My Not-Quite-Scientific Composition I Experiment

Although I have been teaching college writing courses non-stop since I first entered the classroom as a T.A. in 2001, and have taught for a number of universities and community colleges in both Minnesota and Wyoming, Fall 2014 was the first time I taught an online class. I wasn't exactly *avoiding* teaching online… I was just never told to do one until my annual contract was renewed in Fall 2014—with the caveat that I teach an online Composition I course.

In all honesty, I dreaded teaching online. "How am I supposed to put all of what I do," I said to my mother over lunch, running through a short catalog of facial expressions I use in the classroom, "into a box?"

Yes, my biggest concerns about teaching an online course revolved around my wide array of facial expressions, sense of comedic timing in the classroom, and varying levels of sarcasm I incorporate when explaining some of the more complex (heavy, dull, boring) topics we must get them to care about in Composition I.

Running a close second to that concern, though, were many others. How do I turn what I do in the classroom into an online-only format? How will my students perform some of my favorite group activities? How will my students do peer revision on their papers? How will I grade, and return papers to my students? How will I make sure the students are doing all of the work I'm assigning?

Realizing I had no choice, I decided to construct a little academic experiment for myself: I would use the same textbook, try to incorporate the same group activities, and have students complete the same writing assignments in *both* my online and face-to-face Composition I courses during the Fall of 2014. That would at least give me a higher level of "investment" into the success of the online course, right?

And then I looked around for assistance. Thankfully, I have: A) a friend from graduate school who teaches some online courses for another school, and B) access to college libraries with books on how to teach online courses. Those two things allowed me to breathe a little easier as start-up week approached. But, since I had to wait until start-up week to get issued a laptop computer on which to work, I allowed myself to stagnate on the front-end-loading portion of course set-up until the week before the semester officially began.

So how did I do? Read on.

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Start-up Week: Six Days Until the Semester Officially Began.

Getting the laptop wasn't automatic success. I managed to sign in to D2L just fine; I managed to create a Profile for myself just fine. I couldn't understand the rest of D2L-speak, though. My grad school friend suggested I contact my campus D2L support staff—who set me up with an appointment for training on the Friday of start-up week. Classes were beginning on Monday. That would leave me just over 48 hours to prepare my online class—but I was already scheduled to do some personal projects out-of-town (sans electricity and internet access) Saturday and Sunday. Sigh.

By the time I headed out of town Friday at 1pm, I at least had a Profile, a Course Syllabus, and a Semester Schedule ready for students to view Monday morning—which I viewed as the Official Beginning.

Challenge #1: What Defines the "First Day of Class"?

Defining the "First Day of Class" has always been the minute I walk into the classroom for the first time. Depending on how often a Composition I class meets, my first day of class has ranged from 8am Monday morning to 3pm Tuesday afternoon. But when does it begin for the online student?

Answer: the minute they first log on. So, I chose to be ready, and have the Welcome Message, Syllabus, and Semester Schedule all viewable by 8am Monday morning.

Challenge #2: What Should the "Welcome Message" Say?

By the time we become teachers, we've all heard the phrase "You never get a second chance to make a first impression" innumerable amounts of time, correct? So each First Day outfit is always carefully selected, and the syllabi are prepared and printed. There have been a number of times I've gone into a classroom as a brand new employee, resident of the town, or even without a class roster—but the outfit, and the official reading-through-the-syllabus have set the tone for the semester.

So what would the best Welcome Message for an online course say? And, how should it be constructed? Using the formal level of language many instructors feel students "should" be using in academic writing? Or, could I use a more casual approach, to make students feel comfortable in this "introductory" writing course? I wear a "power suit" when I walk into the brick-and-mortar classroom the first day—but then I tell jokes to make the students relax a bit…

Sitting down at the computer, the words just fell into place.

"Welcome to ENGL 1151, *Composition 1*, the Online Version.

I am your guide, Jeanette Lukowski.

I won't bore you with a lot of details about myself today—we have the rest of the semester for that. But do know that I'm always willing to answer questions.

I've been teaching a variety of college writing classes since September 2001, at a variety of schools. This online gig is new to me, though, so bear with me if I stumble.

If you're reading this, you've successfully signed into our class. Excellent! Now find the syllabus, please; it's going to dictate the pace for us, and lay out the institutional parameters of the course.

My personal expectations (deadlines, formatting, rubrics) will be surfacing throughout the semester when they matter. The brief-and-condensed-version for today: there are two kinds of writing that will take place in this course, Formal and informal. Yes, I'll explain it as we go along—but be aware of it, okay? Formal writing will be expected in the essays you submit to me via the

Drop Box; informal writing will be limited to journals, and some of the discussion board posts. (Not texting language, though. Yes, I'm pretty good at reading it, but part of my job is to get you familiar with the kind of writing you might be doing in a job setting. Do you think your boss would appreciate a solicitation to his / her new client in text-speak? I'll tell you stories later.)

For now, welcome!
Locate the syllabus, please.

[Signature Block, with complete title and affiliation]"

Challenge #3: Why Do I Need to Separate the Syllabus from the Semester Schedule?

I don't know if I actually *needed* to, but my grad school friend splits her materials up. She said online students need to understand how the class will be run—which means clearly explaining how due dates and deadlines will work, how to contact me with questions, and how to respectfully engage in discussions with other students enrolled in the course. So I separated the parts.

Although they contained much of the same information, the Syllabus and Semester Schedule for the online course were modified versions of what I gave my face-to-face class at 10am Monday morning. The Syllabus for the online course became much longer with the level of details needing to be covered, and the Semester Schedule was pruned of information I didn't want students to worry about. (I had visions of students who would "work ahead.")

The Semester Began—And I Faced a Steep Learning Curve.

I am happy to report I had the Welcome Message, Syllabus, and Semester Schedule posted, and ready to open at 8am Monday morning—the official start of Fall semester.

Whether it was a good idea or a bad idea, I told my online students about my inexperience teaching through an online platform. I wanted them to respect my general experience and knowledge, and "forgive" me for what I anticipated would be a rough semester as I figured out how to navigate through an online course myself. Having worked through a training session for online course delivery six or seven years previous (online, of course), my training had been for a different online delivery platform than I was now using.

Thankfully, the university has a great online support team. I attended nearly every training session they offered Fall semester—from Discussions to Quizzes to Grade Book Management—and emailed more questions than I care to remember right now. In spite of facing a learning curve resembling the steepest incline of a roller-coaster, I was generally pleased with what I managed to pull off that semester. I was pleased, that is, until two weeks before the semester ended.

It never occurred to me to "Close" assignment boxes, until a couple of students started completing, and submitting work from the beginning of the semester.

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So what did I learn from this experience?

#1) **I learned that "personality" *can* be imparted through text in a message board.**

During my first one-on-one meetings with one of the online-support team members, I received a compliment that helped lighten the weight of instructions I ran through my brain over-and-over while walking the mile back to my parked car.

She said, "I just love how you sound like a real person here in your Message to the class! That's very good. One of the problems many of us face, when teaching an online course, is that students don't see us as real *people*."

#2) **I learned why *some* students especially value online courses.**

There were 25 students enrolled in each of my sections of *Composition 1* the first day of Fall semester. I recognized one of the names in my online roster: a young woman who had taken a face-to-face writing course with me during Spring semester. When I asked her (via email) why she was taking the course online rather than in the classroom, she explained that all of the face-to-face courses had been full by the time her registration window opened.

A few of the students lived and worked in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area; one had begun her degree program on campus before accepting a job in the cities, another was interested in a degree program unique to Bemidji State University.

A few other students lived within an hour's drive of campus—but they worked full-time day jobs, and had families to tend to at night. Online courses are more manageable for these students, especially at the "Generals" level of courses.

#3) **I learned that complaining students exist everywhere, regardless of the format.**

Tuesday, September 2nd, what I considered to be the first day of the second week of classes, I had an online student complaining about the due date for assignments being Friday at 5pm.

He might have sent the email to me on Friday night, or Saturday morning—but I didn't get it until Tuesday when I returned to the office. (One of the items in the online course Syllabus was about how I wouldn't be responsible for checking email messages during weekends, or school holidays. Monday was Labor Day.)

"My other classes," his email read, "have all had due dates of Sunday at 11:59pm."

I was annoyed by the suggestion that online courses should *all* operate the exact same way—but I did my best to set my annoyance aside while drafting my response. "I like to do my grading on weekends," I explained; "I also open up the assignments for this class at 1am Sunday mornings, which means you have nearly the entire week to complete the task, while my face-to-face students won't see the assignment until 10am Monday morning."

He never replied to my response—and wasn't consistent about getting the assignments done on time. Would the outcome have been different if I had changed the due dates to Sunday at 11:59pm?

#4) **I learned there was no adequate way to "read" student attendance.**

Attendance is important to me. Perhaps this is due to my years of working in Corporate America before transitioning over to teaching in my late 30's, but a component of the Final Grade for each of my face-to-face courses has always been Attendance. Online, I was unable to tell how often students were checking in, though. Were they on every day? Or, three times a week? Were they spending an adequate amount of time reading through the material I had posted? Were they "cheating" in their entries on the discussion boards by simply posting, then editing the entry—circumventing the caveat that they create a new post of their own before reading others' posts?

#5) **I learned that Peer Revision is even more difficult to execute online.**

I love Peer Revision. I feel it is a very important component of writing classes because it not only encourages students to become better writers, but it also empowers those who question their own writing abilities.

When teaching a face-to-face classroom, I dedicate one classroom day for Peer Revision work for each formal paper assigned, I form random groups based on who is in attendance each particular day, and I mix up the groups throughout the semester. The random-selection method used to form the groups usually means that "good" writers and "weak" writers are evenly distributed throughout the room. I remain in the room the entire time, keeping students on task, and making myself available for clarifying questions at any point.

So I tried to create a similar experience for the online students. I created a Discussion Board, explained the "rules" of Peer Revision, divided the students into random groups (which changed for each paper), and gave them several days to complete the work of Posting, Responding, Revising, and Submitting the Final Paper.

Students who chose not to participate created bad feelings within their groups, then—something I didn't quite know how to counteract. If students *didn't* email me about lack of participation from group members, I didn't notice it until I was assigning Participation points for the activity. When students *did* email, me, was their enough time left in the cycle to move group members around?

By the end of the semester, I just opened up the Discussion Board and left Peer Revision open to whoever was willing to participate, assigning Participation points accordingly.

#6) **I learned that online students weren't all as "serious" as I expected them to be.**

I had one young man who wouldn't do the smaller, somewhat weekly writing assignments I posted—but wrote an extensive end-of-semester paper on the topic of stalking. My student felt he was being stalked by someone he had met through an online discussion board; his paper began to read like a conspiracy-theorist had written it, bringing in information about how "I took a screen shot of what he had posted to [the celebrity's] web site," "I posted an excerpt of what he had posted on my wall," and "I even tracked down his URL to…."

So he had time to do all of *that*, but couldn't read any of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and write a one-page journal response for every set of 5 chapters? Ugh.

#7) **I learned how much I value the "relationships" I can build within a classroom.**

After the fact, I found out one of the students in my online course works on the same floor of the hospital I found myself in—during the semester—for a week. I had gone into the hospital on a Friday night, had an unplanned surgical procedure on Saturday morning, and was released the following Tuesday afternoon. It's a small town; it's a relatively small hospital.

When I read the Interview Essay he wrote, about his supervisor in the hospital, I became frustrated by the knowledge that I might have walked past him a dozen times as I took my 30 minute walks around the unit Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday.

Did he recognize me from my profile photo, and deferred to the hospital's policy on patient privacy? I would have happily visited with him about the novel we were reading at the time.

By the same token, students within the classroom are able to form friendships with others in the room. Are online students talking to each other beyond the class Discussion Board?

#8) **I realized I have much to learn before I feel *successful* about teaching online.**

As a general rule, I will accept "late" work—within reason—if *given* a good reason. In a face-to-face class, I'm able to see a student's facial expressions, and watch the body language while listening to the explanation before deciding whether or not I will accept the late work.

With an online course, though, the litmus test comes down to how the student explains the situation in an email. What if the student is a good writer, able to craft a story out of thin air?

In the end, it boiled down to how *many* of these emailed excuses I received from an individual student—and when the emailed excuse came, in relation to when the assignment was due.

Unfortunately, I didn't know about "Closing" an assignment box (not realizing there was a difference between "Due Date" and "End Date"), so some of the more experienced online students were able to slip the assignment in at the end of the semester sans permission.

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I had a really illuminating semester teaching the same course, with the same textbook, in both an online and a face-to-face classroom at the same time. I won't say that I'm now "reformed" to the idea of online instruction, but I *will* say I can see how online courses have merit for the right kind of student.

One of the online students, identified only as a Sophomore, Criminal Justice Major, took advantage of the End-of-Semester Course Evaluation to tell me how s/he really felt:

"Sometimes the course felt a little disorganized. I wasn't always clear on due dates or due date times. It seemed that the due date times changed occasionally, which makes it difficult when planning out when to do homework in your course along with homework from another course. I always find it helpful when I'm on the course homepage to see the assignments that are going to be due in the next week or so. They're usually listed with the date and time, but in your course not every assignment was listed. […] Early on in class it was going okay, but as the course load increased it became clear that you were maybe struggling with some aspects of online teaching."

I will concede, I had the Semester Schedule with the 5 Major Essays posted by Monday, 8am, the first day of Fall semester. But did I have to have the Weekly Activities all plotted out and explained the first day as well? That sounds more like an antiquated "Correspondence Course" to me, rather than an online, interactively-based Composition 1 college writing course—complete with personalized, detailed, (gently explained) constructive commentary provided on every writing assignment so each student can evolve into a better writer.

Will I teach an online course again?

If I have to.