Chapter 17
What Online Writing Spaces Afford Us in the Age of Campus Carry, “Wall-Building,” and Orlando’s Pulse Tragedy

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ABSTRACT
Theorizing about twenty-first century writing spaces, the authors argue that online writing environments offer particular affordances to writing teachers when navigating challenging subject matter at complex, political moments. Alongside narrative theorization, the authors provide stories about their writing experiences alongside their students, while offering strategies for complicating and extending our field’s discussions of the possibilities for online writing in the age of massive online open courses. The authors conclude that, while online spaces cannot offer “safe spaces” for writing instruction, they may offer “braver” spaces as students and instructors alike grapple with challenging, political landscapes.

KAIRONIC COLLABORATIONS: REBECCA AND TRAVIS
In the early 2010’s, we, Rebecca and Travis, held leadership roles in the University of Houston (UH) English Department’s hybrid and fully-online online writing initiative. As we taught online courses and led our colleagues through workshops focused on online writing instruction, we fielded best practices from the discipline’s experts (Hewett, 2010; Warnock, 2009) and drew upon the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s (CCCC) Position Statement on Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (CCCC Committee, 2013). While these resources prepared those we mentored and us for designing courses’ nuts and bolts, they were insufficient in preparing us for talking with our students and colleagues about challenging subject matter in online writing spaces. With recent events surrounding

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Texas agents bolstering border patrol, systemic racism and police brutality, and queer injustices extending to and beyond institutional access, all topics that we would expect to surface and then be discussed in face-to-face writing courses, we were at a loss for how to have such conversations online, or how to create an online space where students would feel comfortable bringing up such topics. Not only was this not covered in our own professional development as online writing instructors, but it was also not welcomed by some of our local workshop leaders as a valuable and necessary component of training and professional development for new online writing instructors.

We see a similar absence surrounding the scholarship around the teaching and development of MOOCs. Researchers that argue for the value of MOOCs recognize the strength of their interactive nature (Krause, 2014) and their potential for writing research (Grabill, 2014), while those who argue against MOOCs note the potential lack of an effective writing teacher who offers individualized attention to students (Porter, 2014), the problematic idea of the MOOC as a free education for all (Barlow, 2014), and the limitations of a teacher who primarily acts as “guide” rather than teacher (Samuels, 2014). While these are important resources for both MOOC instructors and online writing teachers, they fall short of preparing instructors for context-specific writing scenarios. In this chapter, we write from our own experiences of teaching writing online and working with students through discussions about tense subjects, such as representing illegal immigrants and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) injustices through writing and research.

While this was always an aim of our chapter, recent events that took place after our initial writing forced us to rethink and re-prioritize our focus. We could not fail to address local university policies on gun control instituted in August 2016 and the recent Orlando tragedy. As we reflect back on how we discussed tense subject matters in the online space in the past, we attempt to imagine how we can use such strategies to help us talk and write through such events with students in the future and how we can prepare online writing instructors for such conversations. We argue that, although online courses and MOOCs can, perhaps easily, ignore political climate and current events, university online writing instructors have a responsibility to consider specific university context through which local, national, and global events are realized. We also argue that the university online writing course, and online spaces in general, provide a fruitful environment for these discussions.

In this chapter, we imagine what the future holds for online writing instruction (OWI). We take the University of Houston online writing environment as a site for critically examining our pedagogical roles and responsibilities. While some have argued that Massive Open Online Courses have much to offer online writing teachers, we insist that online courses housed within particular universities have unique institutional contexts that shape the course environment in significant ways different from MOOC environments. In particular, we take up Charles Lowe’s (2014) question in the Introduction to Invasion of the MOOCs: The Promise and Perils of Massive Open Online Courses (2014) about how learning happens in an environment made up of thousands of students and in which the teacher’s role becomes closer to that of an “instructional designer” (p. xi) than that of an interactive teacher. Specifically, he asks, “What is lost without these student-teacher connections? That’s the question that has yet to be answered (p. xii).”

Using a teacher-research approach, we investigate, reflect on, and build theory for practice from our online teaching in the context of local and national zeitgeist. We argue that the MOOC-like approach to online education as rooted primarily in effective course design facilitated by an appropriate guide, a kind of free education for the masses, misrepresents the potential and value of the student-teacher interactions that are central to teaching writing effectively online in our current political/cultural moment.
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