sense of community in the online classroom, mitigate issues with accountability, encourage exploratory discussion, engage diverse learning styles, improve student-instructor interaction, and increase their efficiency as an instructor. With the support of literature, this article claims that the intrinsic learning opportunities and benefits of face-to-face interaction in dealing with freshman composition students outweigh the inherent inconveniences that live or synchronous online features may cause.

Keywords: face-to-face, retention, composition, synchronous communication, community, accountability, exploratory learning, efficiency.

Introduction

While working in the Utah State University Writing Center, I observed a tutoring session for a student that was enrolled in an online English 1010 class. As the session progressed it became clear that the student had little idea of what he was doing; he couldn't even tell the tutor the name of the assignment he had apparently brought into the session. Afterwards, I wondered how a student could be so lost in the middle of the semester and how I would have likely dealt with his confusions much earlier if he had been in one of my face-to-face classes.

This is perhaps an extreme example of what can happen with an online student. However, more disconcerting cases kept cropping up. Throughout the last two semesters, I listened to several of my students describe how unhelpful their online writing center tutoring sessions had been. While the tutoring sessions were obviously meeting one practical need of these students, to save time, their experience with the online tutors hardly seemed to mirror the magic that can happen in a face-to-face session. In addition, I have heard a few of my colleagues who have taught online classes for some time mention the disturbingly high, yet typical, drop-out rates in their online composition courses, which clearly implies that needs are not being met.

As a composition instructor who encourages and requires students to participate in one-on-one conferences, I have found that a 15 to 20-minute meeting not only results in increased learning, better papers, and more thorough revisions, but it also helps me to make personal connections with the student while simultaneously giving me the opportunity to assess their progress in the course. Thinking back on the "lost" student, I wonder if the majority of our online students are getting, desire, and/or need the same kind of face-to-face attention that traditional students enjoy. I also wonder how efficiently online composition instructors are able to handle, whether through asynchronous or synchronous methods, the occasional moments of class-wide confusion and subsequent need for explanation—situations which I can usually resolve within the live classroom en masse and within a relatively short amount of time.

Because a substantial portion of freshmen students, at least at my university and for whatever reason, are relatively "high-maintenance" (or moderately motivated) and because freshman composition courses are generally considered a gateway course critical to student retention efforts (Peterson, 2001), I began to question whether or not the typical, predominantly asynchronous, online freshman composition course is most conducive to the success of the majority of the students who initially enroll in these courses.

To address these concerns, which are likely shared by others in our profession, I write this article to argue that by implementing consistent, simulated (digitally-enabled) or actual face-to-face interaction in the online freshman composition course, instructors will be able to meet the needs of a wider range of their students and also increase their own efficiency.

My recommendations apply specifically to freshman composition instructors and programs that employ social-constructivist pedagogy/andragogy and are open to the use of synchronous communication tools in their online classrooms, whether or not they already employ mixed synchronous and asynchronous or fully asynchronous interaction in their classes. The ultimate hope is that the reader will find aspects of this discussion applicable in their search for ways in which to improve their curriculum design.

I subscribe to the position that many online education university programs and instructors are, quite successfully, providing credible and possibly superior educational opportunities to students locally and around the world (Blakelock & Smith, 2006; Rude, 2005). Online education programs have made tremendous strides in adapting and reconceptualizing the online classroom in a way that many of their students often feel that they haven't missed out on any of the experience an onsite class might afford (Rude, 2005).

However, as is an issue with both on- and off-site classrooms, a significant number of needs are not being met, and curriculums must be continuously evaluated for ways in which they can be altered to better accommodate the varied practical and learning needs of their students and the practical needs and pedagogical goals of the instructor and program. In this article, I will discuss whether or not the typical online classroom environment is conducive for a diversity of freshman learners and present synchronous interaction as a method for meeting more of the predominant demographics' needs. In addition, my concerns, echoed by instructors and students alike, regard the perceived authentic educational value of generally synchronous, and more specifically, face-to-face interaction between students, their peers, and instructors. The question is whether or not some level, minimal or critical, of interpersonal communication and its accompanying intrinsic learning opportunities is forfeited in the online classroom (Kiefer, 2007).

One of the common struggles that online instructors face is how they can or should adapt the pedagogies that they employ in the onsite class to the perceived constraints or freedoms introduced by the available online classroom technologies. However, as stated by Kelli Cargile Cook and Keith Grant-Davie (2005), the use of online teaching technologies should be "driven by our pedagogy, rather than vice versa" (p. 2). As an addendum to this argument, I feel that one of the goals of implementing online technologies should be more than just merely to accommodate pedagogical goals; these tools should actually enhance the instructor's ability to meet the needs of their students and make the instructors experience more efficient instead of increasingly time intensive, stressful, and complicated.

I admit, with others, that there does not seem to be a panacea-like solution for filling all the potential pedagogical gaps and situations evident in both on- and off-site classes. Also, because of logistical and technological constraints shared by instructors, programs, and/or students, the implementation of simulated/actual face-to-face elements in a course can be problematic or inconvenient. Nevertheless, this paper represents an effort to present a few more ideas to the long list of potential solutions to potential problems encountered in the online freshmen composition course. The hope is that instructors invested in the improvement of their curriculums will consider providing students and themselves with more opportunities for face-to-face interaction by requiring weekly synchronous interaction in their online classrooms.

Literature Survey

Kelli Cargile Cook (2005) states that, "as in the traditional onsite classroom, online instructors' underlying learning theories and pedagogical goals may vary, but the better the fit between the instructors' theoretical foundation, pedagogical goals, and available technologies, the more easily attainable pedagogical goals will be" (p. 54). She also provides the following list of key considerations:

1. Distance education courses need not be weak or impoverished replicas of traditional classroom courses; rather, such courses should be rich, stimulating, and nourishing learning spaces in their own rights.
2. At the same time, distance education courses must be as rigorous as their onsite counterparts, incorporating the same course goals and requiring students to use their intellects and demonstrate their knowledge and skills through adequate and appropriate assessment opportunities.
3. Finally, to achieve these goals, distance education courses must be pedagogy-driven, not technology-driven—courses wherein instructors plan and implement pedagogically sound goals and appropriate activities that are supported by technology choices” (p. 65).

Thus, if an instructor’s pedagogical goals are being restricted by the technologies being used in their online classroom, they are encouraged and obligated to modify their curriculums until more of these goals are being met.

The following discussion of literature acknowledges the resounding success of online programs in meeting the learning needs of their students but also highlights potential deficiencies associated with the online learning environment, particularly those features that would strongly affect the freshman composition student.

Increased Use of Online Education

The use of and demand for online courses continues to grow throughout the U.S. (Lancaster, Yen, & Wang, 2003). Cargile Cook and Grant-Davie (2005) state that, among the factors driving this trend, this demand is being driven by

...institutional pressure to launch courses and programs rapidly in order to keep up with, or ahead of, the competition... sales pressure from the developers of the hardware and software, who are anxious to suggest how and why we should use their products... and... pressure from the technology itself, which has developed in dazzling, tempting profusion, at a faster rate than the theory needed to guide our use of it (p. 1).

Another obvious motivation for increased availability of online education comes from a push to meet the time-bound and distance-bound needs of working-professionals and adult learners.

They also assert that universities are successfully using both synchronous and asynchronous methods of instruction in both undergraduate- and graduate-level programs (Cargile Cook & Grant-Davie, 2005). In particular, online graduate education programs are thriving, and the digital environment, in many cases, would seem to be superiorly suited for both the practical and learning needs of the demographics electing to take these courses (Rude, 2005).

Nevertheless, a significant amount of research implies that the typical online classroom might not be the ideal learning environment for the majority of undergraduate students, particularly freshmen.

Online Instruction’s Advantages Over the Traditional Classroom

According to several surveys, the top reasons students appreciate or seek out online courses is to accommodate their schedules/time commitments (Eaton, 2005; Kibby, 2007; Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006). Another two related and top-cited reasons for taking online courses is to avoid commuting and/or because of the unavailability of local educational programs (Eaton, 2005). David Hailey, Keith Grant-Davie, and Christine A. Hult (2001) suggest that, in addition to the benefit of increasing accessibility, students who might perform poorly in or who would otherwise be unable to attend a traditional classroom may be more likely to flourish in the online version of the same course.

According to a survey conducted by Blakelock and Smith (2006), many online composition teachers feel that their courses provide students with increased opportunities to collaborate with and join a community of writers, that the environment facilitates positive results in peer-review groups and allows the development of customized learning plans designed to address individual student strengths and weaknesses, and that it achieves these aims more adequately than the traditional classroom.

In accompaniment to these results, Blair and Hoy (2006) also cite research that suggests elements of the online experience “[allow] more reserved students to be heard” and “[liberate] students from gender, race, and class hierarchies that empower some and alienate others” (p. 41). They also put forward that, assuming the course is set up properly, the online classroom allows students who grow frustrated with collaborative activities and discussions the opportunity to complete course work more quickly than is required and coordinate modified schedules and efforts through direct communication with the instructor, while the other students continue to successfully enjoy the communal elements of the course.

Of the multiple benefits that can come from online learning, many of Blakelock and Smith’s (2006) survey respondents specifically emphasized the following:

- “Growth of enrollment and program
- Responsibility for learning shifting more to the student
- Increased technological literacy among faculty and students
- Inclusion of other media forms in writing
- Increased accessibility to education for remote students
- Better developed relationships with online students, as opposed to [face-to-face] students
- Increased diversity
- Online courses positively influencing [face-to-face] classes
- More emphasis on visual aspects of writing
- Increased expectations of what students will produce” (p. 157).

In addition to the increased incentive for students to develop their computer literacy (Kibby, 2007), the credibility of writing programs can receive the recognition that they need to prove their efficacy in how they help students develop the technological literacy that will enable them to succeed in future college courses and careers and help them become familiar with modes of learning online (Stodel et al., 2006).

Blair and Hoy (2006) also cite research that suggests a combination of online writing courses are well suited for constructivist pedagogies aimed at getting students to write for an authentic audience. A common goal among composition instructors is to get their students to start considering the needs of their audience, and meeting audience needs requires the provision of context, the use of clear and coherent language, and the use of rhetorical principles. It can be argued that the online composition classroom requires students to practice using these elements in their writing more than a traditional class could.

Moreover, knowing how to write towards meeting the needs of and to communicate clearly with a specific audience is arguably one of the most valuable skills that our freshman students could learn. In the live classroom, instructors have the luxury of adding addendums to their words, rephrasing, seeing the reaction of the audience to their communication, and adapting instructions or explanations based on the verbal and non-verbal cues exhibited by the audience. On the other hand, the written word, published and sent, is hard to take back and edit. Thus, the students are faced more fully with consequences of not writing in a rhetorically sound manner.

Another unique advantage of the online classroom is that all written dialogue in regards to class activities and discussions is continuously accessible (Blair & Hoy, 2006). Kastman Breuch (2005) specifically mentions how peer review conducted through synchronous chats enables students to take advantage of rapid, brainstorming interactions and feedback while also having the asynchronous option of reviewing archived chats later on.

In addition, students and instructors both appreciate particular learning advantages of asynchronous discussion forums. According to Stodel et al. (2006), students appreciated that they had more time to reflect on their responses, which enabled them to articulate their thoughts more accurately. This aspect of online learning holds particular implications for meeting the needs or preferences of students who are shy or uncomfortable with giving spontaneous verbal responses to either simple or complex questions.

However, one can also argue that the online format may limit their opportunities for developing interpersonal communication skills.

Carolyn Rude (2005) claims that the synchronous aspects of a MOO (a text-based, online interface) facilitate more lively discussions than the face-to-face classroom. Another advantage she cites is that the synchronous chat allows multiple students to respond to prompts simultaneously, instead of having to take turns like they would in the live classroom. She also argues that the synchronous discussion may facilitate interaction and interpersonal relationships more effectively than face-to-face courses, and that all of these aspects of the online classroom are in line with constructivist pedagogy.

Another advantage to online communication is the increased opportunities to develop critical reading habits, as students' success in the course depends on their understanding of task expectations. Whereas in a traditional classroom students can often become dependent on the instructor to repeatedly remind them of due dates, assignment expectations, and review course readings for them, students are placed in a situation where their accountability and careful reading of course materials is paramount to their success in the class. This format may also better facilitate learning styles more suited to text-based rather than auditory- or visually-based instruction.

For instructors who are interested in quantifying their ability to apply conference and collaboration pedagogy, there are online document management programs available that allow students, their peers, and/or instructors to both synchronously and asynchronously workshop documents (e.g., GoogleDocs, wikis, and virtual-whiteboard applications).

Cargile Cook (2005) states that “[t]hese new software innovations not only [support] students working through the writing process in the computer classroom but also...[provide] students with collaborative opportunities to work with others when their traditional classrooms [is] not in session” (p. 57).

Potential Disadvantages of the Typical Online Classroom

One of the common struggles as teachers move from the traditional to the online classroom is dealing with the applicability or transferability of previously employed pedagogies in regards to the online classroom (Cargile Cook, 2005). Kelli Cargile Cook (2005) warns such instructors that “the practice of teaching is changed when one moves into the online environment; therefore, instructors should not blindly expect that their traditional teaching strategies will directly transfer into successful online teaching scenarios” (p. 54).

Despite the benefits of asynchronous and synchronous elements in the online classroom and the efforts at compensation for face-to-face communication through the use of synchronous communication, the experience cannot fully mimic the traditional classroom experience. According to Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch (2005), “even synchronous technologies are not quite the same as immediate, face-to-face interaction,” stating that “[b]ecause contributions to synchronous chats are slowed by technology, resulting conversations may appear differently than they would in face-to-face environments” (p. 145).

Since the conception of online teaching, it has also become clear that the strictly digital courses work well for some students but not for all. However, the same problem exists in the traditional classroom as well. This might suggest that a hybrid format might be more accommodating than a strictly internet-based classroom (Blair & Hoy, 2006; Kibby, 2007).

Research conducted by Sapp and Simon (2005) suggests that there are multiple, latent issues introduced by the typical online environment:

- The absence of non-verbal cues common in the traditional classroom cause instructors to have a more difficult time determining student engagement and understanding.
- There is less social interaction, and such interaction is attributed to creating a conducive learning atmosphere.
- The increased time commitments associated with teaching online may pressure instructors to skimp on their obligations to their students.
- The absence of auditory and visual interaction may cause first-time online students to become particularly disoriented in the digital environment.

Because interpersonal communication skills are highly valued and transferrable, there is some question as to whether the online classroom is dynamic enough to help students develop this skill, which may be more easily developed in the face-to-face environment. In connection with this idea, Sapp and Simon (2005) assert that “increased interpersonal contact between teachers and students (and among students) is necessary” and that, though online synchronous elements may facilitate some additional opportunities for interaction, they may insufficiently “simulate real-time interaction,” which they imply contributes to a sense of “interpersonal camaraderie,” the students’ level of learning motivation, and their development of interpersonal skills critical for personal and professional development (p. 478).

Many online instructors, particularly less-experienced ones, can often lack the writing skills necessary for creating interpersonal connections and expressing emotions or caring, given the constraints of the medium (Sapp & Simon, 2005). It is also apparent to many instructors that many of their freshmen students are even less likely to carry this skill. Kate Kiefer (2007) adds the following:

“Unless students are sensitive to or willing to examine the different functions of text in an online class, they can be trapped by their constrained understanding of writing and finish the course with less awareness of the contexts of writing than their counterparts in the traditional classroom” (p. 142).

Blair and Hoy (2006) also infer that adult learners are less likely to effectively participate in online peer review because they grow apprehensive due to the lack of visual reactions that allow them to “read” their peers and suggest that it may be more difficult for reviewers to build up trust in this context.

In discussing conflicts between students or instructors that occasionally arise in online classes, Hailey et al. (2001) state that emotional outbursts and misunderstandings are much more easily managed in a face-to-face environment, where there is less possibility to misinterpret intentions because of context and visual and auditory cues. They also imply that as audio- and video-conferencing options become available, such tools may make it much more easy for online instructors to manage these kinds of situations. One of the possible reasons that they offer for these occasional, volatile situations is that certain online students grow frustrated with unfamiliar learning environment and may take that frustration out on their peers and instructor.

Implications

The literature suggests that there are both remarkably positive aspects of the online classroom that facilitate sound freshman composition pedagogy as well as multiple negative aspects that may inhibit the learning experience of a significant number of students. The literature also implies that many of the less-effective characteristics of the typical online environment are related to an apparent lack of face-to-face interaction.

The most valid argument against the incorporation of face-to-face elements in the online course is that it would defeat the purpose of what draws a large number of students to online classrooms in the first place—convenience. Anything synchronous and especially face-to-face requires students to be at a certain place at a certain time, and many of the students electing to take these courses are trying to avoid exactly that. Nevertheless, is the priority of education to be convenient or is it to provide the best possible opportunities for learning? I hope that we subscribe to the latter.

The literature implies that face-to-face interactions may be important and, perhaps, critical to student learning. Thus, I feel that instructors of online freshman composition need to consider specific ways in which they might incorporate more face-to-face elements into their curriculums and supplement their ability to teach effectively in the online classroom.

Increasing the Sense of Community and Accountability Among Students and Teachers

Community and Social Presence

The desire for increased and quality interaction is universal in both traditional and online courses (Webb Boyd, 2008), and social presence seems to be what many online students yearn for the most (Eaton, 2005; Stodel et al., 2006). Research conducted by Aragon (2003) implies that social presence is a

critical component in the creation of a conducive learning atmosphere online. Anderson (2004) adds that the “absence of social presence leads to an inability to express disagreements, share viewpoints, explore differences, and accept support and confirmation from peers and teacher” (p. 274).

According to a few surveys conducted among online students, approximately half, and in some cases more than half, of them report missing face-to-face interaction with other students and professors (Eaton, 2005; Kibby, 2007; Stodel et al., 2006). One can only speculate what a survey of students who withdrew from these online courses might have added to the results.

Among the elements of “community” or face-to-face classrooms that students reported missing or desiring were the following:

- Being energized by classroom discussion and interaction
- Humorous and engaging tangents
- Improvisation and spontaneity
- Robust dialogue
- Perceiving others and being perceived
- Getting to know classmates and developing real-world friendships
- Non-verbal cues used to avoid misinterpretation
- Ability to show or elicit emotion in discussions
- The freedom to speak, rather than always being required to take the time to write down responses or thoughts (Stodel et al., 2006).

I join with Stodel et al. (2006) in the belief that despite all of the methods, tools, and pedagogies being employed in online classroom to promote community, “more can be done to enhance social presence in online learning” (p. 12). One of the most apparent ways to do this is through the use of emerging audio- and video-conferencing technologies, which can enable at least the semblance of physical presence and the use of verbal and non-verbal cues (Stodel et al., 2006). Online instructors might also consider the use of VoIP (voice-over Internet Protocol) applications or telephone conferencing as a means for increasing social presence in the digital classroom (Grady & Davis, 2005; Stodel et al., 2006).

Moreover, a substantial number of freshmen are likely to lack the ability to effectively express themselves to their own satisfaction and, thus, develop a sense of presence and community connection online because of their underdeveloped writing skills. Though it can be argued that the typical online freshman composition course provides students with increased opportunity to practice and develop conversational writing skills, I believe that, particularly in the initial and critical beginning stages of the class, students may feel like they cannot express themselves accurately in writing and, thus, may become frustrated to the point that they decide to, in terms of the class, participate and write less, develop feelings of isolation or disconnect from their class community (Blair & Hoy, 2006; Stodel et al., 2006), or even drop the course. These negative effects of disconnect are also likely to be amplified among the ranks of the less-motivated or “high-maintenance” freshmen in our courses.

A substantial amount of effort and research has been put into designing online curriculums in a way that supplements lack of physical, social presence, including the sharing of personal profile pages and synchronous chats (Rude, 2005). However, I feel that these elements cannot adequately replace or mimic the face-to-face experience. In addition, the value that students and teachers ascribe to this experience should be seriously considered when designing an online curriculum, particularly if the incorporation of actual or simulated face-to-face elements in the course could help to meet the apparent needs of freshmen composition students.

Accountability

The sense of accountability in the online classroom is, understandably, different from that demanded in the live setting, and, as indicated in the literature review, online courses likely demand that students shoulder more responsibility for their education and success than the traditional version. Though instructors want to encourage the development of accountability and responsibility, perhaps the typical

online classroom demands too much, too quickly from the typical, moderately motivated freshmen composition student who is not accustomed to a “faceless” medium.

Research conducted by Sapp and Simon (2005) suggests that online composition courses need to foster more interpersonal accountability, indicating that the absence of human mediation negatively affects levels of procrastination and motivation among students. In addition, the face-to-face experience may carry with it a higher sense of social responsibility and provide more built-in incentives to perform and complete course assignments (Kibby, 2007).

Grady and Davis (2005) report that an online course that incorporates weekly, synchronous opportunities for interaction “helps to structure learning events, fosters continuous progress on reading or tasks, provides accountability to each other and to the instructor, and enables the teacher to get a sense of how students are reacting to their work” (p. 117). Rude (2005) adds that though weekly synchronous classes may be inconvenient for some students, the overall opportunities for learning and personal interaction that it affords are worthwhile and greatly appreciated by class members and instructors alike.

Online freshman composition courses probably work well for many students. However, I wonder if it is mostly the highly motivated, self-driven students that are benefiting from these courses, while the social-encouragement needs of the less-motivated students are less likely to be accommodated. My experience with freshmen composition students confirms that they often have problems showing accountability. The majority of my students require almost constant reassurance and reminders of due dates and assignment expectations. I also feel more obligated to help them when I can see their confused or concern-ridden faces. For example, in the live classroom I can pull a student aside at the end of class, look into his/her eyes, and say, “I haven’t seen your review draft yet... What’s up?” However, in the online classroom it might be easier for me to write off, and be less inclined to notice, a late draft from a student and just think, “Well, it’s too bad they don’t want to show responsibility for their education; it’s less work for me anyway.”

Admittedly, encouraging and maintaining a sense of accountability in the freshmen composition course is a challenge in both online and face-to-face courses. However, the online classroom might demand higher levels of accountability than a significant number of freshmen are prepared to give, unless the course incorporates some form of face-to-face interaction, whether it is simulated or actual.

Accommodating More Stages of Learning and Learning Styles

As was stated in the literature review, online classrooms can be more effective mediums for the practice of certain critical aspects of the writing process (e.g., audience-based writing and asynchronous, reflective writing) and better accommodate students with learning styles and social preferences more suited to faceless and/or asynchronous discussion and response (e.g., shy students who feel uncomfortable participating or sharing their ideas with the class). However, an inherent assumption is then that online environments are going to be less suitable to other stages of learning and alienate learning styles that flourish in the live classroom. Thus, it is important to consider whether or not the online curriculum might be able to mitigate some of this alienation through the incorporation of face-to-face contact and discussions and to take a “best of both worlds” approach.

Implications for Exploratory Communication and Learning

Clark (2001) states that online “[d]iscussion forums have replaced the casual conversations in the classroom” and that “[d]iscussions are no longer rapid and experimental” (p. 120). In addition, Stodel et al. (2006) have found that many learners believe activities that involve exploring and engaging problems might be better suited to the face-to-face environment, and they cite research that implies online forums often fail to facilitate lively communication and mimic the feeling of a conversation.

Because it generally takes more time to write a message or response, as opposed to just sharing ideas and questions out loud, it is understandable that students (and teachers) might be less inclined to participate as much in online discussion forums as they would in the face-to-face setting. The lack of immediacy in communication also holds implications for causing less exploratory discussion, the exposure of the “edited” versus “authentic” self, and, perhaps, less creativity (Stodel et al., 2006).

In addition, Stodel et al. (2006) report that students often feel the need to take more time and carefully articulate their postings due to their permanent nature and that they sometimes feel compelled to provide references and proofread their writing—a clear sign of a non-exploratory mode of writing. In general, this could be considered—and *is*—a positive effect of the online asynchronous or synchronous discussion forum; however, as stated by Ballenger (2008), the exploratory modes of the thinking/learning/writing process (or the phase characterized by the creation of ideas, brainstorming, tangents, and recognizing connections and associations) are as important to critical thinking as evaluative and reflective modes (or phases associated with questioning the clarity and rhetorical value of their communication as well as revising and editing).

Though synchronous chats are often cited as a suitable method for facilitating a forum for exploratory discussion in an online freshman composition class, they are probably not the ideal replacement for the physical experience (Stodel et al., 2006). Therefore, if the use of exploratory, interactive discussion is a strong value held by instructors and composition programs and matches their pedagogies, they should consider finding ways to provide a medium that is ideally suited for the task. I submit that actual or simulated face-to-face meetings are this preferred medium.

Accommodating a Diversity of Learners

It is especially important to understand and consider the learning styles and needs of students when designing a curriculum for freshmen composition courses. Instructors need to realize that an increasing number of students with learning styles that might be better accommodated by the traditional classroom are choosing to sign up for online freshman composition courses. Their motivations for doing so may come from the misconceptions that online classes are easier or less time consuming. Many more students, particularly adult learners, are motivated to take the online plunge because of convenience or the fact that they don't always have to be at a certain place at a certain time in order to succeed in the course (Eaton, 2005; Stodel et al., 2006). And it is probably safe to say that most freshmen composition students are coming into college more accustomed to the live visual, auditory, and social aspects of the traditional classroom than the typically faceless, writing-oriented aspects of the online classroom.

It is also important to note that freshmen sometimes lack the conversational literacy/leadership skills required to engage in online critical thinking discussions, particularly in an online environment (Stodel et al., 2006); thus, the online discussion thread might not be as well suited for critical thinking, energetic, and reflective discussions as the face-to-face discussion. A significant number of freshmen and adult learners are also lacking in technology literacy skills, which can be particularly detrimental to their success in a predominantly digital environment.

Given the apparently diverse audience, needs, and learning styles present in our online classes, instructors should consider designing online courses in a way that eases students into the online environment and helps them to cope with, adapt to, and become confident in using the modes that will enable their success in the course (Stodel et al., 2006). In addition, a survey conducted by Eaton (2005) showed that students would like their instructors to incorporate more delivery modes into the classroom, including audio and video capabilities.

The incorporation of actual or simulated face-to-face interaction into the online freshman composition classroom would likely help instructors to better accommodate learners who would normally have preferred or been more inclined to succeed in the traditional classroom. The face-to-face medium would also give instructors an opportunity to ease those freshmen uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the online environment into their courses.

In addition, combining the already successful aspects of the online classroom with face-to-face discussions should, according to Kibby (2007), help maximize participation because the learning preferences of both students who prefer the live energy of the face-to-face experience and those who prefer the asynchronous aspects of the online experience are being met.

Improving Effectiveness of One-on-One Interactions

According to my own experience and the experience of Kiefer (2007), students desire feedback from the instructor more than anything else. Students also appreciate having informal and formal conversations and opportunities to meet with instructors before, after, and outside of class (Stodel et al., 2006), all situations common to the traditional model of instruction and less likely to take place in the online

classroom.

I have also noticed that a significant amount of critical learning and “ah ha!” moments happen in the face-to-face, one-on-one conferences that I hold periodically with my students, and I have found holding these meetings to be the most effective means for helping my students to understand and apply effective writing and revision techniques. These meetings also provide opportunities to develop trusting relationships, assess students’ understanding of course concepts, offer advice in regards to any external factors that are affecting their success in the course, offer encouragement and reassurance, and engage in brainstorming discussions.

Because constructivist-style teaching usually involves the instructor taking the role of a coach or mentor, composition instructors who hold to this philosophy often find face-to-face interactions particularly valuable and critical to their pedagogy. In addition, efforts to increase interaction between students and instructors online seem to be critical to helping students become engaged in the course and to the retention of students in general and adult learners in particular (Blair & Hoy, 2006; Sapp & Simon, 2005).

Assuming an online instructor incorporates some form of student-teacher correspondence or conferences into their curriculum, the experience is, more than likely, quite different from the face-to-face version. I rely heavily on verbal and non-verbal cues as I adapt conversation and instruction in my conferences with students and can’t imagine how the level of interaction I draw out of students could be orchestrated through text, at least without a heroic effort and substantial time commitment.

Online instructors sometimes resort to using the telephone to engage in needed and meaningful conversations with students (Grady & Davis, 2005), which implies that the need for synchronous, human interaction is there. I would submit that, if the use of video- or audio-conferencing technology is not an option in an online course, for whatever reason, instructors should at least use the telephone as a means for making human connections with and assisting their students. However, I believe that implementing actual or simulated face-to-face conferences into the curriculum would create the ideal learning environment for this particular context.

Increasing Instructor Efficiency

Stodel et al. (2006) question whether or not the level of time commitment currently demanded by the typical online classroom is necessary for the creation of a functional learning environment and wonder if the expectations are being set too high. They also discuss how student expectations in regards to how quickly instructors should respond to e-mails and posts are also higher for online classes, which implies that online instructors are having to read and respond to queries more often than they would have to in the traditional classroom.

Because teaching online composition courses involves meticulous preparation, almost entirely written modes of communication, occasionally less than ideal student-teacher ratios, the need for frequent e-mail Q&A traffic, and the familiarization with new technologies and software, to name a few examples, online instructors often have to put in an inordinate amount of time into making sure their classes’ needs are met (Blair & Hoy, 2006; Blakelock & Smith, 2006; Stodel et al., 2006). Many of these time-consuming aspects of teaching online are unavoidable; however, incorporating actual or simulated face-to-face interaction in the online classroom can serve as a means for alleviating at least some time-related burdens and increase their overall efficiency.

Writing and providing text-based lessons, discussion prompts, and responses to individual student questions takes up a significant portion of online instructors time. In the traditional classroom, these tasks generally take up less time, due to the fact that lectures, discussions, clarification of expectations, and Q&A sessions can mostly be handled, implemented, or conveyed during, before, or after class periods. In order to deal with and keep track of student questions efficiently, some instructors have created discussion forums specifically dedicated to Q&A; however, this only helps if the students choose to read through and participate in the forum.

The inclusion of consistent actual or simulated face-to-face class meetings in the curriculum is a viable option for helping instructors to manage the aforementioned tasks more efficiently. Instructors could also use these sessions, particularly at the beginning of the semester, to assess and address issues relating to students’ lack of familiarity with the technologies used in the course or other issues indicated by a lack

of participation or other verbal and non-verbal cues.

Face-to-face interaction may also alleviate some of the time commitment involved in grading and providing feedback on the students' assignments. Instead of having to write lengthy comments and suggestions, which can take anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour, instructors could instead choose to allocate that time for setting up an appointment to meet with each student and review their paper with them either on campus or over distance through the use of video conferencing software.

Conclusion

Because face-to-face interaction improves the sense of community in the online classroom, better accommodates freshmen students' issues with accountability, encourages exploratory discussion, engages prevalent learning styles, improves the ability of instructors to help their students one-on-one, and increases instructor efficiency, I propose that online freshman composition instructors should require weekly or at least bi-monthly actual or simulated face-to-face sessions and incorporate periodic face-to-face student-teacher conferences into their curriculums.

As stated by Grady and Davis (2005), "A central issue in course design is the challenge of creating a virtual environment that recreates the best qualities of face-to-face interactive teaching and learning" (p. 102). However, as Lynch (2002) states, "We need only to find the courage to embrace change and mold it to enhance the teaching and learning environment" (p. 157).

In the spirit of embracing functional change, increasing the use of face-to-face interaction in the online freshman composition course is one critical element that instructors can implement to improve the already successful and rich learning opportunities students gain from the digital classroom. The inconvenience caused by having students meet in the physical classroom or synchronously via online video conferencing is far outweighed by the opportunities for learning and social interaction, and the literature suggests that a significant number of students will appreciate having this option (Eaton, 2005; Lynch 2002; Stodel et al., 2006).

Of course, the incorporation of consistent and physical face-to-face classroom and conference sessions into the online course would effectively make it more of a hybrid model. Nevertheless, the hybrid format may be what works best for freshman composition students, as research conducted by Kibby (2007) suggests.

However, the simulated face-to-face option may hold more appeal for instructors, online programs, and online students, particularly those restricted by proximity, time constraints, and other external factors. It is important to note that an actual face-to-face meeting would demand class space that may or may not be available. In addition, students who are either bound to unpredictable schedules or reside in time zones far away from the source of instruction may not be able to participate in a course that demands synchronous and/or live interaction.

Another consideration is that many freshman composition instructors often lack much choice when it comes to digital classroom technologies available for use. After conducting a survey of educational institutions nationwide, Blakelock and Smith (2006) found that approximately half of the respondents used either Blackboard or WebCT to manage their online courses, which feature predominantly asynchronous tools and lack synchronous video-conferencing capabilities. In order to compensate for the constraints of the given medium, online instructors may have to supplement their digital classroom programs with video-conferencing software and tools not provided by their educational institution. Fortunately, video- and audio-conferencing equipment are becoming increasingly affordable and a standard household technology, and free software programs that accommodate simultaneous, multi-user video and audio conferencing are already available online. Thus, online composition instructors and programs can require that their online freshmen students be prepared to use these tools in their online courses while taking comfort in knowing that doing so isn't likely to become a financial burden for their students.

In the end, we can also take comfort in knowing that we have fulfilled our responsibility as instructors to continually seek for ways to improve our students' learning experiences while also enriching our own teaching experience. In my opinion, whatever we can do to decrease the number of "lost" students

wandering through the physical or digital halls of our universities is a worthy endeavor, and an increase of face-to-face interaction in our classrooms will help us come closer to accomplishing this goal.

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