Chapter 12

The Online Writing Program Administrator (OWPA): Maintaining a Brand in the Age of MOOCs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores issues specific to writing program administration considering the huge influx of online writing courses across the country. The author argues that a pedagogical shift has occurred that requires a change in administering writing programs: teaching online is different than teaching face-to-face. Considering this influx and pedagogical shift, the author argues that in the age of MOOCs, focusing on faculty support and the development and maintenance of online writing courses (OWCs) becomes imperative. The central idea of the chapter is that in order for online writing instructors to focus on what they do best (teaching), they need to be led by someone with online writing instruction (OWI) experience, who is trained and qualified to lead a writing program that includes OWCs. The author argues for the development of a new WPA role, an Online Writing Program Administrator (OWPA), in order to distinguish a brand (a concept from Keith Rhodes, 2010) of OWI, which is distinctly different than the instruction and content offered by MOOCs.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the New Media Consortium Horizon Report identified six technologies as potential game changers for education: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) being the first of them. While MOOCs have been growing in popularity since their 2008 invention—and their appeal extends beyond free learning and the development of new skills—educators continue to be weary of their presence and argue that “that there is a need to examine these new approaches through a critical lens to ensure they are effective and evolve past the traditional lecture-style pedagogies” (New Media Consortium Horizon Report, 2013, p. 4). MOOCs are particularly worrisome for online writing instructors who realize the value in reduced classroom sizes, which enable instructors to provide more personalized instruction to students. MOOCs,
by definition, negate this valuable component of writing pedagogy. In “Teaching the Online Writing Instruction (OWI) Course,” author Scott Warnock (2015) argues “that the experience that MOOCs provide is not one that should be “confused with the disciplinary concept of a writing course, in which interaction with the instructor is integral” (p. 175). While instructors are an “integral” part of the success of an online writing course (OWC), proper training for those instructors is also very important, and not just training to teach online, but training to teach writing online.

Looking at the CCCC OWI Committee’s Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing (2013), one can see that one of the committee’s main focuses is on support for OWI instructors (specifically looking at Principles 6 & 7^2). This focus extends to proper OWI training and preparation; supporting the instructor who is “integral” to the course experience. Nevertheless, support, preparation and training aren’t always the top priorities at institutions with online courses. As Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann (2004) note in Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction, “While money is spent relatively freely to develop online learning platforms, software, and self-contained modules, precious few dollars are spent on teacher training, particularly on training that supersedes learning how to navigate a specific electronic platform and that addresses instead the pedagogy of online teaching and learning” (p. xiii). While many assume that what works in a face-to-face course will seamlessly translate to an OWC, unfortunately this is not always the case. Due to budget cuts, most colleges are being pressured to do more with less, thereby feeling pressure to offer OWCs. However, as Warnock (2015) asserts, “in delivering MOOCs or the next greatest teaching innovation, OWI teachers should not forego what makes great teaching and what makes institutions of higher education work” (p. 174). Instructors are an integral cog in “making higher education work,” and it is clear that OWI requires instructors to possess a different skill set than used in their face-to-face writing instruction.

Stuart Selber (2004) reminds us in his essay, “Multiliteracies for a Digital Age,” “Those who are centrally involved in the change process itself must have the requisite knowledge and skills needed to get the job done” (p. 226). In order for OWI instructors to focus on what they do best, they need to be led by someone who is trained to do so. So we must consider whether or not the leaders of the programs and the OWCs have access to training that will give them “requisite knowledge and skills needed to get the job done” (Selber, 2004, p.226). In this chapter, I will argue the need for an online program administrator (OWPA). In defining the OWPA role, I will explore the history and the current state of the WPA role and determine that current circumstances do indeed require redefining the WPA role. Based on personal experience and current OWI scholarship, I will outline the ideal framework needed to facilitate a writing program that includes both face-to-face and OWCs. Further, I will provide suggestions to address the pressure to offer more online courses, arguing that with the rise of MOOCs. The key to sustaining a writing program full of qualified and supported instructors is through—what Keith Rhodes (2010) termed—branding.

UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY OF WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

Before delving too far into the need for an OWPA, it is important to explore a brief history of the WPA role in first-year writing at the university level. One of the main issues with the role is the workload. Oftentimes WPAs begin with being in charge of the writing program, but the role expands, which leads to burn out. Susan McLeod’s (2007) book Writing Program Administration is one of the first to provide a comprehensive history of the WPA role and she explores why the role has such high demands and often
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