Chapter 23
Conducting Programmatic Assessments of Online Writing Instruction: CCCC’s OWI Principles in Practice

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ABSTRACT

Individuals seeking to evaluate the efficacy of online writing instruction (OWI) within a larger writing program must consider the unique challenges and opportunities of this method of teaching. This chapter describes the use of the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s “A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction” (2013) as a framework for assessment. The discussion focuses on the methodological process that led to the implementation of these principles in a local programmatic study, as well as the results of this analysis. This chapter ultimately argues that the application of the CCCC’s principles can be particularly beneficial for administrators seeking an accessible heuristic for assessing fully online and hybrid writing courses.

INTRODUCTION

Since Warnock’s (2009) seminal text Teaching Writing Online: How and Why, the expansion of online writing instruction (OWI) continues to present unique obstacles and opportunities for students, teachers, and writing program administrators (WPAs). Concepts, in particular, that OWI scholarship has neglected to address at length are assessment and evaluation. McKee and DeVoss (2013), however, noted in their collection Digital Writing: Assessment and Evaluation, “Within this dynamic [digital] landscape—where established and emerging practices and processes interanimate and remediate—we as writing instructors and administrators face some challenging questions, particularly around the a

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assessment and evaluation of student writing” (preface, para. 1). McKee and DeVoss’s contributors made significant strides toward advancing our understanding of how to effectively adapt our assessments of students’ multimodal writing. Hewett and Ehmann (2004), moreover, suggested how WPAs could work with instructors to assess individual OWI courses. But compositionists have yet to discuss how writing programs can adapt existing programmatic assessment practices to effectively evaluate OWI. How do the challenging questions McKee and DeVoss raised for digital writing, for instance, also manifest within a programmatic implementation of OWI? Although OWI evaluation at the writing program level has been touched on (Autry, 2011), a thorough description using a practical and accessible framework has yet to surface. This chapter will consequently describe the systematic process of evaluating OWI execution—specifically as a transition from previously addressing only face-to-face (f2f) assessment—focusing on the methodological decision-making process that led to the chosen study methods in a local programmatic study of one Writing Program’s OWI.

According to extant research and as emphasized by study participants, online instruction has several built-in potential benefits especially helpful to writing-intensive courses. Warnock (2009) provided several examples, including that by necessity, the course becomes more writing–based as well as that students who might otherwise be denied an education because of access issues can participate. He also argued that teachers and students can choose the personas they wish to present, independent of physical or affective characteristics. Furthermore, the electronic nature, according to Finlay et al. (2004), creates a record of all instruction and participation for reference. Similarly, instructors in this study believed that because OWI students must participate to demonstrate a presence (e.g., the requirement to comment on classmates’ blog posts), they forgo the choice to remain silent as they can during class. And, finally, with excellent instruction, a high rate of participation in discussions creates a strong sense of community, contended Webb Boyd (2008).

There are, however, several drawbacks associated with this method of course delivery, including a high drop out and fail rate (Sapp & Simon, 2005; Sussman & Dutter, 2010). Warnock (2009), again, explained other obstacles such as the potential for instructors to become teachers of technology instead of content, the amplification of student or instructor disorganization issues, and the added difficulty of building course communities. Assessment thus enables researchers to ascertain the extent to which both the benefits and drawbacks associated with OWI are applicable within a local setting. This chapter consequently provides a heuristic model for assessment using the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s, “A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction,” (2013) as a framework. Using the CCCC’s Principles as an initial assessment access point can provide critical insight into OWI implementation, especially for evaluators and researchers who perhaps lack significant familiarity with online writing courses and/or a particular writing program.

BACKGROUND

Research on effective online teaching practices in general and across disciplines populates library databases continuously, providing instructors across universities with myriad material for continuous online instruction improvement. Online Learning Journal, for example, publishes articles devoted solely to improving online courses across disciplines. Researchers of online courses, publishing in various journals, have approached the topic from different angles. Some studies have compared online to face-to-face (f2f) as a way to determine which mode results in higher pass rates and elicits better student evaluations.