Title
On-Line Writing Courses: Do They Work?

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■ **This article describes the development of an advanced ESL composition course, a bridge course to Freshman Composition, which is delivered almost totally on-line via the WebCT course management system. The course, Composition for International Students, is offered at an urban community college that enrolls approximately 33,000 students in the Southwest United States. In addition, the efficacy of the on-line course is compared with the face-to-face method of instruction through the seven semesters the course has been offered.**

Background

Institutions of higher education are offering on-line courses, motivated by the desire to offer more flexibility for the students (Carr, 2001). However, many of those courses are sometimes instated without regard to the pitfalls (Zemsky & Massey, 2004). My institution is no different. A community college in a explosively growing, popular tourist destination in the Southwest United States, the institution also has to schedule courses in the many rural areas of the state. To meet the needs of a wide variety of students, many of whom have shifting work schedules and obligations, the college began to offer distance education courses via television, satellite, and the Internet in the 1990s.

The English as a Second Language program at my institution is a discipline in the Department of International Languages and enrolls approximately 4,000 students per semester. Approximately 300 of those students are from Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, and the Philippines and are on international student visas. All of the ESL students are taught primarily on one of two main campuses and a satellite center. First Year Spanish I and II had been offered on-line for two years when it was proposed that an on-line ESL class be developed, and I willingly volunteered to do it. However, not being at all computer-savvy, I admit that at that moment, I was very nervous about learning the technology necessary to teach the course. I was paid a stipend of $1,890 (3 credits of adjunct pay) to create the course.

Training and Development

In Spring 2000, I began the first part of the long process of first learning how to use the WebCT course management system, researching different on-line teaching techniques, and finally developing the course material, assignments, and communicative activities for the ESL writing class (Kearsley, 2000). The college offered monthly beginning and advanced seminars on how to use WebCT and how to write HTML code, so I attended as many of those as could fit my schedule. Although many word-processing programs now convert text files to HTML and there are HTML authoring systems that produce sophisticated Web pages, I learned basic HTML code so that I could make minor changes in the on-line appearance of the course.

I also took several on-line courses from Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), an organization devoted to teaching ESL, so that I could experience taking on-line classes. The minicourses that I took through TESOL, The Basics of Online Instruction and Advanced Workshop for Online Presenters, introduced me to the process of designing my course. (A description of those courses can be found at http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/seccss.asp?CID=244&DID=1716). Having heard numerous horror stories from both my students and other faculty members about their experi-

ences with on-line teaching, I was determined to avoid as many mistakes as possible in designing and teaching the course. The student complaints, such as not understanding how to access the different functions within the course and not receiving timely instructor feedback, echoed what I had already read in such extensive works as "Students' Distress With a Web-based Distance Education Course" (Hara & Kling, 2000).

In addition to the on-line courses, I read a variety of texts such as *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide* (Ko & Rossen, 2001), *The Online Teaching Guide* (White & Weight, 2000), *Creating Learning-Centered Courses for the World Wide Web* (Sanders, 2001), and *Teaching Online* (Draves, 2000). Although many of the sources covered teaching with another course management system, Blackboard, the key principles (how to send email, post messages to a "bulletin board") could be applied to the WebCT system.

Taking on-line courses, I got to feel, firsthand, the frustration of "glitches" caused by the instructor, the Internet connections, and the course management system. Another advantage was networking with other professionals in the field who had developed on-line courses and were willing to share their materials and experiences. As for learning the course management system, I found that the most effective way was to have a one-on-one session with a tutor. Fortunately, my institution has a large contingent of support personnel, many of whom would sit with faculty and patiently guide them through the development process. I found that particularly helpful when I began to install the course material for my class and design the different functions I wanted to be available (for example, the Bulletin Board, the Chat Room, the Calendar), for no matter how many times I saw the process demonstrated in a seminar, I needed to have a technician sit with me for the first few sessions while I actually accessed and operated the different areas of the WebCT program. After two hour-long sessions of WebCT instruction with a tutor, I was ready to construct my composition course.

Designing the Course

Once I became comfortable with the WebCT management system, I was ready to choose a textbook, write course materials, and design on-line activities that would be similar to the course objectives of my face-to-face (f2f) course. I also had to select methods for measuring my students' progress. The textbook I finally chose, *Great Essays* (Folse, Muchmore-Vokoun, & Vestri Solomon, 1999), was particularly adaptable to on-line learning because of its step-by-step approach to writing the different parts of the formal essay, the many model essays it contained, the wealth of exercises for which students could check the answers themselves, ideas for group discussions and activities, and the generous amount of suggested writing topics. It turned out that this textbook was very effective for the on-line course I eventually did teach, and students gave it high ratings in the end-of-semester course evaluations. The second edition (Folse, Muchmore-Vokoun, & Vestri, 2004) does not have answers in the back of the book, but the publisher maintains a Web site from which students can print the 22 pages of answers. As the on-line students were not receiving the direct instruction that they would in a f2f class, the numerous model essays and sequential activities gave them substantial practice in organizing their ideas and writing compositions.

The course materials I designed were study notes and weekly activities that the students would access in conjunction with reading and completing the textbook exercises. For the first 5 weeks, the students would write and send me extended paragraphs, with various parts of the compositions highlighted (topic sentence, major and minor supporting details, and conclusion). In the following 8 weeks, students would submit four essays, one from each of these rhetorical modes: narrative, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, and argument. I set a specific due date and time for each assignment; for example, "Due on or before Monday, February 28, by 5 p.m." The students could also click on a link on the

Calendar function of the course for the course materials, assignments, and due dates. In addition, each week I would send the students a detailed description of the next assignment.

Since this was a composition course, the students would be assessed both on the quality of their written assignments and on the depth of their Bulletin Board comments. After reading their compositions, I could determine their individual problems and refer students to specific Web sites in the Useful Links section of the course. The Useful Links sites had grammar explanations and exercises students could study to work on their specific writing problems.

For correcting essays, I researched several techniques. In my on-line courses and research, I had learned about drawing comment boxes, color-coding comments, and even inserting audio comments throughout the returned assignment. However, I chose to keep it simple because I was not sure what computer equipment my students would be using to access the course. I believed that the more complicated the course became and the longer it took for materials to download to their computers, the more frustrated my ESL students would become. I finally decided that they would simply copy their word-processed essays into an email message to me within WebCT. I would then type short corrections and comments in capital letters within parentheses but address the organization and overall quality of the composition in a personal message to the students, which I would write above the corrected composition pasted into email messages to them.

Premiere

The first on-line course began on September 6, 2001. My institution offered 2-hour training sessions, both on-line or in a classroom, on how to use WebCT, and the students who attended one of the sessions were able to access the class without difficulty. Although I expressed to them the importance of taking a workshop, many of the students failed to attend a training session and experi-enced difficulty in manipulating the course functions. I then helped those students by phone and email, giving specific instructions.

The first assignment was to read and print the syllabus and then email information to me (their address, phone number, native language, etc.), so that I would have their student data and also know that they could work the email function. Then they began to work through the course material, reading the textbook, writing and emailing assignments, and posting messages to the Bulletin Board.

For communicative activities, I had created a structured series of questions that students were required to comment on and debate via the Bulletin Board, and the students received points for participating in the discussions. Before starting the course, I sent the students an in-depth email message about Internet etiquette and cautioned them that written comments on the Bulletin Board could be as hurtful as spoken comments in a f2f course. This reminder was also in my on-line syllabus for the course. Most of the students did participate; many of them wanted an area to express themselves about topics other than the course materials (for example, the September 11 incident happened five days after the class began). Therefore, in addition to the Bulletin Board topics, I created a special section called Creative Writing and Stories. Several students took advantage of the space to convey their personal feelings and react to others' comments. Since WebCT allows the instructor to monitor Bulletin Board participation, I could send a "private" email to students who were not offering substantial participation and remind them that participation was a course requirement that would affect their final grade. As in f2f classes, participation varied from the very chatty students to those who offered the bare minimum in responses.

The course materials and assignment sections were left open for students to peruse as they had time, though instructors do have the option through WebCT to limit the days materials are accessible. At first, several students furiously worked ahead,

thinking they could finish the 16-week class in a few weeks, but most of those students eventually slowed their pace once I returned their compositions with numerous corrections, low grades, and suggestions to write more carefully and to proofread what they submitted. Students received final course grades on the basis of the written assignments, four of which were formal essays, 10 guided Bulletin Board discussion assignments, a midterm, and a final exam.

Challenges

The major problem in on-line teaching is that I sometimes forget how difficult it is for students just starting their on-line class. My advice for instructors designing Internet classes is that they take an on-line course or two to experience firsthand the frustration of trying to follow difficult instructions while not being able to get instant feedback from the instructor. Taking several on-line classes before teaching on-line helped me avoid making similar mistakes in my course design. I felt frustrated when I didn't know how to post messages and email classmates when I first started taking on-line courses using WebCT and Blackboard, so I understood, firsthand, the importance of the instructor's being available to answer questions and "talk" students through their difficulties. For example, since WebCT has both a Private Mail (email to only the instructor) and a Bulletin Board function, in the first days of class, some students would mistakenly "post" private email messages to me on the Bulletin Board and send Bulletin Board responses to me through the Private Mail. That is why it is always important to give clear and even repetitive, step-by-step instructions initially. Many students will be familiar with the on-line framework, but the ones who are not will become extremely frustrated very quickly. That is why I make certain that the students also have the numbers and email addresses of the technical support personnel at the institution. Occasionally, an access problem is due to the students' com-

puter configuration, and the technicians can help those students, something I am not qualified to do.

Another problem is in the tone of email messages. In a classroom, the instructor can soften the impact of a verbal comment by tone of voice and facial expressions, but the Internet options are limited to emoticons of smiling, winking, or frowning faces. In addition, after an instructor types repetitive responses to a similar question, instructor comments may appear to be abrupt to the student (see Young, 2002, for a detailed description of how email messages can be misinterpreted). I try to focus on the good aspects of the composition and avoid curt written remarks, which can be hurtful and discouraging, while at the same time correcting mistakes and offering suggestions for revision. Also, many students send me short, chatty messages along with their assignments. I have found that it is important to respond to their personal messages when I send back corrected work. My on-line students are a lot more willing to accept criticism and improve their writing if they think that I am not just pointing out errors.

For faculty starting out in distance education, the amount of time the on-line instructor must put into the course should never be underestimated. At least the first time out, I was spending three times the amount of time that I devoted to my f2f courses, mostly in answering email messages and in giving individual explanations. Many times I still send the email answer to one student's question to the rest of the class if I think it might benefit the others.

I also have to be prepared for quirks in the Internet connections and course management system. Many of my students send their assignments to me between 11 p.m. and 4 a.m., a time when the college network might be down for maintenance. They become frustrated when their emails cannot be sent at that moment. Occasionally, there is also a "bubble" in the course management system, in which email messages get lost. Fortunately, the college is able to retrieve the

message from WebCT, which keeps a backup of all the course work. WebCT personnel welcome feedback and improve the course management system with every new version they release.

One major logistical nightmare that I have not yet resolved is giving the midterm and final exams. My concern is that Internet-savvy students might plagiarize from materials on the World Wide Web. Therefore, I administer f2f midterms and finals (picture ID necessary) at two of the campus testing centers. Since I give the students a choice of several days to take the test, I individualize the essay test questions, so that no two students in the course will have the same essay-writing prompt. However, my insistence on this security measure means that I have to collect the tests from the various testing centers, copy the exams, correct the tests, copy them again, and send the corrected exams back to the students via the postal service.

Another problem I have not yet solved is ascertaining whether the on-line student is actually the person doing the work. By requiring frequent Bulletin Board assignments, I can compare the writing in the discussion questions to that in the compositions, but at the same time I realize that the prose in the discussion answers may be more informal. However, if there is a blatant discrepancy between the two samples, I discuss the problem with the student. As for plagiarism, I have received essays that have been partially or completely copied from other sources, and I can usually "catch" the offending students by finding the originals through an Internet search with Google or another search engine. In addition, by giving the midterm and final exams in the controlled atmosphere of the testing center (the logistical problem mentioned above), I can be sure that I have two authentic examples of the student's writing, and I weight the grades of the exams heavily in calculating the course grades. Overall, I have found that most students do their own work.

Effectiveness of the On-Line Course

Finally, how effective was the on-line course compared with the f2f method of instruction? Regarding student retention, all 19 students who started the initial course finished it, including those who had lost their jobs and had other job and family changes that were due to the local economic downturns in tourism starting in the fall of 2001. Each semester since then, the completion (retention) rate has ranged from 96% to 100%, compared to a 50% retention rate of all on-line courses offered at the college. Part of the success is due to the student tracking function available to WebCT instructors. If I notice that a student has not logged on for several days, I call or email the student to find out why. In some cases, the student has fallen behind and is considering dropping the class. When I know what the problem is, I am able to help the student find a solution, either by granting an extension and/or by suggesting other support services at the college. Other factors that may be contributing to the high retention rate are that about 75% of the students in the class are international students who are required to earn a certain grade point average to maintain their visa status, and they generally don't have jobs and/or families, so they are able to devote more time to their studies. Approximately 90% of the students are from Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, and the Philippines; this demographic factor may also be influencing the retention rate and is a topic for further investigation.

To measure academic performance, all sections of the ESL courses (f2f and on-line) were given an exit exam, part of which consisted of a formal essay. The instructors graded the tests and submitted final course grades for the students. However, as part of a state-mandated, collegewide outcomes-assessment program, the essays of randomly chosen students (names deleted) were read by three ESL faculty members and holistically graded on a 5-point scale (5 being near perfect, 1 incomprehensible, and 3 the cut-off score for passing).

The on-line ESL writing course had a passing rate of 75% compared to a passing rate of 50% for the four f2f sections for the Fall 2001 semester. The passing rates for students in the Spring 2002 semester were 71% for the on-line course versus 62% in the four sections of f2f classes. In subsequent semesters, the passing rates have been about equal for both platforms. Broad generalizations cannot be made without further statistical study because there are so many confounding variables. For example, the on-line students might have received more individual time and attention from the instructor than did the students in the f2f classes. Further variables include the on-line students' English proficiency levels, the degree of motivation of students in on-line versus f2f classes, and the aforementioned demographic variable.

As the exit test assessment continues, there will be more data to analyze regarding the efficacy of on-line instruction. However, the results of the past seven semesters have been positive. Perhaps being able to email the instructor makes students more comfortable in expressing their opinions, but I receive many more positive responses about the on-line course than I have ever received in the f2f writing classes. Students comment that they appreciate the flexibility of the course and have found the one-on-one interaction with me valuable in helping them understand their individual writing problems. Even though I communicate with the students in my f2f classes before and after class, during office hours, and with email, I find that I have a lot more formal and informal interactions with my on-line students via the WebCT management program. Many on-line students have even commented that they felt less anxious about writing and that they had gained the confidence to continue taking on-line courses. Although I had been skeptical about how effective on-line composition classes would be when I first started teaching one, I have since added another section of the advanced composition course, and those classes have filled within the first few days of registration.

Conclusion

From my point of view and experience in teaching composition classes on-line for the past seven semesters, classes taught in a "virtual" setting can be just as effective as those taught f2f in regards to academic achievement and student retention. An indication that more instructors are gaining confidence in on-line instruction is that another ESL instructor from my department began teaching an intermediate composition course last year, using WebCT, and has reported that both he and the students have been satisfied with the class; in Spring 2005, the beginning on-line writing course is being launched. We may not be "teaching from the beach yet" (Muldoon-Hules, 2004), but the results of the particular classes described in this paper have been encouraging.

Acknowledgments

Author

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