Chapter 18

Introduction Discussion Board Forums in Online Writing Courses Are Essential: No, Really, They Are

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ABSTRACT

This chapter develops a framework for thinking about online writing instruction and how it impacts training and the evaluation of new and senior faculty. This chapter interrogates online writing instruction by using activity theory and ethnography to examine the role of introduction discussion forums in an online writing course. Results from this study show how student interaction in introduction discussion boards is influenced by peer reciprocity and instructor modeling. The analysis of this study contains important ramifications for WPAs regarding how an online writing course functions, and the motivation of its users, and how these factors will impact course delivery and programmatic writing policies. Furthermore, the analysis of this study suggests ways in which administrators can increase efficiency and quality of faculty training as institutions accept the pedagogical shift to online writing instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The skills that may foster a strong environment for interaction and collaboration in the face-to-face (f2f) classroom do not necessarily translate naturally to the online environment. The collegiality that can develop in an f2f classroom—the moments of playful banter and seemingly off-topic discussion—can be completely absent. Consequently, instructors may struggle with how to encourage student interaction in the online environment.

An additional factor complicating student interaction is the limitation of course software and tools. Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) must balance a variety of criteria when considering the pedagogical functions of the course management system (CMS) for an online writing course: cost, ease of
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use, available tools, functions, privacy. In regard to this emphasis on tool use and overall system function, Dennen (2005) cautions that tool use and student interactions in an online course are contextual:

Tool design may have some effect on pedagogy, but it is the design of specific course activities that affects their ability to generate effective peer and instructor–student interactions. Further complicating the matter, there does not appear to be one correct or better way to teach via an online medium; instead, one’s contextual factors should greatly affect the selection of teaching methods and activities, just as they should in a traditional classroom. (p. 129)

To meet the demands of the contextual nature of online writing instruction, instructors often use discussion boards to facilitate student interaction; however, this interaction has the potential to be minimal or insular in online environments, especially those in a massive open online course (MOOC). In an effort to encourage interaction, many online instructors begin class with an introductions board for students to meet, a pedagogical move reminiscent of the f2f ice breaker activities of the first day. The goal of these discussion tools in the online course is to mimic the kind of interaction that students are familiar with in the f2f setting.

Scholars in professional and technical writing have used activity theory, with its analysis of complex activity systems, as a theoretical and methodological frame (see Hart-Davidson, 2002; Roy, 2004; Spinuzzi, 2004; Spinuzzi, Hart-Davidson & Zachry, 2006; Mehlenbacher, 2007; Sherlock, 2007; Walls, 2007; Mehlenbacher, 2008; McNely, 2009; Jones & Potts, 2010; McNely, 2010). In examining online student interaction specifically, activity theory allows researchers to investigate how students use tools in their environment. The socio-cultural and historical elements of activity theory, in particular, allow instructors to address Dennen’s criticism because they emphasize the importance of contextual factors in shaping interaction.

In this chapter, activity theory and ethnography are used to examine the significance of introductions discussion forums in online writing instruction. By analyzing a fully online first-year composition (FYC) course, this chapter describes how a faculty member used an introductions discussion forum to connect with her FYC students and model discussion forum engagement for her students. The goal of this chapter is to develop a framework for thinking about online writing instruction that impacts training and evaluation of new and senior faculty. Additionally, the analysis in this chapter suggests programmatic applications of this research. Specifically, this analysis suggests that understanding what happens in an online writing course and what motivates its users will enhance course delivery at the faculty and administrative levels. Furthermore, the analysis in this chapter suggests ways in which administrators can better train their faculty for the pedagogical shift to online writing instruction.

ONLINE WRITING INSTRUCTION BACKGROUND

Rhetoric and composition scholars have acknowledged the need for discussion about online writing instruction by establishing the CCCC Committee on Best Practices for Online Writing Instruction to assess and address pedagogical, administrative, and disciplinary concerns of their community. In April 2011, the committee issued “Initial Report of the CCCC Committee for Best Practice in Online Writing Instruction,” which described pedagogy, training, and supplemental support as the top three themes that emerged from their studies. In March 2013, the committee released its “Position Statement of Principles