

# Minimizing the Distance in Online Writing Courses through Student Engagement

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## ***Applied Pedagogies: Strategies for Online Writing Instruction***

edited by Daniel Ruefman and Abigail G. Scheg. Boulder: UP of Colorado for Utah State UP, 2016. Print.

## ***Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction***

edited by Beth L. Hewett and Kevin Eric DePew. Fort Collins: WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press, 2015. Print.

## **“A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI)”**

by the CCCC Committee on Best Practices for Online Writing Instruction. *Conference on College Composition and Communication*. Mar. 2013. Web.

A pervasive problem for many online writing instructors is establishing a connectedness with their online students and vice versa (see Anson 273; Barber 251; Brady 350–51; Breuch 376–79; Hailey et al. 392; Peterson 367; and Sapp and Simon). Partly to blame are the tools that online instructors use to communicate and teach. Problematically, the very act of writing can enhance the distance the instructor is trying to overcome. Scott Warnock reiterates this in *Teaching Writing Online: How & Why*, where he argues that audiovisual modes of delivery should be in an instructor’s mindset due to the challenges of communicating and the pressures that online writing instructors feel to provide useful and clear feedback for their students (24, 129). Further, he argues the value of using media tools, stating, “In addition to other benefits, creating a video or audio of yourself every other week can help lock students back into the idea that you are a real teacher ‘out there’” (145). Warnock argues that creating a sense of community and helping to clarify an instructor’s persona is vital to the success of an online writing course (OWC). Using media tools is just one more way to help show students that their instructors are “out there,” providing multiple ways through which that connection between student and teacher can be formed or enhanced.

Even though the benefits of multimedia communication are clear, online

courses are recognized as a venue for instruction via writing (Daniel Ruefman's chapter in Ruefman and Scheg 4)—where teaching and learning happen primarily through written communication and alphanumeric text. In “A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI),” the CCCC Committee on Best Practice for Online Writing Instruction indicates that “students must access much of their interactions, instruction, orientation, supplemental assistance [. . .] in text-based manners” (13), and the surveyed online instructors relied upon text-based tools exclusively for teaching and communicating with online students (21). Unfortunately, because online writing courses (OWCs) primarily occur through alphanumeric text, sound, video, and other media tools are often not considered in online pedagogy. The choice to communicate with students primarily through writing may inadvertently increase a problem that many online faculty associate with distance education: distance between faculty and students (Stow). Engaging learners through the use of various media tools (sound, video, chat, virtual office hours, synchronous lectures, etc.) supports different learning preferences, and we wish to illustrate how various media tools can enhance learning opportunities by reviewing some recent research on OWI. Using the three sources noted above, we evaluate how they support the integration of various media tools in the OWC to help minimize the isolating effects of the online class by enhancing the human element within an otherwise impersonal learning environment.

We selected these three sources because they work together well, collectively, to demonstrate the theoretical framework for the use of media tools, the benefits of using media tools within online courses, and, to a lesser degree, specific practical suggestions for what online teachers can do to incorporate such tools into their pedagogy. The CCCC position statement, in general, provides the theory behind why it's important to incorporate media tools, and OWI Principles 1, 3, and 11, specifically, all make the case for adjusting one's teaching style to suit the online environment. Scott Warnock's chapter in *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction* offers an argument for the use of other tools. The two chapters we've selected from *Applied Pedagogies: Strategies for Online Writing Instruction* allow readers to see the nuts and bolts: that is, they underscore the value of engagement with real-life examples from instructors' OWCs, illustrating how instructors can use a variety of tools to make their online course more engaging. And finally, the other two chapters we selected from *Foundational Practices* give readers other considerations when incorporating media tools into the OWC. These selections introduce readers to the affordances and limitations of moving beyond the text-based OWC. All of these sources provide valuable insight into the importance of student engagement in the OWC and further suggest how the use of media tools in the OWC can help establish additional opportunities to connect with the class and with others in the class. Online writing instruction is a complex task to undertake, but when teachers move beyond teaching and communicating through writing alone, the work of the online teacher can feel even more overwhelming. These sources help explain why teachers should make the efforts to do so, and they demonstrate how the use of various media tools helps build connections and bridges the gap between online students and teacher.

## Ideas Grounded in Theory and Practice

To provide theory, leadership, and pedagogical support for online writing instructors, the OWI committee of CCCC developed “A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction (OWI)” in 2013, offering fifteen principles with effective practices for both instructors and administrators to consider as they offer OWCs. These cover a range of issues relating to OWI, but for the purposes of this article, we focus on principles 1, 3, and 11:

- > OWI Principle 1: OWI should be universally inclusive and accessible.
- > OWI Principle 3: Appropriate composition teaching/learning strategies should be developed for the unique features of the online instructional environment.
- > OWI Principle 11: Online writing teachers and their institutions should develop personalized and interpersonal online communities to foster student success.

While there are other principles that support the use of media tools in the OWC, these three are the most relevant because they theorize key differences between teaching writing face-to-face and doing so online, emphasizing that the differences in delivery formats should be accounted for and catered to. The principles included here help online educators recognize the theory and practice behind OWI and the need to consider new and different pedagogical approaches when teaching writing online—particularly approaches that emphasize additional modalities beyond the linguistic in formats beyond the written. Looking specifically at these three principles will help a new or seasoned online writing instructor understand the value placed on making OWCs accessible on multiple levels. Principles 1, 3, and 11 illustrate to readers that utilizing media tools is one clear way to assist in accessibility of content and support students in different ways of interacting with the OWC.

Principle 1 establishes that by the very nature of online education, OWI can be exclusive and inaccessible—something that new online writing instructors should be very aware of. The technological basis of online teaching can make the potential to learn an impossibility if the online student cannot locate the course, connect to it, or use and maintain the technology necessary to participate in the class. At the heart of online teaching is the goal of student success, but when students and instructor are distanced from each other, virtual barriers interfere with teaching and learning, and instruction becomes less personal and potentially impossible. This principle supports the argument for using various tools in the OWC because it reinforces the idea that not all students make meaning in the same ways and that using multiple methods to convey content maximizes the opportunities and potential for student engagement. Digital tools such as Jing, Screencast, Google Hangout, and Skype provide instructors and students with the opportunity for an enriched learning experience and address multiple preferences for learning. Many digital tools are also built right into the various learning management systems available, and these tools provide a way to incorporate audio, visual, and real-time elements, such as chat, without making students leave the OWC.

To make online learning more inclusive and accessible, Principle 3 notes the importance of the “unique features of the online instructional environment.” These unique features, if utilized, can enhance opportunities for students to establish a more personal connection to the instructor and classmates, helping form an engaging learning environment that can enhance student success. Principle 3, through its emphasis on the unique elements the online environment provides, demonstrates the need for considering and adopting multimedia instructional materials as online instructors prepare their courses.

Principle 11 stresses the need for community in the OWC and argues that it is an instructor’s job to create an environment where a sense of community can develop and flourish. Utilizing tools such as sound and video allows students to feel connected to their instructor and see that their instructor is actually a very real person who is working within the same online spaces as the students are. In any online course, helping students feel like they are a part of the class is imperative to student success. Instructors who create a sense of community and encourage students to interact as they would in a traditional face-to-face course see better persistence rates in their courses. Further, personalizing the classroom with these audio and/or video touches, along with images, helps to create a welcoming environment for students and reduces the intimidation factor some feel about online learning.

## **Understanding the Argument for Engagement**

The 2015 book *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction*, edited by Beth L. Hewett and Kevin Eric DePew, extends the conversations initiated by the OWI Principles. Contributors to this edited collection cover a variety of OWI topics, including OWI basics, pedagogical and administrative decisions, inclusivity in OWI, and new directions in OWI. This book is a wonderful resource for online writing instructors in general, covering both theoretical and practical aspects of online teaching, but it also provides a few key chapters that speak clearly to the importance of incorporating varied media into OWI instruction. The first selection from this book is chapter 4, “Teaching the OWI Course” by Scott Warnock. This chapter is the best illustration of the argument for using media tools in the OWC. After reviewing this chapter, readers will understand why it is important to include alternate technologies and move beyond the text-based OWC, even if one is a new online writing instructor. In “Teaching the OWI Course,” Warnock admits that he “tries to cover a lot of ground” (151), introducing five OWI principles and exploring many online instruction topics, such as instructor presence, developing conversations, responding to student writing, class management, assessment, and technologies (151). While Warnock notes that this chapter is not intended to be a guide for new online writing instructors, it is a great reference for all instructors who may teach online one day, as his primary concern is to help instructors find “ways to hold onto teaching persona and voice while cultivating and sharing good pedagogical ideas and practices” (152). An instructor’s persona and voice are easily lost when an instructor teaches online, but it is these aspects of the instructor that can enhance students’ sense of that instructor and the creation of a community

within the online class. Through the unique affordances of online technologies, online instructors can cultivate, capture, and share this persona and voice with their online students (178). These tools and approaches, varied through myriad technological possibilities, matter—their use can be the difference between students feeling connected or distanced from their instructor.

Warnock says that using such “tools opens up incredible opportunities” (155) and “[u]sing audio/video is one way technology can enhance communications, whether the course is text-centric and asynchronous or live video-based and synchronous” (158). Warnock delivers on his aim to help make readers aware of how they can maximize the potential of establishing their persona and voice. Through the use of media, communication opportunities can be maximized, and students can draw from a richer, more varied assortment of texts and materials as they attempt to learn within the class and connect with other participants in the course. Warnock’s chapter provides readers with a brief overview of how instructors can create a teaching persona through the use of technologies.

### **Practical Application**

In “Return to Your Source: Aesthetic Experience in Online Writing Instruction,” the first chapter of Daniel Ruefman and Abigail G. Scheg’s *Applied Pedagogies*, Ruefman argues for a return to an aesthetic experience in teaching and learning, noting that just because a course is online, it doesn’t mean there cannot be sensory experiences. Ruefman notes, “True learning takes place through aesthetic experience in an environment that is conducive to the learning process, and it is the responsibility of instructors to construct that environment” (15). In fact, because online courses exist in the rich, multimedia domain of the Internet, sensory experiences are expected and *should* be integrated into the course. Throughout the chapter, Ruefman provides strategies (with examples) for making the learning experience enhanced, including providing direction, reinforcing content, and offering constructive feedback. In discussing how to provide direction, Ruefman argues for the creation of multimodal assignment directions that utilize audio and/or video. He notes that “[instructors] often overlook the oral explanation that they would normally provide during scheduled class time. On those occasions, the online course lacks aesthetically” (12). In addressing the strategy of reinforcing content, Ruefman notes that online courses as a whole tend to be incredibly text heavy, and instructors could utilize all of the technologies available to reduce some of this reliance on text. He argues that instructors should consider “supplementing readings with digital media that parallel or reinforce the concepts illustrated in those primary texts” (13). Ruefman continues that “juxtaposing” materials in a manner that includes audio, video, and text allows students to hone their analysis skills in order to unpack key concepts (13).

In closing his discussion of strategies to improve the aesthetic experience of an OWC, Ruefman notes that providing video or audio feedback on writing assignments enhances the sensory detail of the course and provides instructors and students with a more engaged experience, providing alternate options for making

meaning. Ruefman explains that “audio and video feedback does not [need to] take the place of written comments, but rather, it provides an opportunity for the instructor to explain the rationale of their feedback in a way written comments might not allow.... Moreover, audio files can establish a more personalized tone that makes students more receptive to the written feedback” (14–15). Written comments can provide direction and feedback, but they will lack the personal cues that audio or video can provide—perhaps the best bet is for instructors to consider a compilation of formats for feedback. Ruefman finishes the chapter noting that moving from face-to-face teaching to online teaching is not simply a matter of reusing existing materials. He notes the major differences in face-to-face and online courses and encourages instructors to take time to plan out the experience of their courses. He again stresses that aesthetics are part of the learning process, and it’s up to instructors to provide these in their OWCs, for “in so doing, sterile, inaccessible web-based courses can be revitalized by taking into account the single most important variable in learning—the human element” (15).

Whereas Ruefman argued for a well-rounded aesthetic experience within an online course, Tamara Girardi encourages online faculty to conceive of their teaching as a distinctly different activity from the familiar face-to-face teaching they most likely have prior experience with. In another chapter from *Applied Pedagogies*, “Lost in Cyberspace: Addressing Issues of Student Engagement in the Online Classroom Community,” Girardi argues that when considering how to teach effectively online, “there are significant pedagogical differences that must be recognized” (59). To increase the likelihood of student engagement, online writing instructors must work to develop an online community—and a key component of that community is the development of presence. The ability to feel connections to others in the class (both instructors and students) is derived from the sense of who other people in the class are, minimizing the isolating effects that online courses often have on their participants. Girardi offers several concrete strategies to help develop connections between course participants, all involving communication methods that emphasize additional communication modes beyond the linguistic. Two key suggestions emphasize the use of alternate media to enhance the potential for students to develop a sense of who other course participants are: introductory phone chats and the use of social media. Phone chats allow the instructor to hold brief conversations with small groups of students (63–65), and the use of social media offers a space where images, video, and sound can be integrated easily to enhance teaching. The key here for Girardi’s suggestions is that she aims to meet student expectations for what they anticipate an online course to be (especially how communication and instruction will occur within that space) (72). Through the use of these strategies, Girardi has found successful methods to enhance the online community present within her online writing courses.

### **Further Considerations**

In returning to the *Foundational Practices* book, two chapters give readers further consideration and complicate online teaching as the authors experiment with us—

ing media tools in their OWCs. Connie Snyder Mick and Geoffrey Middlebrook's chapter, "Asynchronous and Synchronous Modalities," explores the differences between asynchronous (non-real-time) and synchronous (real-time) modalities and offers suggestions on when to use each. Regardless of whether a course requires real-time interaction, the instructor can decide how to use technologies that create synchronous opportunities even in an asynchronous class. This chapter demonstrates how and why blending modalities and media should be considered, as both modalities and differing media offer students varying opportunities to access the content of the course as opposed to a single modality and minimal variance in media. Mick and Middlebrook provide helpful examples of various asynchronous tools (email, discussion boards, blogs, streaming video/audio, and non-real-time document sharing) and synchronous tools (text-based, audio-based, and video chat or conferencing, web conferencing, and real-time document sharing) to demonstrate options in developing online teaching materials (132).

Mick and Middlebrook state that a frequent criticism of online learning "is that too often neither instructors nor students indicate that they have forged satisfying relationships with one another" (143–44). Developing an understanding of when synchronous or asynchronous tools might be useful is beneficial for online writing instructors, particularly when attempting to develop a sense of community within the course. OWI Principle 11 stresses the importance of community, and both asynchronous and synchronous tools can enhance that sense of community. Mick and Middlebrook note "the emerging consensus regarding the choice of asynchronous and synchronous modes is that neither is inherently better, but that they complement one another" (137). It's important to recognize why specific tools are chosen for teaching and why one modality might be privileged, or should be privileged, over others. More important, though, is to then consider the impact that those choices will have on students. Determining how and when to use both synchronous and asynchronous technologies and multiple media, specifically audio and visual media, can decrease the distance between instructors and students, making a relationship and community more likely. The purpose to this chapter is to illustrate how instructors can be strategic in their use of synchronous and asynchronous methods to connect with students. The authors illustrate the value and drawbacks of each, allowing instructors to pick and choose the most beneficial modality (based on Mick and Middlebrook's findings) when designing their OWCs.

Kevin Eric DePew challenges readers to think differently about the rhetoric of OWCs in his chapter in *Foundational Practices*, "Preparing for the Rhetoricity of OWI," arguing that "as instructors and students prepare for OWI, they need to look beyond the functionality of the technologies used to teach the class and learn how to read them rhetorically" (439). Relying on OWI Principles 1 and 2, DePew makes the case for both student and instructor preparation for the rhetoricity of OWI; he argues that "OWI, by its very nature, creates a situation in which instructors can teach students skills and strategies they will need for various roles they will occupy throughout their lives" and help them become "people who can potentially shape their world with the digital writing tools at their disposal" (462). Instructors using

technologies and encouraging the use of technologies already built into the online course platform helps students understand the skills and strategies needed for the various rhetorical situations they're already being put into as a result of being in an online course.

For example, using a sound or video overview to explain a particular writing assignment allows students other ways to make meaning of the message and to understand the complexities involved in crafting a response to that writing assignment. Utilizing these types of tools is one way of helping students understand that technologies, like audio/video and the LMS, create instances where they can practice understanding the rhetorical situations and contexts of writing. DePew reiterates this idea of practice when he notes that teaching OWI courses as applied rhetoric and using the challenges created by technology becomes a great opportunity where instructors can help students understand the technologies and practice what they are learning (462–63). Using various media tools as teaching tools also reiterates what Mick and Middlebrook indicate about the use of multiple modalities and what Warnock argues about using these tools to enhance the learning experience.

### **Conclusion: Our Recommendations**

The basis for a community is the idea of knowing members of that group, feeling confident about who else is present within that working space. When an instructor limits the methods by which he or she communicates with students, the persona the student develops of the teacher is limited, both by the content the instructor provides and also by how the student takes up that content. We hope this essay helps online teachers who are considering expanding their online pedagogy to include multimedia tools by providing some source material that can assist them in their process of doing so. The sources we've reviewed here explore the overall value of using varied tools to engage students and present research that assesses the value of doing so, further demonstrating that such pedagogical moves enhance opportunities for richer, more varied student/instructor interactions. Online teaching that limits itself to one method, whether that be exclusively alphanumeric writing, audio, or video, will limit the meaning-making potential of that teaching material, with the very real possibility of being inaccessible to students who are not of the abled majority. When an instructor limits communication to that which is written, students who develop meaning differently are left out, further isolated. By providing varied means for students to make meaning, through the use of sound and/or video, synchronous conferences, phone calls, online study groups, and so forth, instructors offer students additional ways to develop meaning, by which a more complete, richer sense of who the teacher is can be formed.

While media is essential to all of these resources, we realize that this presents the opportunity to isolate groups of students, particularly those with hearing or vision impairments. When relying exclusively on one format of communicating or teaching online, there is a very real possibility of leaving out groups of students, for all students have different abilities and preferences, or those students living in

rural areas with Internet speed/connection limitations. Therefore, we encourage instructors to consider their individual teaching situations and student populations. Instructors can experiment using media tools in their OWCs to utilize closed captioning or to balance out written communication with audio forms—essentially providing multiple ways to access the same message. This will provide a level playing field for all student populations, creating a more sensory-enriched experience for all students. If we enhance the possibility for meaning making through the use of media tools, then all students have multiple paths to make meaning—a richer, more complex meaning.

We hope that this essay is practical and helpful to current or future online writing instructors. With more opportunities to listen to an instructor's voice and to see the instructor's face, students can then more accurately apply instructor feedback to their written course materials, decreasing the likelihood of misreading an instructor's writing and minimizing the risk of miscommunication. Videos, audio recordings, and even chat or video chat programs create opportunities for instructors to engage more personally with online students. In addition to or instead of alphanumeric writing, using media tools can help span the distance, providing alternate opportunities for instructors and students to establish a connection, enhancing a student's likelihood for success within the OWC. As Warnock reminds us in *Teaching Writing Online*, "Writing teachers have a unique opportunity because writing-centered online courses allow instructors and students to interact in ways beyond content delivery. They allow students to build a community through electronic means ... these electronic communities can build the social and professional connection that constitute some of education's real value" (xix–xx). We encourage online writing instructors to read and review the literature mentioned in this piece as well as extensions of these texts, as they are rich with practical advice for OWI and also theoretical explorations of the complexities inherent in OWI. ❏

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