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Paying attention to adult learners online: The pedagogy and politics of community

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Abstract

Our article profiles the evolution of a fully online writing course designed for adult learners in our university's Prior Learning Assessment Program. Based on our own observations and experiences teaching adult learners online, we question if the virtual learning environment presents different challenges and prospects for the adult learner versus the traditional student learner, along with an extension and complication of the more social metaphors of "virtual community." Moreover, because of the changing demographic from traditional to adult students, we argue that this change also fosters a change in the relationship between teachers and students. In chronicling this relationship, we note problems when the labor of adult education becomes invisible to those supervising online instructors. Because of these "invisible" labor issues, we argue that successful online instruction must include a range of interactions between students and instructors that extend the more public concept of community to better acknowledge the importance of personal, private interaction. Thus, we conclude with a call to rethink our online writing pedagogies to be more flexible to adult learner needs and learning styles, simultaneously recognizing the impact of adult online education on faculty workload.

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Writing instructors' depictions of undergraduate student writers, whether they be face-to-face or online, often presume students to be traditional 18–22-year-olds. As a result, although much research exists on online instructional design and computer-mediated communication, there is limited discussion of teaching adult learners in the online writing environment, even as emphasis on teaching online courses for adult learners occurs more within corporate-based training rather than computers and writing scholarship. Yet, Michelle Comstock (2004) has contended that as "more of our classrooms become telepresent, reappearing in the elsewhere of Internet and Web spaces, questions over the immediacy and intimacy necessary to critical thinking, writing, and learning have become more charged, raising doubts about exactly what

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or who can be taught at a distance.” Given the material conditions of student writers in a range of university settings, and our own experiences teaching online writing courses to adult learners, we will argue that more attention to the rationale, curriculum, and audience for online writing instruction is vital in determining how successful our pedagogical practices are in meeting the needs of the diverse, adult students seeking academic degrees through online delivery. As Patricia Webb Peterson and Wilhelmina Savenye (2001) have noted,

When distance education enters the picture, a discipline has to rethink its commitments, its practices, and its assumptions . . . Although distance education debates currently point out the issues already sizzling in composition studies, these debates also bring in new concerns about the effects of changing learning, teaching, and writing practices. (p. 319)

In light of such concerns, our article profiles the evolution of a fully online writing course designed for adult learners in our university’s Prior Learning Assessment Program (Blair & Lewis, 2003) and similar to other programs in the United States and Canada (Pevoto, 2003; Wright, Knight, & Pomerleau, 1999). Despite the successes in the transition from face-to-face to fully online delivery, we have encountered numerous administrative and supervisory dilemmas in addition to the need for communication models that fit the needs of the adult learner population. As part of this transition, we have also noticed differences in needs, motivation, production, and assessment between adult online learners and traditional college student learners in this course as well as in other online, computer-mediated, and on-campus courses. Based on our own observations and experiences teaching adult learners online, we began to question if the virtual learning environment presented different challenges and prospects for the adult learner versus the traditional student learner, along with a need to extend and complicate the more social metaphor of “virtual community.” Because of the changing demographic from traditional to adult students, we shall also argue that this change also fosters a change in the relationship between teachers and students, particularly given studies, such as Barbara Pevoto’s (2003), which suggests that students enrolled in web-based courses may not succeed as well as in other hybrid formats. Although Pevoto’s study is limited because of the small number of subjects actually enrolled in the web-based version of the course being researched, it is nevertheless important to pay attention to the needs of students new to web-based learning. Ironically, as current research in our discipline addresses multimodal, multimedia literacies for enhanced communication and literacy practice, we have found in our work with online adult learners that traditional interpersonal email communication between instructor and student and among peers has been among the most powerful tools in teaching and learning.

In chronicling the need for such interpersonal communication online, however, we will also acknowledge the problems that occur when the labor of adult education becomes invisible to those supervising online instructors. For instance, despite the large amount of discussion board traffic that occurs in an online course, very often the teacher-student interaction that occurs via private email is inaccessible to evaluators who presume that teaching involves a constant virtual presence that is more teacher-centered than student-centered and less viable for adult learners. Because of these “invisible” labor (Samuels, 2004) issues that include virtual curriculum design, classroom management, and the increased student expectations of and need for teacher response and assessment in adult learning environments, we argue that successful online instruction must include a range of interactions between students and instructors that

extends the more public concept of community in order to better acknowledge the importance of more personal, private interaction, strategies as common to the writing curriculum as to successful distance-learning pedagogy. Such extensions better address the needs of adult learners who, because of personal and professional constraints, may benefit less from a group concept of community for all aspects of the course, particularly when levels of motivation or when “response from fellow learners may be ineffective, incomplete, or even erroneous” (Westera, quoted in [Huang, 2002](#)). Simultaneously, we call for more attention to the impact of adult online education on faculty workload, including the role of private email between student and instructor as a virtual equivalent of student-teacher or peer-tutor conferences that enhance the likelihood of online writing courses accommodating adult learners.

1. English 207, Intermediate Writing: prior learning assessment for adult learners

Online education often appeals to a specific type of learner, one presumed to be more self-motivated and self-directed, in part, because of their frequent status as “adult learners.” Already in professional positions while returning to college for both career change and career advancement, adult learners’ access to college is increasingly dependent on online delivery of courses across the curriculum. With this student profile in mind, in fall 2001, Kris Blair partnered with Stan Lewis, Bowling Green State University’s Director of Adult Learner Services, to deliver a fully online version of English 207: Intermediate Writing. This particular course has been a longstanding offering for students enrolled in BGSU’s Prior Learning Assessment Program. As [Kristine Blair and Stan Lewis \(2003\)](#) have indicated, Prior Learning Assessment acknowledges that “college-level learning may be acquired from experiences outside a formal classroom setting” (p. 1) and, not unlike other such programs, relies on portfolio assessment as opposed to the credit by examination model. Because of the emphasis on documenting students’ life and work experience, it is natural that the home for developing student portfolios be within the context of a writing course, an academic space in which students can benefit from having their drafts of biographies, resumes, and proposals for course credit reviewed not only by a writing instructor but also those who possess similar histories. In addition, the goal-based nature of portfolio development ([Wright et al., 1999](#)) may lend itself to both adult learning and distance education in its emphasis on self-motivated, constructivist learning ([Huang, 2002](#)).

The final portfolio itself is divided into three main sections, each containing several assignments. The first section, titled “Life Experiences and Goals,” contains the critical biography, educational and professional goals statement, and resume. For the critical biography assignment, students address how their life experiences, including their familial, social, and professional experiences, shape who they are today. The critical biography is both a narrative and an analysis that theorizes the meaning of those life experiences in relation to individuality and social roles. In the educational and professional goals statement, students describe their academic and professional goals and their path to achieving them. For the resume, students document their skills, abilities, and educational and work experiences.

The second section, titled “Course Goals Research and Course Credit Proposal” contains the research progress report, course credit proposal, and a final virtual PowerPoint presentation. For the research progress report, students discuss their method for gathering information

about the courses for which they are seeking additional college credit. Students include such research options as interviews, course syllabi, catalog descriptions, course observations, and library searches. The course credit proposal is addressed to the instructor of the course for which students seek additional college credits, and in it, they explain how their life and professional experiences have met the goals of the course and how these personal and professional experiences and activities have demonstrated their fulfillment of the overall course requirements. For the PowerPoint presentation, students develop and deliver an overview of their research and their portfolio for the other online English 207 students.

The third section, titled “Appendices and Documentation,” contains documentation that provides details about the students’ skills, abilities, and experiences that warrant academic credit. This documentation includes written artifacts, such as brochures, newsletters, reports, professional and academic texts; support from colleagues and employers, such as letters of reference and performance evaluations; and visual documents, such as photographs, certificates, PowerPoint presentations, graphs, charts, and tables.

As this description of the portfolio suggests, the emphasis is upon self-assessment and reflection, blending a range of personal, academic, and professional genres to reinforce, as Alan Knight et al. have contended, that “success at work (and in life) is about much more than intelligence and knowledge of academic content” (p. 91). From this perspective, the relationship between the workplace and the academy are equalized: The workplace is as able to prepare someone for success in the academy as the academy is able to prepare someone to enter the workforce. Such a philosophy is especially suited to adult learners, typically described as more self-aware and self-reliant, as well as to portfolio assessment in that portfolios “encourage students to make judgments about their own learning and priorities” (Wright et al., 1999, p. 92).

Because of the amount of personal attention required by each student to develop a portfolio that will lead to course credit in another discipline, class size has been kept deliberately small, typically enrolling no more than ten students, roughly half the number in many college writing courses. Smaller class sizes help alleviate the increased workload associated with distance delivery, a concern expressed particularly by new distance instructors who note the additional labor required in personally responding to students online (Hewett & Ehmman, 2004). Although the smaller class sizes of writing courses, whether offered in a face-to-face or online setting, clearly help to foster a “learning community” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999), the particular balance between autobiographical and professional writing also help in community building. Moreover, Blair and Lewis (2003) contend that

The process can serve as an affirming experience for nontraditional students returning to school after an extended absence. Often, these students are anxious about their ability to succeed academically, hesitant to reenter the academic environment, and, at the same time, eager to expand horizons. The portfolio class serves as a transition course where adult students are able to interact extensively with others who may share their concerns, and where they can validate their often extensive knowledge. (p. 1)

Despite the personal and professional benefits for the adult learners who have enrolled in the course since its inception, there have been logistical problems for both instructors and students. For instance, in the face-to-face format the course was consistently offered as a

weekly three-hour evening class. The last time the course was offered face-to-face in the fall of 2000, all seven students (five males and two females) were over 40, worked full-time jobs, and commuted for over one hour to get to class. This composite student profile is consistent with Hsiu-Mei Huang's research (2002), and as Blair and Lewis document, these factors ultimately tipped the scales in favor of a fully online offering. Another compelling factor for moving to online delivery was the success of one student, Greg, who because of work-related travel was unable to attend regularly but did submit assignments electronically for review by both the instructor (Blair) and his peers and who nonetheless produced a portfolio equal in quality to those of his face-to-face colleagues. Although in some sense, this student was not as fully a member of the course "community" in that he was less able to participate in class discussion or peer reviews, the external goal of the course—to receive credit for other courses in his degree area through portfolio assessment—warranted the approach taken.

Both distance learning and writing instruction research favor social, collaborative approaches to student success and move students toward more authentic, audience-based pedagogies that foreground student responsibility and active, constructivist learning (Huang, 2002). Although Lewis, as the director of Adult Learner Services, had concerns consistent with Greg Kearsley's point (1998) that "educators fail to understand that distance education is really about creating a different kind of structure for learning and teaching, not about the use of technology" (p. 49), Blair, as a computers and writing specialist, saw enormous potential to meet adult learner needs and still maintain the integrity of the 207 curriculum. Indeed, there seemed little doubt that an online writing course for adult learners would be a success precisely because of the ability to use digital tools, such as discussion forums, chat rooms, and other forms of public space, including individual homepage functions and group collaboration tools available in course management systems such as WebCT or Blackboard. In addition, the typical aspects of "convenience" inherent to online delivery (Peterson, 2001) would clearly meet the needs of busy, successful working professionals like Greg, the prototype of the "virtual student" Blair worked with in 2000. The resulting online version of Intermediate Writing in the fall of 2001 enrolled seven males and one female, but again, consistent with research in adult and constructivist learning as well as in distance education, the successes and limitations were due less to the technology than to the varying motivation levels and academic priorities of students enrolled in the course. Such factors, as we've discovered, can also contribute to instructor workload concerns in that the increased demand of motivated students to receive assistance from the instructor as opposed to peers, or conversely, the need to reach out to virtually absent students, both impact teacher communication responsibilities.

Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann (2004) note the gap between instructors' desire for reduced class size and administrators' desire for increased class size, and this ideological and material gap threatened the continuation of English 207 Online. Despite student success in terms of course credit awarded in other disciplines and despite the definite need for a smaller class size based on the portfolio requirements and the communication responsibilities previously described, in the spring of 2002, after a second successful stint at teaching Intermediate Writing online, Blair was summoned to an associate dean's office in the College of Arts and Sciences to argue for the continuation of the course. Because Blair was a faculty member in A&S and because the course typically enrolls fewer students due to the heavy writing load and necessary personal attention, the College office decided it was too expensive to employ a tenure-line

faculty member to teach a course with such a consistently small class size. Consequently, to keep the course on the schedule, we arrived at a compromise—a graduate student would be selected to teach the course and would be supervised jointly by Blair and by Lewis. Although from Robert Samuel's (2004) perspective opting for a graduate student represents a privileging of inexpensive labor among administrators, from our perspective this represented an excellent professional development opportunity in that Cheryl Hoy was the first graduate student in the English Department to teach a fully online course. This situation reflected the typical lack of administrative understanding about the workload of a writing course, not to mention the workload of an online writing course, and, thus, further reinforced the invisibility of technological labor from course design to increased student contact hours, something that has been discussed extensively in our own computers and writing scholarship as well as in distance learning pedagogies, particularly with regard to incentive and reward (Lang, Walker, & Dorwick, 2000) for technology infused instruction.

Because Blair developed the course in its current format, Hoy's online English 207 course used the same format with the same visible activities, writing assignments, and discussion board prompts that led to the final portfolio. The online postings of first drafts and revisions of the assignments in Hoy's class were evidence of teaching and learning and could be seen by the adult learners as well as the administrators. In addition, Lewis was involved with Hoy's online English 207 class. He attended the first day of class, a face-to-face orientation, to help answer questions concerning the technical requirements needed for participation in the course and concerning the portfolio process. While Hoy was the online English 207 instructor who read and gave feedback on the written assignments to the adult learners, Lewis also read and gave feedback to Hoy about their written work as he read them in the discussion board postings. After she had assigned course grades, Hoy then submitted the 207 portfolios to Lewis so he could review them and make suggestions to the students concerning their use of the portfolio for course credit in other courses. However, though teaching and learning in both Blair's and Hoy's online English 207 course were taking place in the public space of the Blackboard site, visible to other faculty and administrators, teaching and learning were also hidden and taking place in private spaces of emails, telephone calls, and face-to-face meetings. Similar to the instructional labor of traditional writing courses, this labor is not often subject to "supervision," perhaps because of the possibly false assumption that in a face-to-face class "instruction" is visible and can be documented and evaluated.

2. Communities, neighbors, and commuters: public versus private, or somewhere in between

Not unlike what we see in face-to-face writing instruction, the extent to which a course is successful depends largely on the students themselves. Thus, there were significant differences in motivation among some students particularly two younger students, in Blair's first class who were not only taking their first online course, but who were simply not accustomed to self-directed learning models that require active participation. For these students, who were more comfortable with face-to-face models in which they could be physically present but not necessarily intellectually so, this utopic version of a community simply didn't ring true. As

with our real-time communities, individuals can become “commuters,” those no more able or inclined to participate in online efforts at community building than they are in face-to-face efforts, in large part because of the family or workplace circumstances that made an online course and the prior learning assessment program a “convenient” choice in the first place. In one case, a student, not understanding that the Wednesday evening block when Blair initially kept online office hours was an optional time, frequently logged on each week at the same time to ask “What are we doing tonight in class?”

Even more than the posting of assignments and drafts, the most public space for teaching and learning and the most easily visible aspect of the online English 207 course was the discussion board. As [Jim Clark \(2001\)](#) has noted, “Discussion forums have replaced the casual conversations in the classroom and have a permanent written log. Discussions are no longer rapid and experimental. Students have ample time to read other students’ comments, do research, and formulate a detailed response” (p. 120). Both Blair and Hoy posted prompts to the Blackboard discussion area to foster discussion among the adult learners about the readings and assignments and to “use the posts as a way to better target” the online classroom activities “to the student needs” ([Palmquist, Kiefer, Hartvigsen, & Goodlew, 1998](#) p. 162). The discussion modules fostered a community of writers by offering opportunities for the adult learners to generate ideas, discuss issues related to the class and to their papers, and build a sense of collaboration. In addition to the interactive learning opportunities these types of conversations provided, online course dialogue was archived and the transcripts could be printed out or accessed online at anytime, thus giving the online course an advantage over the traditional course.

In Hoy’s online English 207 course, for instance, there were ten discussion modules. The “Frequently Asked Questions” forum provided students with an opportunity to ask questions about the course and/or the portfolio assessment process. Since face-to-face contact was not a part of an online course, the “Introductions” forum gave students an opportunity to get to know each other better so they could feel comfortable exchanging drafts and receiving constructive feedback. The “Skills Assessment” forum was a place for students to discuss the skills that were relevant to the objectives of the course for which they were seeking additional collegiate credit. In the “Critical Biography,” “Goals Statements,” “Resume,” and “Course Credit Proposal” forums, students brainstormed ideas and exchanged first versions of assignments for peer review. In the “Midterm Research Progress Report,” students discussed plans for researching information about the course for which they were seeking additional credit, and they exchanged first versions of the assignment for peer review. In the “Virtual PowerPoint Presentations” forum, students posted and viewed the presentations that discussed their process of developing a portfolio for course credit. The “Midterm Course Assessment” forum was an anonymous discussion space for students to discuss what was working effectively and what could be done to improve the second half of the course.

These discussion boards did provide students with the opportunity to put their virtual chairs in a virtual circle in an online classroom and discuss their writing. However, in the online peer review, the adult learners were unable to see the reactions to their writing and were wary of critically reading and responding to each other’s writing. [Laurie Olson-Horswill \(2002\)](#) contends, “In an electronic classroom, building trust may seem more challenging, since students’ faces and voices appear hidden miles away behind impersonal screens. As in a traditional classroom,

however, creating a cohesive group takes time and planning” (p. 189). But, because “collaboration doesn’t just happen” and because “many students have no idea how to collaborate on a task in a course,” the instructor should provide “detailed guidelines on the responsibilities of each member of a group, as well as explanations of how groups are to proceed with their task” (Ko & Rossen, 2001, p. 115). In Hoy’s online English 207 course, the first responses to the early pieces of writing posted in the discussion module reflected a pleasant commentary with little suggestion for revision or no response at all, which prompted her to set guidelines for peer review. The following private email sent to Hoy by Susan highlights the need for explanations of the peer review process:

Cheryl, I put my bio out there last week and haven’t received feedback from anyone and am not sure how to proceed from here. So how do I proceed now? Thanks, Susan

Because Susan completed her first draft of the biography over a week before its due date and because this assignment reflected more of a personal narrative rather than an expository piece, such as the adult learners may have read and responded to in previous writing courses, Hoy suspected that they were unsure of how to respond. So, after receiving this email from Susan, Hoy privately emailed all of the students encouraging them to read and respond to Susan’s Critical Biography:

I would like to encourage everyone to respond to each class member’s posts in the discussion board. We are a small class, but we can make a big difference! As the Critical Biographies are posted in the discussion board, open the attachment and read through each one. Reply and write a “first impression” response to the author, and then, offer suggestions for major revision (such as organization, structure, development, or details), and for minor revision (such as style, tone, syntax, or grammar).

Hoy also sent another email to Susan suggesting that she directly ask for responses in the discussion board from her classmates. Susan’s next post was more direct:

Hey folks, I need feedback on my bio, so I can determine which direction to take with it. Thanks, Susan

Susan received feedback from every adult learner in the course within two days of her second post; however, the private space of emails did not allow Lewis to see Hoy’s exchanges with Susan or the other students, as noted in the following email exchange:

Cheryl, I forgot to mention when I sent this the first time. I don’t know if you’ve seen the course site today, but Susan is begging for feedback since the revised bio is due tomorrow. I have no way of knowing if you have given the students private feedback, but they are it seems running behind in giving each other feedback. Stan

Hoy replied to Lewis and also posted the contents of the private email sent to all of the students in an announcement in Blackboard.

Hi Stan, Yes, Susan has emailed me about getting feedback from the class. Since she was the first to post, and it was an early post, I think the others were a bit reluctant to offer specific comments. But, I see that she has asked for more feedback and the other students have responded. And, I will send out personal emails on the bios. Cheryl

For **Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt (1999)**, “Without the purposeful formation of an online learning community in distance learning, we are doing nothing new and different.” But, just as it is important to remember that face-to-face community doesn’t occur by sheer virtue of asking students to put their chairs in a circle, as Hoy’s experience with Susan suggests, an online community doesn’t happen by sheer virtue of creating discussion forums and requiring weekly postings. Thus, there were disappointing moments in both Blair’s and Hoy’s courses for students who clearly had more of an obligation to their peers and had higher expectations for participation. Consistent with distance learning and computer-mediated pedagogies that emphasize early dialogue about communication and participation, it is important to help students communicate their expectations and needs to each other and to create venues other than the end-of-term student evaluation for this form of self-reflection and self-assessment. In addition to the specific guidelines and advice for successful participation that Blair developed for the 207 sequence, another way in which communicating expectations occurred was through a required learning styles inventory, **Neil Fleming’s (2005) VARK (Visual/Aural/Read-Write/Kinesthetic)**, from which students then posted their scores as part of their self-introduction, course expectations, and learning goals.

Although such a practice is common in online courses and is a great “ice-breaker” activity, our experiences teaching online writing courses showed that the most sustainable, effective relationships were not among larger groups but among pairs, both student-to-student and instructor-to-student, more of a coaching and tutoring rather than traditional teacher-centered model. Undoubtedly, such pairs established more of a sense of trust, as students had a range of similar life circumstances that led them to the prior learning assessment program and as a result often made them good readers of the autobiographical and goals-setting documents that comprised portions of the portfolio. In addition to the assistance this coaching model provided the students as writers, there were emotional benefits as well. Often teachers who have not taught online express concern that some aspect of their personality is lost online, and admittedly, there are reports of students feeling isolated in online courses. Yet, in some cases the context of the prior learning assessment program and the adult learner population lead to a shared sense of support and encouragement, even when life circumstances impacted student retention. For instance, in Blair’s first online 207 course, the relationship between one student pair in their late forties, Carol and Gene, evolved from the larger “community” model to a more interpersonal “neighbor” model when Carol’s father became seriously incapacitated from a stroke and died two-thirds of the way through the semester. Although Carol had been a consistent, reliable participant in the course as a whole and a good peer coach to Gene, her “presence” diminished significantly, or so it initially appeared. Because Gene had also recently lost his father, he made efforts to maintain email contact above and beyond the required participation on assignments to help ensure she stayed with the course. Ultimately, Carol completed the course—with some delay in assignment submission throughout the final weeks—and was able, with Gene’s assistance, to finish all documents and submit a portfolio. That this relationship had an impact on Carol was evident from an email she sent Blair nearly three years after the course ended:

Hi Kris, How are things going? Ran across your e-mail address and I thought I’d keep in touch with you. I only got to finish one portfolio because I was sick for two months. I had

an operation. . . Feeling like my old self now. I got a promotion in July. I am now Secretary for Army ROTC. I love it! The people are. . . nice. Gene and I still keep in touch. He is about to graduate. He wants me to go to his graduation. Says when I graduate we're really going to celebrate. School is going very well. Getting A's in my classes. I am now a Sophomore. Wanted to say hi and have a great holiday. Carol

Although both teachers and students have detailed what is gained and what is lost in online learning environments, our own experiences suggest that teacher and student roles can change, and for the better. In face-to-face courses, the instructor might be seen as more distant, harder to access for the personal attention that comes through office hours or the one-to-one conferencing that occurs at the writing center. For [Michelle Comstock \(2004\)](#) these issues of instructional “presence” force teachers to consider distance learning not merely as more immediate, but inevitably more intimate:

As teachers we quickly become attached to our own presence in the classroom, and we know there are a number of ways to lose “it”—to disappear, to no longer be seen or rather to lose control of the scene. With each disappearance, however, there is a re-appearance elsewhere, though different or deferred. For many of us these pedagogical shifts are increasingly mediated by telecommunication technologies—modems and servers that turn our classrooms into telepresences or mediated perceptions of temporally and spatially distant “real environments.”

The extent to which instructors are distanced from students on an interpersonal level impacts their ability to show an ethic of care that, within a writing course, might in fact be as crucial to student retention—especially in light of statistics ([Carr, 2000](#)) that show lower retention in online courses overall—as the curriculum and the emphasis on writing as process. Certainly, much research in computers and writing has addressed both positive and negative aspects of online communication (i.e., [DeWitt, 1997](#); [Mckee, 2003](#); [Regan, 1993](#); [Selfe & Meyer, 1991](#)): allowing more reserved students to be heard, liberating students from gender, race, and class hierarchies that empower some and alienate others, or more controversially, allowing for flaming and other forms of social misconduct that create a hostile, agonistic learning environment. However, less attention in our scholarship has been devoted to instructor role, including the possibility that relationships, such as Carol's and Gene's, could occur between instructor and student, with private email or virtual chat sessions creating a sense of “neighborly” dialogue that is less acknowledged in virtual learning community research.

Although Palloff and Pratt have cautioned against turning an online course into a “correspondence course” between individual students and teachers, these exchanges have an impact on both groups and are consistent with the need for more extensive efforts to support and retain all students, particularly adult learners. This perhaps implies that writing courses, because of the emphasis on students' self-expression, may be more conducive to these necessary interpersonal aspects of online delivery. Indeed, the following exchange between Blair and a student from a later section of the course, Rhonda, documents that blend of the personal and the professional in their discussion of Rhonda's goals statement:

Your goals statement also reminded me of that great little book by Anna Quindlen, *A Short Guide to a Happy Life*, where she talks about how “no one says on their death bed that they wished they had spent more time at the office.” I just pulled it out now to give myself that

reminder, as you have done. . . what that shows is that your writing has a positive impact on your readers. Talk to you soon. Kris

Thanks for your thoughts. . . Funny you should mention Anna Quindlen. I used her 2000 Villanova Commencement Address for my Public Address Performance in my theatre class. It is a wonderful piece and one that I read each week as a reality check. If you are not familiar with it, I would encourage you to take 5 or 10 minutes to look it up. It speaks volumes. . . I will look at expanding my goal statements. Do you see any reason for me to change my critical biography even though it includes goals that I have set for myself? I truly feel that is a part of my critical biography and I would like to keep those 6 goals in there if you feel it is appropriate. Thanks. Rhonda

Admittedly, in reviewing this email exchange, it is evident that such discussion taking place isn't limited to virtual dialogue but of course could happen in a face-to-face conference. What makes the exchange significant is that, as in a f2f conference situation, this is genuine dialogue and more than just marginalia and end "commentary" teachers typically make on student papers. Because this exchange is also not atypical to other 207 students in Blair and Hoy's courses, it is important to complicate the concept of community to allow for a significant amount of private opportunities for students to express concerns about their writing in a nonthreatening space or simply to get the additional attention they need from the instructor. Having taught the course several times, Blair has been struck by those students who, disliking the communal requirements of group discussion of portfolio assignments and group posting of drafts, revisions, and revision plans, often choose to work ahead, finishing assignments early, communicating directly with the instructor (particularly if other members of the class are either less motivated or perhaps too overbearing), and ultimately, being as successful as those students who appreciate and thrive on the more communal course design elements.

Such success is not always the case. Even though the first-year researched writing course was a prerequisite for Hoy's online English 207 course, some of her adult learner students had difficulties with writing for an academic audience, and with organization, development, conciseness, syntax, or grammar. Some of her adult learners completed the assignments and the course quickly with a minimum of peer and instructor responses while others completed the course and each assignment more slowly, carefully and meticulously revising each assignment and requiring more peer and instructor feedback. Likewise, some adult learners had little external influence, such as other academic courses, employment, and family obligations that affected their performance and participation, while others had numerous external influences that affected their performance and participation. These external influences and the diversity in technical abilities of each adult learner in Hoy's online English 207 course generated the need for teaching and learning in private spaces. The impact of external influences can be seen in this private email sent to Hoy from Susan, a highly motivated and dedicated participant in the class:

Hi Cheryl, I am struggling with the course proposal document for several reasons. The most important reason is that I have yet to meet with the instructor to discuss the courses that I am going to propose for additional credit. The reason for this is that LIFE is getting in my way. The secretary that works under me has had some health and personal issues and hasn't been here which means that I am doing two jobs right now. Without going into more detail, even on

the days that she is here she isn't much help. I had a death in the family last week, which of course was not in the schedule of life. Could you let me know what my options are regarding the course proposal, I hope to meet with the instructor in the next few weeks or so. Remember that I am a freshman and it isn't as critical for me get the credit for the additional course (s) this semester as it might be for others. Thanks, Susan

The impact of these external influences on the adult learner can cause delays in completing assignments; these delays can quickly deplete the adult learner's motivation to not finish the assignment, and sometimes not finish the course as well. The relationship between the student and the instructor begins to reflect a mixing of the professional and the personal as the instructor becomes more like a neighbor and friend who listens empathetically and offers encouragement to the adult learner. The following private email exchanges illustrate this transition when Susan begins to question her ability to complete the course on time:

Hi Susan, How is the course proposal going? If you still do not have all of the details you need for the course you are seeking credit for, write it based on what you do have or know about the course. You can revise and adapt it after you complete this class when you are trying to receive credits for the course. Please post one to the discussion board and respond to the others. Cheryl

Cheryl, Unfortunately the course proposal is going nowhere. Not only have I been dealing with issues from the previous email that I sent you a few weeks ago. I broke my big toe on November 21. The break is not in the best place and into my joint. I go back December 15 for x rays to determine if I need surgery. I didn't work at all last week and didn't have access to a computer. Now I am even farther behind with my office duties. This semester has not gone smoothly for me at all. Can you let me know what my options are? Thanks, Susan

Hi Susan, Sorry to hear that this semester is not finishing up smoothly for you. Can you give me some more details about where you are with the course proposal? Will you be able to write at least a general one that can be used for your English 207 proposal? You can always revise it after the semester is over so it better suits your needs. Will you have access to a computer to do and post the PowerPoint presentation? You really are almost finished with the work in this course. Those two assignments are it. I can meet virtually or face-to-face with you to go over your portfolio. Cheryl

Hi Cheryl, Sorry for the delay in replying. The soonest I can have a draft done for my proposal will be Monday. Even though I haven't met with the instructor yet, I intend to write it geared toward ENG 207 and IPC 102. I intend to work on the proposal and power point presentation this weekend, as my husband is on afternoons and I know we do not have anything planned on the social calendar. I apologize for letting "life" get into the way of the course. I hate it when I get behind the 8-ball with work and home, and then when health issues (toes) get in the way life gets more difficult. I would like to ask you if it would be possible to take an INC for the course. Our office is going to be closed over the holiday break and I will have the extra time to put my best effort into compiling my portfolio. My portfolio would be ready for final grading no later than January 8th. Please let me know if this is possible and thank you for being understanding. Regards, Susan

Hi Susan, I understand how life can get in the way of work and school. Monday would be good for me, except that my home computer crashed last week and I will have no way of checking my email until Tuesday morning. However, next week Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday will be good days for me to meet with you. As far as times go, 10:00 a.m. is always a good time

for me, but you let me know what times work for you. What do you still need to finish for the portfolio that you would need an INC for? It seems like you already have the assignments done (except for the course proposal), and the PowerPoint will go quickly. Did you view the sample PowerPoint? The last thing to do is to assemble the portfolio, which you'll bring to our meeting. Remember, you will still be able to make changes to the portfolio for each course you are trying to receive credits for, after the semester is ended. The credit for English 207 will be separate from the credits given in IPC 102 and the other courses. Cheryl

Hi Cheryl, I have attached my course proposal at where I am at so far. Please review it and let me know if I am on the right track. I will promise to take the time to get the portfolio done before the end of the semester. Thanks for understanding. Thursday morning works best for my schedule. Let me know. Regards, Susan

When Susan and Hoy met for a face-to-face conference to review Susan's portfolio, Susan commented that because of these email conversations, she realized how much coursework she had already completed and how little she had left to finish. She said that she felt relieved and that she could finish the class; she only needed to revise her course proposal and develop a PowerPoint presentation, a software program with which she already had much prior experience. Susan's ultimate success in the course is partially but clearly tied to these interpersonal exchanges with Hoy, a feature of online learning that may challenge Pevoto's (2003) claim about student success in online settings. Certainly, there exist implications for future distance learning research. Although Pevoto defines student success in terms of grades and the role of delivery in communicating and clarifying expectations, much of this success can and should be based on the role of both instructor and fellow students in providing personal and professional support, variables admittedly absent from Pevoto's study.

Inevitably, what makes Blair and Rhonda's and Hoy and Susan's exchanges equally significant, from both a course design and workload standpoint, is that an equal amount of teaching and learning is taking place in private as opposed to public space in the online writing community, with significant implications for instructor role and overall faculty labor. For both Blair and Hoy, these workload issues had both positive and negative consequences. Just as we've heard colleagues indicate they'll conduct a class observation when we're "teaching," as opposed to facilitating more collaborative, student-centered activities, it wasn't always clear to Lewis, as a cosupervisor of the class, that Hoy, consistent with successful face-to-face writing pedagogy, was engaged in extensive private dialogue with students at midterm and toward the semester's end, as opposed to more whole class discussion in the Blackboard discussion forum. For that reason, the course seemed inactive, with Lewis requesting that Blair double check in her role as cosupervisor.

In many ways, however, the challenges in evaluating and supervising online instructors are not all that different from face-to-face evaluation and supervision, particularly when those in supervisory roles hold more teacher-centered ideologies about instructor role and when so many aspects of successful writing instruction are as much private as they are public. One option for future documentation could include the use of the blind copy feature on email, documenting both the quantity and quality of interpersonal exchanges. Although we did not utilize this option out of initial privacy concerns for both students and instructors, future procedures could include providing notification or securing permissions at the beginning of a

course in order to have private email exchanges reviewed by supervisors through the blind or “cc” function, or even to share exchanges in more formalized observation sessions between instructors and supervisors. Such “publication” of private exchanges may help to make visible the workload issue, but is the necessity and possible requirement to do so at odds with the type of interpersonal relationship that can so positively evolve between student and instructor? One possible solution to this dilemma may be to better acknowledge to students the “newness” of online teaching for instructors and supervisors and to explain that a “facilitator” model of learning and instruction is in fact collaborative. Ultimately, for Hewett and Ehmann (2004), supervisors, trainers, and trainees are collaborators “in a process in which [they] critically observe what happens, [. . .] explore the perspectives of participants involved, and seek to accommodate identified needs” (p. 8).

3. Conclusion: rethinking instructional presence and workload

In a 1992 discussion, Ron Fortune and Janet Eldred discussed the need to rethink metaphors of orality and literacy when applied to computer-mediated communication, noting that electronic activity breaks down the false binary between the two and equalizes their status. Similarly, our experiences teaching adult learners online suggest it is vital for both student and faculty success that we rethink our metaphors of “community” and, as Comstock (2004) contends, the “politics of presence” in distance learning environments. The success of our online interaction depends on our recognition of the “neighborly” relationships among students and between students and instructors, recognizing that among our adult learner populations there might be students who thrive as well in private space as they do in public space. As we have suggested, a full concept of virtual community includes a range of both group and individual dialogue, in which both are valued equally by instructors, students, and supervisors. In many ways, writing courses appear conducive to online delivery for the type of interpersonal dialogue we have documented. And, though we do not mean to suggest that such dialogue is not equally possible in a face-to-face course, we are suggesting that the invisibility of email or other two-way exchanges, in particular, requires the same consideration as other face-to-face forms of the “student conference,” not only for their impact on curriculum and student success, but also for their impact on faculty workload and reward.

Because the circumstances that led to Hoy’s role in English 207 suggest an ideology consistent with Samuel’s concerns about the labor issues surrounding online instruction, there are clearly more efforts to be made on behalf of online instructors, ensuring that both incentive and reward are appropriate. Ironically, tenure-line faculty who teach online courses at Bowling Green are compensated quite well: \$2000 in development funds and an extra \$1000 stipend for teaching the course. However, there has been little to no change in the merit, tenure, and promotion guidelines at our own institution for online instruction despite the administrative recognition that fully online and other alternative formats (weekend courses, workshops, etc.) are vital to competing for adult and other nontraditional learners in the online educational market. Moreover, as teaching increasingly moves to a student-centered, teacher-as-facilitator model, there will need to be guidelines for observing and evaluating online writing instructors, for even as innovative guides, such as Hewett and Ehmann’s *Preparing Educators for Online*

Writing Instruction, focus on the criteria for selecting and training online teachers, less emphasis is placed upon how peer or supervisor observation changes in an online setting to include as broad a range of data as is utilized in traditional writing classroom settings, particularly the types of private email exchanges we've profiled in this article. One useful strategy Hewett and Ehmann include is the simulated conference in which a supervisor and instructor role-play the typical types of interactions between students and instructors. Hewett and Ehmann also include useful criteria for evaluating synchronous conferences (pp. 137–142) that should not only be utilized by supervisors but also be modified for the types of peer reviews that are included in tenure, promotion, and merit files.

Although the administrative perception of graduate students as “cheaper labor” is one that will likely continue to dominate staffing and scheduling, as writing specialists we are well aware of the importance of professional development and teacher training both in maintaining the curricular integrity of the writing classroom and in introducing new teachers to the constructivist theories that dominate rhetoric and composition as well as distance learning. Clearly, however, we must work to make visible the academic labor issues to administrators and those outside our discipline, for although the development of prior learning assessment portfolios constitutes a heavy workload for both student and instructor, the idea that lower caps that resemble seminar caps, such as our English 207 classes of seven to ten students, are for teacher convenience does not account for the increased labor of online instruction in general and online writing instruction in particular. For that reason, recent guidelines developed by the CCCCs—including statements on tenure and technology (1999), teaching and assessing writing in digital environments (2004), and hypothetical case studies of faculty working with technology (2002)—need to account for faculty working in more fully online settings as opposed to the face-to-face or hybrid environments that dominate the various cases. Ultimately, these guidelines should be shared more widely with both department and university administrators, urging them to pay more attention not only to the needs of online learners but also to the needs of online educators.

Despite our call for continued consideration of adult learner needs and resulting faculty workload issues, the circumstances that led to both Blair and Hoy teaching this group of students have helped lead to a stronger sense of a teaching community in our department of English. Another graduate student, Lucie Shetzer, has just finished teaching the course, increasing opportunities for students to collaborate in research projects, including Cheryl Hoy's dissertation project, “The Adult Learner in the Online Writing Classroom.” Part of this research, both individual and collaborative, will be based on interviews and surveys with the English 207 students, instructors, and supervisors, questioning the extent to which the existing course structure and curriculum meet the needs of adult learners. Given our own experiences, Bowling Green's College of Continuing and Extended Education, where English 207 is technically housed, is considering moving away from a traditional sixteen-week course format for 207 to focus more on an individual, independent study model that is consistent with a writing center conferencing model and that will also allow students to complete the course at their own pace. Although English 207 may represent a case study of an online writing sequence, it is our hope that computers and writing specialists will continue to rethink traditional design and delivery modes for writing instruction that presume those collaborative, community models will transfer so seamlessly from the face-to-face to the distance classroom.

Equally important, our status as technology experts must extend from curricular innovation to teacher advocates, ensuring that current and future online writing instructors, regardless of status, receive appropriate incentive, reward, and recognition for the impact of technology on academic labor.

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