Chapter 7

Creative Approaches to Teaching Life Writing Online: The Value of Discussions, Creative Blog Posts, Final Projects, and Real-Time Video Interaction

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author examines various ways in which discussions, creative blog posts, final course projects, and the real-time video tool BB Learn Collaborate can be best used to engage online students in a graduate course in “The History of Life Writing.” Moving between detailed research about technology, collaboration, and autobiography as well as her own personal reflections about her experiences teaching the course, this chapter provides some useful suggestions about how to best engage online graduate students in the subject of life writing. Finally, drawing from students’ own feedback, the chapter reveals the powerful effects that real-time video conferencing can have for creating an engaging online presence for teachers and students alike.

INTRODUCTION

For nearly fifteen years I have taught online graduate courses in the Rhetoric, Writing, and Digital Media Studies Program at Northern Arizona University. During that time I have continually updated my courses to make discussions stronger, blog and journal assignments more inviting, and final writing assignments more flexible and practical so as to accommodate our student population, many of whom have full-time or part-time work as teachers in middle schools or high schools, work as editors, or hold positions as workers in business and industry. For the first time this year, however, I have not only revisited those aspects of my classes and tried to bolster them to create a stronger community in my classes. I have also brought in more real-time, synchronous video interaction into my online classes through BB

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Learn Collaborate. I have found it very effective in terms of increasing student motivation, engagement, community, and success. As J. Politis and D. Politis’s (2016) careful study of the BB Learn Collaborate experience suggests, “easy access to Blackboard Collaborate and deliberate structure [was] found to motivate learners [to] become more engaged in their learning process leading to improved knowledge acquisition attributes of conceptualisation, tolerance and amiability” (p. 212). Likewise, as Robertson and Riggs (2018) reveal, “finding ways to emphasize the authenticity of collaboration can increase student motivation by making the value of the activity more apparent” (p. 82). Working together—be it through discussions, blogs, or video—can be invaluable in getting and keeping students highly engaged.

In this chapter I will examine how the various course assignments as well as this specific real-time video feature functioned in “The History of Life Writing,” a 7.5 week long course that I taught in Spring 2019. But, first, I should prepare the reader. This is not a standard academic argument alone but rather something of a hybrid text. My approach to this chapter is a bit nontraditional in that it weaves together scholarly commentary and analyses alongside my own personal meditations about the course. I chose to take this approach because the subject of the course and therefore the chapter seemed to call for it, to encourage me to weave together multiple voices and multiple identities as well as to reflect upon what I was writing as I was writing it.

Increasingly, life writing is becoming not only a more important part of our academic and scholarly arenas, but also an important part of our popular cultural moment. As Fuchs and Howes (2008) note, life writing is now a key commodity:

Scrapbooking, trade-publication guides for conducting family history, do-it-yourself genealogy databases, memoir clubs and writing circles, contracted ghostwritten autobiographies for corporate leaders or even the corporations themselves, commercially prepared video biographies for weddings, anniversaries, and funerals—all these trends speak to the importance of life writing in contemporary culture. (p. 11)

Thus, life writing not only has value to our students in terms of its history and its theory. Life writing’s value now suffuses much of what they are encountering in their daily lives as well. Or, to put it another way, as McCooey and Takolander (2018) describe,

The rise of social media, to choose one example, has made autobiographical representation ubiquitous. Such forms of representation are often the source of considerable cultural anxiety. Social media, mobile networks and smart devices mean that life writing is not only ubiquitous, but also instantaneous and trans-medial (p. 2).

Autobiographical writing is no incidental part of our students’ lives at this point. It operates as a central form of writing in which they take part—even if they do not always look at it critically or analytically. Likewise, how this happens—via technology use—is crucial to realize. As Pacansky-Brock and Ko (2017) discuss, “outside the walls of the classroom, most college students learn through connected and highly personalized experiences” that involve rich peer involvement, peer involvement that often centers around issues of the self.

My “History of Life Writing” graduate course continually takes the value of life writing in our cultural moment into consideration. It entails that students produce a number of creative nonfiction blog posts. These are assignments taken from Ellis (2009). I select ones that specifically focus on the construction of the self—from a one-inch window exercise during which students have to place a one-inch frame on