




# WRITING TOGETHER

Ten Weeks Teaching and Studenting in an Online Writing Course



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NCTE Stock Number: 59231; eStock Number: 59248

ISBN 978-0-8141-5923-1; eISBN 978-0-8141-5924-8

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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Warnock, Scott, 1967- author. | Gasiewski, Diana, 1992- author.

Title: Writing together : ten weeks teaching and studenting in an online writing course / Scott Warnock, Drexel University ; Diana Gasiewski, Drexel University.

Description: Urbana, Illinois : National Council of Teachers of English, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017052626 (print) | LCCN 2018002767 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814159248 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814159231 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching (Higher) | English language—Composition and exercises—Computer-assisted instruction. | English language—Rhetoric—Computer-assisted instruction. | Composition (Language arts)—Computer-assisted instruction.

Classification: LCC PE1404 (ebook) | LCC PE1404 .W275 2018 (print) | DDC 808/.0420785—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017052626>

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# Introduction: A Meeting of the Minds

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**Scott: January 6.** *It's the Friday before the winter term begins. I've spent the past month thinking through—based on our program's core syllabus and outcomes—and preparing my online first-year writing course, English 102: Persuasive Writing & Reading. My course site on our university's course learning management system (LMS) is ready to go. I've uploaded the first Weekly Plan of the course. I've added a friendly welcoming announcement the students will see when they have access to the LMS on Monday morning. The overall plan for the course is clear, I hope: the outcomes and learning goals, how the course will flow each week, what the major projects are, when they will be due, what texts we'll be using, and how I will evaluate their work. The fine "content" details? Like any writing course I teach, regardless of modality, I'll work those out as we go in response to what my students are doing. I've been teaching online writing courses (OWCs) for a while. I'm excited to get going.*

**Diana: January 8.** *I'm back from winter break and about to kick off my second college semester. So far, working out the kinks as a first-year student has gone a lot better than expected; I've embraced the college experience while keeping my grades high, which I've seen is difficult for some, so I'm thankful for that. I also switched my major from physician assistant studies (sorry Dad, the science-thing couldn't last) to public relations, so I'm eager to start working on my communication skills again. Yet, alongside new studies, I have a new course structure to learn. This term I'm taking an exclusively online course for the first time. To be honest, I didn't even know it was online until last week, but it should be convenient since I've maxed out my credits and will appreciate flexibility in my schedule (I mean, I can "go to class" from my couch!). I've heard mixed reviews about online classes from friends and upperclassmen, but since English is one of my favorite subjects I'm not too nervous. I'll log in to the course tomorrow just to make sure I have everything prepared for the week.*

## Scott: An Online Writing Teacher

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A 2016 report sponsored by the Online Learning Consortium found that more than 5.8 million students have taken at least one online course (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, and Straut). Hundreds of thousands of these learners are taking some type of online *writing* course, and these students are involved in a wide variety of engaging intellectual writing experiences, meeting and working with their teachers and peers in an array of electronic formats and platforms.

I have been involved in extensive work about online writing instruction (OWI) for more than a decade. I have maintained a blog called, aptly enough, *Online Writing Teacher*, since 2005 (2005—more than a decade? How can that be?) and in 2009 published the book *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why*. I have written many articles and chapters about teaching writing online and, more generally, the intersection between writing instruction and learning technologies. From 2011 to 2016, I was co-chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee for Effective Practices in OWI. Most recently, in 2016, I was part of a group that launched the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators. Over the past decade, I have been involved with faculty and professional development opportunities about OWI with hundreds of colleagues in nearly twenty states.

Many of my activities focus on the pedagogical, practical aspects of OWI. I have made great friends in the field and through my travels have strengthened a fundamental belief in the commitment, skills, and quality of teachers: Everywhere I go, I meet professionals who care deeply about their students. I have tried to do a good job in various professional development roles, yet when reflecting on these activities, I have been struck by a consistent experience: Even after an extensive, multiday workshop, some faculty still voice uncertainty about what the actual experience of an OWC will be like. During our closing conversations, a diligent workshop soul will often ask a version of this: “Okay, Scott, but what will the course *look* like?” Some of these hardworking, well-meaning teachers, who have given up their time to learn to teach an OWC and improve themselves as teachers, still express ambiguity about:

1. What teachers do *each week* that specifically constitutes *an online course*.
2. What teachers do that specifically constitutes *teaching an OWC*, which is fundamentally different from the many content courses that have dominated discussions about online learning.
3. What the student experience will be like in an OWC: *How do students participate and engage in an OWC?*

The final point is interesting but perhaps not surprising when we consider that, based on many conversations I have had, few college teachers have ever themselves taken an online course or engaged in any distance/online learning or professional development experience. A good number have not even conducted a remote meeting except by phone.

This inexperience is worth reflecting on when we examine how people learn to teach. In most cases, university teachers are not trained to teach during their graduate experiences or by the universities that hire them. Inexperienced graduate students are often “thrust into the classroom with little or no pedagogical training,” a system that is “a long-running and disturbing national practice,” says Leonard Cassuto in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Patel, “Training” A8). In a November 2015 *Chronicle* story about a grant-supported effort to help graduate students learn to teach, a student with a recently minted PhD in history said, “I swear, the word ‘teaching’ was never uttered in my program, much less ‘pedagogy,’ much less ‘student learning’” (Patel, “\$3-Million”). Many faculty would no doubt say the same thing. So what is their basis/foundation when they start their first term teaching? They probably work from their own experiences as students. Almost everyone has sat in a classroom, likely in a row of desks. Many college teachers had that experience for nearly twenty years. Something has to stick. But of course those learning experiences would be incredibly subjective, based as they often are on our own narrow school travels. Where else might teachers turn—perhaps to caricatures of school and teaching from our broader culture, such as *Dead Poets Society*; *To Sir, With Love*; or *Lean on Me*? As I often do when seeking insight into human nature, I turn here to *The Simpsons*. In Season 5, Episode 3, when Homer returns to college, he wants to be a “campus hero,” so he spikes the punch at an early-term undergraduate mixer. The kids sip the punch and are aghast when they taste alcohol; they are only comforted when someone announces, “Your parents have been called!” Homer grouches about this new generation to his wife: “Marge, someone squeezed all the life out of these kids. And unless movies and TV have lied to me it’s a crusty, bitter, old dean.” *Simpsons* loyalists will recall that the dean ends up being a cool guy named “Bobby” who is always up for some hacky sack and even played bass for the rock band The Pretenders. The episode lampoons our preconceptions of school, but such strong preconceptions and plain old misperceptions do function for students and parents—and for new teachers too. Without a reliable guide, teachers may either follow what they lived/experienced or what they *think* college teaching is supposed to look like.

This can only be accentuated when a teacher is asked to teach online but has never taken an online course. What do such teachers use as the foundation of their teaching experience in the virtual world? What are the pop culture narra-

tives of teaching online that parallel the many onsite narratives, such as those mentioned above? What student stereotypes are a new teacher's equivalent of the "crusty . . . old dean"? The scarcity of these narratives in pop culture may only be matched by their scarcity in academic literature.

Thinking of it like this is startling: Many people who, by nature, may be nervous about technology, can find themselves in a digital teaching environment that is utterly unfamiliar to them. (Perhaps this is one reason faculty are often warier about online learning than administrators [see, e.g., Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman's "Conflicted"]). They do not have their own student memories of the clever in-class icebreaker or interesting in-class group activity or even a teacher's style of writing notes on the board from which to draw. To many teachers, going online represents a new teaching frontier. Also, while one could argue that training for OWCs and online in general may be improving,<sup>1</sup> many teachers are still embarking on such instruction with little support and faculty development.

So how, writing teacher, do you know what to do when you begin to teach online?

### ***The Student Voice***

*Teaching Writing Online: How and Why* was well received, probably for the simple reason that it met a demand: Colleagues of mine needed and wanted to know how to teach writing online but did not have specific resources. Soon after its publication, I had envisioned a follow-up project that would, in building on *Teaching Writing Online* and my above-mentioned workshop and conference experiences, provide more specific pedagogical guidance for OWC teachers. But during the planning of that second project, something nagged at me: My experiences in faculty training and at many academic conferences revealed an off-missing component of conversations about writing pedagogy, online or onsite: *the student voice*. In gatherings, teachers talked, often late into the night, about classroom practices, philosophies, and approaches, but students, the "recipients" of these practices, philosophies, and approaches, were absent.

This absence exists despite a recognition, across disciplines, that students should be more prominent in these conversations. In 1993, in the journal *Studies in Higher Education*, Alan Booth said of history instruction that "any response" to new challenges in such instruction "should begin with a careful consideration of student perceptions and needs" (227). In the sciences, many studies indicate that students' attitudes and interest decline as they proceed through their education; investigating this issue for the journal *Research in Science Education*, Marianne Logan and Keith Skamp followed students for two years, and the process was as important as the results, they said:



Apart from identifying the teacher's pedagogical approach and classroom environment as two key issues in understanding these students' journeys, the importance of listening to and heeding the students' voice may be an even more critical concern in addressing the decline in students' attitudes and interest in science. (501)

When research does draw on student views, it tends to rely more on quantitative results—such as end-of-course surveys—than deep dives into their experiences. The research on teaching tends to attempt to determine effects based on student surveys or evaluations (e.g., Childers and Berner, 2000).

We do not even have a reliable nomenclature for the student experience. As Mary Louise Pratt famously said, “Teacher-pupil language, for example, tends to be described almost entirely from the point of view of the teacher and teaching, not from the point of view of pupils and pupiling (the word doesn't even exist, though the thing certainly does)” (38). As this thing nagged at me, I wondered if I might more responsibly represent the student experience through a research collaboration. There was support for taking this approach. A *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, “The Human Variable in Teaching,” commented that “Every student is a puzzle” (Hoover A28), yet teachers often don't take (or have) the time to solve those puzzles, which may involve listening more closely to students and involving them in our educational research. The Council of Undergraduate Research (CUR) defines undergraduate research as “student-faculty collaboration[s] to examine, increase, and share new knowledge or works in ways commensurate with practices in the discipline” (Wilson 1). The broader approach of “co-research” provides a frame for enabling research participants to see themselves as researchers (e.g., see John Benington and Jean Hartley; Robin Boylorn). And in their introduction to *Undergraduate Research in English Studies*, Laurie Grobman and Joyce Kinkead say undergraduate research has been “slow to grab hold in the humanities, particularly in English Studies” because “we as faculty have not articulated to our students the methodology of inquiry in our fields except as injunctions in our classes to ‘write a paper’. . . . As faculty, we need to articulate our methodology, define appropriate tasks for students, and ask for authentic scholarship” (x).

Several winters ago at Drexel, I taught a first-year OWC. Diana was one of the students. She changed majors several times—of course that is common among undergraduates<sup>2</sup>—and ended up pursuing an undergraduate degree in teacher education with a minor in English. She took two other courses with me, one of which was Writing and Peer Tutoring Workshop, Drexel's training course for students who want to work as tutors in our campus writing center. Diana became a tutor (a position at Drexel called peer reader), and while work-

ing together in that writing-centric environment, we often discussed our OWC and teaching in general. While continuing to think about the student voice,<sup>3</sup> I approached Diana one day about coauthoring a journal article that would provide a dual-perspective narrative of the experience of that OWC. It would be straightforward but also, I thought, innovative: We would describe specifically what it was like to teach and what it was like to participate as a student in an OWC. At the very start of the drafting process, we hit a pleasant snag. Diana, just with a simple first pass, handed me nearly six thousand words! I stepped back and realized this project might well warrant a more elaborate medium: a book.

## **Diana: An Online Writing Course Student**

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So, I wrote six thousand words about my experience in Scott's class. When we initially planned for this exercise, neither of us was expecting what came out of my reflection. I mean, students typically do not put in the effort to pick apart the pedagogy of the course and their subsequent reactions (or, perhaps, they don't have the opportunity to, but we'll elaborate on that point later). When given the chance to provide feedback on a class, my peers often kept their summaries to a brief "It was super easy" (code for they earned an A) or "The professor is a jerk" (code for they didn't earn an A). Sure, a few friends offered more detail on the teacher's style of delivery, charisma, or intelligence, but the rundown mainly consisted of the course difficulty and "coolness" of the professor. What was missing was authentic, detailed, responsive analysis.

To be frank, when would a student have the opportunity to provide such feedback? Course evaluations are conducted and surveys are sent out, but opportunities rarely arise when a college student can sit down and analyze each week, each assignment, and each discussion from a course. Fortunately, I found myself in a scenario where I could produce that exact response. Scott and I realized our professional relationship, classroom experience, and knowledge base on pedagogy could warrant a book, and we plowed forward with enthusiasm.

Despite my bubbling excitement (which was more than justified, considering I was twenty-two years old and could potentially be a published author), I did have incredible self-doubt about my authority on the project. Why would anyone want to hear from me, a newly graduated college student, in the first place? I mean, I earned great grades, but I wasn't a perfect 4.0 student. I was ambitious in my side projects and enjoyed venturing beyond the required work, but I didn't have a story written about me in the school newspaper or anything. I was successful, but there are other young adults who have achieved far more

than me at my age. From my perspective, I struggled with my identity within the story. Should I write as the “average student,” trying to provide a catch-all perception of an online course? Or should I write as me, Diana, the social, outgoing student who adores writing and is fascinated with the field of OWI?

As I worked through this dilemma, I realized several things were required of me for the project to work:

- Experience as a student
- Decent writing skills
- Base knowledge of pedagogy
- Honesty

The first two aspects are self-explanatory and, for me, easy to meet. The latter two, however, are what pushed me to move forward with my original voice for the project. Having experience as an education major (the major I finally settled on), I would have a somewhat informed idea of what was going on in Scott’s mind as he produced work for the course and assessed us. Would I be able to nail his pedagogical reasoning throughout an entire analysis of the course? No, but I would know enough to produce useful feedback on how his course design affected my learning—useful in the sense that I could speak the same educational language as Scott and our primary readers, those who want to teach writing online. I could work as a liaison between students and course instructors, translating both students’ reactions and the instructor’s intent to help bridge the pedagogical gap between professors and students in higher education, particularly online. This was a role not all students in my position could fulfill.

Education majors are, however, easy to come by. If Scott wanted to, he could have asked any education major (or any student versed in pedagogy) who took his OWC to fill my role, but he didn’t. He asked me. So this is where the last requirement of honesty came into play. I have a genuine interest in writing instruction, particularly its role in higher education and online settings. This interest tumbled into my life as I worked in the Drexel Writing Center (DWC), where I frequently provided writing feedback in synchronous, online tutoring sessions. I was already interested in teaching, but once I faced the struggle of communicating with a peer online while trying to provide successful instruction and feedback, I was hooked. Ever since my experience in the DWC, I’ve focused my studies and coursework largely on OWI, creating a path to eventually work full-time in the field.

So, in all simplicity, I love what we’re writing about. Beyond being a student, a communicative student, an education studies student, I have genuine passion for what we can achieve through writing this narrative. Our narrative

represents a great opportunity for the field of OWI, and maybe online education in general. While any average student response is useful in providing the generally unheard perspective of “studenting,” my unique voice offers so much more: detail, individuality, and honesty.

## Scott and Diana: Writing Together

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In the coming chapters, the two of us, teacher and student, will chronologically follow the trajectory of a ten-week OWC at Drexel University. The primary goal is to provide our main audience—the many teachers, including graduate students, who teach OWCs or who are in training to do so—with a casebook that describes in detail the teaching and learning perspectives of an OWC. The ten core chapters are filled with specific pedagogical resources to help teachers implement teaching practices that take advantage of the rich, text-based environment of a primarily asynchronous OWC. In those chapters, we describe our strategies, activities, approaches, thoughts, and responses as we moved through a term teaching and *studenting* an OWC. We hope that you will learn detailed approaches about teaching a writing course in a digital environment; you will see specific assignments as well as ways of enacting teaching strategies. Each week, we focus on a particular theme, including offering a brief “Behind the Screen” sidebar of materials and resources relevant to that theme. We include the week’s “Weekly Plan” in the beginning, as well as emails and Discussion posts from the class throughout each chapter. In most cases, these are the actual texts from the students and teacher. We created a lot of those words in informal electronic environments, and for this book, Diana and Scott usually chose to leave the writing as it was when it was composed for the course; after-the-fact edits were only made to avoid confusion.

Diana, in some way taking on the role of an ongoing “respondent,” will describe how she approached each week’s activities. Through that voice, she will aim to lend insight into online student behaviors and practices, and we hope you will understand better how students perceive digitally-facilitated writing courses and how they navigate—and live through—the experience of participating in one. As we mention above, student voices are often absent in conversations about teaching in higher education, and the naturally dispersed nature of an OWC—i.e., the teacher is often not the center of the action—may exacerbate this. While we will demonstrate in the coming chapters how this teaching-learning dynamic is complex, OWC teachers are confronted with some fundamental, challenging questions about students that they perhaps do not think of in onsite courses: *Where* do students do their work? *When* do they do it?

What do they see/perceive when they use their machines to *interface* with the material? How do students perceive teaching *instructions*? How do they develop a sense of *community* in an OWC? How do they handle the *writing and reading load*? In “A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for OWI,” OWI Principle 1 states, “Online writing instruction should be universally inclusive and accessible” (Conference 7). Diana’s perspectives will help you see what students are doing as they access and participate in an OWC. After all, teachers’ limited view of students’ experiences in higher education may be related to the fact that, in many cases, teachers are unlike those whom they teach.<sup>4</sup> In a broader sense, by following the kind of co-research approach we mention above, we hope we might expand the way other qualitative pedagogical works are created. In our case, the student is not passively being studied but is actively involved in the story- and meaning-making of the experience.

We chose the title *Writing Together* because we interacted almost exclusively in writing through the interface of an LMS and engaged in a writing-based educational journey along with other students in the class. *Writing Together* aims to be an unusually told teaching *story* about an OWC and how the human beings involved on both sides wrote and learned with others who were part of that online learning community one winter. Narrative theorist David Herman said, “Rather than focusing on general, abstract situations or trends, stories are accounts of what happened to particular people—and of what it was like for them to experience what happened—in particular circumstances and with specific consequences” (3). The FYW course we describe is, of course, just one of infinite possibilities for such a course. While we closely follow the syllabus and assignments of the actual course Scott taught that winter, occasionally Scott’s narrative brings in learning-teaching experiences from other OWCs; think of it, if you will, as *pedagogical creative nonfiction*. In taking our approach, Scott thinks about the fascinating composition teaching book by William Coles, *The Plural I—and After*. In the introduction, Richard Larson says that Coles’s book “shows how one instructional plan was employed at one college in one recent semester by one instructor in his teaching of writing,” and

if reliving, through this dramatic or fictional representation, the experience of this course at that time turns out to illuminate for readers the fundamental experience of teaching [...] as good drama and good fiction illuminate for readers the experiences they represent, I think that William Coles will believe his book to have been worth the writing. (vii–viii)

In our earliest conversations, we felt that the book would be strongest if it had a distinctive voice and flavor from each of us, but we also realized that if the book



were too pedagogically and technologically specific, it would be of little use to most instructors.

While the narrative follows a real course, as described in the pre-chapter, not some generalized first-year writing “everycourse,” we do generalize the approaches and pedagogies so other teachers might use them in their courses. While the texts and themes will differ significantly from how others might teach, we believe the fundamental pedagogy of having students work together with an instructor in a collaborative, process-driven, writing-centric way is applicable to many teaching situations in which online writing teachers might find themselves. We have only referred to specific assignment texts in which we felt the reader would be interested, or we mentioned those texts because to omit them would be confusing in the context of that week’s activities.

## A Note about Platforms—and Pedagogy

All that being said, there is of course a pedagogy at work here, and the specifics of it are presented in the pre-chapter that follows. This course was conducted primarily asynchronously, featuring lots of message board work, using a common LMS as a platform. The class involved a significant team project.

### Behind the Screen: In Case You Were Wondering, Online Learning Is Not Going Away

Approach aside, the exigency of this book is real. Thousands of sections of online writing instruction are offered each year in US institutions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “In fall 2014, there were 5,750,417 students enrolled in any distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions” (National). With recent cultural movements in education such as Starbucks’ collaboration with Arizona State (Ripley), it is likely that these numbers will grow. Scott’s *Teaching Writing Online* continues to sell copies for NCTE even nine years after its publication. In short, OWCs continue to be developed as institutions expand their OWI offerings.

As a component of a core curriculum, the course focused on rhetorical mode instruction in persuasion/argument, but the strongest informing pedagogy is Writing about Writing (sometimes called Writing Studies) (as described by Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle). Scott asked students to engage in a lot of metawriting and reflecting. The final project was a writing portfolio. Scott (as he describes throughout) used a low-stakes grading approach that featured lots of points and many small, graded assignment opportunities for students to earn those points. Of course, these factors all matter and influence the experience and learning of the course. Note too that this was a ten-week course, in line with Drexel’s quarter system. Most teachers work in a longer semester system; however, we realized that for a book, ten weeks may be ideal. It made for a succinct book, and one of our concluding arguments is about transfer; the process work surround-

ing Project 1 is transferable to other projects, so in a semester course instructors would develop another, similar round of projects.

Also, nothing pedagogical that we describe is dependent on a specific LMS platform. The experiences Diana relates are mainly about the way she exchanged ideas with colleagues and with her professor using readily available learning technologies. While any good technology scholar knows that a technology invariably influences the experiences (and often thought processes) of its users, we have done our best to write this book from the perspective of being “platform neutral”: A teacher with access to basic LMS tools should be able to use teaching strategies similar to those described here.

## **And a Brief Note about Students**

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We received Approval of Protocol from Drexel University’s Office of Research for this book project. Students whose writings were used in substantive ways explicitly granted us permission to do so. Students had the option to be referred to with a pseudonym throughout our text, and most of the names you encounter in the book are pseudonyms. In any case, we only used the first names of students we interacted with in the course.