Online Writing Instruction Report and Recommendations

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Introduction and Objectives

The goal of this report is to assess the current state of online writing instruction (OWI) in the Clifton campus English Composition Program and offer some recommendations for future progress and OWI enhancement. While this report is not a comprehensive review of the vast amounts of disciplinary and pedagogical research on online writing instruction, we will try to place our program and recent instructional experiences in a larger university and disciplinary context.   This report grew out of the Teaching and Technology Committee, formed by members of the Arts & Sciences English Composition faculty actively teaching online, to explore issues related to online writing instruction and provide technical and pedagogical support to faculty.

General Background on Online Writing Instruction

A 2011 survey by the Babson Research Group and the College Board found that 6.7 million students took at least one online course in 2010 and that 31% of all higher education students will take at least one online course in their college career (Allen). Online education is experiencing tremendous growth across all disciplines, and English Composition has been one of those programs that has embraced this new pedagogical environment.

Online Writing Instruction (OWI) is offered in two main formats: fully online courses and hybrid course models.

> FULLY ONLINE: These are courses in which students interact generally asynchronously with the instructor and their peers primarily through an online course management system or other online communication services.

> HYBRID ONLINE COURSES: These are courses in which students complete some of the coursework in an online environment but also have scheduled meetings throughout the term. The number of synchronous meetings can vary according to course requirements.

As English Composition remains one of the few required courses for all students at most institutions, it is likely that the numbers of online courses in our discipline will continue to increase.

UC Online Writing Instruction

The A&S English Program began offering fully online composition courses in the summer of 2007. Since the initial pilot courses, our English Composition program has offered 99 fully online courses according the following breakdown

Semester Courses
English 1902 (2 cr): 3 courses

Quarter classes:
ENGL 101 Bridge (6 cr): 1 course — English 2989 (2 cr): 12 courses
ENGL 101 (3 cr): 23 courses — ENGL 1001 (3 cr): 12 courses
English 102 (3 cr): 32 courses — ENGL 2089 (3 cr): 1 course
English 289 (3 cr): 15 courses — ENGL 1012 (3 cr): 0 courses

More recently, the A&S English Composition program has offered approximately 23 -25 fully online courses per academic year. These courses have been taught by approximately eight full-time Educator

faculty and select graduate students and adjunct faculty. The Clifton campus has yet to offer hybrid online writing courses.

UC Blue Ash and UC Clermont both have robust online programs, including fully online and, at UCBA, hybrid offerings.

Preparation and Training

We must be careful not to underestimate the transition in thinking and process that is required in preparing to teach and take online writing courses. Faculty and students need to be properly trained in and oriented to the online environment since such preparations are essential for online writing course.

For Faculty

One of the key misconceptions about online teaching is that it is a relatively seamless and therefore easy process to translate a face-to-face course to the online environment. Most online scholars now agree that teaching online should involve a complete rethinking of pedagogy, assessment, material delivery, communication processes, and technology use. Also, as online teaching moves from the niche to the mainstream, more instructors will be expected to teach online. Online teaching is no longer just the hobbyhorse of the department technophile. Additionally, given the probability of increased numbers of online offerings, it will be necessary to include more faculty in the expectation of teaching such courses. Therefore, there is a need for thoughtful training and preparation of online instructors.   The 2011 *State-of-the-Art of OWI Report* by the Conference on College Composition and Communication indicates that most online instructors have fewer than seven years of online teaching experience. Only 48% of the respondents indicated that they had some kind of mandatory training to teach fully online courses while 58% had access to optional training. Additionally, 32% of respondents who taught hybrid courses participated in mandatory instruction and 53% indicated some kind of optional training. Many OWI survey respondents indicated that they received no training, orientation or preparation prior to teaching online courses.

Some universities have provided faculty with substantial support for online instruction. Fasse, Humbert, and Rappold describe the Rochester Institute of Technology's extensive program on online faculty training. Their IT support includes consultation with individual faculty; providing a three-week orientation course for new online faculty; sharing recommendations about successful online practices, demonstrations, and presentations; integrating various services directly in the Course Management System; and having a "student community course shell" that is required of all students (Fasse). This kind of organized training and sustained support is an ideal approach for fostering a strong and robust interest in online instruction—an approach more likely to result in successful courses and satisfied students.

Currently the A&S English Composition program does not require mandatory training of online instructors, although faculty are encouraged to seek out general technical training and pedagogical development on their own. Some resources are currently available for faculty interested in online training and development. The English Department's Teaching and Technology Committee offers one or two workshops a term on various online teaching concerns. Currently Blue Ash College offers a seminar on Distance Learning Design. Now that the university has put more emphasis on online education across all colleges, there are more opportunities for online training. UC's Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning also offers workshops on a variety of technologies and distance learning pedagogies. The Faculty Development Council and University Libraries offer week-long Summer Instructional Technology Institutes for both beginners and advanced users. It is essential that these types of opportunities for online teaching training and development continue to grow. Teaching writing online can pose particular challenges, such as conferencing via non-traditional methods such as Skype and Blackboard Chat, and helping students conduct research when they might not be able to meet the instructor at the library.

Although these offerings are useful on an ad hoc basis, what is lacking in most of these ancillary offerings is training that is uniform and discipline specific. It is advised, therefore, that a mandatory training regimen be put into place to help prepare faculty for teaching online, including training sponsored by the program or department for which the course is offered.

Recommendations:
- Mandatory training required for those assigned to online writing courses (i.e. certified completion of distance learning pedagogy workshops—UC sponsored or elsewhere).

- A discipline-specific pedagogy workshop session organized and funded by the English Composition program and led by an experienced online writing instructor.

- Investment by Arts & Sciences in an instructional web designer to assist in creating a template and various materials for all online instructors.

For Students

A successful online course depends on the expectations and preparedness of the student as well as the instructor. Statistics show that approximately one third of all college students will take at least one online course in their career; it is imperative that students are adequately prepared to succeed in the online environment, as it presents different challenges from a traditional face-to-face course. According to the 2011 *CCCC State-of-Art Of OWI Report*, national student attrition rates for fully online courses were in the 1-10% range, and were slightly higher in hybrid courses offered in 2-year colleges and slightly lower at 4-year schools.

In our own program, there has been an average attrition rate between 20-27% since we began teaching online courses in 2007. While we have not completed a rigorous statistical analysis, anecdotally, students in First-Year composition courses (English 101/1001 and 102/1902) tend to have a higher drop and failure rate than those students enrolled in the Intermediate Composition courses. We should also be aware of the variety of online students we have at UC. For example, some students are enrolled in fully online programs (e.g., Early Childhood Education and Nursing programs). These students are more acculturated to the demands of online learning. Other students take online classes while on co-op. Still others are campus students who take an online course to compensate for a busy work and school schedule, or because face-to-face courses are full. In some cases, online courses may not be a student's first choice or even a preferred one. It is important that the university sufficiently prepare *all* students to learn and succeed in an online classroom. Outside of those fully online degree/certificate programs that have built this training into student orientation, there is a lack of university-wide online orientation or readiness training and assessment for the casual online student. This suggests that the implicit assumption by the university is that students can be as successful at online courses as face-to-face, an assumption that seems to neglect the fundamental differences and challenges of the online course environment.

All of these concerns point to the need at the University of Cincinnati to better orient new students on what to expect from online courses. One side benefit of student success in any online course appears to be that the success rate in future online courses, both in terms of retention and class success, rises dramatically. In a study that investigated online re-enrollment and retention, Hachey et al. note that knowing a student's prior experience with online courses explains the 13.2% variance in retention and 24.8% variance in course success. At the Rochester Institute of Technology, non-traditional students with multiple risk factors (such as work, dependents, part-time status, and so forth) increased their retention rate by almost 25% by taking at least one online course (Fasse). These studies also indicate that if the first online experience is not a positive one, those students will likely avoid online courses in the future; it is all the more imperative, therefore, that students be well-prepared to take their first online courses.

One way to better prepare students is to address popular misconceptions about online writing courses. Many students believe that online classes are easier or less work than a traditional campus class. Students need to be acclimated to the idea that the total time spent on online classes should be similar to their face-to-face counterparts; this would include the equivalent of the 3 hours per week of in-class time in a face-to-face class, as well as time for homework and major writing assignments. In a survey to UC Blue Ash, Clermont, and Clifton English Composition faculty who teach online, faculty were asked about their work expectations for students. Regarding "quantity and time required to complete homework assignments per week," 100 percent of faculty responded that expectations are the same as those for face-to-face classes. Regarding "overall time students should spend working in an online section per

week," faculty answers ranged from 6 hours per week of class work to at least 12 hours per week total. Many faculty members replied that online courses involve a substantial time commitment on a student's part, with one faculty member remarking: "It will take most students at least as much time to read and comprehend the course materials without the benefit of face-to-face instruction as it would in a face-to-face course. More often than not, they require much more time to read and process the course material, and tools designed to facilitate this, like discussion boards, are more time-consuming than in-class discussions" (Survey).

Several sources make clear that faculty need to be literal and thorough in explaining to students the time and curriculum equivalencies expected in an online class. The *CCCC The State-of-the-Art of OWI Report* suggests that it is the faculty member's responsibility to orient students to the nature of an online writing course. Most of those surveyed by the CCCC study "indicated that their students received email prior to the first day of classes to orient them to the course and its online nature. Many fewer respondents indicated their belief that any kind of counselor had interviewed, oriented, or otherwise prepared students for the online setting of the writing course." For students who had received some kind of orientation, most respondents "indicated that such orientation primarily was text-based although some orientation was provided face-to-face (especially in the hybrid setting) and audio/visual means were used only rarely." Yet when asked specifically "what expectations are set with students about taking these online writing courses," 82% of respondents answered "available for frequent, regular, and information contributions to online discussions" and "regular availability via email (to receive class announcements and correspondence from teacher/classmates)," but just 58% responded with "specific number of hours per week to complete reading, writing, response/research assignments." Furthermore, while 94% of respondents address "how to use the interface(s)" and 85% address "how to contact the instructor" in some sort of student orientation to the online class, only 62% address "how to manage your time in an online class" and just 52% address "netiquette." Clearly, faculty need to address and support student expectations more comprehensively; this also, clearly, requires more time to do so.

Recommendations:
- Encourage College and University representatives to create an orientation assessment to Blackboard and the UC Library system for all students. One possibility is to require that students achieve a minimum proficiency level to be given credit for the assessment which would then be required in the event they sign up for an online course.

- Create a Readiness Assessment specific to online writing courses that registered students must complete prior to the start of the term. This could be sent out by the instructor of the online course.

- Create a programmatic orientation video featuring online writing instructors and past online writing students discussing course expectations and workload. This video can be posted to individual course BB pages.

- Make available standard student workload and course expectations for English Composition classes that can be included on course Blackboard pages and syllabi.

- Educate and work closely with academic advisors via emails, workshops, flyer, meetings, and other means so they are fully aware of the particular challenges of an online writing class.

Faculty Workload and Evaluation

As this white paper has already shown, there is much preparation involved in creating a successful online course. Since faculty need to devote the time necessary for online preparation, we also need to consider faculty workload issues that arise with this teaching model. The work does not stop once the course is planned; effective online teaching also requires more time and effort during the instructional term. The American Federation of Teachers noted in 2001 that good distance education "generally requires more teacher preparation time than a traditional class as well as more time devoted to interacting with students" (American). Similarly, Lawrence Tomei noted in 2006 in an article from the *Journal of Technology and*

Teaching Education that his research indicated online courses include increased time presenting instructional content, and that advising and assessment were more time consuming in an online environment. For example, his research found that on average, for delivery of instructional content, the impact on teaching load was 59.18 hours compared to 41.25 hours of traditional instruction. For online counsel and advisement, the impact was 40.43 hours compared to 34.75 hours for traditional students. Overall, Tomei suggested that for the course that he was researching, which included quizzes and other test-taking, assessment of which was actually *less* time-consuming online, nevertheless online instruction took a minimum of 14% more hours than traditional face to face courses.

This increase in instructional time is also noted in the 2011 CCCC *State-of-the-Art of OWI Report*, in which the committee found that survey respondents in fully online and hybrid courses "generally saw the online course as demanding a great deal of time on theirs and students' parts. They also indicated that the online setting required more reading and written communication on their parts, which increased the time required for course interaction. Although they reported that their need to grade, respond to students, and provide writing feedback did not change, the written nature of all of those activities added to their work. Additionally, they cited such activities as commenting on discussion posts, crafting class announcements, and responding to emails and other written questions as increasing their workload." Reports also show that students tend to have expectations of 24/7 access to their instructors and quick response times to emails and other requests. There seems to be a need for online instructors to be "on-call" more than a face-to-face instructor. Since the parameters of class time are more amorphous in an online environment, it is not surprising that the number of hours devoted to instruction has increased as well.

The *UC Blue Ash English Department Handbook* requires faculty to provide "clear expectations of when, where, and how you will be actively engaged in the course (not just grading their submitted work" (9). Specific expectations include: making the class accessible and ready to go from the first day of classes; establishing clear learning goals and outcomes; replying quickly to emails and other queries; correcting problems as soon as possible; engaging students weekly both as a class and individually; establishing patterns to finish grading and offer students meaningful feedback on homework and more significant assignments; and providing supportive and encouraging messages to students (12-13). While these are all tasks that we expect from faculty teaching in a traditional face-to-face environment, the reality of online teaching requires that these efforts be done on more of one-to-one basis between teacher and student, therefore increasing the amount of time overall that these elements will take to complete.

These workload expectations are especially complicated in a program where many of the instructors are already carrying heavy teaching loads. In the A&S English Composition program, most Composition faculty have large teaching loads of writing-intensive courses: an average of twenty-one credit hours per academic year. Online sections of introductory and intermediate composition have been taught by roughly 30% of full-time faculty who teach 50% or more of their per-semester course load as online courses. In addition to other departmental and professional commitments, these faculty are taking on courses that, as noted above, are more labor-intensive than their face-to-face counterparts. Additionally, these more experienced professors are less available to teach equally important face-to-face courses. Given the time needed to adequately prepare for and execute successful online courses, faculty may be in danger of burning out or spreading thin their attention to these demanding classes and the publication and service obligations that are part of their workload and reappointment and promotion criteria.

Recommendations:
Considering the overwhelming evidence documenting the increased workload for online faculty, we must take steps to ensure that faculty have the time and energy to perform at superior levels.

- *Treat as Separate Course Prep*
  Because of the intensive preparation and course design required by online instructors prior to a class and the increased workload during a term, we recommend that online courses be treated as a separate course preparation. Designing and managing an online section of ENGL 1001 is not the same as designing and teaching an on-campus ENGL 1001. While it is the same course content, the delivery of material and pedagogy involved in the online course warrants a separate preparation demarcation.

- *Cap Class at Appropriate Size*
  Another clear way to ensure the quality of teaching while not overburdening faculty is to limit class size to a manageable amount of students. Numerous studies recommend that class sizes be limited (Rovai 2002; Tomei; American Federation of Teachers; Taft, Perkowski, and Martin 2011, and others). One researcher noted that twenty students in a course would be challenging but manageable "if highly literate, capable and motivated," but that a class of twenty becomes a full time job where "students cannot write, understand papers, and cannot think analytically" (Sieber). The 2013 Conference on College Composition and Communication *Position Statement on Effective Principles and Practices for Online Writing Instruction* states that online writing courses "should be capped responsibly at 20 students per course with 15 being a preferable number." In "A Framework for Evaluating Class Size in Online Education," researchers Taft, Perkowski, and Martin suggest where instruction is interactive, which it is where instructor feedback is required and which is recommended for all courses in order to provide increased retention, then the recommendation is a small to medium class of 20-25 students. Additionally, in regard to Bloom's Taxonomy of learning, where a course is one that focuses on application, it should be medium size (16 to 40 students), but where it emphasizes higher levels of learning including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, the class should be small (15 students or less). Finally, in regard to the "community of inquiry model," where teaching presence is crucial, student-teacher interaction is frequent, regular feedback is required, and in-depth assessment is integral, classes of 20 or less are recommended. Their overall recommendation is that where all these elements favor a small class size, then classes should be restricted to 15 students or less (Taft 193). Based on this data, we recommend that online and hybrid classes be capped at 20 students at most, instead of the traditional 23 for face-to-face composition courses. Smaller classes, when coupled with more robust student orientation and preparation, are likely to increase retention rates in online courses and make for more engaging and interactive online courses.

- *Incentivize Instruction and Compensate Equitably*
  As the implementation of online teaching varies widely across institutions, there is no consensus on how to best incentivize and compensate faculty for designing and teaching online courses. One recommendation that does seem consistent is that instructors need to be compensated equally for teaching online courses as they are for face-to-face courses. The 2013 CCCC *Position Statement on Effective Principles and Practices for OWI* clearly states that "Online writing teachers should receive fair and equitable compensation for their work." Moreover, we do not support reduced compensation for online instructors who may be using materials that were designed by other faculties or entities.

  We do, however, support additional compensation (monetary or otherwise) for those instructors who takes on the responsibility for creating sharable materials or serving as mentors or trainers for new online faculty. Catherine Schifter, writing in the *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, studied the compensation practices of 160 institutions and found that many institutions have used additional or higher pay for the development and teaching of online courses, reduced course loads, provision or reimbursement of residential internet access, reduction of other workload duties (service, committee work, etc.) and teaching assistant support to encourage high-quality online teaching (Schifter). Recently, the College of Arts and Sciences has offered a competitive training program for faculty looking to develop online courses. Faculty who are chosen for this workshop are promised generous compensation for their work. Unfortunately, the number of faculty eligible to participate in this program is limited. While this is a step in the right direction, it may be more useful to spread compensation more widely—even if not as generously—so that more faculty will be encouraged to participate in such programs.

- *Align Expectations with Department RPT and Workload Documents*
  Another issue that will have to be addressed as the university encourages more online teaching is how this type of teaching work will factor into the Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure process. Because the numbers of online faculty in any given department tend to be low, there is a fear that there will be insufficient recognition and value of online teaching and course

development and that such work will not be given the appropriate weight in RPT decisions. For example, in the English Department's RPT criteria and workload documents, there is no specific mention of online teaching and its unique demands. These documents assume a face-to-face workload which is not necessarily the most appropriate metric for adequately assessing faculty who have moved into the online environment.

Assessment and Data Collection

An important, yet often overlooked, element of successful online instruction is regular and reliable course and faculty assessment. This assessment should take several forms, including internal peer review of online course materials, student evaluations at various points in the term, and more robust data collection. UC 2019 and the Academic Master Plan make clear the importance of assessment and its connection to the goals of overall student, faculty, and university excellence.

Currently UC does offer some programs to help instructors and administrators effectively assess various aspects of online courses. UC is a member of the Quality Matters program, an inter-institutional peer review and assessment system that focuses on online instructional design (*Quality*). Recently there has been a push to educate more faculty on the Quality Matters rubric and evaluation system as a way of regulating and certifying online courses before they are offered to students. However, there is a cost to participate in this program, so it is unclear if this is really a viable option for all departments and online faculty who may wish to participate. Also, Quality Matters looks only at instructional design not instructional delivery.

Another assessment hurdle is distributing and collecting student evaluations. While many colleges and departments already use an online system of student evaluations such as *My Course Eval* or other do-it-yourself online systems, the university does not have a standardized online system to administer, collect and collate course evaluations.

The issue of course evaluations is a particular problem for the English Composition program. We currently still use hard copy evaluations that students are expected to fill out and are then delivered by hand to the department office. This system clearly will not work for online courses.   Our program's initial solution of having students email evaluations to the department administrative assistant has not proven to be a reliable or successful collection process for course evaluations. Online instructors have reported very low rates of return of student evaluations. This is problematic in various ways: administrators do not see a representative sample of student feedback to identify any potential issues; instructors have minimal feedback in order to make necessary pedagogical or curricular changes; and this lack of student evaluations may have negative repercussions on an instructor's annual review or RPT dossier. In addition to student evaluations, our English Composition program does not currently complete yearly reviews of students who have completed the composition sequence online, as the program has done for traditional face-to-face courses. We are missing the opportunity to assess how our composition sequence works in the online environment and if any changes or accommodations need to be made to the curriculum. Our program is still oriented to traditional face-to-face courses only, with the online courses and the experiences of those students being more of a secondary concern and up to the individual faculty member to adjust accordingly.

Recommendations:

- Institute a programmatic Peer Review program at least as rigorous as face-to-face observations are and as standard as those observations which faculty must currently seek to have completed in preparation for the RPT review.

- Investigate a university-wide online course evaluation system that is reliable and customizable in an effort to increase the rate of student evaluation responses.

- Begin collecting valuable data at mid- and end-terms to gauge students' challenges and successes in online writing courses.

Final Recommendations

Online courses are already proving to be a valuable addition to higher education. Additionally, UC 2019 and the Academic Master Plan make it clear that faculty and student excellence is a priority, and that the means to such excellence includes promoting learning through technology and the support of such learning for both faculty and students. Together with initiatives to improve flexibility of learning and increase student retention, we can see that the move to online instruction requires careful thought, planning, and support, and particular attention to disciplinary needs and course-specific demands. Such approaches are necessary if this instruction is to effectively represent course learning objectives, help to attract and retain students, and provide both students and faculty with the opportunity to excel.

Therefore, given the writing intensive nature of English Composition courses in particular, we strongly encourage that further development of online instruction in the English Department include primary attention to the following concerns which have been noted earlier in this white paper:

- The need for mandatory training of online faculty and continuing support in course development;

- Course enrollment caps and equitable workload decisions regarding distribution of online courses; and

- Orientation and continuing readiness assessment of students entering these courses.

Such primary focuses can be achieved through attention to the various recommendations in this document, together with regular reassessment of needs as online courses move ahead and increase, as they inevitably will. While it is clear that current online courses are robust and usefully meeting many student needs and course objectives, it is only through a unified and thoughtful approach by faculty and administration, with coordinated university resources and support, that we will be able to maximize the potential promised by online course instruction and enlarge the possibilities that such courses hold for students, faculty, and the university alike.

On the Creation of this Report

This report was written by faculty Michele Griegel-McCord, Cynthia Nitz Ris, and Lisa Beckelhimer, members of the Teaching and Technology Committee (TTC) in the A&S Department of English and Comparative Literature, with input from colleagues and TTC members Molly Brayman, Chris Campagna, Allison Hammond, and Jim Knippling, and based in part on survey responses of other faculty teaching online courses in our department and at the Blue Ash and Clermont campuses. Under the direction of former A&S Composition Director Laura Micciche, the TTC had begun examining the experiences of faculty who were teaching online Composition courses, and the writers sought to contextualize these experiences and to offer recommendations that could assist in future course development. Because online teaching continues to evolve, it is important to note that this white paper is a work in progress, and the authors welcome input and ideas for further considerations and in developing additional recommendations. We appreciate the encouragement of English Department Head Jay Twomey and Acting Composition Director Joyce Malek in producing this report.

Source Notes

Sources that can provide additional information are noted below. Special attention should be paid to the comprehensive study conducted over a six year period that is reflected in the report and statement of principles developed by the Committee on Best Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI), as charged by the National Conference on College Composition and Communication (A&S English Department Associate Professor Lisa Meloncon is a committee member). This effort, which included extensive textual research, national on-site research, and original surveys, includes the initial *2011 State-of-Art of OWI Report* and has been recently updated by the comprehensive *Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction*. It is strongly encouraged that these documents be reviewed as a supplement to this white paper, as the findings there mirror many of the recommendations we have made in this document, and go beyond to recommend various guiding principles that can be useful guidelines for students, faculty, and administrators.

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