Collaborative Writing in Composition: Enabling Revision and Interaction Through Online Technologies

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ABSTRACT

As online education grows in popularity, the literature on such courses has expanded as dramatically. However, discussion of online tools specifically for composition instruction has received far less attention than general course-management systems and online discussion forums. The composition process has changed with the advent of computer processing, yet composition research rarely focuses on the advantages of the digital composition process. That process could change again with recent developments in social systems and networked, cloud-based applications. This article highlights the way online composition platforms can meet the needs of writing courses. New tools can provide new opportunities for student collaboration, teacher involvement, and writing-process research. This article uses Sally J. McMillan’s model of Cyber-Interactivity and Robert R. Johnson’s model of User-Centered Design as frameworks in which to view collaborative writing, arguing that students in online composition courses need collaborative tools that allow a single document to be created by a student, edited by others, and commented on by all. The ill-fated Google Wave platform is evaluated through this perspective. Practical benefits of the platform and implications for writing instruction are included. Collaborative online composition, using systems with features like Google Wave, is presented as essential in modern composition courses.

Keywords: Collaborative Composition, Instructional Design, Instructional Technology, Online Education, Peer Review

INTRODUCTION

Both composition and course design present particular dilemmas that prevent online composition courses from matching quality of experience seen in standard face-to-face classes. Additionally, classes taught via computer should be able to use the medium as a tool to better understand and work with the act of writing, which is now done using those same computers. Online composition courses need to employ a system that allows composition teachers to witness the process of writing without needing to rely on formal draft stages and provides a forum for true peer-to-peer collaboration instead of simply communication. Using the theories

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of Nancy Sommers, Sally J. McMillan, and Robert R. Johnson, I will show that such a system (previously available with Google’s Wave platform) would appropriately address current course-design concerns, support the pressing need for social and collaborative learning in online environments, and emphasize the role of revision in writing.

Early research into the process of writing involved asking students to “think out loud” while composing essays, journal entries, or other specific assignments given by either instructors or researchers (Crowley, 1977; Emig, 1971; Perl, 1979). In order to better understand the writing process used by students outside a laboratory environment, researchers developed studies that addressed the artificial nature of previous work and drew attention to the variety of steps involved in creating a written work (Berkenkotter & Murray, 1983; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Rose, 1980). Despite efforts to the contrary, researchers continued to confess that the only observable element in the writing process is the product it created. The continued emphasis on researching process, rather than the observable product, created some dissension (Horowitz, 1986). However, the focus of research turned from the overall writing process to a particular interest in revision, now accepted as a critical step in the production of good writing (Hawkins, 1980; Sommers, 1980; Yagelski, 1995). The meaning of the word “revision” differs between students and teachers: student revisions tend toward the surface level only, while teachers expect deeper and more thorough changes. More recent research has focused on helping students understand the benefits of deep revision, and one common instructional method is the use of peer revision, which is effective in regular, ESOL, and special-education courses (Ferris, 1997; Haaga, 1993; McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Paulus, 1999; Stoddard & MacArthur, 1993; Topping, 1998; Wallace & Hayes, 1991). By evaluating the papers of their peers, students become more critical of their own writing and more aware of the expectations of the writing situation. Paradoxically, as distance learning grows in popularity, composition students are increasingly distanced from peer review, often writing alone and submitting without input from classmates. Students need a system for facilitating online collaborative writing, and instructors need a system that emphasizes revision over completion. As I will show, Google’s discontinued Wave platform provided such a solution. I will argue that a similar platform would benefit both classroom practice and composition research.

Whereas composition research has traditionally focused on student processes, research into online courses typically focuses on the Course Management System (CMS), the uptake of those systems by students, and student perceptions of the quality or ease-of-use of the CMS. Enhancements to the feature set of a CMS are driven more by technological development than by instructional methodology, such as the addition of “blog-style” discussion boards in response to the explosive popularity of blogging, rather than in response to a demonstration of pedagogical necessity. The evaluation of a CMS often focuses on the user interface or the features offered by a specific product, not on a specific student need or whether a feature is academically relevant (Gillet, Latchman, Salzmann, & Crisalle, 2001; Ovadia, 2010; Treviranus, 2009). Student communication styles are most often studied in terms of whether those communications are asynchronous or synchronous (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Hirumi & Bermúdez, 1996; Jahng, Nielsen, & Chan, 2010; Klemm, 2005). More recently, studies have evaluated whether online student work can be considered truly collaborative given the limitations and abilities of current software (Paulus, 2005). Studies of student perceptions of online learning often find that students’ interest in a course is directly proportional to the level of active engagement; the online format itself does not substantially contribute. Indeed, actively engaging students with the course material is notably more difficult online than in person due to the lack of presence. The literature on online course design is severely lacking in evaluations of the affect of these courses on student engagement and their feelings toward both class and
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