Preface

OUR ORIGIN STORY

Our editorial collaboration on *Handbook of Research on Writing and Composing in the Age of MOOCS* represents our longstanding professional working relationship, from our initial meeting at Bowling Green State University, where Elizabeth was a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric and Writing and Kristine was a faculty member in the program. Both of us had a strong interest in technology and teacher training, which led to our first collaboration on an educational technology class in BGSU’s College of Education and Human Development and to the eventual completion of Liz’s 2004 dissertation “Transitioning into the Fully Online Writing Course: A Pilot Study.” In between, there were numerous other partnerships, including Liz’s role as an online mentor to faculty in English teaching online for the first time, a role resulting from a course Kris taught in the doctoral program, “Online Learning for English Educators,” and that ultimately enabled a co-authored article with Kris, Liz, another online mentor, and a new online instructor that foregrounded the benefits of discipline specific faculty development teams for online course migration (Alvarez, Blair, Monske, & Wolf, 2005).

As our expertise grew, however, we began to realize that the challenges for both teachers and their students went far beyond the ability to successfully migrate face-to-face writing courses for online delivery. Indeed, it was important that we not reinscribe the early rhetorics of technology that took the utopic view that technology in the classroom was automatically an empowering process. As we questioned that empowerment, we turned to the work of Cynthia L. Selfe (1999), who has long encouraged technology users to become technology critics (Selfe & Selfe, 1994) and thus “pay attention” to the material and cultural conditions that empower some and disenfranchise others. For Selfe, this meant asking “Cui Bono?” or who benefits from what can be an uncritical rush to technologize. We decided to take up Selfe’s question in our own 2003 article, “Cui Bono?: Revisiting the Promises and Perils of Online Learning,” in which we established an historical and scholarly framework for the rise of online writing instruction. This framework, which included both utopic and critical uses of technology in writing studies, helped us articulate and interrogate the newest rhetorics of technology that grounded online learning within the language of both access and convenience for students and the rise of the course management system within the language of ease for instructors. Although the language of benefit was and is a pervasive one, we ultimately argued that while many students benefitted from online education, it was potentially at the expense of their instructors. Inevitably, in this early phase of online writing instruction, the academic labor of faculty was a secondary concern to institutions looking to online learning as the answer to enrollment and tuition issues in what was becoming a competitive and, in the case of institutions like the University of Phoenix, a profit-bearing educational business model.
In the thirteen years that have passed since we published our “Cui Bono?” article, our roles and responsibilities have evolved. In her career as a tenured professor, Liz has been responsible for the training of teaching assistants to develop and deliver online courses, developing a course similar to the one she took with Kris, and she has served as an Assistant Chair and Composition Director, leadership roles that have been tied to faculty development and faculty labor. Kris has served as both a Department Chair and now a Dean, roles that have involved online curriculum development and the challenge of simultaneously advocating for online learning and for the support for faculty who engage in this labor-intensive process. Despite this shift in our professional roles and responsibilities, and despite the changes in tools in the shift from a Web 1.0 culture of static, primarily text-based online learning spaces to Web 2.0 culture of dynamic, interactive, and multimodal online learning spaces, writing instruction is here to stay in one form or another. Then and now, it’s an equally complicated process to provide support and reward structures for faculty and to honor the goals of access and equity for students. As more and more institutions, writing programs, and composition faculty are charged to virtually serve the diverse learning needs of equally diverse online student populations, conversations about program and course-level best practices continue to dominate our professional networks across the discipline of writing studies. Rhetoric and composition specialists have responded to these conversations with groups such as the CCCC Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction, which developed a Position Statement (2013) on Principles and Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction and a series of best practices for a range of stakeholders involved in the development, delivery, and assessment of online courses. Clearly, the profession is taking a stronger stance to ensure that online writing instruction receives equal attention to face-to-face instruction in terms of institutional support, quality control, faculty training, and student needs. To that end, a 2015 collection from Parlor Press, Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction (DePew & Hewett, 2015), aligns best practices in online writing instruction with the CCCCs principles. Many online learning experts, including contributors to our collection such as Tiffany Bourelle, Beth L. Hewett, Sushil K. Oswal, Theresa Quezada, Scott Warnock, and Jessie C. Borgman, have more recently founded the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators (GSOLE).

During this time, there have been range of both single-authored and edited collections attending to the topic, along with special issues of journals such as Computers and Composition, that have attended to both hybrid and fully online learning within writing studies. These include such titles as Jonathan Alexander’s and Marcia Dickson’s Role Play: Distance Learning and the Teaching of Writing (2006), Joyce Magnotto Neff’s and Carl Whithaus’ Writing Across Distances and Disciplines: Research and Pedagogy in Distributed Learning (2008), and Scott Warnock’s Teaching Writing Online: How and Why (2009), and Daniel Ruefman and Abigail G. Scheg’s Applied Pedagogies: Strategies for Online Writing Instruction (2016). Equally significant are discussions contextualized around specific contexts for and applications of online learning, such as Lee Ann Kastman Breuch’s Virtual Peer Review: Teaching and Learning about Writing in Online Environments (2004), Kelli Cargile Cook’s and Keith Grant-Davie’s Online Education: Global Questions, Local Answers (2005), and Beth Hewett’s The Online Writing Conference: A Guide for Teachers and Tutors (2010). The strengths of these and other treatments rest in their appeal to the targeted needs of specialized audiences, whether it be novice online writing instructors (Warnock), sub-disciplinary contexts that include professional and technical communication or writing centers (Cook/Grant-Davie & Hewett), or again, specific types of online writing practices such as peer review (Kastman Breuch).
Although rhetoric and composition has a longstanding investment in digitally-mediated writing pedagogies, particularly in the sub-discipline of computers and writing, discussions of fully online learning, even with the conversations we reference above, have until very recently been more disparate, often occurring in a broader range of interdisciplinary scholarship on andragogy, faculty development, and educational assessment. As a result, *Writing and Composing in the Age of MOOCs* seeks to join the online education discourse within Writing Studies based on our joint experiences as online instructors, as teacher training specialists, and as graduate educators concerned that future faculty in rhetoric and composition are sufficiently prepared for the rhetorics and realities of online learning in diverse institutional contexts. From our perspective, we simply need more discussion of these issues in our published scholarship and more case studies about the possibilities and constraints of fully online writing instruction in the larger context of higher education. Given this institutional context, it is impossible to ignore the technological and economical shifts that have led to the rise of the MOOC, or the Massive Open Online Course. 2012 was deemed the “Year of the MOOC” by the *New York Times* (Pappano, 2012) in light of so many institutions, primarily research intensive flagship schools embracing the MOOC model of a video talking head professor delivering content to 60,000 plus students with little or no interaction between teacher and students. These early online remediations of lecture-based face-to-face university courses are referred to as xmoocs, while cmoocs (both terms introduced by Canadian computer scientist and educational innovator Stephen Downes) are considered more “connectivist,” using a broader range of tools to foster instructor-student and student-student than the typical MOOC learning management platforms such as Coursera, EdX, or Udacity facilitate.

Since then, with a number of notable models of success and failure, the debate over who benefits, “Cui Bono?” from this curricular model has been ongoing, with concerns about preserving curricular integrity, meaningful assessment, and ultimately student success as universities rush to technologize, or in this case “MOOC-i-cize” courses from computer science to philosophy, and of course, writing. Not unlike discussions of online learning, until very recently, discussions of MOOCs were equally disparate in writing studies, but often occurred in the form of commentaries from faculty who enrolled in courses to experiment with genre and modality. One notable exception to this trend is Steven Krause’s and Charles Lowe’s (2014) collection *Invasion of the MOOCs: The Promise and Perils of Massive Online Courses*. The collection’s title is an ironic one in that it echoes our original “Cui Bono?” article from 13 years ago, yet it also powerfully suggests that as technology and delivery systems change, the types of questions we should be asking should remain constant, which is powerful rationale for *Writing and Composing in the Age of MOOCs*. In the Krause-Lowe collection, a number of contributors from institutions such as Duke University, Michigan State University, and the Ohio State University report the results of pilot composing and writing courses funded by the Gates Foundation in 2013. The Ohio State team’s (Halasek, et al., 2014) “A MOOC with a View: How MOOCs Encourage Us to Reexamine Pedagogical Doxa” recounts not only the new experience of collaboratively teaching OSU’s Rhetorical Composing MOOC but also how that experience challenged traditional narratives, and the assumptions behind them, of who, what, and how they were teaching not only in online environments but in face-to-face ones and the need to move away from narratives that position the role of teacher as a single individual and presume that everyone enrolled in a college course occupies the subject position of “student” with the same level of motivation for enrolling in a college writing course.

Thus, they and other contributors to *Invasion of the MOOCs* advise against a one-size fits all model, and we are honored to have one of the OSU MOOC developers, Ben McCorkle, write the foreword to our collection. As with Krause and Lowe’s collection, *Writing and Composing in the Age of MOOCs*
represents a series of diverse curricular models, institutional contexts, and material conditions shaping the audiences, purposes, and methods for teaching writing online on both larger and smaller scales, from MOOC settings to the more standard class sizes found in the writing classrooms across the United States.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE COLLECTION**

Even as we consider what a MOOC environment can teach us about other learning spaces, both virtual and face-to-face, several of our contributors rely on a range of criteria and variables to assess the relative value of writing MOOC spaces. For instance, Richard Colby’s Chapter 1, “Typology of MOOCs,” grounds the collection by reviewing a range of MOOC delivery models, questioning what those models offer rhetorically, technologically, and pedagogically. In this way, Colby and other contributors encourage us not to jump on the MOOC bandwagon but to question the motives and goals for migrating and potentially transforming writing courses in such spaces. Similarly, in Chapter 2, “Writing MOOEIs? Reconsidering MOOCs in Light of the OWI Principles,” Beth L. Hewett and Scott Warnock contend that MOOCs are less viable as a credit bearing “course” in the traditional sense; thus they call for better understanding of their educational benefits in terms of accessibility, stakeholder input, infrastructural challenges, preparation and training, and incentive and reward. Equally important is the need to situate MOOCs in diverse contexts; for Sushil K. Oswal this includes delivery of US-based MOOCs to international students. In Chapter 3, “MOOCS in the Global Context,” Oswal calls for further attention to the quality of content we deliver to global audiences, rather than focus solely on the benefits of delivery. Because we live in a global digital participatory culture, as Valerie Hill notes in Chapter 4, “Digital Citizens as Writers: New Literacies and New Responsibilities,” educators must attend to the information literacy of students to foster critical thinking, reading and writing across the varied genres, modalities, and tools of both social and academic online spaces in which students have become not just consumers but prosumers. Such literate processes must have an ethical component as well; indeed, in Chapter 5, “Principled/Digital: Composition’s ‘Ethics of Attunement’ and the Writing MOOC,” Matthew Overstreet argues for criteria that assesses writing MOOCs by their ability to foster a rhetorical sense of composing that is “attuned” to context, concluding that MOOC delivery models are less able to fulfill this imperative than smaller-scale counterparts.

In addition to chapters that emphasize the larger question concerning the viability of writing MOOCs in general, many pieces in *Writing and Composing in the Age of MOOCs* also provide a detailed look at specific case studies or student populations. In Chapter 6, “Getting ‘Girly’ Online: The Case for Gendering Online Spaces,” Jen Almjeld questions the gender-neutrality of MOOCs, given that so many of them are housed in fields dominated by men, and she provides a useful example of two fully online courses in girlhood studies to stress the need for more diverse strategies to foster women’s participation in fully online learning environments. The cultural assumptions about who our online students are also drives Patricia Jenkins’ Chapter 7, “Arguing for Proactivity: Talking Points for Owning Accessibility in Online Writing Instruction.” Jenkins calls for establishing guidelines for online course development that meet the needs of students with disabilities so that we “walk the talk” about our goals of inclusivity and accessibility for all learners. Part of that inclusivity certainly involves understanding logistical needs of adult learners, as Teresa Quezada, Beth Brunk-Chavez, and Evelyn Posey contend in Chapter 8, “Connecting Writing Studies with Online Programs: UTEP’s Graduate Technical and Professional Writing Certificate Program.” The authors profile the transition of the program at the University of
Texas, El Paso, to serve the region and beyond through migrating courses in ways that expanded the student recruitment pool and ultimately enhanced more consistent delivery through both scheduling and faculty development. Moreover, how we deliver courses in ways that meet students’ learning styles is a critical question in Chapter 9, Virginia Tucker Steffen’s “Contact and Interactivity in Televised Learning: 15 Years Later.” Tucker reports the results of a study comparing an interactive television course and an asynchronous online course, concluding that while online students expect and demand interactive learning opportunities, there remains a role for video-based delivery.

Despite the emphasis on meeting students’ educational needs and expectations, a number of contributors question the motivations for online delivery and partnerships and the extent to which, as Krista Petrosino suggests in Chapter 10, “Developmental Writing and MOOCs: Reconsidering Access, Remediation, and Development in Large-Scale Online Writing Instruction.” MOOC-based learning may be a step in the right direction but for the wrong reasons, including the presumed financial gain at the expense of our discipline’s curricular values and practices. Tyler Branson echoes this concern in Chapter 11, “Problematic Partnerships: An Analysis of Three Composition MOOCs funded by the Gates Foundation,” in which he reviews the pilot projects at Duke University, Georgia Institute of Technology, and the Ohio State University. Branson asserts that despite the collaboration with external partners with competing ideologies about teaching and learning, such opportunities expand our expertise and influence cultural discussions about written literacy.

Inevitably, these tensions between the how’s and why’s of online learning have led to questions about the role of writing program administrators and writing faculty in the planning process, something Jessie C. Borgman foregrounds in Chapter 12, “The Online Writing Program Administrator (OWPA): Maintaining a Brand in the Age of MOOCs.” Here, Borgman argues for WPAs to become experienced online educators prior to developing online curricula and supervising writing faculty teaching online courses. Borgman’s compelling argument is aligned with Jacob Babb’s contention in Chapter 13, “Reshaping Institution Mission: OWI and Writing Program Administration,” that “WPAs and writing instructors must participate with other stakeholders in that reshaping.” In overviewing his campus’ experiences matching online learning to regional access needs, Babb also emphasizes sustainable labor practices for faculty and other material conditions that enable and constrain OWI. These labor practices are often invisible and devalued, as Thomas Patrick Henry suggests in Chapter 14, “What’s a ‘Technician’ to Do?: Theorizing and Articulating MOOC Maintenance Concerns.” Henry relies upon a Marxist framework to argue for the role of faculty as workers and the MOOC as the machine that may ultimately replace them at worst or obscure their vital role in design and delivery of content. With discussions such as Laura Howard’s Chapter 15, “A (Critical) Distance: Contingent Labor, MOOCs, and Teaching Online,” the inevitable question becomes how to structure MOOCs and other forms of online writing instruction in ways that improve the material conditions of those who teach it, notably part-time faculty often victimized by the corporatization of higher education.

In many ways, these questions connect back to our original concerns about who benefits and the need for balance between student and faculty needs. Thus several essays attend to the roles both groups play in these online settings. Jason Chew Kit Tham’s Chapter 16, “Audience, User, Producer: MOOCs as Activity Systems,” calls for an understanding of how students are both audience for and user of online spaces, necessitating user-centered instructional design strategies that address the concrete activities of the students than an idealized identity. Travis Webster and Rebecca Hallman Martini’s Chapter 17, “What Online Writing Spaces Afford Us in the Age of Campus Carry, ‘Wall-Building,’ and Orlando’s Pulse Tragedy,” advocate for a number of signature pedagogies in writing studies, such as letter writing
and journaling, to theorize through narrative the experience of sociopolitical moments, to foster writerly activist identities for students, and to maintain critical communication between students and teachers. Both Webster and Hallman Martini, along with Jennifer Stewart, combine empirical research with activity theory. Stewart’s Chapter 18, “Introduction Discussion Board Forums in Online Writing Courses are Essential: No, Really They Are,” similarly argues that student motivation and ultimately student success is influenced by both peer reciprocity and instructor modeling, strategies that should be a part of faculty training for both new and experienced faculty. Clearly, these strategies are part of any strong writing community, something Rebekah Shultz Colby researches in Chapter 19, “Using Online Writing Communities to Teach Writing MOOCs.” As Shultz Colby stresses, online writing communities teach each other the values of that community and how to writing effectively within that community; based on her research, she identifies three viable pedagogical strategies for fostering communities of practice in MOOC-based settings. The ongoing challenge for writing instructors is determining what practices can not only migrate but potentially transform the online writing classroom, and in the case of Chapter 20, Stephanie Odom and Leslie Lindsey’s “Hacking the Lecture: Transgressive Praxis and Presence Using Online Video,” video lectures counteract the traditional presentation of content for mastery and regurgitation. Rather, such video delivery can humanize the instructor by creating a sense of identity and presence.

Our final set of essays focus on strategies for enhancing assessment in a range of online contexts; Tiffany Bourelle’s and Beth L. Hewett’s Chapter 21, “Training Instructors to Teach Multimodal Composition in Online Courses,” documents the role of eportfolios as a formative and summative tool for developing and scaffolding multimodal assignments, along with other strategies that ensure that composition’s current emphasis on multiliteracies in the face-to-face writing curriculum scales to online writing curricula as well. Chapter 22, Robert McEachern’s “Challenging Evaluation: The Complexity of Grading Writing in Hybrid MOOCS” explores the use of MOOCS as a way to create a blended classroom of face-to-face and online in both content and communication, assessing student’s efforts to balance both environments in ways that disrupt the concept of the classroom as an individualized, isolated academic space. And in Chapter 23, “Conducting Programmatic Assessments of Online Writing Instruction: CCCCs OWI Principles in Practice.” Nicki Litherland Baker and Elisabeth H. Buck use the CCCC Position Statement on Online Writing Instruction we reference earlier to guide best practice and overall online quality. They strongly encourage writing program administrators to see the OWI guidelines as a heuristic that informs faculty development and serves as an assessment framework.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of individual focus, these diverse chapters in *Handbook of Research on Writing and Composing in the Age of MOOCS* indicate that the greatest impact on online learning in general and online writing instruction in particular can be described in one word: *Change*. From an institutional perspective, significant changes have occurred at a number of levels, including shifts in legislative funding models for higher education mandating that institutions develop a customer service model and market to a broader range of student populations whose career goals may not be met by traditional degree delivery modes. This also results in a change in enrollment management strategies, for just as the level of state support decreases, institutions often look to increase the numbers of tuition-paying students. Given the shifts in this population from traditional college-age students to more diverse markets that include international
students and adult learners, we can no longer presume our physical brick and mortar writing environments are accessible to all students. But perhaps the greatest change is the shift to more open-access, multimodal learning environments across the disciplines that better accommodate 21st-century students, who in our current economic climate, demand an educational model that allows them to better balance academic, professional, and family responsibilities in ways that are both affordable, and bridge the gap between what students do with technology and what we do, or don’t do, with technology as academics.

Many chapters support a broader range of curricular and technological formats that meet the diverse learning styles of these diverse learners, moving from more limited emphases on text-based learning systems to multimodal environments that integrate the verbal, the visual, the aural, and the kinesthetic through use of video, audio, and other media rich learning objects. These shifts not only mesh with scholarship in the field of writing studies that foregrounds an emphasis on multiliteracies (Selber, 2004; Selfe, 2007; Alexander & Rhodes, 2014) but also call the question about the cultural capital of a face-to-face education in a digital era that mandates more consistent accessibility of quality academic content online. As individual writing programs may debate the migration to online delivery in general and MOOCs in particular, another institution has already made that shift or soon will, to the detriment of enrollment, revenue, and ultimately relevance in a changing era of anytime-anywhere access to quality instruction, including writing instruction. Regardless of these changes, the chapters in Writing and Composing in the Age of MOOCS so clearly document that we should engage in the type of critical interrogation that Selfe has long advocated. We should also, as Selfe and other colleagues have done, experiment first-hand with multiple digital delivery formats, from course management systems, open access social media, to MOOCs. That our contributors take on these dual roles as users and critics will ensure that writing studies will continue to question of “Who Benefits?” or “Cui Bono?” from the development and delivery of online writing courses and programs.

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REFERENCES


