Chapter 2
Writing MOOEEs?
Reconsidering MOOCs in Light of the OWI Principles

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ABSTRACT
In this chapter, the authors consider the conundrum of a writing MOOC, which is both a counter-traditional type of college “course” and an experimental online venue that recently has gained, lost, and regained traction. Using the CCCC OWI Principles and current scholarship as grounding, the authors argue that MOOCs are too big and technologically unwieldy to be considered a traditional, credit-bearing writing course and that they are problematic even when the credit issue is removed from the equation. Issues include inherent accessibility, responsibilities to stakeholders, infrastructure challenges, needs for educator preparation and training, and compensation. The authors then reimagine the writing MOOC as a MOOEE, or massive open online educational experience, to take advantage of its relative benefits. Nonetheless, even reconceiving a MOOC as a MOOEE does not solve all of its problems when held against educational principles that address both learning and material conditions.

INTRODUCTION
Through all the crackling conversations in education publications and forums about massive open online courses (MOOCs), the particulars of online instruction or distance learning are still not differentiated enough from online writing instruction (OWI). Generally speaking, online instruction encompasses teaching online in any discipline, but OWI is unlike most online disciplinary instruction in two straightforward ways:

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1. Online writing courses are not content-driven, and
2. They always require writing.

Although writing courses can have what we might think of as disciplinary content—such as the writing studies approaches Downs and Wardle (2007) described—they are skill-focused in that they are based on learning about, composing, and sharing writing. Writing must be practiced to be learned or, as Yancey (2015) articulated, “Learning to write effectively requires different kinds of practice, time, and effort” (p. 64). In high-stakes settings like credit-bearing college courses, a student’s practice writing needs an instructor’s responsive feedback and guidance.

Writing courses, including online writing courses (OWCs), are—or should be—about composing, the primary activity that occurs in them. Because such composing occurs in the context of potential readers, a writing course necessarily is about writers interacting with each other and the instructor. While teaching about writing occurs in any writing course, the writing itself—alphabetic text and multimodal compositions alike—is the main focus. In online settings particularly, that instruction happens through and with writing. Anecdotally speaking, OWI materials most often are delivered in textual form. The student’s writing—also usually text-based—needs to be read; teachers and peers typically offer feedback using text with occasional digital voice instruction. This basic nature of writing-as-communication for a genuine reader-as-audience is the particular, peculiar flavor differentiating writing courses from most other college courses. The added nature of writing-as-teaching is OWI’s general modus operandi and its most challenging element. In both cases, the writing course builds as it proceeds, and the course texts emerge as students write and rewrite because students create those texts—hence, the course itself—over time.

This crucial distinction between general online instruction and OWI represents a challenge for compositionists. In that context, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction (2013) published A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction, which identifies and describes core educational principles and example effective practices for teaching postsecondary writing online. The statement’s practical purpose is to support writing program administrators (WPAs), teachers, and tutors as they administer, design, and teach OWCs or tutor online writing students, and as they communicate with others about them.

In this chapter, we consider the conundrum of a writing MOOC, which is both a counter-traditional type of college “course” and an experimental online venue that has gained, lost, and regained traction in a few short years. Using the OWI Principles and current scholarship as grounding, we argue that MOOCs are too big and technologically unwieldy to be considered traditional, credit-bearing writing courses. Credit issues aside, problems with these courses include inherent accessibility, responsibilities to stakeholders, infrastructure challenges, educator training, and compensation. We then reimagine the writing MOOC as a MOOEE, or massive open online educational experience, to take advantage of its relative benefits. Nonetheless, even reconceiving a MOOC as a MOOEE does not solve all of its problems when held against educational principles that address both online composition learning and material conditions. Minimally, we believe online writing students still need instructors to help them improve as writers, an opinion grounded in the principle-centered OWI Position Statement.

The online education landscape continues to groan with tectonic shifts and changes. Some see these rumbles as harbingers of destructive eruptions. But this geological metaphor shifts from impending disaster to regeneration if educators reframe these changes as being driven by mutable processes. This chapter envisions changing writing MOOCs into MOOEEs to improve their educational potential.