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Teaching Basic Writing in a Web-Enhanced Environment

Linda J. Stine

ABSTRACT: Remarkably little has been published on what works or does not work in online basic writing (BW) instruction. Internet-based learning is not a natural fit for BW students, and instructors planning hybrid or distance learning courses face a difficult task, with little theory to guide them. This article reviews current research and advice on three key questions about web-based learning in general: how online learning affects the teaching role, what kinds of assignments are appropriate to this medium, and how teachers can best promote the sort of student self-reflection important to academic success. BW teachers are encouraged to consider carefully how best to translate general Web-based teaching/learning theory into praxis tailored to their specific students and then to share the results, so that their questions, their experiences, and the experiences of their students begin to play a larger role in the online education debate.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; developmental students; Internet; computer-mediated communication; online instruction; adult learning; higher education

Internet-based learning[1] is not a natural fit for basic writing students. Online learning places heavy demands on such students' weaker skill areas—reading and writing—rather than building on their oral and aural strengths. It requires a level of technological skill that basic writers, especially older nontraditional students, often do not possess. It assumes a sense of independence and self-confidence that developmental students almost by definition have not attained. It also demands disciplined time management, which is an ongoing struggle for developmental students even in traditional class settings. Basic writing teachers considering a move to some form of blended course or to a distance learning environment, therefore, face quite a challenge, and yet despite copious literature on Internet-based education in general, remarkably little has been published on what works or does not work for online basic writing instruction.

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In an effort to contribute to the "more inclusive conversation" that Catherine Gouge (347) calls for, one in which writing teachers rather than university administrators or IT staff define the terms of the online/onsite debate, I gather together some of the "lore" (Del Principe) about online education in general, note times when I found myself questioning the lore—and the lure—of online course delivery for a basic writing class, and highlight areas where additional research is needed to answer three questions BW teachers will have to consider: how does online learning change the teaching role, what kinds of assignments are appropriate to this medium, and what tools/methods may best encourage the sort of student self-reflection so important to academic success? The more we understand about best practices in online learning in general, the better decisions we can make about which practices to adopt, adapt, or reject as we design successful learning experiences for our own basic writing students.

RETHINKING THE TEACHING ROLE

Teaching online is harder, more time consuming, less rewarding to many instructors because of the personal remove, and often less fairly remunerated than teaching in a traditional environment. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons—personal, professional, political, not to mention the sheer volume of articles touting the Internet's potential to change and radically improve education—basic writing teachers in increasing numbers are trying out hybrid or distance education options. My own decision to design a blended course, in which students attend class one week and work online the next, arose from both practical and pedagogical reasons: the need to save busy working adults commuting time and, if possible, money, along with the hope that the online experience would provide these students with new writing opportunities while simultaneously increasing their comfort with the kinds of educational technology they would be facing in future courses. I quickly came to appreciate Martha Snyder's caution that moving a class online requires teachers to define—for themselves and for the students—the goals, values, instructional methods, and learning situations so as to make sure that the new course is logical and its materials congruent.[2]

One essential piece of planning information needed is the level of student technology access and skill, since this defines the kinds and scope of appropriate learning activities and ensures that teachers build in instruction where needed. As Joellen Coryell and Dominque Chlup remind us, "It is

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important to train students *how* to before asking them to *do*" (270). Ideally, a hybrid classroom will be a dedicated computer lab equipped with a shared network drive accessible to all students, a projector, and Internet connection, allowing the teacher to demonstrate technology tools in class and give students time for hands-on practice. While not completely eliminating the problems that inevitably occur when students go home and try to replicate these activities on their own computers, in-class practice at least moderates some anxiety and stress. Teachers of true distance education courses, of course, do not have that show-and-tell luxury, but animated screen captures depicting the steps for desired skills can provide a useful alternative, especially for visually oriented students who learn better from pictures than from written directions. Adult basic writers with high writing anxiety and high computer anxiety will quickly feel—and become—lost if they cannot complete an assigned task because they are unable to navigate the technology. Even younger, more tech-savvy students do not necessarily translate their ease with a cell phone or a YouTube video into ease with an unfamiliar course management system.

Another important question to consider when planning the online component of a course is how teachers are going to "talk" to students when this "talking" is taking place online. In the classroom, we often respond quickly and briefly at first and then engage as needed in a lengthier dialogue to explain our answer, so that the message the students take away is the one we planned to send. Denied the option of immediacy and dialogue, online teachers must consider their words carefully when responding to student questions, papers, or postings. As many online educators have cautioned, e-mail is a "hot" medium that offers much more opportunity for miscommunication than does a classroom conversation (Halio 58). Sarcasm is dangerous, humor is hard to produce, and a long written message can decrease a student's chance of understanding the main point while a brief one can be interpreted as dismissive. Finding the happy medium may be especially problematic for teachers of basic writers; our students are often inexperienced readers, so we will need to find ways to check student reactions frequently.

When to respond can be just as difficult as *how* to respond, since online students want and expect the same sort of instant gratification that face-to-face conversations offer. Experts stress the importance of setting response parameters clearly. If the course management system offers automated responses, teachers are urged to create an auto-response that immediately acknowledges receipt of assignments (so students know their work has not gone astray) and explains when more detailed feedback will be provided. For

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anxious basic writers, who frequently trust neither their writing nor their technology skills, providing a variety of instructor access options (phone, fax, chat, IM, Facebook, etc.) can be the difference between a student persisting or dropping out. I have found that giving students my home phone number establishes a bond of trust: my pledge to be there when they really need me and their agreement not to abuse the privilege. The personal bond, so necessary for demonstrating the encouragement, clarification, and individual concern that basic writers often seem to need, can get stretched to breaking when students do not have the luxury of regular, face-to-face interaction in class and office hours. Onsite students do not have to worry that their teacher might not show up in the classroom; they do, though, wonder if the teacher is really "out there" when they are working online. Renegotiating issues of trust and access is an important part of the online course planning process.

Where to respond on electronically submitted assignments is another question to consider. All experienced writing teachers know the basic recommendations for effective commenting on student papers: identify positives, give explanations rather than labels, speak as a reader not a grader, clarify not just what to change but how to do so, be respectful, be compassionate, personalize the responses, provide timely feedback, and tie it into specific assignment criteria with a clear summary of the main steps to take for improvement (Wolsey 313). Thomas Wolsey found that the online students he surveyed placed special value on detailed comments and components phrased as questions, and preferred feedback embedded in the text (using Word's "track changes") over summary comments at the end. While those findings may or may not hold true for other students, online instructors would do well to check student preferences and work within those preferences when possible. Students working online will not be able to ask for immediate clarification and elaboration the way they can when papers are handed back and discussed in class, so the more comfortable they are with the feedback modality, the better the chance for effective communication. One of the discoveries I made when investigating student preference was that my students liked to give feedback in writing but they liked to *get* feedback orally. This led me to supplement my inserted comments written on individual student papers by using a digital recorder to post an audio file on the class website containing a more extensive oral explanation of typical trouble spots.

Feedback methodology is also an issue to consider when planning peer review opportunities for an online or hybrid class. During one of the early

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in-class sessions of my hybrid course, students practice a variety of review options and then discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each: which works best if the feedback is going to be printed out, which works best for focusing on the big picture, and which works best for giving and/or receiving comments, based on personal learning preferences. When they are ready to start online peer review, students decide within their individual groups how they want to get comments from the others, some choosing to talk things over by phone or Skype so they can ask for explanations, others choosing "track changes" so they have a clear printed record, and others asking for a summary via e-mail so they can focus on a few big issues without getting bogged down in detail. Teachers working entirely online might consider including an early discussion forum on this issue, suggesting general pros and cons and asking students to specify and explain their preferences.

Determining when, where, why, and how to structure online components takes considerable time, and these time pressures do not let up after the initial planning period ends. The time commitment required for online teaching typically continues to be heavier than for onsite teaching, even after the course design and materials have been created and any new technology has begun to feel familiar. It is simply harder to write than to talk, and managing online learning experiences requires much more writing from the instructor: announcements, e-mails checking in on students who are not contributing, responses to discussion postings, comments on blogs, and detailed comments on student papers. Online teachers find themselves logging on at least three to four times a week, if not daily, and for hours at a time to monitor discussions, model good responding practices, answer students' e-mailed questions, and send out announcements and clarifications, not to mention trying to track down and encourage students who are not participating (Smith, Ferguson, and Caris 43). Over and above such new demands is the time spent responding to and evaluating student papers. For these reasons, a maximum class size of twenty is typically recommended for online classes in general (Colwell and Jenks); most instructors, unfortunately, will have little power to enforce this ideal. Teachers who end up with more students than they hoped to find in their online classes must be extra vigilant in finding ways to create community without burying themselves and their students under a blizzard of discussion postings and e-mails.

Advice is available on methods of response and course structure that will help instructors manage the increased demands on their time (e.g., Warnock); teachers planning the move online need to consider this issue carefully. They must also consider their response to the diminished personal

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contact: can an online teaching relationship provide the same satisfaction that a face-to-face classroom offers, or will it simply be a case of more work, less time, and less fun?

For me, problems of time and isolation have been more than offset by two unexpected rewards. First is the joy of discovering countless ways to expand my teaching arsenal as new technologies emerge day by day. Each new application I read about causes me to rethink both subject matter and subject delivery; the continuous innovation that technology change enables provides a sense of job satisfaction not as easily maintained while teaching the same topics from the same textbooks in the same manner. Second, although I am more separated from my students in the hybrid sections in that I see them only half as often, by the end of the semester I feel that I know them better than my onsite students as a result of having read their various kinds of writing with particular care in order to make sure that my responses are as clear as possible, since we may not have the opportunity for a follow-up discussion.

STRUCTURING ONLINE LEARNING ASSIGNMENTS

One of the main decisions teachers face when moving a course online is what new kinds of learning experiences to include. Such a decision requires careful attention to what Don Olcott terms the "five I's" of effective distance teaching (Palloff and Pratt 52): *interaction* (between student/student, student/teacher, and student/course material), *introspection* (student interpretation, revision, and demonstrated understanding of concepts), *innovation* (experimenting with new tools to address various learning styles), *integration* (of facts, concepts, theories, and practical application of knowledge), and *information* (what students need to know to move on to the next level.) Consider, for instance, just one decision relating to the first "I": the syllabus. The syllabus typically sets the tone for how students interact with teacher, students, and course material. A syllabus for a web-enhanced course must therefore at a minimum explain to the students the following points: how to log in (including instructions for using browsers, finding the course site, printing out or saving online material, searching the Internet, sending and receiving e-mail), requirements for successful online learning (time framess and time management), any important differences in the roles of instructor and students in an online vs. traditional class setting, how communication between instructor/students and students/students will take place, rules for

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giving feedback and other issues of netiquette, and how students can get needed help (Palloff and Pratt 123). One new section that had to be added to my hybrid course syllabus, for instance, was a definition of what would be considered being "present" or "absent" during the online weeks. Another was how the inevitable technology problems would be handled: students are not penalized for deadlines missed because of a failure of the course management system, but when an assignment is submitted late because a student's own computer/printer/Internet access crashes, that student is penalized according to the policies laid out in the syllabus, since the mark of a responsible professional is to have a back-up plan. Another new section of my hybrid syllabus involved reminding students of the importance of backing up files in several places and how to attach files to an e-mail message that they can send to themselves using our CMS e-mail as additional insurance against lost or malfunctioning flash drives, procedures that we practice together in an early onsite class so that I can stress the importance and make sure students know the process. Of course, the longer the syllabus gets, the more chance that our BW students will overlook or misunderstand important sections. Anjanette Darrington suggests including an early discussion topic asking students to post what they do not understand about the syllabus. In addition to making sure that students actually read the syllabus, such an assignment gives the teacher a chance to provide timely explanations of anything misunderstood and to add new information as needed.

Innovation, the third "I," presents perhaps the greatest challenge for teachers of basic writers. All writing teachers understand the importance of providing a mix of assignments so as to get to know more about their students' strengths and weaknesses than the formal academic paper reveals. Online courses suddenly make available an embarrassment of riches. Cynthia Selfe, for instance, asks writing teachers to "encourage students to deploy *multiple* modalities in skillful ways—written aural, visual—and . . . model a respect for and understanding of the various roles each modality can plan in human expression, the formation of individual and group identity, and meaning making" (625-26). She challenges teachers to help their students create meaning through all the kinds of multimodal composition that the Internet enables, so as not to limit their "bandwidth of composing resources" (641) to words on a printed page. This is indeed a challenge for *any* writing teacher; it is an even greater one for developmental writing teachers charged specifically with helping their students gain control over the written word, raising the question of how best to use the freedom that the Internet offers to improve student writing without neglecting

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the skills traditionally privileged in the academy, all the while working within constraints of the limited access and technology skills common to basic writers. If I ask students to write about a YouTube video rather than a journal article, I may get more interest and thus more time on task and better thinking, but am I preparing them for the next level of assignment, which will require them to work with text-based, scholarly articles? If I ask students to present their ideas in pictures and bullet points on a PowerPoint slide, will I be taking away another needed practice opportunity for expressing themselves in grammatical sentences and fluent paragraphs? How do we define the "writing" part of "basic writing" in this multimedia age? I find myself still limiting student writing primarily to words and keystrokes, and I worry that I am doing a disservice by thus narrowing the "composition bandwidth." We need much more research describing the kinds of non-print-based learning experiences and writing assignments BW teachers might successfully integrate into web-enhanced courses.

Even if writing is still defined narrowly, however, web-based instruction has multiplied immeasurably the ways we can choose to teach it. One of the main advantages the Internet offers is a wealth of new ways to involve students in different types of learning and accommodate a fuller range of learning preferences. Researchers from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, for instance, have developed a course model comprising eight different ways of learning that they call OctoPlus: connect, reflect, share, learn, practice, personalize, experiment, apply (Kelly, "Adaptive" 7). Teachers planning an online course could productively use this framework to ensure that they are providing comprehensive, well-sequenced learning activities, offering students the chance to learn in many different ways. In a basic writing course that includes grammar review, for instance, students might first take a pre-test to connect with their past understanding of a topic like sentence boundary errors, then *reflect* in an online journal about what they know and don't know. Once they have clarified their thoughts by this personal reflection, they can *share* their conclusions with others through a blog or discussion posting, following this up by viewing a PowerPoint or video or reading a chapter in a textbook to help them *learn* any aspects that they have identified to be problems. Next would come *practice* in the form of exercises, followed by another discussion posting commenting on what they have learned *personally*. At this point students could be asked to *experiment* with their knowledge by developing brief explanations and examples to teach their classmates one new thing they have learned. Finally, students could *apply* their understanding by writing papers free of that grammar error,

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and/or reviewing classmates' drafts for grammatical correctness. Not all assignments need to move through all eight processes, of course, and not all students need to work through all eight steps even if available, but the model offers a good lens through which instructors can re-view their learning tasks before moving them online.

Christina Matas and Cameron Allan found asking students to keep short-answer learning portfolios helpful in improving their generic writing and thinking skills. They require their students to write a sequence of three short essays. Viewing this process in terms of the Octoplus framework, the student writes a first draft (*practice*), sends it to a peer for review while reviewing another student's draft (*sharing*), revises the essay based on peer review (*personalizing*), and then writes a *reflection* on the learning experience involved. Matas and Allen found that a series of small, repetitive assignments like this reduces student anxiety and improves writing, technology, and cognitive skills, while guiding the students toward more critical self-reflection. While this repeated sequence of learning experiences could prove useful in any writing class, such built-in opportunities for building community, receiving positive reinforcement from peers and teacher, and gaining control over the technology through repetitive activities would be especially valuable in an online BW class where anxiety levels run high and metacognition levels low.

Catherine Green and Rosie Tanner provide additional advice on accommodating online students' varied intelligences: intrapersonal, interpersonal, linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical, naturalistic, bodily-kinesthetic. Many of their suggestions call for activities that require students to get away from the computer to perform some action; such an activity provides the buy-in on a topic that makes students willing to come back online to process it. To describe what an ideal writing teacher might be, for instance, Green and Tanner first ask the students to make a metaphor that expresses their ideal, allowing them to choose among sculpting, poetry/song, dance, listing/rank ordering, finding something in nature that represents the ideal and photographing it, observing a good teacher in action and writing a summary, or finding a representative archaeological artifact on the Web. Students post descriptions, videos, or photographs of their results, and then reflect and comment in writing on their and others' choices. Instructors must, of course, make sure that technology problems do not limit students' abilities to complete the assignment. Will basic writing students already know how, for instance, to digitalize a photo or video and post it to the class website if they want to choose that option? If not, how will they learn those

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tasks, and will the results be worth the time taken away from other learning activities? My promise to the adult, generally technophobic students in my hybrid course has always been that I will not ask them to do anything at their home computers that we have not practiced together in our face-to-face class; this has necessarily limited the number and the complexity of the technology-based assignments I can require, not wanting my onsite class periods to be devoted solely to practicing computer tasks. How do basic writing teachers best reconcile what we *could* do with all the new teaching options available online with what our students reasonably *can* do?

Even when all the decisions on assignments and technology have been made, online course planning is not finished. Teachers still need to determine how best to present the online assignment directions. A study of the usability of an online first-year composition course for community college students (Miller-Cochran and Rodrigo) found that students missed important information when it was located in large blocks of text. The researchers thus recommend using shorter text blocks, color, and headings to make important information stand out, advising instructors to simplify the course design by putting all major links in a navigation bar, make the sequence of activities clear, and allow for multiple points of access. Other design tips include placing important information in the center of the screen, highlighting and using headings to focus the reader's attention on critical information, providing explanations of why students must do something to accompany explanations of what they should do, and including links to simpler and more difficult material so that the each student can relate at his or her knowledge level (Anderson & Elloumi 10).

Teachers moving online cannot, therefore, simply upload old assignment directions as a .pdf file. A typical set of print directions, for instance, might contain several double-spaced pages of text organized chronologically, beginning with the assignment topic, purpose, and audience and then providing specific suggestions for how to plan, organize, draft, edit, and proofread. For online use, such an assignment is best redesigned as a brief "front page" summary of directions, containing hyperlinks to different screens with additional advice for moving through the stages of the writing process. Students viewing the assignment from the monitor can thus read the main points easily without being confused by screens dense with text. They are also guided into more goal-directed, active reading habits by the fact that they can choose to follow various hyperlinks for additional information.

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THE BASIC TOOLS: CHATS, WIKIS, BLOGS

Chatrooms

In the traditional classroom, much of the energy and the learning emerges from face-to-face discussion, with students and teachers focused on the same issue at the same time. Course management systems attempt a simulation of such real-time communication with chatrooms and whiteboards. Although acknowledging potential problems such as lack or misunderstanding of affect and difficulties posed by the text-intensive nature of the interaction, Beth Hewett has found these tools useful for online tutoring, arguing that the language of instruction more nearly resembles oral dialogue, with the whiteboard offering a chance to teach by "doing" rather than just by talking, along with the added advantage of a record of the proceedings available at the end. For basic writing instructors considering this option, though, I would draw attention to one potential concern that Hewett notes:

> [S]tudents who are uncomfortable with the act of writing in instructional settings may find synchronous conferences more challenging or challenging in different ways from asynchronous instruction because synchronous interactions require real-time participation. Not only do such conferences ask the students to write about their own writing, but they ask students to do so using writing with sometimes instantly visible texts. (7)

Here again, BW instructors will have to weigh the pros and cons carefully as they consider the option. Can we get our students past the initial fear of expressing and exposing their weaknesses and make such a conference into an empowering situation, or will we lose the power of the student/teacher interchange if we force it online? What sort of supports can we build into the communication process to make sure that student discomfort leads to learning rather than leaving? I have not yet had much success using chatrooms for instructional purposes with my adult students—busy lives make finding a common meeting time difficult, and, more importantly, reluctant writers find it difficult to formulate thoughts, come up with the right words to express these ideas, and quickly "publish" them for all to see without a chance of editing—but students in my classes have sometimes used chatrooms as social gathering places, agreeing on a day and time for those

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interested to "drop by" and talk about how their week is going. The tool is probably a useful option to consider in a basic writing course even if not as an essential part of the instruction itself. How/if basic writing instructors are incorporating synchronous communication options into online classes is an area in which more case studies are needed. Also needed is research on more technologically rich (and costly) real-time communication tools like Wimba, which allow students to see and hear one another rather than being limited to written text on whiteboards and chats. Do the visual/oral advantages such tools offer make enough difference to basic writers to justify the cost to institutions and students? Are there comparative studies looking at this sort of cost/benefit in the research pipeline?

Wikis

Much has been written about wikis with respect to collaborative writing and learning, and the inherent democratization involved in providing all members equal opportunity to revise a piece of writing. Rebecca Lundin argues that wikis have the potential to help change pedagogy and expand the options for peer review by allowing students to edit one another's writing directly, post a response, or post a link to outside resources. She describes a successful activity in which students are offered the chance to post drafts voluntarily on the wiki for review by teacher and classmates, with the "price" of such review being the requirement that the poster respond to the drafts of two other classmates. Her perception is that online review via wiki is less threatening and more anonymous than face-to-face peer review groups. Basic writing teachers will have to consider carefully whether the benefit of using this tool, one that adult students may not be familiar with, is extensive enough to warrant its cost. In addition to possible technical problems, I suspect that many basic writing students will be reluctant to make use of the main function of a wiki—deleting someone's words and substituting one's own—because of their insecurities about knowing the "right" thing to say, a problem that arises frequently in in-class peer review groups. How best to mix wikis and basic writers is yet another issue absent from our scholarly literature.

Blogs

Blogs are a more familiar tool for online learning and, on the surface, seem ideally suited to the needs of basic writing students. Cheryl Smith,

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in an article discussing blog use with her first-year composition students, notes that blogs provide:

> an online arena where error, language play, and invention are not only accommodated but actively incorporated, blogs are a surprisingly straightforward way to negotiate the tensions of error. They add a new platform for writing that increases opportunities for student-driven expression, facilitate and energize the processes of collective brainstorming and peer review, stimulate creativity and class community, and supplement more traditional platforms for writing without supplanting or detracting from them. (37)

Smith sees blogs as democratic spaces, arguing that by allowing "participants equal access to a public voice in a forum that is familiar to many young people, blogs create a safe place for risk-taking and error" (38). Those of us who teach older students, however, students for whom blogs are just as unfamiliar a writing space as the formal academic essay, will have to think carefully about how or if we can make blogs a familiar place where they too can feel that important element of play that "lowers the emotional stakes of failing" (West 597). Another issue to be aware of is that students tend to associate blogs with informal writing style (Ellison and Wu), so instructors must be explicit about what style they expect students to use in their blogs.

A variation on the blog that basic writing instructors interested in enhancing students' metacognitive skills might consider is the public learning diary. Learning diaries involve more extended responses than blogs, and normally are shared with only a small group rather than posted publicly for all to read, so they may be less threatening (Nückles, Schwonke, Berthold and Renkl). The goals of blog and diary, however, are the same: improved critical reasoning and enhanced self-understanding. Teachers will have to decide what sort of writing environment best meets the needs of their students and their course goals—a private online diary accessible only to the writer and perhaps the teacher, an in-class discussion forum accessible to some specified group of students, or a blog on the Web open to all.

ENCOURAGING STUDENT REFLECTION

The most valuable and widely used tool for online learning, judging from its prominence in the literature, is the online discussion forum. Scott

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Warnock, in *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why*, a concise and accessible how-to manual for teachers who want to migrate their courses online while maintaining the integrity of their personal instructional philosophy and pedagogy, sees discussion boards as almost "the holy grail of writing instruction" (69). Different from a public blog, discussions are generally limited to members of a particular class group. They can be moderated or un-moderated, expressed in more or less formal language, and comprised of shorter or longer responses. Whatever the parameters set, the discussion forum, with its capacity to expand, enhance, and elevate the level of students' reflection on course content and on their own cognitive style, is the tool most often invoked when discussing online learning as a promising venue for composition instruction, active learning, and community building. Students engaged in writing for discussion forums are writing frequently, writing for communication rather than just for grading purposes, and writing in situations that more closely simulate authentic, everyday situations, thus increasing student investment.

The potential for basic writing instruction is clear. Any potential benefits, however, arrive trailing a number of potential problems. The first is the general difficulty of maintaining student presence. Students sitting alone at their home computers are invisible. Instructors need to think carefully about how they will ensure four factors essential to social presence online (Dow): *effective dialogue, well-structured interactions, ease of use of media tools* (such as orientation to use course management systems like Blackboard if students are not experienced with them), and *transparency of computer-mediated communication.* Effective dialogue and transparency of communication are connected: students need to learn how to talk about relevant topics using "netiquette," and, because it is difficult to know what other people are thinking and feeling when they are invisible, teachers must consciously create the kind of social engagement that happens automatically in face-to-face classes. To ensure well-structured interactions, instructors may want to establish small groups in which students can build relationships with one another. These relationships can be supported with clear time frames, goals, and well sequenced learning tasks, with large topics broken down into small chunks and ample time for discussion of the steps and how students are managing the goals.

Few basic writers tend naturally to define and express themselves through writing, so enticing them into discussion-based learning requires conscious, informed, sustained instructor efforts: ongoing positive reinforcement, such as personal e-mails to students who have written especially good

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posts; interesting, relevant topic choices, so that students want their ideas to be heard (I survey students at the end of the term to determine which topics they most liked and disliked and change the following semester's discussion accordingly); relatively brief prompts, so that students don't spend all their efforts just getting through the initial question; a reasonable enough percentage of the overall class grade for busy students to want to take it seriously (in my course, 15% of the final grade); and quick notification, in person or by e-mail, any time students are not meeting the requirements, so that they know the teacher is always reading even when that teacher is not participating in the discussion. Letting small groups of students choose the topic and moderate the discussion during part of the semester has proven to be another good way of stimulating engagement.

Although in theory discussion boards are assumed to produce higher level thinking, allowing students time to work their way from mere understanding toward synthesis and evaluation, the second difficulty BW teachers must consider is that in practice this does not occur on its own (see for example Hou, Chang, and Sung). Kay Lehmann recommends that teachers end each of their postings with a question, so as to keep the discussion going and encourage student response (11). Her general facilitation rules are to ask thought-provoking questions, summarize discussions so as to validate the views of those who have responded as well as inspire others to jump into the conversation, review points made to encourage students to contribute additional similar or opposing viewpoints, save time and encourage community by providing general group feedback rather than responding individually to every student post, and ensure that no one is being ignored (20).

Students have to create their own status within the new "space" of online learning. Bill Anderson suggests that much jockeying for political control takes place in the discussion forum, as students decide what to read, when to read it, how honest to be in their postings, whom to respond to, and how long they are comfortable waiting for answers to something they have posted. Instructors must be alert to negative patterns that may develop, such as students who stop contributing because they do not get reinforcement, students who only reply to "friends" they agree with, and students who only send out too brief or too "safe" responses. Research shows that students who post early tend to control the discussion, derive more satisfaction from it, and do better overall in grades. To stimulate early and active discussion, Scott Warnock (qtd. in Kelly, "Adaptive") suggests using simple prompts (so that students don't have to log off and think awhile before responding), making the discussion fun (like posting a controversial

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claim that students can debate), making discussion responses valuable to the overall course (asking students to use posts as evidence in subsequent papers), allowing the students to moderate some of the discussions, giving students choices (by having a variety of forums available but only requiring a specific number), and building students' metacognitive skills by having them review what has been written and explain why a particular post (or poster) was their favorite.

In my own hybrid classes, I find online discussions essential to encourage both pre-thinking and re-thinking. One assignment, for instance, asks the students, all of whom are adults working in helping professions, to respond to the following posting:

> Everyone who works in the field of human services has to deal with the problem of poverty to some extent or another. In this week's posting, I'll be interested in hearing your views on (1)what puts people into poverty, (2) what keeps them there, (3) why poverty seems to affect minorities and women disproportionately, (4) what the effects of poverty are on the consumers with whom you work, and (5) why it is so hard to break out of the cycle of poverty and dependence when the U.S.A. is supposed to be a land where all people are created equal and have equal opportunity to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." Give specific examples where you can from your professional or personal experience. What can we as individuals do to begin to solve the problem? What must the country as a whole do to address it?

This posting, purposely broad, typically sparks a heated online discussion, as students express their personal views in an initial posting and then agree or disagree with at least one classmate's response in a second posting. Unlike in oral discussions, everyone has the chance both to reflect on the topic for as long as is necessary to focus their ideas before "speaking" and to have their opinion be "heard." In the following face-to-face class, we talk about the different causes listed, seeing how they fall into two categories, the liberal (*it's the government's fault and we can best help the poor by changing the economy and the educational system*) and the conservative (*it's the individual's fault and we can best help poor people by teaching them other ways of thinking, parenting, and living*). Having now clarified and labeled their own views and heard the opposition, students read with more understanding an article describing an educational reform project designed to appeal to both sides and then write

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an essay about how their workplaces might collaborate in that project. The initial on-line discussion provides the buy-in and the incentive, and students tend to write with a much more authentic voice than they would have for a typical "summarize this article and use it in an essay" assignment.

Discussion forums also can be used to help students explore their own strengths and weaknesses as learners. Alfred Rovai presents a model for predicting persistence among distance education students (9), looking at student characteristics (such as age, gender, ethnicity, academic level), student skills (e.g., facility with technology, reading/writing skills, time management), external factors (job, family, life crises), and internal factors (commitment, goals, social integration, interpersonal relationships, learning and teaching styles, etc.). Online basic writing teachers might profitably share this or a similar model with students in an early discussion forum and suggest that students use it for self-assessment, with the goal of identifying strengths, weaknesses, and group strategies for dealing with weaknesses.

Ideally, interaction in an online community involves students in essential academic skills: learning to listen to one another respectfully, trying to identify other students' assumptions, challenging unsupported opinions, building on other students' ideas, and assisting each other in drawing inferences from what was said (Shen et al. 19). Simply adding a course component that requires students to reflect on their learning, unfortunately, does not in itself ensure better understanding of the topic or improve students' meta-awareness. As Edward Taylor cautions (Merriam 5-16), students only gain the ability to reflect through continuous and guided practice over time. The teacher needs to be present in the discussion to model appropriate behavior, focus the discussion when it strays into non-productive areas, encourage and reinforce postings that show reflective thinking, point out areas of agreement or disagreement in order to ask students how to reach consensus or understanding of difference, insert new information from opposing viewpoints when students do not do so on their own, request clarification or elaboration as needed, and diagnose and correct student misunderstandings of issues when they occur. Just winding a discussion up and letting it run, no matter how carefully worded the questions and directions, is not enough.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Nothing that I found in my review of the literature on the pros and cons of online education has changed my overall conviction expressed in

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my 2004 *JBW* article (Stine) that a hybrid course provides a better learning experience for the adult basic writers I teach than either a pure distance or face-to-face option would. The hybrid environment allows an exploration of the new world of online teaching and learning opportunities while, at the same time, retaining the structure and personal connection that adult developmental students tend to need and value. Betty Collis and Jef Moonen (25) suggest that teachers must explore the "four E's" when considering the fit between online learning and their individual course: *environment* (the institutional context such as equipment and technical support), *educational effectiveness* (perceived or expected), *ease of use* (where the students will be accessing the course, with what kind of equipment, and with what level of prior knowledge), and *engagement* (the student's personal sense of engagement and self-confidence with technology.) Their research found *environment* and *engagement* to be most important of the four with respect to learners in general. I have found *ease of use* more important to my students, adults who tend to exhibit low self-efficacy in the academic domain and limited skills in the technology domain, students who have to struggle against a tendency just to give up on academic (or technological) tasks they do not understand. A hybrid course stimulates growth by pushing students beyond their comfort level, but not so far that they are lost.

Nevertheless, given the right students, the right teacher, and the right structure, it is clear that wholly online basic writing courses can be successful. One of the few published studies focusing specifically on basic writing instruction in an online environment compares outcomes from 256 developmental writing students who self-selected online instruction with those who opted for face-to-face classes (Carpenter, Brown, and Hickman). The online classes had a significantly greater withdrawal rate but also had a higher success rate for those students who stayed on and completed the course. Distance learning seems to present the typical entrepreneurial dilemma: the potential for significant benefit but also for significant harm.

Terry Anderson concludes that the challenge teachers face when they contemplate web-enhanced instruction is "to create a mix of learning activities that are appropriate to student needs, teacher skills and style, and institutional technical capacity" (Anderson and Alloumi 279). Meeting that challenge will require research on how best to maximize the benefits while accommodating the barriers that online education presents for developmental students. These students make up an already sizeable and growing population, one too easily ignored in the literature.[3] President Obama recently announced a proposed twelve billion dollars in new support for community

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colleges, with the goal of producing five million additional graduates (Fischer and Parry). If the typical community college student takes even one remedial course, this will mean a host of new basic writing students waiting on the horizon. Many of them can be expected to self-select, or be advised into, online courses because of accessibility issues and/or perceived educational benefits. Unfortunately, it is still far from clear at this point what factors are most likely to make that online experience a successful one. We need more descriptive case studies and more comparative research specifically focused on how developmental writers of all ages fare in a variety of online learning situations. We do our students, the field of basic writing, and the richness of our professional composition discourse a disservice by remaining on the sidelines of the online education debate. Our questions, our experiences, and those of our students must begin to shape that conversation.

Notes

1. "Internet-based learning, or "online learning" as it is interchangeably called, covers a wide spectrum of instructional delivery methods. On one end of the spectrum is web-enhanced learning, the traditional brick and mortar course in which all class meetings are held face to face, but for which the instructor provides an online component, often through a course management system like Blackboard or Moodle, to supplement the classroom interchange. Further along the spectrum is hybrid, or blended, learning, in which the course has been designed for some specified mix of face-to-face activity and online instruction, from courses designed to spread the in-class requirements evenly throughout the semester, meeting perhaps one week online and one week onsite, to others that require only a brief, initial period of face-to-face meetings and then move online for the remainder of the term. At the far end of the spectrum is true "distance learning," instruction delivered completely online, with no face-to-face component.

2. Teachers working from a constructivist philosophy may find Snyder's table (54-56) in which she outlines goals, values, methods, and situations for a sample online course, a useful guide.

3. While a recent Department of Education meta-study (Means et al.) on the effects of online education found that "the effectiveness of online learn-

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ing approaches appears quite broad across different content and learner types" (xv), and while the age range of the learners studied did include more adults than children (13 to 44 years, split evenly between students in college or earlier and students in graduate or professional programs), none of the studies included targeted adult developmental writers per se.

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