The Internet has greatly changed how we communicate. Now, online media such as email and chat rooms allow individuals to overcome barriers of time and space to interact directly and instantly with persons located in distant regions. Additionally, online media permit users to share information easily and quickly with vast audiences. Individuals, for example, can email files to an almost unlimited number of recipients, or they can present ideas in the form of Web pages that can be viewed by an international audience. As a result, Internet-based technologies allow humans to interact on a previously unprecedented scale. The benefits of this type of communication have led to the widespread use of online media in professional settings.

Internet-based communication often relates to writing. That is, one generally uses writing, or typed text, to share information with others. The text in a Web page, for example, provides users with the information needed to understand or to navigate the related site. Moreover, media such as email, online chats, and listservs often reduce interactions to typed messages exchanged among individuals. The writing process is therefore essential to effective communication through Internet-based media.

While many organizations have recognized the benefits of online communication technologies, each can have its own perspective on what constitutes best practices for communicating through (or writing for) these media. A disconnect between the communication expectations of different groups can thus affect how successfully individuals interact when moving from one group to another. Perhaps the greatest shock in relation to this transition can be seen in students who move from an academic environment to the workplace. That is, educators may teach students the uses of specific online media and writing practices related to those media. Employers, however, might have different expectations of the communication technologies with which new employees should be familiar and the best methods for communicating through those media. For this reason, writing and communication instructors need to understand different aspects of online communication technologies so they can better prepare students
for success after graduation. It is equally important that employers understand methods used to teach online communication practices so they can better anticipate the knowledge base and the skills sets new graduates bring to the workplace.

This kind of “mutual understanding” between academia and industry is particularly important at this point in time, for online communication technologies have led to major shifts in how the workplace is configured. A growing number of employees now participate in teleworking—a practice in which individuals work from home, but use online media to interact with the office or the corporate headquarters. Similarly, more individuals are participating in virtual teams in which coworkers located in different regions use online media to collaborate on the same project. Furthermore, the ability of online media to transcend borders has resulted in an increasing amount of work being done by individuals in other nations. A result of this international outsourcing is that workplace communication increasingly involves online media as a mechanism for managing international employees or for interacting with overseas colleagues.

In all of these situations, written communication is key. It facilitates the level of information sharing needed for individuals to interact successfully outside of traditional workplace environments. It is therefore important that writing and communication instructors understand discourse via online media in order to prepare students for success in their future careers. Similarly, a familiarity with uses of online media in communication instruction provides employers with insights on the abilities of prospective employees and on models for Internet-based interactions. By overviewing how online media can be integrated into educational practices, one can create a foundation for dialogue between academics and employers. Through such dialogue, these parties can work to establish the kind of education needed for success in an online age.

The purpose of this collection is to provide academics and businesspersons with the foundation for such a dialogue. To achieve this end, the collection brings together 14 essays that examine different aspects of communication via online media. These entries have been organized into six major sections, and each section focuses on concepts or approaches related to writing and online communication. In essence, the entries in a section provide examples for thinking about or applying particular technologies in different settings. Readers can use these examples to consider methods for employing online media within their related academic or industry practices. Ideally, the breadth of topics covered in these essays will create a common knowledge base for discussion related to producing good students who will also be effective employees.

The book’s first section, “Computer Technology in Written Communication Instruction: A Historical Overview,” provides a foundation for understanding how online communication technologies have become an important component in the teaching of communication. In this section, Mark D. Hawthorne offers a
first-hand account of this process as he experienced it during his 40-year tenure in higher education. Hawthorne begins with a story of how engineering students in the ’60s used mainframe computers to examine the stylistics of Milton, and continues to his present experiences teaching courses in online publications. In his account, Hawthorne overviews how changes in technologies—and attitudes toward technologies—affect educational practices. While this chapter is not a comprehensive history of the topic, it provides readers with important insights on the attitudes (both enthusiastic and hesitant) associated with adopting new technologies into academia. These insights can serve as a guide for readers considering the use of online media in their teaching practices. The chapter also draws interesting—though indirect—connections between how trends in business and technology can affect education. Such a perspective could provide readers with ideas for how academia and industry may form partnerships around mutual interests in online communication practices.

The book’s second section, “Online Approaches to Teaching Communication,” overviews how instructors have integrated online media into different writing and communication classes. Ideally, this section will provide ideas for how educators can use different technologies and teaching approaches in their classes. The essays in this section can also provide businesspersons with an overview of the kinds of learning experiences available to students. Additionally, the information presented in these chapters could serve as a foundation for industry-academic partnerships in which students explore the effectiveness of new methods of exchanging information online.

The objective of Wendy Warren Austin’s chapter, “Hypertext Theory and Web Writing Assignments in the Writing and Professional Communication Classroom,” is to propose that writing and communication instructors focus less on the technical aspects of Web page publication and more on teaching principles of hypertext, visual design, and writing for online media. Austin notes that more professional and technical communication courses incorporate assignments involving Web page creation, as do many first-year composition classes. This convergence, Austin explains, creates interesting paradoxes for both instructors and professional website developers. To avoid such situations, Austin advocates that basic hypertext principles be taught in prerequisite courses, so instructors can spend more time teaching the advanced hypertext theories and the software applications used to generate such texts.

In their chapter, “Millennium Leadership Inc.: A Case Study of Computer and Internet-Based Communication in a Simulated Organization,” Stacey L. Connaughton and Brent D. Ruben present an approach to teaching distanced leadership and mediated communication competencies. The authors’ objectives in presenting this approach are to explain how one can use simulation as an instructional model, to highlight the outcomes of this approach, and to discuss
how educators, students, and professionals may benefit from such a design. To achieve this end, Connaughton and Ruben focus on three key aspects:

1. Discussing the role of simulations for approximating “real-world” dynamics within the classroom.
2. Presenting a course design that allows educators to do so.
3. Giving examples of computer and Internet-based communication from this course, Leadership in Groups and Organizations, which they developed at Rutgers University.

Through this focus, readers learn how simulations help students develop “real-world” communication competencies in geographically dispersed contexts. Such a perspective could also be beneficial to individuals who participate in international teams connected by online media.

Classroom environments can benefit from asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as online discussion groups, for they can enhance instruction in a number of ways. Shawn McIntosh explores this relationship between technology and teaching in his chapter, “Expanding the Classroom: Using Online Discussion Forums in College and Professional Development Courses.” In the chapter, McIntosh examines asynchronous CMC, specifically an online discussion group, in graduate-level writing and communication classes. He also explores how the discussion groups improved the learning environment in five major ways. McIntosh then offers advice for using online discussion groups in different classes, as well as warns of pitfalls related to such media. Academics and businesspersons can use McIntosh’s perspective as a guide when they consider using such technologies as a part of their organization’s communication practices.

Online media often facilitate collaboration by creating communities around a particular topic or project. The book’s third section, “Perspectives for Internet-Based Collaboration,” examines instructional models used to facilitate such online collaboration. Educators can use the approaches in this section to plan their own online collaborative activities, as can businesspersons who use online media to create virtual work teams.

In his chapter “Creating Community in the Technical Communication Classroom,” Timothy D. Giles examines how listservs can create a sense of community in technical communication classes. He begins by examining the notion of “community” through reviewing the literature related to composition and community, and then examining the concept of Psychological Sense of Community (PSC). Giles next explains how he used the Sense of Community Index (SCI) to examine community in four classes—two that used listservs and two that did not. The purpose of this comparison is to determine how online communities
compare to those formed in more traditional (offline) contexts. Academics and businesspersons alike can use Giles’ findings as a mechanism for creating effective online work groups (communities) around certain projects.

In her essay “Virtual Networks: Mapping Community-Based Collaboration and Professional Writing,” Melody Bowdon argues that the Internet has blurred the lines between the professional writing needs of for-profit and non-profit organizations. As a result of such blurring, Bowdon claims, professional writing teachers need to train their students to work in a variety of environments. In addition to traditional training that prepares students for the workplace, Bowdon advocates exposing professional writing students to the non-profit sector.

Rhonna J. Robbins-Sponaas and Jason Nolan’s chapter, “MOOs: Polysynchronous Collaborative Virtual Environments,” defines, describes, and assesses the form of collaborative virtual learning environment known as MOOs. The chapter deals with understanding what a MOO is, what features make it a valuable collaborative environment, and issues of accessibility, access, and governance. The chapter considers text-based multimedia environments; general features of synchronous and asynchronous technologies; the notion of polysynchrony; tools for rapid prototyping, education, or training of users; application accessibility; costs in hardware, software, and manhours; and whether it’s worth organizations getting involved in MOOs at their present state of development.

As noted earlier, online media are global in nature, for they allow individuals in different nations to interact with relative speed and ease. As a result, instructors and businesspersons could find themselves using such media to interact with students, counterparts, or managers located in different nations. Linguistic difference, however, could cause communication problems in such exchanges. The book’s fourth section, “Internet Approaches to English as a Second Language Instruction,” examines this situation by focusing on Internet-based approaches to teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). The essays in this section familiarize readers with methods for helping ESL students and employees improve their proficiency in English.

The section begins with Julia Lavid’s chapter, “Developing a Web-Based Course for the Conventional English Grammar Classroom: Issues in Planning and Design.” In her essay, Lavid presents a model for incorporating the Internet into in a traditional grammar course for non-native English speakers. Lavid hopes that her approach will encourage more ESL teachers to blend Web-based tools into traditional face-to-face courses—a perspective that could also benefit corporate training practices.

In “A Bridge to the Workplace: Using an Internet-Based Simulation in the Writing Classroom,” Mark R. Freiermuth overviews an online approach to decision-making simulation in an academic writing class comprising 26 ESL students in Japan. The students in the study constructed an online glossary aimed at build-
ing sufficient background knowledge related to the simulation. Teams of students then created online documents that demonstrated their understanding of the simulation problem and offered potential solutions to situations. In this process, students received information via the Web, and all related documents were posted to student homepages. Assessment and observation revealed that the simulation motivated students by making connections between simulation activities and career choices. The results of such a study can serve as an impetus for similar simulations in academia, business, and government.

The degree of access facilitated by online media mean that they can often be a key mechanism for seeking assistance. In the case of education, this assistance could come in the form of online tutoring; in the case of industry, it is often embodied by online help activities. In both cases, it is imperative that assistance providers understand the needs and the goals of their clients in order to provide beneficial information. The book’s fifth section, “Internet-Based Tutoring,” presents perspectives for providing help through online media. While the essays in this section focus on tutoring practices related to writing, the ideas and approaches covered in these chapters provide insights for how businesses could provide online assistance.

In the section’s first essay, “The State of Online Writing Labs: Have They Fulfilled Their Potential?,” Jo Mackiewicz presents a study of 343 online writing labs (also known as OWLs). Through this presentation, Mackiewicz tries to answer the question of whether OWLs are fulfilling their potential by becoming fully interactive spaces where tutors help students become better writers through email and other media of electronic communication. The article also suggests future directions for the development of online writing labs. While such perspectives relate to educational (tutoring) practices, these results could also provide industry with insights on how to create interactive online help services.

Amy Lee Locklear’s chapter, “Is This a Real Person? A Tutor’s Response to Navigating Identity in the Spaces of a Synchronous Electronic Writing Center,” explores some of the theoretical and pedagogical issues that emerged from a study of identity, collaboration, and discourse methods in online writing centers. The premise of this study was to advance tutor training when transitioning from traditional face-to-face to synchronous online interactions. The study reveals the complexities of online identity perception and projection, and how it affects tutoring methods in online environments.

The book’s sixth and final section, “Future Trends in Computer Use for Written Communication,” examines how certain business, legal, and technical trends could affect communication through online media. While the topics covered in this section are by no means comprehensive, they do provide insights on important developments that can affect online communication in both the classroom and the workplace.
The section begins with Nancy A. Wiencek’s chapter, “Telework: A Guide to Professional Communication Practices.” In this chapter, Wiencek discusses the need to rethink professional communication practices as a result of the growing popularity of telecommuting. According to Wiencek, telework has had a significant impact on both task-oriented and personal aspects of written communication. The author calls for a dialog between teleworkers and their managers in order to re-negotiate professional communication practices.

The section’s second chapter, Brian Still’s “An Open Source Primer,” provides readers with an overview of Open Source Software (OSS). In this chapter, Still defines OSS and OSS movement, and explains the differences between OSS and proprietary software and the effects this difference could have on educational and workplace practices. Still believes that OSS will grow in popularity, and more and more organizations will rely on it. As a result, organizations need to know the benefits and the limitations of OSS in order to make more intelligent choices related to the kinds of software they will use.

In the section’s final chapter, “Cut and Paste: Remixing Composition Pedagogy for Online Workspaces,” John Logie expresses his concern with what he sees as a widening gap between traditional composition pedagogies and the realities of workplace communication. In his related discussion, Logie focuses particularly on how composition pedagogy often promotes the view of the writer as a solitary creator of the text, yet individuals in the workplace usually operate in teams. In order to address this gap, Logie offers pedagogical advice designed to promote a connection between the teaching of writing and the realities of workplace communication. Through such an approach, Logie provides readers from academia and industry with a framework from which dialogue can begin.

Online media provide academics and educators with a key point of overlap as both parties continually search for new ways to use the Internet in their activities. The readings in this collection can provide a mutual base of knowledge the two can use to explore online communication in terms of their own objectives and in terms of working with the “other.” Ideally, this mutual understanding will help readers realize how perspectives on and uses of online media can contribute to the learning process and to industry practices. Such a mutual understanding can, in turn, contribute to an academia-industry dialogue that will result in the cooperation needed to help individuals make the transition from students to employees.

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