Locating Student Disconnect in the Hybrid Composition Classroom

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In the fall semester of 2010, the University of Houston implemented a pilot program to teach English 1304, Freshman Composition II, as a hybrid course with incorporated on-line writing studios. The on-line location of these discussions provides teachers an opportunity to observe student writing processes, to identify common areas of weakness, and to explore alternative methods of education. The introduction of the hybrid model to composition classrooms at UH offers insight to accompany the course adjustment to teaching styles and schedules, and an opportunity to reevaluate current methods of teaching in light of the hybrid format. The dynamic nature of the hybrid classroom offers new insight into student problem areas in the writing classroom and can identify significant differences between students' classroom comprehension and students' on-line written performance. This academic intersection of on-line and in-class instruction stands to teach us key points about student learning and makes us aware of the advantages and disadvantages each has to offer. Drawing from the writing studio model put forth by Rhonda C. Grego and Nancy S. Thompson in Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces, the studios of the hybrid

program at UH operate as weekly on-line discussions. Students meet once weekly on campus and participate in on-line discussions during the week. At the beginning of the semester, students are placed in on-line groups of 5-6 people. Students log in to their discussion groups (they are only able to view their own groups) and attach a draft or outline of the current essay they are working on in class. Students, joined by a class facilitator, are asked to provide constructive feedback to each of their group members' drafts. With an increase in Internet and hybrid education in colleges and universities in the United States, the need to accordingly develop and evaluate methods of instruction is evident. Different locations of teaching present new areas of potential improvement and expose both student and teacher problems. While student confusion in composition has existed long before the development of hybrid course structures, it would be remiss to ignore the value of the insight these courses are able to provide.

The value of on-line discussions in the teaching of freshman composition has become a topic of much attention in recent years as the number of hybrid education courses continues to grow. Researcher Linda Stine provides a valuable overview of recent scholarship, weighing on the advantages and disadvantages of on-line composition. One of the primary concerns often brought up deals with student accessibility to a reliable Internet connection, and student technological capability to navigate the location of Internet discussions, but because my aim is in looking at the model for educational value, rather than economic feasibility, I will not be touching on social or economic viability (Stine 51). Another common concern teachers must address is "voiced by on-line students—that

the on-line environment does not allow for the familiar face-to-face interaction that provides crucial feedback to students (Boyd 228). Significantly though, this concern, while valid, is primarily directed at composition classes that are conducted completely on-line and is not often cited as a common complaint in hybrid classes, which combine the traditional classroom with the on-line discussion. However, the increased demands on the instructor to moderate and participate in board discussions can be a significant drawback to the hybrid model and, as Stine states, "having to anticipate all the potential problems above and address those that may materialize later adds to the demands placed on faculty members who must find the time to create, maintain, and teach, an on-line class" (54-55). The role of the instructor in on-line discussions varies widely from class to class, but one way of addressing this concern is to use a model of writing studios similar to the one UH employs, with an on-line facilitator who absorbs the majority of the responsibility that accompanies the Internet location.

The class facilitator is usually an experienced undergraduate student, but the first semester of the program also employed three incoming graduate TAs, myself included, as facilitators. The necessity of the facilitator position not only lightens the work load of the instructor, but proves to be more effective than having student-led studios or having the professor lead discussion. Student-led discussions are problematic because of the possibility that the designated leader forgets to post by the deadline and group participation suffers for the week. Additionally, peer-led studios lack an identifiable authority figure, and students may be less likely to consider suggestions of their classmates without having an authority figure

observing to verify the advice being given. Similarly, teacher participation in studio discussions often implies a judgment on content, which adds stress to an otherwise low-key "drafting" environment. Increased stress and fear of grading can discourage students from sharing their brainstorming and revising processes, which is key to the success of the studio.

In the eyes of students, the facilitator is a welcomed middleman, a convenient bridge serving to close any perceived gaps between themselves and the course leader. Because the studio group discussions are primarily reserved for student communication and peer review, the facilitator's inclusion provides an opportunity to view the writing process from the students' perspective. The facilitator is assumed to be less concerned with, perhaps even detached from, the grading process, which enables students to ask for clarification and guidance without having to fear that their questions might negatively affect their course grade. Regardless of the validity of these student fears, and regardless of the true grading responsibility of the facilitator, ultimately students are more likely to turn to their facilitator for help than they are to turn to the course leader, who seems poised, with red pen in-hand, for student-centered attack. In this context, the facilitator functions as a medium through which both voiced and unvoiced student problems can be observed, recognized, and responded to.

On top of this, the facilitator interacts with students in a familiar and deceptively non-threatening location: the Internet. While the traditional campus classroom is located in an almost exclusively academic environment, on-line Blackboard discussions exist in a location that much of their time is already

spent. Most, if not all, students use the Internet daily for entertainment, socializing, communicating, shopping, googling, bill paying, etc. Fully accustomed to the on-line environment, students often find that on-line discussions come quickly and easily. Indeed, student responses to their peers are often longer than assignment requires. When comparing student output on-line to student participation in class, there is almost no question that the on-line environment more effectively engages each student in the drafting and composing process. Possible reasons for the increase in individual output on Blackboard compared to the classroom are numerous, and range from simply ease of accessibility to mental perceptions of on-line work as "not real" classroom work. Additionally, while participation is required both in-class and on-line, studio discussions provide a definitive record of individuals' participation, whereas classroom participation is much harder to enforce.

One of the most obvious benefits of this set-up is that the weekly discussions ensure students are engaged in writing constantly throughout the semester, thereby discouraging procrastination and fostering good work habits. Furthermore, by reading and responding to their peers' work, students learn to recognize the qualities of good writing and can identify areas of weakness and offer suggestions for improvement. Because students are engaged in writing, reading, and revising on a weekly basis, the hybrid model helps students understand writing as a process, rather than a "product." Over the course of the semester, students see their own writing improve as well as the writing of their peers, which helps them to fully recognize the value of review and revision. Further benefits of hybrid education include

the "opportunity for unlimited office hours via e-mail or chartrooms," the expanded opportunities for building effective group collaboration skills, encourages active learning, provides students with prompt and continuous feedback, reduces student procrastination producing more polished writing (Stine 60-65).

Stine's discussion of the potentials hybrid writing courses offer cites Ken Macrorie's argument that students learn best when the perceive what they are doing as valuable and "[r]ightly or wrongly, the Internet is considered "worth doing" (Stine 55). A quote from a student from Boyd's research analysis confirms the benefits of having each student participate:

> I enjoyed the discussion boards in which we responded to questions and had discussions about readings. These discussions allowed each person in the class to express their opinion which entails greater involvement from each and every student than a traditional class (it is impossible to achieve this amount of input from EVERY student in a standard classroom environment). (235)

On-line discussion ensures everyone's participation, resulting in a fully engaged conversation between group members. Another major benefit of the hybrid format is that the on-line discussions provide a permanent document of student thought and conversation about writing. As identified by Stine, the "persistence of on-line communication" as an aspect that holds great potential when applied to the studio setting (58). This persistent nature of Internet communications refers to "talk going on 24

hours a day, around the world, accessible at least as long as the web site lasts—can be profoundly important in helping basic writers view themselves as writers" (58).

The on-line studio location encourages students to ask questions that might otherwise go unvoiced in class. Students who are quiet or shy in class are given the opportunity to interact and participate in an alternate location. One explanation for this seems to be a definite awareness of peer audience and an understanding that it is acceptable within groups to ask questions and to make mistakes. A look at studio observations from the hybrid class I facilitated in the fall semester of 2010 offers a valuable demonstration. While rarely asked during class, questions were frequently brought up in on-line discussions. on-line, students were more likely to express confusion or turn to classmates for clarification of an assignment. This is not to say that there is something particularly unusual about freshmen students failing to ask questions when they are confused and it is likely that students prefer to ask each other, outside of the classroom, rather than the instructor.

Sometimes, the insight offered by the studio discussions simply revealed a lack of knowledge about topics recently addressed (often exhaustively) in on-campus classes. To provide some examples: How do we do a works cited page?; What is a research question?; and So, what are we supposed to write about? What these questions suggest, rather than a lack of understanding, is simply a failure to pay attention in class. Thankfully, these became less prevalent as the semester went on and as students adjusted to the college academic environment. More worryingly though, the comparison of on-line classroom and campus classroom writings

revealed a startling disconnect between students' demonstrated ability to express themselves on-line and their ability to adequately translate these thoughts into material for on-campus classroom discussion and exploration. It seems apparent that the facilitator's observations and interactions with the students in on-line discussions hold value to the primary instructor of the course in that they help to resolve some of the more troubling questions we have regarding student performance. The excerpt that follows, taken from my own experience as an on-line facilitator during the fall semester of 2010, demonstrates:

As the deadline for the first essay approached, I felt able to anticipate the students' final copies, having followed each student's topic for the several weeks. Reading through the first set of papers however, I was surprised at the number of students whose essays were significantly unlike those they had extensively outlined in their small group discussions. A comparison of the drafting and revising carried out on-line, and the resulting essays produced revealed a startling disconnect between students' demonstrated ability to express themselves on-line and their ability to adequately translate these thoughts into material for on-campus classroom discussion and exploration. Why is it that students are able to express themselves clearly and articulately among their peers on-line but not in the assigned essays? All of the discussion posts

represent steps towards producing an essay, which is why it is even more puzzling to receive a paper from a student who explained his position and reasons on-line, but turns in a paper that includes neither a position, nor any of the reasons he outlined.

It seems that one of the major roadblocks students encounter with their writing is simply their ability to translate their writing from an informal discussion setting into an academic essay without accidentally losing pieces of their argument along the way. Unfamiliar with the format, they get so caught up in trying to maintaining a certain level of academic discourse that they ultimately fail to adequately include and emphasize the subjects they talk about. My reflection on the above experience concludes:

> The fact that almost all of the students in my section of 1304 were able to express themselves on-line in a much clearer and more articulate way than they were able to in the completed versions of their assigned essays suggests to me that the difference between Blackboard and the classroom is not only one of physical location, but also one that more significantly exists within student's mental recognition of what does and does not fit into their image of "academic discourse."

There is an evident disconnect between student perceptions of themselves as writers on-line and themselves as writers in the classroom. Somewhere between Blackboard and the campus classroom students have created a mental divide between what constitutes standards of good writing for each location. Reading these student papers can prove to be very frustrating, not only because they are unclear and unfocused, but because their studio discussions act as a reminder that they are perfectly capable of creating clear, well-thought out arguments. For some reason in typing up the final copy of the paper, students can tend to replace, and in some cases completely remove, any clear, or straightforward points, like the ones they had written about in their studio groups. Somewhere between writing for the studio group and writing for an academic essay, students seem to have trouble with the successful transference of their thoughts from one to the other. It is almost as if students get stuck trying to create what they "think" an academic essay should consist of. Students who have little experience with formal writing don't have a clear idea of what makes and essay "good" or "bad." As a result, they often end up creating a vision of the "college paper" that fits with their perceptions of what college writing is.

The problem is this image of writing is not based on the qualities of good writing; rather, it sits upon loosely conceived notions of what students' imagine a "smart" sounding paper would consist of. As Ken Macrorie has famously described it, "the phony, pretentious language of the schools—Engfish" (11). Because they have convinced themselves that the college essay is something far removed from the on-line writing they are familiar with, students try to create a paper that conforms to their image of the academic essay, which seems to be one that is complicated, confusing, boring, wordy, and most importantly, "smart" sounding. Unfortunately, the Engfish Macrorie described over 20 years ago is still very-much alive in today's composition classroom. These are the students who – "thoroughly trained in Engfish

are hard put to find their natural voices in the classroom. They have left them out in the hall" (Macrorie 14). What the on-line discussion of the hybrid course captures is comparable to the "natural voices" of students Macrorie hears in the halls.

The majority of English 1304 students have grown up in an Internet-ready world and as such are fully accustomed to using the Internet, because it plays such a large role in many of their daily activities. If students are most comfortable operating in on-line environments, we must recognize the degree to which their unfamiliarity with the classroom results in misunderstood expectations and disconnect with methods of translating their primary means of communication, the Internet, into piece of writing suitable for the college professor. This gap in understanding is worthy of further exploration for it indicates a weakness in teacher-student communication, specifically in hybrid composition classes.

Explanations for the differences in on-line and in-class writings vary widely, but drawing from my own experiences and building from past research, there are a variety of factors at work here, but a few seem to have significant impact and are worthy of further exploration. The first is audience. As Varone notes from her experience, on-line studio groups reinforce the writer's awareness of audience. As Huntington Lyman puts it, the dreaded "Engfish" often occurs "when students feel they have to pose in their writing by imitating the third-person, objective writing of school textbooks" (63). If student preoccupation with maintaining the third-person viewpoint takes their focus away from the content of their writing, it makes sense that on-line-discussions help develop writing that sounds natural and genuine. Discussion posts are frequent and informal, reducing student concern over producing writing of perceived "academic" quality. Furthermore, student conversations on-line open up discussions about confusing or awkward wording, often a result of Engfish, and alerts the writer to the nature of the problem.

Students know their classmates will be reading and responding to their posts, which often discourages sloppy and careless writing (Crank 152). To take this one step further, the hybrid program at UH keeps students in the same studio groups for the entire semester, meaning that group members will be reading and responding to their peers' writing at all stages of the process. Not only does this build a sense of community within the student groups, it also ensures students follow through on the expectation that they will thoughtfully revise their writing. Once students get feedback on initial drafts, they are expected to revise and re-post the draft. Because the same students who read and responded to each group member's initial are also the same students who read the revised draft, the need to show evidence of thoughtful and noticeable revision from week to week cannot be escaped. Boyd's research also supports this belief with her conclusion:

> Written discussion board exchanges provide students with a good opportunity to craft their thinking within dialogic exchanges rather than in isolation, which help students better envision an audience for whom they are writing. The presence of an immediate audience seems to encourage students to pay careful attention to writing in a way that addresses audience issues— (239).

When students engage in peer-review sessions in-class, there is a higher chance that original drafts will be only slightly, or sometimes not at all, revised because there is very rarely a follow-up group session to the in-class peer review, so the temptation to avoid revision is higher.

These benefits, when combined with the insight of the class facilitator, provide an opportunity for educators to identify student discomfort and disconnect and areas that can be improved upon to further student learning. Among others, areas of disconnect that the facilitator is privileged to locate include student comprehension, effort, participation, ability, and writing style. Able to connect with students while guiding their writing enables the facilitator to locate and address areas of student concern that may be unrecognizable or purposely hidden from the teacher's awareness. It is from this location that the facilitator assumes the responsibility of identifying any gaps in comprehension and communication that may hinder student learning potential and discourage active participation. Recognizing these gaps in student comprehension is undoubtedly an essential first step to improving the quality of student writing in hybrid composition classes. With further examination and observation of student writing in hybrid composition courses, we can expect a broadening of our view of current student writing processes and abilities, and with the insight of the on-line facilitator can work toward developing appropriate revisions in the way these topics are approached in the classroom setting. By pinpointing the crucial areas many students to struggle with, teachers are enabled to address these concerns directly, therefore maximizing the effectiveness of the hybrid setup.

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