

From Gatekeeping to Greeting:  
Fostering Persistence in First-Year Online Writing Courses

by

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## ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of courses are offered online and increasing numbers of students are pursuing post-secondary studies. At broad-access institutions, such as land grant universities and community colleges, this presents a particular concern around student persistence—that is, the number of students who complete diploma, certificate, or degree requirements from an institution. Such increased access and increased enrollment also present unique challenges to first-year writing instructors, who are often the first professionals with whom first-year students are in contact.

Here I explore the many reasons why student persistence should interest first-year writing instructors, in particular, those who are teaching online. Student persistence has important civic, economic, ethical, institutional, and disciplinary implications that first-year instructors cannot ignore. I propose a persistence-based pedagogy that involves six essential elements: designing learner-centered online writing courses, demonstrating mattering by valuing student writing, fostering self-efficacy by making assignments relevant, fostering student connections through collaboration and community, engaging virtual learners by fostering a sense of place and presence, and recognizing the challenges and minimizing the risks of teaching online.

Such an undertaking is necessarily transdisciplinary and draws on scholarship in rhetoric and composition, instructional design, educational psychology, applied linguistics, and higher education administration. It connects pedagogical principles advanced nearly fifty years ago with digital pedagogies

that are in their infancy and attempts to balance the social epistemic nature of writing instruction with the real-world demands of diverse student populations, increasing course sizes, and ever-changing technologies.

Perhaps most importantly, this dissertation focuses on strategies that online writing instructors can adopt regardless of their theoretical leanings, academic training, or institutional requirements. While persistence-based instruction does not change the purpose or outcomes of first-year composition and does not replace proper placement measures or address early-term drop rates, it does provide a framework for facilitating online courses that is rooted in rhetorical theory and composition pedagogy and promotes informed teaching and lifelong learning.

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## Chapter 1: Making Persistence a Goal

In 1975 Vincent Tinto published “Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research.” More than thirty years later, institutions are still struggling to quantify student-retention data and implement strategies to decrease attrition rates. However, despite volumes of research, institutions still grapple with retention. More curiously, despite decades of concerted research on first-year student retention, surprisingly little retention scholarship has been directed toward that mainstay of first-year coursework: composition classes. Although composition courses are, in general, required first-year courses with relatively small class sizes, institutions have yet to explicitly leverage these courses as a focus of retention efforts. Increasingly, however, more institutions offer composition courses online in an effort to attract and accommodate more students. What can first-year online writing instructors do to help these students persist, and what can writing program administrators and department chairpersons do to support these efforts? Before attending to these questions, it is necessary to examine the state and significance of persistence, the emergence of online writing instruction, the relevance of persistence scholarship to online writing instruction, and the most common causes of early departure. Finally, it is necessary to formulate a theory of persistence-based online instruction that advances composition scholarship.

In the United States today, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, upwards of 45% of first-year college students fail to complete their degrees, most students leaving the institution between their first and second

semesters or between their first and second years. This rate has remained surprisingly steady despite increases in enrollments. Arguably, a college education is essential in today's information society. According to Carmen DeNavis-Walt and Robert W. Cleveland, who wrote "Money Income in the United States: 2001" for the U.S. Bureau of Census, college educations result in anywhere from a 27% to a 63% higher income level, depending upon degree attainment. Today, jobs that once required no formal education, credential, certification, or entrance examination require some level of prerequisite achievement, such as an associate's degree.

Although first-year courses, such as first-year writing courses, were once gatekeeping courses, serving to weed out underperforming students from advancing to higher-level studies, the educational climate surrounding prerequisites has changed significantly. Now, many consider first-year composition a service course intended to help students acquire and hone academic research, writing, argumentation, information literacy, and digital literacy skills that position them for success throughout their academic careers. First-year composition sets the stage for a successful first-year, assimilation into post-secondary studies, and completion of a post-secondary certification or degree. Scholars have documented that the majority of student departures happen within students' first years of enrollment, most markedly for nontraditional students (see Otero, Rivas, and Rivera; Rayle and Chung).

In "Should I Go or Should I Stay? A Study of Factors Influencing Students' Decisions on Early Leaving," Margaret Glogowska, Pat Young, and

Lesley Lockyer interviewed 19 students who had voluntarily withdrawn from nursing courses. They extrapolate that “The beginning of the course is a time when students are vulnerable to thoughts of leaving...students have not yet made the investment that provides resources for dealing with later difficulties” (70). However, vulnerable students rarely make their concerns known. For “The College Departure Process among the Academic Elite,” Joseph Hermanowicz interviewed thirty former students who left the university. They

almost never consulted faculty, academic advisers, or residential staff. When interaction about leaving did take place with these people, it was usually at the conclusion of students’ own deliberation processes, when strategies for intervention are at their weakest. (89)

He concludes that reactive intervention is a poor strategy and, instead, retention efforts must be directed at all students, especially in their first year. In the absence of a validated identification and intervention process, the best alternative is to be proactive—if not in the identification of at-risk students, then in the instruction to each student. Beginning-of-program, beginning-of-term, and beginning-of-course instructional experiences can play significantly into students’ decisions to depart or persist. It follows that students are the most vulnerable at the beginning of courses in the beginning of their academic programs, for example, the first few weeks of a first-year writing course. This can be a time when support provided by composition instructors and writing center tutors can be of great significance to students (Glogowska et al. 64). First-year composition

is both an opportunity to help first-year, and in particular first-semester, students succeed. For many composition instructors, student success is measured in grades, pass-rates, or student evaluations. How many are able to look beyond their courses at how successful their students are after their first and second terms? In short, has retention been emphasized as a primary concern of first-year composition instructors?

Indeed, small minorities of researchers question whether improving student persistence should be an instructional goal; they assume attrition can be attributed to students who moved to other institutions that were a better fit for them. A few researchers, such as Amy Rummel, Dan Acton, Stephanie Costello, and Gillian Pielow, authors of “Is All Retention Good? An Empirical Study,” assert that some attrition is necessary to avoid graduating inferior students. This restricted view, which assigns an essentialist state of inferiority to students, is where composition studies, informed by critical theories, can lend an informed perspective. A broader view might acknowledge that struggling students have been the products of what Paolo Freire coins the “banking system of education,” sorted into inequitable curricular tracks or disenfranchised as members of underprivileged minority groups (see Freire; Venezia and Kirst). In addition, such students may not identify with their institutions, programs, faculty, or peers in ways that support their progress (see Rayle and Chung; Rendón; Schlossberg).

Why should composition instructors extend their concerns to a new area: retention? Should this not be the concern of institutional officers? Certainly, student persistence is important to instructors and institutions for numerous

reasons, both humanistic and economic. Institutions and their instructors have an obligation to nurture human potential, intellectual growth, and academic success. Furthermore, for many public institutions, the number of students enrolled at a certain date in the term affects how state funds are allocated, which affects institutions' budgets, staffing ratios, and student services. In turn, budget allocations, teacher-to-student ratios, and student services affect the overall student experience and academic and affective outcomes. Finally, states are interested in producing an educated workforce that will attract employers and provide higher earnings, thus contributing to their tax revenues and economic growth (Maestas et al. 239). According to Andrea Venezia and Michael Kirst, authors of *Inequitable Opportunities: How Current Education Systems and Policies Undermine the Chances for Student Persistence and Success in College*,

Increasing the rates of student success at [broad access] colleges is a sound public investment because it can have a tremendous impact on the civic and economic well-being of each state by improving people's economic security, increasing their civic participation, and increasing college completion rates of students who are economically disadvantaged and students of color. (301)

Although it is clear why institutions and states are concerned with student retention, why should individual instructors—who may already feel challenged by larger classes, more diverse student skills, a dearth of full-time and tenure-track positions, and the demands of lesson planning, instruction, assessment, grading, and other institutional commitments—want to concern themselves with attrition

problems, which are generally perceived to require institutional or programmatic solutions or are simply considered to be the inherent result of broad-access admissions? The answer is threefold: first, instructors have a vested interest in the ongoing success of their institutions if for no other reason than for the security and perpetuation of their own livelihoods; second, composition instructors, who often understand the confluence of race, class, and gender upon academic advancement, should understand the ethical and economic importance of helping struggling students experience success and graduation; and third, teaching to retain students might simply be good teaching that, in fact, promotes student engagement, cooperation, and success.

Each student's individual success is perhaps more tightly interwoven into the success of English departments, post-secondary institutions, and even state and national economies than may be acknowledged. In addition to being concerned with their students' success, composition faculty should be concerned with the success and longevity of their discipline; their departments; their institutions; and, ultimately, their states and nations, which benefit fiscally, socially, and civically from graduating students who are prepared to participate in a global information economy (Venezia and Kirst 301). In turn, the health of these organizations shapes the career stability of compositionists and the shape of the discipline in general.

#### The Current State of Online Writing Instruction

The Sloan Consortium's annual report on online instruction indicates that one-third of students take at least one course online during their post-secondary

studies, and this number is increasing term after term. This increase adds more complexity for composition instructors, who need to adapt to online pedagogies, digital curricular materials, learning management systems, and instructional techniques. In fact, Thomas Russell's work on the "No Significant Difference" phenomenon reviews research from more than 350 studies of online instruction and reports that online instruction is at least as efficacious as traditional instruction. According to Patrick Slattery and Rosemary Kowalski, who wrote "On Screen: The Composing Processes of First-Year and Upper-Level College Students," we are in the midst of a new period of writing instruction. Slattery and Kowalski consider this the "second wave" of computer-based writing instruction: the first wave, in the early 1980s through 1990s, when word-processing software enabled writing, editing, and formatting efficiencies; and the second wave starting with more computer-mediated communication (CMC) over the Internet (61).

Clearly, there is an imperative for composition instructors and writing program administrators to address the emergence of online instruction, tutoring, research, and writing. The digital medium is more than just a way to retrieve or convey information otherwise accessible in print; it represents a sophisticated and nuanced set of digital literacies, which learners must acquire to succeed in online courses and, increasingly, in an information-based society. In today's hyper-technological environment, writers and students of writing are routinely using electronic and digital writing, research, and communication technologies. In addition to word processing programs, writers are using Internet search engines and Web sites; online indexes, databases, journals, and book synopses; and email,

instant messages, bulletin boards, and social media sites to convey their messages. Many writing classes are conducted partially or entirely online, and students are encouraged to access online tutoring centers and resources, such as Purdue's Online Writing Lab (OWL). In her article, "Digital Divide 2.0: 'Generation M' and Online Social Networking Sites in the Composition Classroom," Stephanie Vie notes that nearly all writing today happens in computer mediated spaces. She points out that while some students may have superior technological skills, they are unable to thoughtfully assess the role of technology in their lives (10).

In the past decade, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the Association of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) have issued calls to address digital literacies. In 2004, the CCCC issued a "Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments," stating that, "...the focus of writing instruction is expanding: the curriculum of composition is widening to include not one but two literacies: a literacy of print and a literacy of the screen." Similarly, NCTE released a position statement on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies stating, "...the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies—from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms—are multiple, dynamic, and malleable." The statement lists the following six outcomes:

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology



- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media texts
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments

Similarly, the WPA Outcomes Statement includes a fifth area devoted to composing in electronic environments. According to this document, by the end of first-year composition, students should be able to

- Use electronic environments for drafting, reviewing, revising, editing, and sharing texts
- Locate, evaluate, organize, and use research materials collected from electronic sources, including scholarly library databases, other official databases (e.g., federal government databases), and informal electronic networks and Internet sources
- Understand and exploit the differences in rhetorical strategies and in the affordances available for both print and electronic composing processes and texts

In 2011, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), along with the NCTE and the National Writing Project (with endorsement by the

CCCC), participated in the design of the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, which delineates a set of skills and habits of mind that inform writing instruction to prepare for college readiness. One of the five skills that it proposes—alongside rhetorical processes, critical thinking, writing processes, and knowledge of conventions—is the ability to compose in multiple environments.

The framework states,

Composing in multiple environments refers to the ability to create writing using everything from traditional pen and paper to electronic technologies... For example, a writer might be asked to write a traditional essay, compose a webpage or video, and design a print brochure all based on similar information. (14)

It suggests that instructors provide guidance for students to

- Use a variety of electronic technologies intentionally to compose
- Analyze print and electronic texts to determine how technologies affect reading and writing processes
- Select, evaluate, and use information and ideas from electronic sources responsibly in their own documents (whether by citation, hotlink, commentary, or other means)
- Use technology strategically and with a clear purpose that enhances the writing for the audience

- Analyze situations where print and electronic texts are used, examining why and how people have chosen to compose using different technologies
- Analyze electronic texts (their own and others') to explore and develop criteria for assessing the texts. (14)

Many institutions are turning to online instruction not only because it is instructionally sound, but simply to reach more students. Reaching more students does not equate to retaining more students; thus, special attention needs to be paid to student persistence. In fact, the research on retention shows that relationships are the single most important predictor of student persistence (see Schlossberg; Tinto "Theories"). Yet, in the online environment, these relationships are virtual and may require special techniques to build. Some instructors report that teaching online allows them to establish closer relationships with their students, provide students more individual attention, and encourage students to participate with their peers in more constructive ways (see Conrad and Donaldson; Hewett and Ehmann; Warnock "Teaching"). Retention in the online course is certainly influenced by, although perhaps not entirely dependent upon, relational instructional strategies: how the instructor interacts with students and responds to students and encourages affiliation. Therefore, online instructors must understand the unique role that pedagogy plays in persistence.

#### Persistence in Online Writing Instruction

Even if composition instructors care about their students' persistence, what can these instructors do? Their attention is on instruction, assessment,

curriculum, and grading, as well as publications, conferences, technology, committees, and the complexities of an increasingly diverse student body in broad-access institutions. Where is there room for composition instructors—some struggling for tenure; others pulled from fields as diverse as literature, creative writing, and applied linguistics; some racing from campus to campus as adjuncts; others teaching above eighty students per semester; still others devoting time to writing centers, technology committees, student placement, and peer mentoring; and many being graduate students or first-time instructors—to learn the nuances of what they personally, not their departments or their institutions, can do to help students persist?

Persistence is highly relevant in writing studies, where process is often emphasized over product and, as per the WPA Outcomes Statement, students must “Be aware that it usually takes multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text.” This perseverance is at the very heart of retention studies. The statement begins, “Learning to write is a complex process, both individual and social, that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance.” The statement pays special attention to learning, stating, “Helping students demonstrate these outcomes requires expert understanding of how students actually learn to write.” Such objectives are, by their very nature, learner-centered, which, as the next chapter indicates, is key to persistence. Similarly, the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing lists “persistence” as one of eight habits of mind that students need to acquire and defines it as: “the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects” (9).

Nevertheless, the reference to persistence in the framework is illustrative of the relevance of persistence as a concept within literacy and writing studies.

Despite the dearth of scholarship connecting composition and persistence, composition programs are in an opportune position to contribute to student retention efforts. First, students generally take composition courses during the first two semesters of college. Second, composition courses are often required, with the requirement posing an obstacle for struggling students at risk of early departure. Third, these courses often feature relatively small class sizes wherein students and their instructors have the ability to interact. Fourth, by the nature of their two-term structure, they offer a bridge from the first term to the second—a bridge that could carry students further into their individual studies. Fifth, they allow for the types of activities that persistence research suggests: emphasis on inclusion, mattering, and validation; ongoing orientation to the institution and its resources; and experiential, process-based learning (activities common to composition instructors). Finally, composition instructors may be among the most willing instructors to embrace attitudes and pedagogies that support student persistence. For example, composition instructors familiar with social construction theory are in a position to recognize the myriad factors that influence student performance in composition courses. Those who use learner-centered, democratic, and critical-literacy pedagogies recognize that students' self-efficacy and agency must be cultivated in concert with their writing and critical thinking skills.

Pegeen Reichert Powell, author of “Retention and Writing Instruction: Implications for Access and Pedagogy,” calls for rhetoric and composition faculty to attend not only to the scholarship of their discipline, but also to the scholarship on retention. She asserts, “the questions surrounding which of our students persist until graduation and why should... reframe our conversations about pedagogy” (664). Composition instructors and writing program administrators should supplement preferred pedagogies with instructional practices rooted in educational psychology, instructional design, and adult learning that demonstrate connections to the academic, socioeconomic, and affective factors that influence student persistence. Research derived from higher education administration, educational social policy, and educational psychology is also directly applicable to the composition classroom. Many of these practices have either seeped in over time or have been adopted by instructors, department chairs, or writing program administrators. These include promoting student choice in writing topic selection; accommodating and encouraging dissenting viewpoints; making grading criteria and rubrics transparent, if not collaboratively devised; and supporting struggling and nontraditional students using all available support services, such as the writing center, online tutoring, and peer collaboration. Many of these are practices, which will be discussed in the chapters ahead, typically engaged by composition instructors, regardless of their theoretical leanings.

While there is scholarship on effective online instruction, praxis in online writing instruction, and student persistence, scholars generally ignore the issue of student persistence in first-year online writing courses and, in particular, around

how such courses can be designed and facilitated in ways that promote persistence. In addition to the lack of research connecting student persistence and writing instruction, the research that does exist is largely qualitative and, often, anecdotal; while I draw connections among the scholarship from several disciplines, there is no empirical data that draws a line of causation between online writing pedagogies and student persistence. Instead, there are opportunities to connect disparate qualitative research in ways that argues for a persistence-based online writing pedagogy, attempting to answer the question: how can the pedagogies, curricula, instruction, assessment, and technologies that writing instructors use be adjusted to assist students to simultaneously meet composition outcomes and persist in post-secondary studies?

Below I define terms commonly associated with persistence; examine how it can be viewed through a transdisciplinary theoretical framework; evaluate the most common factors that affect persistence and cause attrition; and build the groundwork for advancing a theory of persistence-based instruction by drawing connections among scholarship related to learner-centered instruction, mattering, student-connectedness, and virtual presence, all of which are central to instructional and affective factors influencing persistence. In doing so, I stress the persistence is imperative for composition instructors, regardless of their professional training, preferred pedagogies, and institutional outcomes.

#### Definitions of Terms

There are several common terms that I reference that bear definition, discussion, and differentiation: persistence, retention, learner-centered instruction,

online instruction, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, technology, and Web 2.0 technologies. Although these terms have commonly understood definitions, they are of special significance in scholarship related to persistence and, therefore, need elucidating.

*Persistence and retention.* Researchers in higher education administration, educational psychology, and numerous other fields often interchange the terms *retention* and *persistence*. In general, the former pertains to the advancement of students from their first to second semesters and the latter refers to success in graduating students (see Crissman; Edward).

*Learner-centered instruction.* Educators focus on learning, rather than teaching. Learner-centered instruction responds to differing levels of student access, recasts the role of the instructor to instructional designer, frontloads and sequences curricula, diagnoses learner needs, takes a developmental approach to sequencing instruction, and provides ongoing assessment for understanding (see Huba and Freed).

*Online instruction.* Educators conduct classes entirely via computer-mediated environments, with dispersed students and using learning management systems, electronic textbooks, curricula, assessments, and activities adapted for the digital environment (see Warnock).

*Pedagogy.* Educators adopt approaches to teaching supported by substantial research and theorizing around how learners best construct knowledge within a given discipline. Composition pedagogies include teaching modes of discourse, teaching writing as an expressive exercise, teaching writing



as argumentation, teaching writing as discourse analysis, and teaching writing as a form of digital literacy. Pedagogies are neither fixed nor discrete, and it is common for one instructor to adopt various pedagogies that inform his or her primary approach to composition instruction (see Hillocks).

*Curriculum.* The term curriculum may refer to an established series of courses, concepts, or skills based on specific epistemologies or, more generally, the materials used to support instruction, such as textbooks, media, technology, and self-, student-, or peer-generated materials. I will differentiate among curricula and curricular materials although this is not entirely consistent with the scholarship I reference (see Tomlinson; Brown).

*Assessment.* Educators assess learning. Assessment often conjures up notions of culminating graded activities, such as high-stakes tests, midterms, and final exams. However, these associations reflect a restricted and outmoded view of assessment. A richer, more robust definition includes every opportunity for students to demonstrate, evaluate, and improve their understanding and mastery of course outcomes and objectives (see Angelo and Cross; Huba and Freed; Stiggins). These opportunities could include self-assessments, formative assessments, and summative assessments. For the purposes of this research, assessment will include every assignment that a student is expected to complete whether evaluated by the instructor, the student, a tutor, or a peer (see Angelo and Cross; Huba and Freed).

*Technology.* Educators often use material devices. Defining technology can become difficult semantic terrain. Although people formerly wrote with desks, paper, and pens, which are also broadly considered technologies, they now often favor computers equipped with software programs. Today, technology is generally considered a combination of electronic tools, such as computer hardware, and digital environments, such as software programs and Internet sites (Kirtley, 213).

*Web 2.0 Technologies.* Web 2.0 technologies extend beyond computers into the realm of mobile devices and often refer to the nebulous social areas where data can be both stored and retrieved. For this purpose, Madeleine Sorapure defines Web 2.0 as both “a platform, with applications and files stored on the Web rather than on a user’s desktop” and a participation method, “the participatory Web, the social Web, the read-write Web” (60). For my purposes, “technology” includes hardware, software, and Web 2.0 technologies, such as social media.

#### Causes of Persistence and Attrition

A report issued by the American Council on Education indicates that nearly 2.5 million public high school students graduate in the United States each year. In their senior year, nearly 90% indicate that they plan to go to college, and 70% actually pursue some type of postsecondary education. Of those students, 50% aspire to earn a bachelor’s degree. However, 41% of students who earn more than ten credits at a two- or four-year school never complete a degree (American Council on Education). To date, there is no single explanation for why such a high

number of students fail to reach their degree aspirations. In *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, Tinto asserted that race, ethnicity, gender, prior achievements, and socioeconomic statuses interact with other factors, such as the level of integration within the college system and particular academic goals—all of which coalesce into eventual completion or attrition (see also Hermanowicz).

#### *Preexisting Academic Factors*

Large proportions of first-year students struggle with post-secondary coursework; in fact, reports from the American Council on Education indicate that this number could be as high as 63% at 2-year institutions. Among the most widely accepted predictors of success are incoming students' high school cumulative GPAs, success in college preparatory coursework, and standardized college entrance test scores, which explains inclusion of these points in application packages (Maestas et al. 246). However, Tinto challenges the degree to which grades are linked to persistence (Tinto, *Rethinking*, 48). Furthermore, institutions may not counterbalance grade-related data with contextual information that may have contributed to incoming students' low scores or that may forecast success, including those factors under the control of the institutions and their faculty. On the basis of 109 studies, and after controlling for score-based traditional predictors, Huy Le, Alex Casillas, Steven Robbins, and Ronelle Langley, who authored *Motivational and Skills, Social, and Self-Management Predictors of College Outcomes: Constructing the Student Readiness Inventory*, surveyed students from across fifty broad access public institutions and identified

three primary indicators of college success: academic self-efficacy, achievement motivation, and academic goals (483). These indicators, in turn, are deeply connected to previous academic success; the desire to pursue additional education; and the ability to articulate clear and attainable outcomes, respectively. In short, prior academic success often begets future academic success.

### *Socioeconomic Factors*

Financial support, class status, and social-group membership all matter. Financial support plays an important, but complicated, role in persistence because it is linked to other socioeconomic variables and is difficult to isolate in student departure decisions. Although some research reports that students with more financial resources in general are more likely to persist, other research shows that finances are a negligible factor to the perceived likelihood of attaining one's academic and career aspirations (Cofer and Somers 60, 70; Maestas et al. 247; Otero et al. 169). In *What Influences Student Persistence at Two-Year Colleges?* James Cofer and Patricia Somers cull data from national databases of more than 12,000 students. They write,

full-time, dependent students and students who are nearing completion are more likely to incur debt to attend school, because of their dependency status and their limited incomes, or the proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel." Thus, for these students, debt may be positively associated with persistence. However, another group of students may be debt-averse. These students may be African American or private school students. In any case, a

small amount of debt is enough to discourage their persistence.

(70)

The past two decades have revealed considerable research illustrating the connections among socioeconomic status, race, and college graduation. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in the 1997-98 academic year, only 8.3% of all bachelors degrees awarded were received by African American students; only 5.5% by Hispanic students; only 6.0% by Asian or Pacific Islander students; and fewer than 0.7% by American Indian and Alaskan Native students. Of African American students, 70% enrolled in four-year college programs fail to complete a degree, compared to 45% of Caucasian American students. According to Claude Steele's research for "Race and the Schooling of Black Americans," the disparity in attrition rates is attributable to African American students' lack of affiliation with the schools they attend (4-5). NCES also revealed that fewer than 50% of Hispanic high school students meet enrollment criteria for four-year institutions, approximately 40% of these enroll immediately after high school, and approximately 10% graduate. It is impossible to ignore the role that socioeconomic status has on student persistence.

### *Institutional Factors*

Both attrition and the academic struggles that may precede it are prevalent at the broadest of broad-access institutions: the community college. In fact, according to Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer's work, *The American Community College*, only half of all community college students persist long enough to earn credit for a single term (56). The reasons for this attrition are

perhaps less related to the institution than the academic and socioeconomic histories of the students at these institutions. This is consistent with research by Ray Christie and Philo Hutcheson, authors of *Net Effects of Institutional Type on Baccalaureate Degree Attainment of "Traditional" Students*, who examined longitudinal data for 1,577 first-year students at broad access institutions who aspired to earn bachelor's degrees. They state:

Attending a two-year college is inversely related to being white, achieving a strong high school grade point average (GPA), earning a four-year degree, having an academic high school curriculum, participating as a leader in high school activities, and having a high socioeconomic status. (9)

Persistence measures are indispensable for high-attrition institutions such as broad access institutions. Forty years ago, in his text *Self and Society*, Nevitt Sanford proposed his person-environment theory, which hypothesized that an individual's readiness to demonstrate academic competency is based on a combination of personal maturity and the right environmental conditions. (276-291). Central to Sanford's theory was the notion that these institutional factors influence affective responses, which contribute to student success.

#### *Instructional Factors*

Instructional factors (essentially, how instruction is sequenced, delivered, remediated, evaluated, and supported) have a significant role in persistence. Glogowska, Young, and Lockyer note that the "greater similarities than differences between the experiences and perceptions of students who stay and

those who leave has led to a shift from examining reasons for leaving to seeking to understand factors which influence students to remain” (64). Randi Levitz, Lee Noel, and Beth Richter examined those very things that might be considered “pull factors” in “Strategic Moves for Retention Success.” They developed a 73-item National Student Satisfaction Survey that asked students to rate those items that were most important to them in their post-secondary experience. The top six items were related to instruction including content, the quality of instruction within their majors, the registration process, faculty, advisement, and the quality of instruction in general.

In “Integration and Adaptation: Approaches to the Student Retention and Achievement Puzzle,” Zepke and Leach discuss their meta-analysis of 146 persistence studies and claim that a learner-centered approach to instruction, student services (such as housing, counseling, and extracurricular activities), and faculty-student relationships is crucial for persistence (49-52). Most studies found that student outcomes improved when:

- Students “are comfortable with organizational behaviors, the institutional environment, and institutional processes.”
- “Institutions promote personal contact outside classrooms and show a commitment to students’ total well-being.”
- Institutions offer “accurate, comprehensive, and easy to follow pre-enrollment advice and academic counseling is a priority area.”

- “Students have regular and meaningful contact with teachers, both inside and outside the classroom.”
- There is an emphasis on “the quality of teaching.”
- Students “were involved in some kind of academic learning community.”
- Students do not experience “‘social isolation,’ ‘alienation,’ and ‘difficulty making friends.’” (49-52).

### *Affective Factors*

One vital factor that affects student persistence is the affective response students have to their learning environments. Tinto examines affective factors in a theory of student persistence and attrition that evolved over three decades, documented in his 1975 article “Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research,” continuing with his 1986 text “Theories of Student Departure Revisited,” and culminating in his 1993 book *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. In essence, Tinto proposes a longitudinal, interactional model of persistence that is based upon Emile Durkheim’s suicide model, in which individuals who do not feel affiliated with the social collective are more at risk for committing suicide. When examined this way, attrition can be viewed as a response to not establishing oneself within one’s post-secondary community, thereby making it essential for all members of an institution, including instructors, to offer attrition prevention strategies.

In the past forty years, numerous other scholars have addressed students’ affective responses in terms of their relationships with faculty, fellow students,



and the institution at large. Nancy Schlossberg provides insight into the detrimental effects of student marginality and the importance of affect. Many researchers report that students' social networks are as important as their prior academic histories in predicting their likelihood of persisting (see Baker and Pomerantz; Nora; Ralye and Chung; Saunders and Serna). Others point to the crucial role of student and faculty relationships (see Harmanowicz). Ricardo Maestas, Gloria S. Vaquera, and Linda Muñoz Zehr point to the significant effects that a sense of belonging has on student grades and persistence (250), and Laura Rendón discusses the importance of validating students' work and experiences (12-17). Steele describes the feelings of alienation that nontraditional students may feel and the negative effects it has on their overall educational experience.

#### Promoting Persistence

The preceding research also indicates that there are many complex and often preexisting factors that influence the extent to which any given student may persist in his or her post-secondary educational goals. Glogowska, Young, and Lockyer substantiate Tinto's assertion that, in the majority of cases, persistence decisions cannot be linked to a single factor; instead, they are the result of complex, intermingling factors. They conducted ethnographic studies with a group of adult students to identify what they call push and pull factors. Push factors are those things that push students out of their academic institutions, such as the challenges of academic work; the burdens of other demands, such as family and work commitments; financial stresses; lack of a support system, such as family, friends, and colleagues who encouraged higher education; and early

experiences that were negative. Pull factors are those factors that pull students back into the programs and keep them there against difficult odds and include commitment to a program or profession; informal and formal support, including support from friends, family members, peers, professors, and advisors; and sheer determination (Glogowska et al. 67, 71).

While institutions have implemented policies around student enrollment, placement, and readiness to promote persistence, what can first-year instructors do to help students persist? The bad news is that many of the aforementioned persistence factors lie outside of an individual instructor's control; clearly, individual first year instructors cannot change the previous academic experiences, socioeconomic statuses, or institutional affiliation of their students. However, first year instructors do have some control over their instructional practices and the affective experiences of their students. By rigorously examining their instructional practices, instructors may find places where they can help students persist in writing courses and beyond, in concert with instructors' individual and institutional responsibilities. Such efforts need not *supplement* content and instruction; they may *undergird* it through a new model of persistence-based online instruction.

Having elucidated the myriad factors that cause students to persist, or depart, from their post-secondary studies, I advance a theory of persistence-based instruction that online composition instructors, regardless of their formal training, can implement across diverse pedagogies, curricula, and students. The model I propose integrates learner-centered instruction and student affective outcomes

with research on rhetoric and composition theories in a way that is directly relevant to online writing instruction.

In short, the model includes six core tenets for online writing instructors:

1. Designing learner-centered online writing courses
2. Demonstrating mattering by valuing student writing
3. Fostering self-efficacy by making assignments relevant
4. Fostering student connections through collaboration and community
5. Engaging virtual learners by fostering a sense of place and presence
6. Recognizing challenges and minimizing risks

This model is deeply rooted in transdisciplinary scholarship culled from fields as diverse as higher education administration, curriculum and instruction, and rhetoric and composition. I have already drawn heavily on Tinto's work describing the interaction of factors on student persistence; in the chapters ahead, I draw on the individual studies of Maryellen Weimer, and Mary Huba, and Jann Freed pertaining to learner-centered instruction; Nancy Schlossberg pertaining to marginality and mattering; Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher for digital literacies and the value of literacy narratives; Karen Burke LeFevre, Peter Elbow, and Scott Warnock for the social epistemic nature of writing and the value of collaborative and collective writing and learning communities; James Paul Gee pertaining to affinity spaces; and Rosemary Lehman and Simone Conceicao for telepresence. Taken as a whole, this large body of transdisciplinary theory, supplemented by

scholarship from others who are active in first-year writing, online learning, and persistence, suggests that first-year writing pedagogies can be recreated in vibrant ways where learners are at the center of the process, actively engaged in dynamic learning communities that meet explicit rhetorical outcomes while implicitly fostering persistence.

### In Summary

Student persistence is key to the success of students, discipline, and institutions and local, state, and national governments; however, there is very little scholarly—and, in particular, empirical—research on how persistence can be addressed in first-year composition courses. Meanwhile, first-year courses—and in particular first-year writing courses—are increasingly being offered online in efforts to attract and retain more students. Furthermore, no other first-year class provides more opportunities to encourage pedagogies that promote persistence, such as providing learner-centered instruction, demonstrating mattering, fostering student connections, and promoting a sense of place. By advancing a theory of persistence-based instruction that is rooted in learner-centered instruction, rhetorical theory, composition pedagogy, and educational psychology, I hope to guide instructors as they move their first-year writing courses online or as they hone their instructional practices. Finally, I acknowledge that there are challenges and risks associated with online teaching in general and with some of the practices that I encourage. My final chapter will identify many of these and offer strategies for ways that they can be minimized and mitigated. By promoting

persistence-based instruction, composition instructors can throw off the notion of gatekeeping and support students in their entrance to post-secondary studies.

## Chapter 2: Designing Learner-Centered Online Writing Courses

Using principles of learner-centered instruction fosters persistence; however, learner-centered instruction is neither easy to define, nor static in its definition, nor drawn readily from one body of scholarly research. It is a contentious, dynamic, and interdisciplinary concept informed by work in higher education administration, educational psychology, curriculum and instruction, and numerous other fields, including rhetoric and composition. In this chapter, I examine tenets of learner-centered instruction, connect these with composition pedagogy, and delineate a series of strategies that online writing instructors might adopt in efforts to become more learner-centered. These strategies include recognizing issues of access, recasting the role of the instructor, diagnosing and assessing learner needs, taking a developmental approach, frontloading curricula, incorporating learning communities, taking a developmental approach, assessing for understanding, and leveraging instructional ecosystems. My discussion of these strategies in this chapter provides the foundation for persistence-based instruction that I offer in subsequent chapters.

Levitz, Noel, and Richter wrote, “We coined the phrase student centeredness to describe the concept as well as the spirit of campuses that were truly focused on students’ needs and, as a result, had very positive retention rates” (32). Similarly, The National Learning Council uses the term *learner centered* to refer to

environments that pay careful attention to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that learners bring to the educational setting.

This term includes teaching practices that have been called “culturally responsive,” “culturally appropriate,” and “culturally relevant”... (and) also fits the concept of “diagnostic teaching.” (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 79)

In *Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learning*, Huba and Freed note that being learner centered also means thinking about the student experience from a systems perspective, in other words, designing courses and coursework that meet learning outcomes, providing relevant content, and promoting other academic departments, programs, and support services to enhance learning (7). They write, “In a systems framework, we work together to design and deliver a curriculum that is coherent to students rather than work separately to design individual courses that we will find personally satisfying.” They continue:

We also seek partners in other academic departments, student affairs, the library, the computer center, and other segments of the institution that provide services to enhance learning. Systems thinking continually reminds us that our courses are components of an entire system to support learning. (7)

This systems perspective is at the heart of persistence-based instruction. It reminds instructors that courses are but one experience in a much larger curricular and institutional ecosystem and that, to affect student success, it is necessary to adjust both instruction in composition and induction into post-secondary studies.

## Learner-Centered Instruction and Composition Theory

One of the assumptions underlying the scholarship on learner-centered instruction is that instructors will be well schooled in the theories, traditions, and epistemologies of their disciplines. Unfortunately, because first-year composition is often taught by contingent staff, teaching assistants, and instructors trained outside of rhetoric and composition, in areas such as literature, creative writing, and applied linguistics, it is prudent to discuss common composition pedagogies prior to incorporating learner-centered instruction.

In *Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, Richard Fulkerson outlines the pedagogies that have taken root across composition studies, which he groups into the following categories: critical/cultural, expressive, argumentation, genre analysis, and discourse induction (654-688). Fulkerson describes, at length, instructors' indoctrination into these various theoretical stances and the scholars who have espoused them, while attending very little to the overall success of any of these in terms of student performance, engagement, or retention. Each pedagogy is intended to advance students' rhetorical capabilities, but none have, as their central tenet, a focus on persistence.

Critical/cultural pedagogies intend to liberate students from hegemonic notions of race, class, and gender. Expressivist and process pedagogies promote reflective, personalized writing and process-over-product, multi-draft revisions, and the many rhetorical pedagogies that Fulkerson subdivides as argumentation, genre studies, and discourse induction all emphasize successful persuasion, acceptance, and induction. Although each of these approaches clearly intends to



enhance elements of student thinking and writing, no single theoretical approach to composition instruction promotes student persistence.

There is no single composition pedagogy that addresses both writing and retention. Similarly, little has been done to evaluate writing pedagogies in terms of their efficacy. George Hillocks attempted such a feat by conducting a large scale analysis of decades of published research to evaluate the effectiveness of the modes of instruction that post-secondary English instructors use, which he categorizes as presentational, natural process, environmental, and individualized (113-131). Hillocks defines these as lecture and teacher-led, expressive and exploratory, problem-based and collaborative, and conference-based, respectively (116-128). He notes that most studies measured effectiveness using rubrics applied to pre- and post-tests; however, the measures were neither uniform nor aligned to contemporary writing outcomes (195). He found that the presentational mode, “in which the instructor dominates all activity, with students acting as the passive recipients of rules, advice, and examples of good writing,” was the least effective (246). Hillocks found the environmental mode to be the most effective. Here, “the instructor plans and uses activities which result in high levels of student interaction concerning particular problems parallel to those they encounter in certain kinds of writing” (247). He notes that these modes may be aligned with the historical progression of composition instruction and that the environmental mode may incorporate aspects of both the presentational mode and the natural process mode but seems to move beyond them both (247). Thus, the

environmental mode is the most learner-centered, and its principles are reflected in contemporary scholarship on learner-centered instruction.

What, then, should be taught in the composition classroom? The WPA outcomes statement for first-year composition is subdivided into the following five areas: Rhetorical Knowledge; Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing; Processes; Knowledge of Conventions; and Composing in Electronic Environments. Similarly, the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing references eight habits of mind (curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition) and five skills (rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, writing processes, knowledge of conventions, and ability to compose in multiple environments) that instructors should encourage, without explicit instructions on how these might be fostered through pedagogical practices. While the Outcomes Statement and Framework provide useful targets for writing program administrators and writing instructors, they do not expressly identify ways in which to achieve them. Moreover, for composition instructors who are new to the composition classroom or online course, little by way of learner-centered instruction is offered.

#### Adopting Learner-Centered Instructional Techniques

Learner-centered instruction is based on adult learning theory. Malcolm Knowles, author of *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, discusses the differences between pedagogy and andragogy and how post-secondary practices often reflect too much of the former and too little of the latter. He likens much of post-secondary instruction to training but not to knowledge creation and transfer.

Knowles maintains that instructional practices that promote learning should be egalitarian, based on adult learners' needs and interests, and remain directly applicable to learners' lives (23-25). Knowles recognizes that adults have different needs, rationales, and purposes in their learning that must be accounted for in learning environments. Adult learners in online courses may be diploma-, certificate-, or degree-seeking; they may have specific career, family, and/or socioeconomic goals or challenges; and they may have unique sources of motivation and interest. Educators should consider these desires when they design learner-centered curricula and pedagogy.

Learner-centered instruction can be viewed as an overlay or scaffolding to writing program outcomes; it helps instructors diagnose student performance, structure assignments and formative assessments, and provide developmental scaffolding and help learners to assess and demonstrate their own mastery.

However, learner-centered instruction does not dictate outcomes, assessments, or the content and activities to which such outcomes and assessments are aligned.

Rather, learner-centered instruction provides principles that inform the selection of techniques, tools, and content that may be most effective in online composition instruction.

The following sections address many aspects of learner-centered instruction that can be readily translated to the online composition course, including: recognizing issues of access, recasting the role of the instructor, diagnosing and assessing learner needs, taking a developmental approach,

frontloading curricula and incorporating learning communities, assessing for understanding, and leveraging instructional ecosystems.

### *Recognizing Issues of Access*

Online composition instructors must acknowledge that online learners may not, under traditional conditions, be able to enroll in courses; the Internet is providing them access to education that may have heretofore been inaccessible. In “Returning Students and the Technical Writing Course: Retention Strategies for New Technical Writing Teachers,” Annmarie Guzy points out that online learning and teaching with technology allow greater access, and the associated potential for retention, than ever before. Guzy stresses that once-hidden resources, such as the writing center, tutoring, and online writing resources, have taken on new importance. Therefore, it is incumbent upon online composition instructors to provide a level of instructional service in keeping with the new level of instructional access, by advising learners to solicit help early and often, particularly in the first term of their first year.

### *Recasting the Role of the Instructor*

In *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow wrote, “The teacherless writing class is a class in which there is learning but no teaching” (vii). Radical when he stated it in 1973, Elbow’s comment was visionary. Unfortunately, this is easily confounded with other, albeit similar, movements, such as expressive writing, critical literacy, democratic teaching, and feminist pedagogy, movements that, although theoretically disparate, would likely be considered by their proponents to be learner-centered in that they enhance the learning experience, focus on the

needs of the learner, and consider the subject position of the learner in regard to the coursework.

Today, the role of teaching has been radically redefined in light of new technologies, Internet-based tutoring and grading, and online course delivery. Online composition instructors must recognize that their role is no longer to disseminate information from the front of the classroom. Students have access to content, technology, support, and even their peers in new, dispersed, mobile ways that both free and restrict traditional notions of teaching. In online courses, instructors spend significant portions of their time teaching students about learning, technology, and collaboration, as well as assessing student performance, communicating individually, and administering courseware. In *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, Thomas Angelo and Patricia Cross note that learner-centered teaching helps students learn how to learn through study strategies and metacognitive exercises (4). Like Elbow, Angelo and Cross prompt instructors to reconsider their pedagogies and how they spend their time and effort.

In fact, retention-based instruction involves a systematic approach to curriculum design and delivery in which the instructor serves as an instructional designer, preparing learning opportunities and assessment techniques that scaffold student learning and elicit student motivation. In *Learner Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*, Maryellen Weimer asserts,

The instructional design aspects of the teacher's role are much more important in learner-centered environments. Activities and

assignments become the vehicles by and through which learning occurs. The most effective ones aim to accomplish one or more of the following four goals. First, they take students from their current knowledge and skill level and move them to a new place of competence . . . Second, the assignments and learning activities need to motivate student involvement and participation . . . Third, the assignments and activities need to get students doing the authentic and legitimate work of the discipline . . . And finally, related and possibly overlapping a bit with the third goal, the assignments and activities of the learner-centered classroom explicitly develop content knowledge and learning skills and awareness. (86)

Functioning as an instructional designer, not a dispenser of content-based information, allows instructors to focus on the overall learning experience while they design, adopt, and adapt materials that provide the basis for content knowledge acquisition. Instructors will also play the role of information brokers who guide students toward resources that help them acquire information and build knowledge, based on students' interests, prior experience, and needs (see Collision et al.).

#### *Diagnosing and Assessing Learner Needs*

One key aspect of instructional design that learner-centered instructors implement is the "needs assessment." In "Predicting Success: Increasing Retention and Pass Rates in College Composition," Beth Brunk-Chavez and

Elaine Fredericksen examine the correlation of placement scores and diagnostic essay scores with student persistence in 70 sections of first-year composition and note that “either measure is a reliable predictor of success and that the two measures together make for an even more reliable predictor” (76). However, the authors assert that many WPA retention efforts are more focused on placement than on instruction and that just because a student places into a course does not mean she or he will succeed in it. Needs assessments help instructors to diagnose learner performance throughout the term, from onset to conclusion. Instructors need not limit their assessments to student performance, as is often the case with diagnostic measures, nor should they use these to track or categorize students. As Knowles suggests, needs assessments should promote instructional practices that are egalitarian and approach learning based on adult learners’ needs and interests and the content’s direct application to their lives (23-25). Thus, good needs assessments have, at their core, measures of students’ self-efficacy, prior experience, and perceived competency. Laura Rendón, author of “Validating Culturally Diverse Students: Toward a New Model of Learning and Student Development,” interviewed 132 first-year students in focus groups across four types of institutions and reminds instructors in all disciplines that the knowledge and experiences that students bring to the classroom must be validated as the foundation upon which knowledge can be built (4-5).

#### *Taking a Developmental Approach*

When considering the best techniques to support instruction, learner-centered composition instructors sequence all course activities, just as course

outcomes and objectives are sequenced, in a manner that promotes mastery. Weimer suggests taking what she calls a developmental approach—not to be confused with remediation. She emphasizes that in learner-centered environments, activities and assessments gradually move students to new levels of competence by motivating participation, encouraging authentic disciplinary work, and developing content knowledge (86). In the most learner-centered environments, instructors meet each student where she or he is and allow her or him to progress with a fair degree of independence. This may be a challenge in reductive or highly sequential online courses; however, it may be achievable in courses constructed to be learner centered.

#### *Attending to Students' Socio-emotional Needs*

In “Marginality and Mattering: Key Issues in Building Community,” Nancy Schlosberg researched the effect of mattering in student persistence and concluded that students who are most likely to persist are those that become integrated socially. Social integration is a key aspect of any developmental approach to instruction; it is an opportunity for online composition instructors to draw first-year students' attention to their emerging identities as members of an academic institution and the transitional discomfort that this may cause.

#### *Frontloading Curricula and Incorporating Learning Communities*

Although composition pedagogies are not directly attributable to retention efforts, institutions have recognized that how students place into composition classes, how they perform in them, and how they receive support when struggling can influence their overall success within their first year and beyond, hence the



emphasis on placement tests, learning communities, and writing centers. In “The Impact of Clustering First Year Seminars with English Composition Courses on New Students’ Retention Rates,” Jennifer Crissman describes the practice of frontloading, or putting faculty, services, and curricula that are most learner-centered in the first year of study to help students adapt, transition, and persist (138).

Frontloading includes instituting first-year seminars, courses that span multiple semesters, and learning communities. In “The Impact of Learning Communities on Retention at a Metropolitan University,” Stephanie Baker and Norleen Pomerantz explore the effects of learning communities on student success. In “Impact of Learning Communities on Retention at a Metropolitan University,” they employed three research methods: delivering surveys to 608 first-year composition students, conducting focus groups in four learning community classes, and comparing data between 328 learning community students and 328 control group students. They found that learning communities have a positive effect on students by building relationships and interactions that result in higher GPAs and somewhat higher rates of retention (115). Such efforts are intended to help students build relationships with their peers and faculty members to help students persist from the first to the second semester of study (Crissman 140).

Unfortunately, the effects of learning communities alone on retention are difficult to judge. Warren Baron describes how learning communities need to be coupled with other efforts in *The Problem of Retention: The Bronx Community*

*College Solution—The Freshman Year Initiative Program.* He describes the increase in student persistence from 59.3% to 76.5% based on a Freshmen Year Initiative Program at Bronx Community College that included first-year learning communities as well as a holistic counseling center, extensive psycho-educational testing, peer-counseling and tutoring, a “rapid-contact counseling system,” and a student success course (1). Thus, in Baron’s study it is impossible to tease out the effect of the learning cohorts independent of other significant, retention-intended variables. Perhaps more importantly, learning communities require significant institutional, programmatic, and curricular direction; they remain outside of the control of most composition instructors.

However, formalized first-year learning communities are not the only type of learning communities. Online instructors can promote learning communities within their own courses (albeit for a shorter term than the generally accepted two-semester or three-quarter norm). Glogowska, Young, and Lockyer recommend several strategies to promote persistence:

Lecturers should be explicit in providing students with explanations of the assumptions and values underlying the nature of “academic work” [and provide] opportunities for working in smaller groups in which they can share problems, ask questions and reflect on their learning [which] facilitate informal support and a greater sense of identity and belonging . . . crucial factors in the decisions of those who stayed. (75-76)

For example, by arranging peer-organized groups based on common attributes such as geographic location, assignment preferences, or career aspirations, instructors can promote small learning communities that may enable dispersed online learners to begin to form small but ever expanding peer networks.

### *Assessing for Understanding*

Teaching first-year composition is necessarily assessment-driven instruction. That is, students are instructed on those elements upon which they are graded: essays. There is a significant and growing body of scholarship on learner-centered assessment, which includes numerous forms of formative, progressive, and informal assessment and a strong bent toward alternative forms of assessment, such as performance-based assessment, classroom assessment, portfolio assessment, and peer/self-assessment (see Angelo and Cross; Biggs; Huba and Freed; Stiggins; Weimer). Learner-centered approaches treat assessment as an opportunity to promote learning, not just a way to measure it.

Weimer writes extensively about learner-centered assessment in *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*. While Weimer notes that there is not a strong correlation in entry-level courses between instructor and student perceptions of quality work, there is still significant value in helping students develop their self-assessment skills (131). Self and peer assessment allow students to evaluate their work based on criteria that they have generated collaboratively. In addition to this learner-centered approach to grading criteria, Weimer suggests separating feedback from grading and implementing a portfolio-based approach to assessment with a strong reflective component (129, 140). She notes, “It is

usually best to separate [feedback from grading] as you would if you return the papers with the comments and then require a written response to those comments before giving the grade” (129). This approach allows students to focus on the feedback, and comment on it, rather than simply looking for the final grade.

Much assessment literature has focused on the validity and reliability of the assessment measure. In other words, is the assessment truly measuring mastery of a particular outcome, and would it produce the same results if the assessment were redelivered? Two less often referenced aspects of assessment are alignment and transparency. Alignment focuses on the direct connection between the learning outcome or objective being met, the assessment used to measure the mastery of that outcome, and the materials and activities that support that successful execution of the assessment. Backward design is one way to ensure successful alignment—that is designing the course activities after the assessment measures have been determined and ensuring that the activities and materials are salient to the learning experience. If instructors interrogate their own materials—reading assignments, research assignments, multimodal activities, small group work, and assignments—in light of their outcomes-based assessments, misalignment may surface. In composition, this may include lectures on grammar, classroom debates, unfocused or unexamined free writing, extensive nonacademic reading, extensive focus on literary criticism, and the prolonged viewing of popular media. Rarely are these types of activities supported in writing program outcomes as indicated by the WPA Outcomes Statement.

Transparent assessment allows learners to articulate the outcome being assessed and understand how mastery will be determined. Here is where criterion-based rubrics, as opposed to holistic grading, support learner success. When learners can see the criterion upon which they are being measured, they can more effectively self-assess and begin to understand their instructor's expectations for academic writing. In fact, learners may be encouraged to co-construct the criteria upon which they are evaluated. In this way, they can identify the traits of "good" academic writing and evaluate those traits in sample essays, the drafts of their peers, and their own submissions and begin to see how closely their perception matches that of their peers, tutors, graders, and instructors.

Learner-centered instruction relies on multifaceted, ongoing assessment as a diagnosis of learner understanding and a prescription of intervention, tutoring, practice opportunities, and additional assignments intended to further that learning. In a traditional classroom, this can be as simple as behavioral observation whereby the instructor can gauge students' understanding through their body language, interactions, and group participation, in addition to more concrete, objective measures of assessment. In the online composition classroom, behavioral observation may be replaced with other, more frequent forms of assessment, such as discussion posts, peer response, and draft submissions. When instructors view assessment as an opportunity to diagnose learner understanding, evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction and make instructional modifications, assessment moves from measuring deficiencies to uncovering

areas where new materials, additional instructional support, or simply more time and practice are warranted (see Huba and Freed).

Toward this end, frequent, low-stakes assessments provide an ongoing feedback mechanism rather than a monumental sign of achievement (or failure). Weimer asserts that...”Anxiety falls when the stakes are lower—when there are more than just two tests or one paper in a term or opportunities to redo or do more” (126). Furthermore, while students are not assigning grades, they may participate in the criteria that guide those grades. Chris Anson, Matthew Davis, and Domenica Vilhott write about encouraging learners to generate their own heuristics and rubrics. They suggest that students use digital resources, such as blogs, to combine their ideas. This generating of criteria helps them understand both the objectives of their writing and the criteria upon which their peers and instructors will evaluate it (37). In *Teaching Writing Online*, Scott Warnock suggests that the online environment also makes it easy to design, modify, and post rubrics; request students participation in the creation and revision of rubrics; and promote understanding of the criteria that comprise them (“Teaching” 117).

Asao Inoue, who writes about the rhetoric of assessment in “Teaching the Rhetoric of Writing Assessment,” supports the prospects of student-generated assessment tools. He suggests that “students benefit when they articulate judgments on their colleagues’ writing and pay extended attention to those articulations of judgment” (49). Inoue stresses the importance of reflecting upon and revising assessment artifacts and language:

When students are asked to create assessment documents for each other's work, dialogue about those assessment documents, revise them, and then reflect upon them, they can explain their assessment decisions and create reflective practices that will transfer to other situations. (53)

In addition to co-crafting rubrics, online writing students can apply those rubrics, revise them based on their usefulness, and reflect on their usefulness in guiding their own perceived mastery of the criteria being evaluated. This is critical to principles of learner-centered instruction that support student persistence.

Finally, learner-centered assessment takes into account not only learner progress toward mastering course outcomes and objectives, but also learners' affective responses to pedagogies and materials and perceptions of their own competency and confidence. Richard Stiggins, in his work *Student-Centered Classroom Assessment*, reports that affective outcomes are closely linked to achievement, motivation, and performance (306). In traditional classrooms, composition instructors can more readily perceive their students' affective responses to various activities, assignments, and materials. In online courses, this can certainly be intuited through students' questions, emails, and discussion posts, but it behooves the learner-centered instructor to actively evaluate affective responses via more direct measures, such as surveys, reflective writing activities, and online student conferences. Learner-centered composition instructors will make changes in their pedagogies and curricula not only to ensure that their

students are mastering outcomes, but also to ensure that their students are engaged with the course and feeling more competent in their own abilities.

### *Leveraging Instructional Ecosystems*

As noted earlier, one of the hallmarks of learner-centered instruction is taking an instructional systems approach to curricula and looking at each curricular choice as part of a much larger ecosystem of related choices that contribute to student learning (see Huba and Freed). Zepke and Leach report that student outcomes improve when students are familiar with their institution's values, goals, and processes and when they understand how to access institutional services (49, 51). Improvements occur when instructors simply help students access their institution's services, especially those services offered online, such as online tutoring, online library resources, and online counseling and student support. Within courses, instructors need to view their syllabi, materials, and assignments as part of a larger course ecosystem. This means ensuring that course assessments are aligned to departmental course outcomes; that curricular materials, readings, and activities support student mastery of these outcomes-based assessments; and that course projects and discussions support other related parts of the institution and student life. While the transparency of this system may be clearer to full-time writing instructors, writing program administrators and other faculty in leadership positions should make this framework more evident to contingent staff and advise them on implementing pedagogies in ways that support institutional and curricular ecosystems.



## In Summary

Composition instructors have been on the forefront of putting instructional theories into pedagogical practice. In composition courses, it is standard practice (if not a best practice) for students to formulate, articulate, and support their opinions; select essay, portfolio, and presentation topics; form self-organizing peer review and collaborative learning groups; and raise issues relevant to their lives, the institution, and the community. However, despite changes in composition pedagogies, including shifts toward and away from didactic, expressive, process, post-process, critical-literacy, democratic, and constructivist approaches, attrition rates have held steady, particularly within and after students' first years. Tempting as it might be, one cannot conflate perceived pedagogical progress with improved student persistence. Moreover, in the realm of online composition instruction, many pedagogical approaches require revision in an effort to ensure that they are learner centered.

Learner-centered instruction should never be mistaken for an abdication of responsibility, or passivity, on the instructor's part; it is highly instructor-directed even though students are largely involved in the development of curricula, selection of content, organization of syllabi, and both peer and self-assessment. Angelo and Cross describe the nature of classroom assessment:

Good classroom assessment techniques are both learner-centered and teacher directed. Learner centered teaching focuses on helping students to improve their learning through study strategies and metacognitive skills. Teacher directed respects teachers'

autonomy, academic freedom, and professional judgment of college faculty. (4)

In fact, learner-centered classrooms are often highly instructor-directed, but the instructor assumes the role of a facilitator, guide, and tutor, diagnosing learning difficulties and prescribing learning solutions. First year composition is in a unique position to put learner-centered principles to use. Composition instructors can recognize how accessible different aspects of courses are; recast their own roles to be more facilitative; diagnose and accommodate learner differences; structure coursework in a developmental fashion; frontload their courses with assignments that support persistence; provide ongoing, transparent assessment; and leverage instructional support services, such as advising, counseling, and tutoring.

### Chapter 3: Demonstrating Mattering by Valuing Student Writing

Significant research demonstrates that student-faculty relationships are foremost among the affective factors that influence student persistence. Hermanowicz pinpoints “the strong impact on persistence exerted by interaction with faculty . . . [as] one of the most important variables behind persistence” (77). Rafael Otero, Olivia Rivas, and Roberto Rivera find, in “Predicting Persistence of Hispanic Students in their 1st Year of College,” that the quality of student-faculty interaction has, more than any other factor, the greatest effect on student satisfaction and persistence. In a survey delivered at 944 institutions, Otero et al. further validated that an instructor’s attitude toward students was the *single most important* way to retain students (165).

How, then, can instructors promote positive relationships with their students when they do not meet those students face-to-face; when they cannot hold conferences with students in their offices; when they cannot rely upon smiles, nods, and greetings to build rapport? Instructors may feel that building rapport online is more difficult than in person, but instructors can build rapport by making their students feel valued. In this chapter, I explore the important role that faculty valuation of students plays in their persistence. More specifically, I begin by examining theories of valuing, belonging, and mattering. Then, I offer four ways in which mattering can be promoted in online writing instruction: placing student writing at the center of the online writing course; conducting the course like a master class; offering, modeling, and encouraging frequent, constructive feedback; and promoting publication or distribution.

## Theories of Valuing, Belonging, and Mattering

Although scholars terms for faculty attitudes toward their students differ (including *valuing*, *belonging*, and *mattering*), they all signify the importance of conveying respect toward students. Ricardo Maestas, Gloria S. Vaquera, and Linda Muñoz Zehr, authors of “Factors Impacting Sense of Belonging at a Hispanic-Serving Institution,” surveyed more than 2,000 college students over two years. They report that the quality of student-faculty interaction has, more than any other factor, the greatest effect on student satisfaction and persistence (165). They describe mattering and belonging as best achieved through academic support, faculty interest, and classroom interaction (249). They write, “When students perceive that their faculty take an interest in them, they have a greater sense of belonging” which has a “positive significant influence on a variety of student outcomes from intellectual and social development to higher grades and persistence” (250). Maestas, Vaquera, and Muñoz-Zehr also found that faculty interest in student development was one of three statistically significant variables that impact a student’s sense of belonging. (249).

Schlossberg proposes a theory of marginality and mattering by which students must feel that they matter to their peers, instructors, and institutions to experience academic and social success in college (9-14). Mattering does not equate to popularity; it is simply the notion of “fitting in.” Feeling marginalized, on the other hand, may not necessarily stem from outright rejection or intolerance but may be the result of feeling different from the mainstream population of an institution or disrespected by its faculty and students.

In their groundbreaking article, “Mattering: Inferred Significance and Mental Health Among Adolescents,” Sociologists Morris Rosenberg and Claire McCullough define *mattering* as “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension exercises a powerful influence on our actions” (165). Treating students with respect and appreciating their differing backgrounds and goals may make the difference between them staying and leaving. Prompting students to write about and reflect upon their goals, experiences, and values may directly affect their persistence.

Andrea Dixon Rayle and Kuo-Yi Chung, who wrote “Revisiting First-Year College Students' Mattering: Social Support, Academic Stress, and the Mattering Experience,” surveyed 533 first-year students and validated Schlossberg’s theory concluding, “Although the students and their life concerns may differ from 15 years ago, it seems that mattering to the college environment remains important to the success of college students” (30). They found that those students who felt more social support, whether from their friends, families, peers, or faculty, also felt that they mattered more to their institutions and, subsequently, felt less academic stress. Rayle and Chung found this to be particularly true for female students (31). Rendón describes the importance of academic validation by faculty members who demonstrate concern, are approachable, treat students fairly, structure learner-centered experiences, work directly with students who need help, and provide timely and valuable feedback (12). Rendón adds, “Validation is most

effective when offered early on in the student's college experience, during the first year of college and during the first weeks of class" (17).

If student-faculty relationships are essential for student persistence, how can online instructors leverage the virtual environment to promote constructive relationships with their students? Instructors interact with students differently online than they do in the traditional classroom. Their role is most often characterized by a shift from "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side." This shift does not necessarily mean that instructors are communicating with students in ways that promote their persistence. In the absence of affective cues, students may feel more isolated and may be prone to negatively interpreting instructor and peer feedback, especially if they feel apprehension about their writing abilities or courses. How can instructors reassure students, particularly in a discipline in which the products that students develop are held up to scrutiny? The answer is simple: we need to value the individual.

As Warnock notes, "In an online class, brief conversational links with students go a long way toward making them feel welcome and connected" ("Teaching" 123), but are brief niceties enough or will students see them as superficial and rely, more heavily, on the grades as markers of their worth and worthiness? There are ways far more fundamental to composition studies, and rooted in rhetorical theory and composition pedagogies, that allow instructors to build meaningful rapport. Online writing courses provide opportunities for instructors to value student texts, conduct master classes, facilitate frequent constructive feedback, and promote legitimate authorship through publication.

## Valuing Student Texts

In his history of composition studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, *Composition, 1900-2000*, David Bartholomae wonders whether “. . . student writing can be taken seriously as writing, as something more than an exercise in correctness and more than a submission to standard forms and expectations” (1951). Similarly, in “Re-Valuing Student Writing” Bruce Horner emphasizes the importance, and relative rarity, of valuing student writing in composition courses: “As intransitive, student writing has no real effects, no real purpose, and performs no real work . . . It is, instead, a ‘bastard’ discourse” (11). Horner discusses the practice of “assigning students to write in an imaginary role to an imaginary audience for an imaginary purpose, a denial that in practice fools no one” (12). He continues, “. . . it is [conventionally believed] that student writings do, in fact, have little to say worth broad circulation” (19). He continues, “At least some of the course practices aligned with ‘social epistemic’ approaches to the teaching of composition are conducive to valuing the work of student writing as academic, in the best sense of that word” (21). Horner is advocating valuing student work by providing students with a legitimate, authentic audience. Horner’s assertion is consistent with the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, which states,

. . . writing activities and assignments should be designed with genuine purposes and audiences in mind (from teachers and other students to community groups, local or national officials, commercial interests, students’ friends and relatives, and other

potential readers) in order to foster flexibility and rhetorical versatility. (7)

The Framework continues, “Teachers can help writers develop rhetorical knowledge by providing opportunities and guidance for students to . . . write for *real* audiences and purposes, and analyze a writer’s choices in light of those audiences and purposes” [emphasis added] (10). Using student texts in authentic ways shows that they, and their authors, are of value. In “Reframing Student Writing in Writing Studies Composition Classes,” Patrick Bruch and Thomas Reynolds promote a practice that they call TWiSTing: teaching with student texts (79). They emphasize that the most important part of TWiSTing is valuing student writing as legitimate, authentic, and academic (80).

Warnock examines the nature of content in online writing courses, noting that it is “largely composed of the students’ own work. This is a difference from most other paradigms, particularly in e-learning, which focus on content delivery” (“Teaching” 28). Warnock takes a pragmatic approach to using student texts:

I often ask students to use class posts as sources in their papers and projects . . . as I think that asking for this type of evidence addresses numerous pedagogical goals. Students must read the posts more carefully to find material for their particular writing project. They also begin to construct or consider authority in the course, as students who are peer reviewing a colleague’s paper may find (with pleasant surprise) themselves being quoted, perhaps juxtaposed with “other” experts from the course texts. (88)



Rolf Norgaard, author of “Embracing Uncertainty: The Kairos of Teaching with Student Texts,” surmises that “A pedagogy focused on work in progress makes for an engaged, student-centered classroom” (229). Students learn by writing for an audience, preparing their work for semi-public consumption, and reviewing their peers’ submissions. Norgaard argues that by evaluating and repurposing each other’s sources, and citing each other’s work, “. . . student work in progress transforms the solitary, silent writing process into a genuine dialog between authors and readers” (231). By writing for a “real” audience, students must consider their audience’s interest and response. Norgaard adds, “Students can no longer write to an audience of one, the teacher, but now must meet the demands of a larger and more real audience, one that includes their peers but can also extend well beyond the classroom” (231). This may mean modifying topics, negotiating multiple perspectives, responding to counterpoints raised during reviews, and clarifying points; this is the work that writers do every day in academic and professional settings. As Norgaard points out, “When students learn on the page, they do more than sit in class and turn in assignments; they become involved in an apprenticeship” (232). By providing students with an audience, instructors empower them as authors, which translates into demonstrated respect for student texts. It follows that if instructors respect student *writing* they respect student *writers*. This allows instructors to forge authentic relationships with students, promoting student persistence.

## Conducting Master Classes

One way to value students is to set high expectations to promote each student's ability to achieve. In *Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice, and Assessment*, Tisha Bender transfers the concept of a "Master Class" to online learning. She describes online courses as places in which students prepare and share polished writing for peer feedback. According to Bender, many of the pedagogies undergirding a master class, such as collaboration, reflection, performance, experiential learning, and authenticity, are also evident in collaborative online learning, with the added benefit of providing frequent opportunities for students to engage, as master classes typically only focus on one or two students per session (140-141). Bender describes the knowledge formation that occurs in settings where students can "form concepts based on the current or previous performances of all their classmates" (140). Online learning provides many opportunities for each learner to share his or her work and to read and provide constructive feedback. Thus, a master class is, essentially, a learning community in which the expectations are set high. The clear message that students receive is that their work is valuable and valued by their peers for its role in their own learning and meaning making.

Master classes are not unlike workshops and seminars, but there are key differences among the three. Master classes focus on refining and polishing student work. Often, this is a richer view than many instructors attach to workshops or seminars, in which student writing may be held up as flawed, incomplete, in need of revision, or as an example of what the instructor views as

weak work rather than valuable work that deserves readership. Joseph Harris, in his work aptly titled “Workshop and Seminar,” differentiates between workshops and seminars, noting that the former helps students revise and the latter helps students learn from a piece of student writing (147). Harris problematizes the relative rarity of these activities within the traditional writing classroom: “If over the span of a fourteen week semester, I meet with a class twenty-eight times, and four of those meetings are devoted to workshops, then what happens to the other twenty-four?” (147). In online writing courses, almost every time students log in they are reading, responding, evaluating, and revising some type of writing, even if it is simply part of a discussion thread.

Online master classes, workshops, and seminars all have one thing in common with collaborative online writing instruction: an authentic audience of student peers. As noted earlier, online courses offer a sense of audience that extends beyond the instructor, and potentially beyond peers, into the public sphere. In “The Figure of the Student in Composition Textbooks,” Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue write about the expansion of audience when digital student texts become the focus of study. They write about a student who “. . . expands her initial considerations of audience to include not only peers and teacher but unknown people interested in the topic” (139). Such an audience may invest students in writing, especially writing that is timely, relevant, and based on familiar, lived experiences, as I discuss in my final chapter. Furthermore, this close evaluation of an authentic audience may prompt students to express deeper levels of clarity (139).

## Facilitating Constructive Feedback

One common way that instructors interact with students in online writing courses is by providing electronic feedback. Although this may not seem like a new practice, it differs in several ways from traditional classroom feedback: first, out of communicative necessity; second, in sheer volume; and third, in terms of peer collaborative work and formative assessment. Removed from accompanying emotional and visual cues, such as the instructor's tone of voice, facial expressions, and general in-person demeanor toward students, feedback needs to be sensitive, constructive, and purposeful. In *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes*, Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann describe the loss, online, of verbal and visual cues from traditional teaching and the need to provide such cues in every type of written interaction through friendly greetings, positive but constructive commentary, and closure to promote a "sensitive stance" (72).

While in a traditional classroom a student may have expected to receive feedback from his or her instructor several times per term and from his or her peers only after workshops prior to project submission, online writing students receive feedback as often as every day. This feedback may be traditional in nature, such as commentary on essay drafts, or may be responses to discussion posts, collaborative writing projects with peers, and modifications to collective writing, such as wikis (all three of these are discussed in more detail in the upcoming chapters). Whereas classroom-based discussions generally involve students responding to the instructor, online threaded discussions are structured so

that students respond to each other. Clearly, feedback has taken an elevated position in online writing courses. In online writing courses, it is critical that instructors consider the nature and quality of their feedback, the importance of peer feedback, and the role of feedback in formative assessment. In each of these cases, feedback can foster relationships that enhance learning and persistence.

*The Nature and Quality of Instructor Feedback*

Denise Comer and Brad Hammer, authors of “Surveying the Efficacy of Digital Response: Pedagogical Imperatives, Faculty Approaches, and Student Feedback,” report that digital feedback, whether in word processing documents, within learning content management system tools, or within email, “alters appreciably both students’ readability of, and ease of use with, feedback and . . . accords a heightened value to what can otherwise seem ‘low-stakes/task oriented’ student writing” (103). Thus, instructor annotations are viewed more favorably and perceived as more useful than the marginalia of yesteryear. In “The Impact of E-Feedback on the Revisions of L2 Writers in an Academic Writing Course,” Frank Tuzi, who studied twenty first-year composition students and analyzed their electronic feedback, reports that electronic feedback did prompt more revisions than oral feedback or writing center feedback (229). In particular, he notes,

Feedback increases the amount of student participation, reduces the role of the teachers, increases the ability to monitor conversations, increases the amount of time students actually write, and provides multiple and redundant responses for students. (220)

Comer and Hammer also noted that digital writing allows instructors to interact more substantially, and earlier, with student writing (106). Digital submissions, regardless of format or genre, make it easier for instructors to access, review, and see the evolution of student writing. Whereas instructors may have been hard-pressed to review a stack of papers twice, once in draft form and once in final form, instructors can now view their students' works-in-progress at any time and make recommendations before the final products are considered complete. This allows students to make revisions based on instructor feedback, not just peer-review feedback (Comer and Hammer 106).

In "Rethinking Evaluation: Using Computer Reviewing Tools to Talk with Students about Their Writing," Terry Frederick reports that digital evaluation allows comments to be clearer, is more efficient for instructors and students, and encourages students to consider how writing technologies affect the writing process (122, 124). She suggests that digital evaluation encourages a feedback loop among students, peers, and instructors, most notably when instructors request that students reply to specific types of feedback (124, 127). In this way, soliciting and receiving feedback becomes part of the writing process, just as it is in professional and academic writing, and part of a larger ongoing evaluation process (127). Clearly, there is a shift away from limiting feedback to "correctness" toward using it to foster authorship, clarify meaning, and promote positive affect. These things empower student writers, strengthen their writing, and allow them to forge relationships with their instructors, and peers, that may foster belonging and persistence.

In “The Low-Stakes, Risk-Friendly Message Board Text,” Warnock suggests that the transparency of instructor responses on message boards allows instructors to “continually model constructive responses” so that students can see multiple exemplars of constructive feedback applied to a wide range of work, rather than only the feedback directed at their work, as in a traditional classroom (99). This transparency and modeling promotes positive, constructive feedback and enables students to see that they, individually and collectively, are respected by their instructor.

#### *The Importance of Peer Feedback*

Interestingly, Hewett and Ehmann discuss students’ perceptions of feedback, arguing that students often perceive instructor commentary less positively than peer or tutor feedback (49). Whether this is attributable to the power differential between instructor-student feedback and student-student feedback, the different types or tones of feedback that each provides, the amount of time that each spends on the work, or some combination of all three is unknown. Regardless, students value feedback from their peers more than feedback from their instructors, according to Terry Carter, author of “A Rationale and Process for Teaching Online Composition.” Carter notes that online feedback is more straightforward than what students may receive in face-to-face classes. She finds that students offer more “honest and candid peer feedback with less hesitation than they do in my face-to-face classrooms” (28). Scott Rogers, Ryan Trauman, and Julie Kiernan describe collaborative practices in multimodal writing in “Inquiry, Collaboration, and Reflection in the Student (Text)-Centered

Multimodal Writing Course.” They assert that digital feedback encourages more thorough feedback because students can “see their role in the revision of an actual working document” (203).

The process of receiving and providing feedback may matter more than the content of feedback itself. Tuzi conducted a close analysis of the stimuli for changes made to writers’ drafts and found that feedback was never the primary stimulus for a change and often only prompted cosmetic changes at the sentence, clause, and paragraph level (226). When surveying students about peer feedback, Patrick Bruch and Thomas Reynolds found, “As many respondents told us, the content of student feedback had far less instructive power for students than having their peer reviewers . . . treat them as writers whose texts were worthy of serious investigation” (80). This connects to the notion of valuing student writing as the centerpiece of online writing courses. Carter notes that the longer “period of engagement” in peer review work in online communities increases learners’ opportunities to build an authentic community (29, 31). In “ESL Students’ Experiences of Online Peer Feedback,” Martin Guardado and Ling Shi emphasize that feedback requires significant interaction with peers’ texts and greater participation especially among traditionally quiet students (444-446).

Warnock requires his students to reference peer citations as evidence in their online posts. He emphasizes that this helps students in “refining their ability to develop an evidence-based mind-set when they write” (“Low Stakes” 99). Warnock also notes that referencing student texts enhances the authenticity of student writing, allows students to understand evidence gathering and citation,



nearly removes the possibility of plagiarism (“Low Stakes” 100), and allows for metacognition, reflection, and metawriting that help students unpack their own writing processes and consider those of their peers (“Low Stakes” 103). As stated in the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, “Teachers can help writers develop flexible processes by having students . . . incorporate evidence and ideas from written, visual, graphic, verbal, and other kinds of texts” (12). Moreover, peer citation encourages students to read closely and critically and to respond to peer texts as citation worthy scholarship.

Bruch and Reynolds assert that students may learn more from analyzing peer writing than from feedback on their own writing (80). Once instructors dispel the emphasis on a singular correct form, learners are able to move from correcting peer writing to shaping the meaning, modes of communication, and rhetorical moves. Bruch and Reynolds note, “The student reviewers, working as a team, are able to help each other appreciate aspects of the text they are reviewing that, as individuals, they might not have noticed” (80). In her article “Analyzing Students’ Perceptions of their Learning in Online and Hybrid First-Year Composition Courses” Patricia Webb-Boyd notes that students often respond positively and enthusiastically to interactions with their peers in particular, as well as their instructors, because they are engaged in multidirectional conversations that extend beyond responses to instructor posts (16). Therefore, peer feedback plays a role in student affective response, which, as addressed in the first chapter, supports persistence.

### *The Role of Feedback As Ongoing Dialog*

In online courses, where students make frequent posts and receive frequent instructor, peer, and tutor feedback, there is ample opportunity to redefine the purpose of feedback. Often, feedback is used to explain the results of assessment. In online courses, feedback, and in particular peer feedback, can be used to shape works-in-progress. According to Warnock, there are increasing calls to differentiate feedback from grading and to provide frequent feedback to encourage greater dialog between writer and audience (“Teaching” 122-123). Inoue states, “I am attempting to separate responding from assessment—that is, the practices of reading and having a human response to a text as opposed to reading a text to judge it along particular dimensions (or expectations)” (49).

Warnock describes the frequent writing and frequent assessment opportunities that this poses as a means of “freeing ourselves from the tendencies to focus on error in our students’ writing, because each assignment itself is only a small piece of that monolithic grade” (“Teaching” 94). Thus, as Warnock notes, peer review and instructor grading do not have to occur only in the high-stakes environment of large projects (“Teaching” 95). Ongoing self, peer, and instructor assessments that amount to frequent feedback on low-stakes assignments seize “the opportunity to create a real conversation about [students’] progress, because multiple small grades create an ongoing feedback mechanism” (Warnock “Teaching” 137).

## Promoting Publication and Distribution

No matter how much educators value student writing; reference it as the center point of course readings to legitimize authorship and audience; and encourage frequent, constructive feedback based on student-generated criteria, one essential element still separates it from the ultimate valuation that is provided in academic and professional settings: publication. Nothing validates one's writing more than having it published, distributed, or circulated. However, rarely is student writing published, and in those cases when it is, it often "deliberately defied conventional expectations" (Horner 11). While publication may be beyond the purview of many writing instructors (and while it poses legitimate risks that will be discussed in the final chapter), it is certainly of keen interest to WPAs.

Karen McDonnell and Kevin Jefferson write about authentic student publication in "Product as Process: Teaching Publication to Students." They encourage WPAs to launch first-year writing journals, promote submissions to campus newspapers, and facilitate getting writing published on student blogs. She mentions "editorial" courses that focus on peer review and workshopping student writing to prepare it for publication. "To students, it is the clearest way to say that their institution values student writing as something more than an academic exercise" (115). This, in turn, is a step toward making students feel valued.

In their article, "Students' Texts beyond the Classroom: *Young Scholars in Writing's* Challenges to College Writing Instruction," Doug Downs, Heidi Estrem, and Susan Thomas describe the benefits of scholarly publication for undergraduate writers. They argue that the undergraduate journal *Young Scholars*

*in Writing* functions to “demonstrate that we’re genuinely asking for something else, that our request of students to attempt to contribute is with precedent and not impossible, not unreasonable, not lip service” (121). They assert that publication is part of a pedagogy, and that legitimizes the writing process, writing, “Students have often in previous instruction lacked having their writing *read* rather than judged, evaluated, analyzed, diagnosed, or corrected” (122). Publication prompts a legitimate form of a peer-review, that Downs et al. contend helps students “to see revision less as a sign of failure and more as a normal function of writing—that is, as development rather than correction” (127).

#### In Summary

Instructor validation is critical to students’ senses of mattering. Marisa Saunders and Irene Serna, authors of “Making College Happen: The College Experiences of First-Generation Latino Students,” followed ten underrepresented students through their college experience and evaluated the persistence differences among students based on their social connections. They assert, “In education, students . . . benefit from the development of relationships with caring educated adults. Students benefit from the social connections they establish with teachers, counselors, and school officials” (148). However, instructors are accountable to their students, institutions, and professions to evaluate student work objectively and to ensure that validation does equate to mere grade inflation. In “An Essential Question: What Is ‘College-Level’ Writing?” Patrick Sullivan asserts that writing instructors must make an effort at “seeing potential rather than actual achievement, or reading a particular essay in a slightly more forgiving

way...[while balancing] the equally high commitment to high standards” (9-10). He continues, “Although there is difference of opinion about the degree to which teacher expectations affect individual student achievement, all of the literature I have reviewed suggests that teacher expectations have at least some demonstrable effect on student outcomes.” (14).

One way to value students is to support their capabilities of writing to broad, public readerships. By using students’ work in courses, managing classes as “master classes” with high expectations, providing and modeling constructive feedback, encouraging students to distribute their work on appropriate digital venues, and soliciting student work for publication, an instructor shows his or her students that he or she takes them seriously as writers, thinkers, and academics. This, in turn, may help students feel that they matter and that they are worthy of further academic work.

#### Chapter 4: Fostering Self-Efficacy by Making Assignments Relevant

Online learning and teaching with technology, as defined in the first chapter, allow greater access, and the associated potential for retention, than ever before. As discussed in previous chapters, composition programs are in an opportune position to contribute to student retention efforts. There is scant research, however, on how composition pedagogy and content might be affecting persistence in actual practice, yet it is clear that certain, mostly outmoded, pedagogies may actually do more harm than good in terms of student persistence. For example, in “Teaching About Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)Envisioning ‘First-Year’ Composition as ‘Introduction to Writing Studies,’” Douglass Downs and Elizabeth Wardle examine the deleterious effect that disconnected writing assignments can have on some first-term students. They describe a returning student who had failed to persist due largely to his experience in a first-semester writing class; despite having “spent every day writing papers for my last job [I] never really took the time to think about what I was writing” (565). Then, when called upon to write academically, he floundered. What provokes anxiety in composition students? The answer to that question is speculative, but Downs and Wardle cite numerous pedagogical problems including a lack of instructor training in writing studies, lack of textbooks that reflect current scholarship, and ongoing practices of using composition courses to weed out seemingly underprepared students (574). Is first-year composition, a course well suited to help students persist, doing the opposite?

As argued in previous chapters, by making persistence a goal, adopting principles of learner-centered instruction, and promoting mattering, educators may help students persist, but can they craft course content in ways that help promote persistence? What would such content look like, and how would it be received by a discipline in which there is already little agreement around what should be taught, how it should be taught, and what comprises composition content in general? In online writing courses, in which students are emerged in some aspect of the writing process nearly continuously, what should they be writing about? Certainly, many students fall back on hackneyed topics (i.e., abortion, capital punishment, and the legal drinking age, to name but a few) while others work on projects that are perhaps seemingly less opinion-oriented and more inquiry-based but still pulled from a list of topics provided by the instructor or the textbook. These topics form the tacit content of composition courses and are arguably of more interest to learners than the assigned readings, textbook chapters, and discussions of rhetorical conventions because these are the topics about which students conduct their research, reading, writing, and revision.

The writing artifacts derived from this substantial coursework are the items on which students are graded. Therefore, while proposing a unified approach to *content* is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to clarify what is meant by the term and examine how it might support persistence-based instruction. In this chapter, I situate the debate around content, differentiate course content from writing assignment content, examine alternative approaches to

traditional research-based writing assignments, and suggest three types of writing assignment content that may help learners persist.

### Situating the Debate over Content

Patricia Donahue, in “Content (and Discontent) in Composition Studies” asserts,

Given the paucity of articles and books about ‘content’ in composition studies these days, it would seem that it is something that we either do not want to talk about or believe should not be talked about, or feel has been talked about to death. (30)

However, the role of content in writing studies has long been debated, and that debate continues today and is relevant to persistence. In 1957, Robert Bowen penned “The Purpose and Content of Freshman English Composition,” which spurred a series of similar articles written on the topic focusing on what exactly should be taught in first-year composition. Bowen hints at many of the problems that still plague composition programs today: disinterested learners, untrained instructors, and haphazard content selections ranging from personal narratives and grammatical exercises to popular cultural projects and literary criticism.

In the 1960s, this puzzlement over composition content continued. In “The Obvious Content of Freshman English,” Dudley Bailey expresses disdain for composition studies relegation to a “service course” and proposes that “...we must assert that we are teachers of a subject matter; and we must...take care to limit that subject matter rigidly” (233). Bailey suggests that this limitation be to four areas: a history of language, an introduction to syntax, an introduction to



rhetoric, and an introduction to literature (233). This question was taken up again, at CCCC in 1965, when participants asked, “Is Freshmen English a liberal arts course or a service course?” (196). This desire for disciplinarity is well contrasted against the more diffused, interdisciplinary content-focus espoused in the 1980s by scholars such as Judith Scheffler, who wrote, “Composition with Content: An Interdisciplinary Approach.” Scheffler described courses organized around thematic concepts, such as “creativity,” with content instruction provided by experts from other fields and writing instruction taking a secondary place as a mere skill (52).

This debate over content continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2000 the CWPA adopted an outcomes statement that formally delineates learning outcomes without specifically directing the subject matter of writing assignments, and in 2011 the CWPA collaborated with NCTE, WPA, and CCCC to adopt the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing that describes habits of mind and experiences with reading, writing, and critical thinking that are foundational to success. Thus, if these outcomes and habits of mind are of primary emphasis in *instruction*, student writing topics, which may be at the epicenter of *learning*, are secondary and may be determined by the institution, program, instructor, or student. This provides an opportunity to shape writing assignments in ways conducive to student persistence.

In 2005, *Writing on the Edge* devoted an edition to the issue of content, based on a panel presentation by Patricia Donahue, Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori, Judith Goleman, and James Seitz at the 2004 CCCC. In “Teaching Content in

Composition,” Salvatori describes the debate between form and content that has long existed in composition studies, asserting, “. . . I find the idea of thinking of content as separate from [its] form to be quite limiting” (17). She contends that by focusing on form, instructors are not only limiting the discipline but limiting students from evolving their thinking, as writing is epistemological (17). In “Historicizing the Form/Content Split in Composition Studies,” Judith Goleman defends skill-based instruction as deeply intertwined with new knowledge formation:

. . . we hear the way in which academics continue to define course content as a body of knowledge . . . . Instead of defining academic skills in the broadest sense as activities which transform bodies of knowledge into understanding, skills continue to be derided as mechanics for making content transparent rather than intelligently different. (25)

In essence, Goleman is arguing for the complementary teaching of both form and content, which is also advocated by the WPA Outcomes Statement and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing.

In “Content and the Composition Curriculum,” Seitz gets at the heart of the issue, writing,

Composition has largely presented itself, particularly in the first-year course but often in advanced writing courses as well, as teaching a practice, or a process, or a method of inquiry. The result

of this emphasis . . . is a curriculum in which subject matter has been deemed largely irrelevant. (26)

Seitz calls for a disciplinary content focused on writing scholarship, expressing concern that “. . . a student who registers for first-year composition has no idea whether her section of the course will concentrate on confessional poetry or Marxist theory or the writings of Gertrude Stein,” and it may seem that “. . . writing becomes a mere adjunct to the ‘topic’ placed at the center—much like ‘writing-intensive’ courses taught in various departments throughout the arts and sciences” (27-28). Warnock refers to this conceptualization of a disciplinary curricula as the writing studies approach, “in which the core reading and study content of the course is material about writing and rhetoric” (“Teaching” 58).

None of this indicates that online writing courses are without content—indeed, the content is rhetoric—but there is significant debate over the nature of both instructor-delivered content and writing assignment content. Downs and Wardle point to “. . . more than 20 years of research and theory [that] have repeatedly demonstrated that . . . a unified academic discourse does not exist” (552). They problematize the notion of academic writing in general, arguing that “asking teachers to teach ‘academic writing’ begs the question: which academic writing—what content, what genre, for what activity, context, and audience?” (556). Editors Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg take up this question in *What is “College-Level” Writing?* numerous scholars explicate nuances that complicate the notion of a unified definition.

In his chapter, “An Essential Question: What Is “College-Level” Writing?” Patrick Sullivan notes the variability of definitions across institutions. He reminds us, “. . . what was college level at one institution was clearly not college level at others” even within the same state or system. (15). Ellen Andrews Knodt elaborates on this point in her chapter, “What is College Writing For?” She examines the different types of writing programs implemented at various institutions and categorizes them into a minimum of six types, each with their own interpretation of “college-level” based on the orientation and goals of the program: the traditional five paragraph essay program, the classical rhetoric program, the sociopolitical program, the writing across the curriculum (WAC) program, the first-year orientation program, and the professional writing program (148-151).

Similarly, Edward White describes the variance in college level writing across and within institutions. In “Defining by Assessing,” White asserts, “. . . it would be absurd to pretend that college-level writing at open Admissions Community College means the same thing as at Selective Ivy League University” and continues, “We might be able to say what Professor Smith at State University sees as college level for his class in Shakespeare, but Professor Jones down the hall would beg to differ” (248). White reminds us that expectations differ at various points in students’ post-secondary careers. He asks,

When we say ‘college-level,’ we need to be clear about what stage of college we are talking about. Do we mean writing ability at point of entry, as with a placement exam? Or do we mean after

completion of a college writing course . . .? Or do we mean at the time of movement from lower-division . . . to upper division work . . .? Or do we mean just before graduation with a college degree? (246)

While scholars clearly express the complexities of defining “college-level” writing, the expectation is even more confusing for students, to whom college-level writing is often considered completely at the discretion of their instructors. Michael Dubson, author of “Whose Paper Is This, Anyway? Why Most Students Don’t Embrace the Writing They Do for Their Writing Classes,” argues that “The attitude students often take is that teachers correct their papers—an idea that implies both an already flawed product and one that only the teacher can fix.” (104). First-year composition instructors who do not express clear criteria for academic writing, or who appear lax in their assessment of writing products, may set the bar unintentionally low, which poses a particular risk for students when their first exposure to college-level writing may, therefore, be far afield from what is expected in other writing intensive courses. Furthermore, each term, writing instructors must redefine their understanding of college-level writing, amidst dynamic shifts in pedagogies, technologies, student demographics, placement testing, administration, and educational policy.

What are writing instructors to make of all of this? While certain aspects of content are fixed (WPA outcomes, an emphasis on writing studies, rhetorical conventions, form, and content); others are flexible, including the topics students are actually writing about. This presents a golden opportunity: to help students

select topics that will help them persist. Downs and Wardle argue for re-envisioning first-year composition in a way that “shifts the central goal from teaching academic writing to teaching realistic and useful conceptions of writing—perhaps the most significant of which would be that writing is neither basic nor universal but content- and context-contingent . . .” (558). Arguably the most context-dependent content for FYC is the transition into academic writing, research, and inquiry. Downs and Wardle recommend that course readings be focused on issues with which students have direct experience. They recommend texts focusing on purpose, process, and procedure; these texts may be supplemented texts that focus on cultural discourses, texts that focus on students’ overall first-year academic experiences, and texts that focus on change, transition, and persistence itself.

In general, then, there are two types of content in writing courses. First, there is rhetorical content, described here as the writing studies approach. Second, there is writing assignment content, which is often student selected, thematic, or connected to other courses. The rest of this chapter focuses on writing assignment content: the content about which students are researching, discussing, writing, and reviewing in their online writing projects, regardless of their length. Furthermore, as elaborated in the sections ahead, I assert that this content should help students not only with their writing, but also with their persistence through their post-secondary experience.

## Alternatives to Traditional Writing Assignment Content

In his work on adult learning theory, Knowles emphasizes the importance of focusing adult learning experiences on learners' needs, interests, and lives (23-25). This not only facilitates learning but also has the distinct potential of encouraging persistence. Lisa Hobson-Horton and Lula Owens examined persistence data on two focus groups of three and six minority instructor education candidates in "From Freshman to Graduate: Recruiting and Retaining Minority Students." They underscore the importance of making students' work personally relevant (101). This is directly in line with what Downs and Wardle suggest when they write, ". . . students learn to recognize the need for expert opinion and cite it where necessary, but they also learn to claim their own situational expertise and write from it as expert writers do" (560). It is also consistent with envisaging first-year writing courses as addressing students' lived experiences. As Robert Davis and Mark Shadle note in "'Building a Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking," alternative writing replaces student apathy toward mode-based writing topics with "excitement in research and theory directed toward projects that linked their academic and personal lives" (432-433).

Davis and Shadle explore what they call alternative research writing which draws on students' lived experiences; connects the personal, public, and academic; and crosses and combines genres. Davis and Shadle describe alternative research writing as "intensely academic" but "reaching beyond the disciplinary thinking, logos-dominated arguing, and nonexpressive writing we

have come to call academic” by mixing “the personal and the public and . . . the imagination as much as the intellect” (422). Alternative research writing allows for “an inward turn” requiring writers to use research to “explore and mediate personal conflicts, contradictions, and questions” related to “an issue or theme of collective concern” (440). In this way, students are extending familiar topics, related to their personal experiences, into topics that may be of concern to their peers, community, or society at large, and conducting research to make these connections and answer critical questions.

The final product that Davis and Shadle describe often requires students to “compose with a large range of strategies, genres, and media” such as “lab reports, case studies, news stories, position papers, take-home exams, and research proposals” (418, 420). Davis and Shadle describe these as “syncretic discourses” that use “a variety of modes, genres, and, in some cases, media . . . from a number of disciplines and perspectives” (430). Such products are conducive to online writing courses where multimodal writing is increasingly common, as I examine in the next two chapters. The relevant nature of alternative research, connected to students lived experiences, may contribute to student persistence.

Asking students to select topics, as is common practice in first-year writing courses, poses a conundrum: complete student choice may foster individualized and isolated writing, limiting the social epistemic possibilities of invention, research, peer review, and revision. However, thematic courses may alienate those students who are disinterested in the topic, lacking in prior



knowledge, or intimidated by writing about it. A balance can be struck. Online writing instruction provides an opportune environment for students to produce individual projects while reflecting upon their common experiences as first-term students, such as transitioning into post-secondary studies; balancing work, family obligations, and studies; and finding or following a new path. As the online writing course progresses, these dialogs about shared but unique experiences can morph into dialogs about topics progressively less focused on persistence and more focused on the nature of writing, such as locating and sharing resources, navigating new technologies, and collaborating on specific writing projects.

Hewett and Ehmann comment on how the online course becomes a “written dialog that occurs over time” (69). Participating in a dialog about their lived experiences, in particular their experiences as first-year students, allows students to reflect on how their experiences are similar or dissimilar to those of their peers, while co-constructing course content in authentic ways. Hewett and Ehmann write about how students craft their own topics, develop their own conversations, and choose what they will respond to and how. In this atmosphere, student interests drive student writing, and this contributes heartily to the overall course content, with the instructor functioning as an editor-in-chief, guiding the discussion and graded artifacts (43). The instructor as “editor-in-chief” is consistent with the recast role of a learner-centered instructor discussed in the second chapter. Furthermore, according to Linda Boynton, who authored “When The Class Bell Stops Ringing: The Achievements and Challenges of Teaching Online First-Year Composition,” students can (and frequently do) identify and

share Internet resources if their work is truly collaborative (302). Self-paced courses and assignments may complicate the establishment of rhetorical community. David Reinheimer discusses the ramifications in “Teaching Composition Online: Whose Side is Time On?” where he argues that students should move through their assignments together, and write about common topics, to fully leverage collaborative research, workshops, peer reviews, and revisions (463).

To reiterate: the term *content* is contentious in first-year writing courses; writing assignment topics are often selected by students (and therefore perhaps not as collaborative as they could be); and an alternate approach to content, whereby students write about things that matter to them personally and make connections among their peers, may promote peer relationships and course relevance and, therefore, foster persistence. However, what exactly should students write about? In this section, I offer three types of writing assignment content that are accessible and relevant to first-year students, including writing about familiar topics, writing about digital literacy, and writing about transition and persistence.

### *Writing about the Familiar*

Writing about the familiar means more than writing a personal narrative; it means writing about family, community, and work—topics that, as Knowles suggests, are timely and relevant to students and help them approach scholarly inquiry based on their lived experience, not just their social or political views. Dubson notes that, by not encouraging familiar topics, we risk disenfranchising

students: “Merely doing what they are told to do without any innate or internal interest in the work is going to prohibit or seriously compromise the kind of learning and growth that we want to encourage.” (101).

Sherry Rankins-Robertson, Lisa Cahill, Duane Roen, and Gregory Glau, authors of “Expanding Definitions of Academic Writing: Family History Writing in the Basic Writing Classroom and Beyond,” explore the implications of writing about familiar topics, in particular family history, especially in basic writing classes, in which students may feel disconnected from both the institution and expectations around academic writing. Here, instructors

can address students’ “disconnect” by providing writing assignments that enable students to simultaneously affirm what they already know (e.g., by allowing students to write about topics of personal, civic, professional, or academic importance to them); engage them with a real, rather than an artificial audience; and encourage them to learn new processes (e.g., rhetorical analysis or using primary versus secondary research), genres, and media. (60).

Rankins-Robertson, who teaches family history writing at Arizona State University, notes that writing about the familiar helps learners feel more comfortable by connecting them with an essay genre that they likely have encountered previously (86); is easily integrated into a larger sequence of research-based writing assignments (86-87); can be aligned to the WPA Outcomes Statement (88); and demonstrates the connection of an individual to a family, community, and socio-historical context (104). Furthermore, Rankins-

Robertson describes family history writing as “multiwriting,” stating, “Not only does family history writing engage students in multiple formats of research, but it is also multi--disciplinary, incorporates the use of multimodal composition, and spans multiple cultures” (97).

Similarly, Davis and Shadle propose that students write about things that matter to their lives and incorporate research to understand the value of expert viewpoints, third-party research, and data, always within the context of their lived experience. Thus students move from writing autobiographical pieces to “generative” ones that focus on “a new incarnation to grow into” (434). This emphasis on things that matter can, in turn, allow students to feel that their experiences matter, as discussed in the last chapter, while simultaneously encouraging learning that, as Knowles notes, is rooted in past experience.

Downs and Wardle also stress that when students write about something that they and their instructor know about, the instructor is more effectively able to help them than if students “had been researching stem cell research or the death penalty” and can therefore encourage the student to dig deeper based on their collective knowledge (566). Because students are writing about, revealing, and researching similar topics, they can identify with each other’s experiences and share research strategies and sources. Downs and Wardle write, “Developing a ‘community map’ of opinion helps students envision research and argument as community inquiry and identify gaps that their primary research can address” (563). They recommend starting with questions (rather than topics), working

through collaboration, and ending with presentations (the results of which may be very useful to other online students also at risk of departure).

One of the most familiar topics, and potentially most beneficial to persistence, is family. As I stated in the first chapter and will address at length in the next chapter, mattering, belonging, and support are critical to student success (See Baker and Pomerantz; Corwin and Cintron; Maestas, Vaquera, and Muñoz-Zehr; Nora; Ralye and Chung; Rendón; Saunders and Serna; Schlossberg).

Ideally, students should feel that they matter to their institutions, instructors, and peers, but online learners may feel sufficient mattering if they feel emotional support from their family members and friends. Writing about these important relationships and the support that can be drawn from them can be a critical first step in helping students identify social support networks they may later leverage during difficult times.

#### *Writing about Digital Literacies*

Not only are many students new to their institutions, but they are also new to the online course environment. Therefore, it is beneficial for instructors to understand their students' digital backgrounds and for students themselves to reflect on their own digital experiences. Selfe and Hawisher write extensively about digital literacy narratives. In *Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States*, they examine how literary practices are shaped by race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, and access to technology. They define technological literacies as “. . . the practices involved in reading, writing, and exchanging information in online environments, as well as the values

associated with such practices—cultural, social, political, and educational” (2). By writing literacy narratives, students evaluate their own personal histories and make connections from their earliest uses of technologies to their current feelings toward technologies, including their own affective response to their perceived self-efficacy.

Literacy narratives need not conclude in the past tense; rather, students may write about their future aspirations; mastery of online courses; and advancement toward academic, workplace, and personal goals. Case studies conducted by Selfe and Hawisher indicate that students overvalue the technical skills that they have cultivated over time and undervalue those digital literacies taught on post-secondary campuses. They may, for instance, consider themselves proficient at editing videos, posting updates, and even producing Web sites, and feel that these skills are more pragmatic than the essays and posts required in online courses. Here, instructors may find that they can leverage these skills to motivate digitally savvy online learners to produce high quality digital artifacts and to motivate wary students to see the value in information and digital literacy. However, this starts by having students express their digital narratives and having instructors assess these to prescribe more useful instructional strategies.

#### *Writing about Transition and Persistence*

Nothing is more pertinent to first-term students than their transition to a new academic environment. In “Social Networking Phenomena in the First-Year Experience,” Jay Corwin and Rosa Cintron write, “The freshman year is often deemed one of the greatest transition periods of a student’s life with minimal

parental involvement” (25). By providing writing assignments that allow first-year learners to understand that they are in a state of transition, reflect on how their experiences are matching their expectations, and relate to their peers’ similar circumstances, instructors can help students advance through their first year.

In his CCCC’s presentation “First-Year Composition and Retention: The Neglected Goal,” Kevin Griffith describes a pedagogy in which he focuses the content of assigned essays themselves on issues related to persistence. Griffith advances a first-year composition curriculum in which writing assignments involve researching issues related to the transition from high school to college, the social history of college, and controversial college issues. His assignments are “designed with the idea that through them students would gradually feel that college experience was part of their identity, and that they had a stake as citizens in this new community” (9). Perhaps the most intriguing part of Griffith’s work is his focus on the transition from high school to college. Although recent high-school graduates are not the only student demographic at risk for attrition, they are certainly among those students who researchers have identified as at risk.

Similarly, Downs and Wardle suggest that students should be researching graduation trends; unemployment trends; the role of race, class, and gender; student debt; university programs; and career outlooks. They may also conduct research on their institution and its requirements; transfer institutions; degree completion requirements; employment opportunities; professional qualifications; enrollment practices; student borrowing and source of student aid; and support services available to them, their peers, or their family members. Finally, they may

write about student success measures, such as study skills, time management, and tutoring, to name but a few. These topics involve legitimate research, address student-oriented concerns, lend themselves to peer collaboration, and promote affiliation among students, faculty, and staff at institutions.

Horner advises having students co-author writing about “growth and change” with dialogic responses to other students (21). For example, students might work on transition action plans, persistence plans, academic plans, and career plans. While many students are still determining their majors in the first year, others are enrolling after years in the workplace and may have very specific goals in mind. Encouraging students to focus on these goals in concrete, actionable, research-based ways allows them to explore things directly relevant to their careers and academic investments, such as career prospects, degree requirements, internship opportunities, funding sources, transfer credits, and even advanced degree programs. Not only are these relevant, but they are also directly related to students’ abilities to persist.

#### In Summary

Persistence is rarely discussed with those who are most at risk of departing: students. While institutions struggle to attract, place, and retain students, they do little to address the issue of persistence in a transparent manner. Learners may not realize that they are in a state of transition, that they can accomplish academic work, and that academic adjustment and integration takes sustained effort over time. If they realize that transition is a normal part of beginning post-secondary studies, they are more likely to understand their



feelings, verbalize their concerns, and make persistence a personal goal. By understanding the debate around content, incorporating alternative approaches to research-driven content into online writing courses, and encouraging students to write about topics that promote persistence, online writing instructors can leverage disciplinary content with situated contexts and help students build successful persistence strategies.

## Chapter 5: Fostering Student Connections through Collaboration and Community

As previously noted, mattering and belonging play a strong role in student persistence. Although student-faculty relationships are critical for student persistence, peer-to-peer relationships are also keenly important. Significant research suggests that students' social networks are as, or more, important than their academic histories at predicting attrition and promoting persistence (see Baker and Pomerantz; Maestas, Vaquera, and Muñoz-Zehr; Nora; Ralye and Chung; Tinto). Saunders and Serna liken belongingness to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, positing that cultural capital is established via networks of relationships that offer membership within discourse communities. The value of one's cultural capital is determined by the size of the network one can mobilize (Bourdieu 248; Saunders and Serna 148). Read this way, cultural capital becomes a measure of community embeddedness. According to Corwin and Cintron, students who possess more cultural capital are less likely to leave their institutions; they write, "Those students [who] have a more difficult time integrating into the social environment face a more difficult route to gaining satisfaction . . . and persisting to the second year" (35). Saunders and Serna also examine student affiliation and find that it affects students' academic performance: "The students who have succeeded in creating new networks have achieved a mean grade point average of 2.84 compared to a mean grade point average of 2.59 earned by students who continue to rely heavily on their old networks" (159). How can online writing instructors facilitate relationships

among students who may never meet face to face in ways that will facilitate mattering, belonging, and affiliation?

Online writing courses offer many opportunities for students to engage with their peers; however, these opportunities are only leveraged if they are a part of the instructors' pedagogy and theoretical understanding of how knowledge construction occurs. Hewett and Ehmann fear that

Some [compositionists] have tended to compare the asynchronous interaction against the traditional face-to-face interaction in a deficit model whereby its only strengths appear to be such pedagogically acceptable traits as primary attention to the writer's stated needs, locally focused embedded commentary, and global end commentary. (70)

In online writing courses, there is a distinct risk of instructors relying on current-traditional pedagogies in what instructors—especially those with minimal training in rhetorical theory and composition pedagogy and a reliance on textbooks and outmoded instructional practices—may perceive to be the absence of face-to-face guided inquiry, discussions, and debates (Hewett and Ehmann 39). Indeed, online writing instruction can reproduce many of the practices of outmoded composition pedagogies, such as expressivism, current traditional or mode-based instruction, or a pure process approach, and has moved through this evolution in much the same progression as the larger composition discipline (Hewett and Ehmann 39).

Such pedagogies do little to encourage students to interact with their peers, outside of perfunctory peer reviews. However, online writing instruction has the

potential to go well beyond these anachronistic but still widely utilized approaches to composition pedagogy and embrace social constructivist epistemology. Social constructivist epistemologies promote peer interaction and, therefore, encourage students to build relationships and pave the way for mattering. In fact, social constructivism underlies many contemporary notions of online writing instruction and underpins practices that promote student persistence. In this chapter, I draw a connection among social constructivist epistemologies, collaborative learning communities, and student persistence. I adopt Karen Burke LeFevre's continuum of social constructivist perspectives to situate online writing technologies to optimize their pedagogical use for *collaborative* knowledge construction that promotes peer interaction and, therefore, persistence.

### Social Constructivism and Online Writing Instruction

Social constructivist epistemologies have influenced writing instruction to various degrees for the past forty years. Lev Vygotsky asserted that exchanges between people of various backgrounds helped them to gain more complex viewpoints. Jerome Bruner theorized that “. . . development is intrinsically bound up with interaction” (13). Jean Piaget observed that learning needed to be connected to the learner's life and context for him or her to make meaning and that it happened in exchanges between equals, not instruction from someone in power. Finally, Kenneth Bruffee's work emphasized the collaborative, peer-oriented nature of learning in composition practice. Elbow, so often associated with expressivist pedagogies, was also influenced by social constructivism in his

approach to peer-based, collaborative writing instruction. Elbow put forward the notion of the “teacherless writing classroom,” in which students could collaborate in small groups without the hindrance of an instructor dominating their discourse decisions.

Today, social constructivism is at the core of much online writing pedagogy and has evolved into praxis in numerous ways, such as collaborative writing projects and online writing communities enabled by online writing technologies. In *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes*, Hewett and Ehmann write,

The educational uses of [online writing instruction] have been rooted strongly in the social constructivist epistemology, wherein knowledge is understood to be dynamic, provisional, and developed and mediated socially as people operate within various “communities” of knowledge. (33).

They acknowledge two strands of social epistemic collaborative learning: one oriented toward ideologies and critical discourse, the other oriented toward task completion. In online settings, these two may converge (33, 37). The two strands converge in online writing instruction when instructors use collaborative methods for both rhetorical discussions as well as exchanges instrumental to assignment completion. Thus, online writing instruction is ideal for collaboration, collective writing, and communities of practice.

Warnock agrees that social constructivist epistemologies underpin online writing instruction. He suggests that online writing instruction is a “progressive”

(and superior) form of writing instruction, due to the sheer volume of writing, the opportunities for collaboration, the increased interactions, and the authentic audience (“Teaching” xi). Warnock describes the power of online writing instruction:

When you migrate your writing course online, students are writing to you and to each other in virtually all of their course communications, expanding ideas of audience, purpose, and context each time they contribute to a message board, generate a blog entry, or engage in an email-based peer review. (xi)

He contends that by using technology, “We could say that we are meeting students even more effectively . . . because, maturing in the interactive age of Web 2.0, they are increasingly accustomed to having dialogue instead of simply being passive recipients of information” (32).

Warnock along with Hewett and Ehmann highlight the opportunities that arise when writing courses are conducted online; students write more frequently, they read each other’s writing more frequently, and they develop shared texts for real audiences through collaborative and collective writing. This presents a unique opportunity for online writing instructors to leverage the many writing technologies at their disposal—message boards, wikis, blogs, eportfolios, Google Docs, social networking sites, and social media sites—to foster social constructivist epistemologies and promote peer collaboration, which is central to building peer relationships that, in turn, enhance the likelihood of persistence. However, there is also a risk that instructors who are unschooled in social

constructivism will adapt online writing technologies haphazardly, perhaps using technology simply for technology's sake, unless they carefully consider how each writing technology is helping students construct knowledge and construct peer relationships. Toward this end, it is useful to adopt LeFevre's social continuum for writing, which she expands upon in *Invention as a Social Act*. LeFevre's continuum places writing (and in particular inventional) practices within four categories ranging from least to most socially situated: Platonic, internal dialogic, collaborative, and collective. Notably, these dimensions focus on the canon of invention as it is often perceived to be impoverished in both contemporary and online writing instruction. After reviewing this continuum, I examine how writing technologies can be utilized in online writing instruction in ways complimentary to knowledge construction and peer collaboration.

### *The Platonic Perspective*

The Platonic perspective conceives of invention as “private, asocial . . . engaged in by an individual who possesses innate knowledge to be recollected and expressed” (LeFevre 50). The Platonic view of invention is problematic because it assumes that the solitary writer is writing independent of the many factors that have shaped his or her subjectivities and writing style, topic, tools, and process. However, the Platonic view cannot be readily dismissed from discussions of invention and technology because of its long history of preeminence among writing instructors, creative writers, and writing students who hold fast to the conception of the solitary writer expressing his or her interiority (Wendt 86). In “Why Wikis are Wonderful for Writing,” Sharon Albert and Cliff

Kussmaul write, “Writing and community are not words that instinctively go together for most college students. Students often consider writing a solitary pursuit [yet] . . . effective writing is not a solitary endeavor” (50). Furthermore, contemporary online writing pedagogies may still rely upon this notion of writing as solitary in self-paced models akin to the correspondence courses of yesteryear, for which students worked in relative isolation and mailed work to their instructors for grading. While the Platonic perspective does not lend itself to collaborative work, explaining the social nature of writing to students may help them understand why writing projects involve significant peer interaction.

#### *The Internal Dialogic Perspective*

LeFevre argues that the internal dialogic perspective conceives of the mind as having “internalized social dictates” that conduct an “internal . . . dialectic with another ‘self’” (50). She continues, “. . . the internal dialogic model . . . does not require that the inner conversation be in terms of opposites. The main feature of this model is that it conceives of ideas as generated through a dialogue – sometimes a dialectic” (55). This is an important differentiation; when writers use technologies, to conduct research, for example, they may encounter new information that contributes to or alters their internal dialogue in a productive, but not oppositional, nature. Contemporary online writing pedagogies often rely heavily on internal dialogic perspectives, particularly in their use of the writer’s journal, often intended to draw this dialog out through metacognition and reflection. Reflective activities create opportunities for students to consider things



that may buttress their persistence: their personal literacy, their support systems, and their persistence plans.

### *The Collaborative Perspective*

The collaborative perspective on invention posits that people interact to invent. According to LeFevre, the collaborative perspective differs from the internal dialogic perspective in that invention is less a result of the individual mind than the interaction between people. An interaction is signified by “a response or adjustive reaction by another individual” (62). LeFevre considers face-to-face peer review groups, small group discussions, and critique sessions to be collaborative (63). Through collaboration, students make connections with peers, identify peers with whom they share common circumstances, and forge relationships critical to their affiliation and ultimately to their persistence.

### *The Collective Perspective*

The collective perspective is based on Emile Durkheim’s “social collective” and the “assumption that invention is neither a purely individual nor an interpersonal act or process; rather, it is . . . transmitted through such things as institutions, societal prohibition, and cultural expectations” (50). Tinto also refers to Durkheim’s “social collective” when he warns that poor integration with the social collective can lead to student departure, which underscores the connection between collaborative work and persistence. Writing developed by a collective is becoming increasingly common due to technologies that allow for multiple authors. This may benefit students struggling to persist, particularly if the collective writing is done through sustained writing communities. Research

suggests that learning communities result in somewhat higher rates of retention, a finding relevant to online writing programs (Baker and Pomerantz 115).

### *Differentiating Perspectives*

The key differentiator among these perspectives is the level and manner of student interaction, which can fundamentally affect student persistence. The Platonic and internal dialogic perspectives involve essentially no interaction, although the latter acknowledges the social forces on intellectual processes, while the collaborative and collective perspectives acknowledge that meaning is derived through social interactions. Because all writers are situated within larger social systems that have shaped their intellect, ideologies, and access to information, there is considerable overlap among the internal dialogic, collaborative, and collective perspectives, hence LeFevre's representation of them as a continuum. LeFevre asserts,

Writers do not invent in a vacuum. Expectations of society, attitudes fostered by institutions, funding preferences of public and private agencies, tacit rules about the nature of evidence and procedures for inquiry, and availability of equipment and materials—these are but a few examples of what influences our inventions. (78)

In terms of direct peer-to-peer involvement, the collaborative and collective perspectives offer online writing instructors excellent frames for considering how their pedagogies align with social constructivism and foster persistence.

Collaboration can be approached in diverse ways. Kathleen Blake Yancey and Michael Spooner, in “A Single Good Mind: Collaboration, Cooperation, and the Writing Self,” write about two ways to approach collaborative writing: hierarchically or dialogically. Hierarchical collaboration is when collaborators provide independent contributions to a final artifact, for example, when students each prepare different sections of a report, presentation, or proposal. Dialogical collaboration is when collaborators work together on each piece of the whole, through the entire writing process (49-52). Hierarchical collaboration is similar to LeFevre’s notion of the collaborative perspective, while dialogical collaboration is similar to the collective perspective. In online writing instruction, most instructors rely on both hierarchical and dialogical collaboration although the latter allows students to provide a more cohesive final product and requires them to negotiate rhetorical problems together as a collective unit. This negotiation facilitates knowledge creation and peer relationships. Saunders and Serna stress that peer relationships, social networks, and community memberships support student persistence (148).

#### Leveraging the Social Epistemic Nature of Online Writing Technologies

When new technologies become available, instructors may use them simply because the technologies seem novel, expeditious, or engaging. While these are legitimate reasons, by situating writing technologies in a social epistemic framework for collaboration, it is easier to see how they support learning and promote peer affiliation. In this section, I survey common course technologies, in particular collaborative technologies, and align their instructional

uses with LeFevre's continuum, thereby proposing that instructors leverage technologies in ways that promote the social, epistemic nature of writing and invention while simultaneously promoting peer-to-peer relationships to enhance persistence.

Instructional technologies have evolved quickly. In "Technology, Learning and Visual Culture," Ron Burnett traces the post-World War II history of literacy technologies from documentary film, through computer labs, to Internet-based technologies. He notes that although different types of analog and digital technologies have been used for over five decades, they have not been targeted at writing as much as at reading, listening, and speaking (146). He suggests that technologies are so intricately tied to popular culture that it can be problematic to adapt them for instructional purposes. Although it is often the case that popular technologies are used in literacy instruction, it is increasingly common to see technologies designed expressly for the purposes of learning—the primary one being learning content management systems (LCMSs). In this chapter, I limit my discussion of online writing technologies to those commonly found in word processing and presentation software products and learning content management systems, as described below. In the next chapter, I explore extending the "classroom" outside of the course learning management system using Web 2.0 technologies.

### *Word Processing and Presentation Technologies*

Early scholarship on computer-mediated composition focused on the changes that word processing tools brought to the writing process and to the ways

in which knowledge was constructed using these technologies. Today, they are an accepted part of writing programs, whether traditional or online, and are generally necessary for students to complete writing projects. The most common word processing and presentation technologies are Microsoft Word and Microsoft PowerPoint although other software products exist and are used by some students and instructors.

### *Web 2.0 Technologies*

Web 2.0 technologies differ from the first generation of Web technologies, now known as Web 1.0, in their level of interactivity. Unlike traditional hypertext pages, which are a digital conveyance of a relatively static, inalterable text and images, Web 2.0 technologies provide rich generative and communicative opportunities. As stated in the first chapter, Madeleine Sorapure, author of “Information Visualization, Web 2.0, and the Teaching of Writing,” defines Web 2.0 as “a platform, with applications and files stored on the Web rather than on a user’s desktop” that is defined by participation, “the participatory Web, the social Web, the read-write Web” (60). Although there are numerous types of Web 2.0 technologies, most contemporary scholarship focuses on hypertext creation, blogging and micro-blogging, contributing to wikis, generating social media, and participating in social networks. Increasingly, LCMSs offer blogs and wikis so that students can participate in these within the relative privacy and security of the course.

### *Learning Content Management System Technologies*

Common LCMSs include Blackboard, Moodle, E-College, Sakai, Angel, Pearson Learning Studio, OpenClass, and DesireToLearn. Each of these systems has features that allow instructors to manage their virtual classroom and interact with their students, such as bulletin boards for announcement posting, drop-boxes for assignment submission, and grade books for grade transmission. Increasingly, LCMSs also provide Web 2.0 technologies, but as they are largely emerging technologies, they will be discussed in the next chapter. Most LCMSs provide a minimum of four interactive technologies that allow students to interact with their instructors and peers: instant messaging for virtual office hours, email options to send messages and files, discussion boards to facilitate small or large group discussion threads, and nonpublic blogs and wikis. LCMSs were among the first Web 2.0 technologies that allowed learners to exchange information; upload files; and participate in discussion forums, bulletin boards, and email lists.

### *Implementing Online Writing Pedagogies to Foster Persistence*

Online writing courses vary considerably in the extent to which they leverage writing technologies. At one extreme, some instructors try to mirror traditional courses. They may post an online lecture via a presentation program, such as Microsoft PowerPoint; assign readings from an e-book; require students to take selected-response quizzes; and submit essays in document format using email or other uploading features. At another extreme, some instructors leverage the virtual environment and design assignments and assessments that involve utilizing a whole host of presentation technologies and interactive Web 2.0

features. For the purposes of this chapter, I lean more toward a digitally modest online course implementation and will address the latter in the next chapter, which is devoted to integrating Web 2.0 technologies in course curricula.

Where do various writing technologies fall on LeFevre's continuum and how can online writing instructors leverage writing technologies to provide their students with an experience rich in a social epistemic notion of invention and not simply focused on formulaic, arrangement-based, current traditional pedagogies? In this section, I align each of the most commonly used LCMS technologies to LeFevre's continuum and then extrapolate the types of writing assignments that might cultivate digital literacies while promoting persistence through peer collaboration and affiliation.

### *Platonic Digital Pedagogies*

Due to the socially situated nature of knowledge construction, it is unlikely that LeFevre would consider any writing, including personal writing, to be truly Platonic in nature. Even fiction writers are not tapping into the deep wells of their isolated imaginations but drawing on socially situated, mediated, and constructed experiences. While it may seem that some free-writing activities lean toward this category, these are generally in response to a prompt and, therefore, socially derived. The use of writing technologies complicates the Platonic perspective even more as access to and engagement with technologies are constructed out of social experiences situated within social settings. For this purpose, writing instructors neither can nor should try to achieve the Platonic perspective but rather should remain aware of it as an influential, if not

anachronistic, ideology that continues to affect how some instructors and students conceptualize writing. However, it may benefit students to realize that writing is social and, therefore, that peer interactions are critical for knowledge construction.

### *Internal Dialogic Digital Pedagogies*

The internal dialogic perspective, when integrated with other perspectives, can be an effective part of learner-centered and persistence-based online writing instruction. When writing independently and in the absence of research, writers are certainly drawing upon their own knowledge and reflecting on their lived experiences. This is valuable as they transition into (or re-enter) post-secondary studies and situate their learning experiences within the larger contexts of their lives. While this perspective may not prompt students to form peer relationships, it does underpin reflective activities, such as digital literacy narratives, as mentioned in the previous chapter.

Literacy narratives, such as those recommended by Selfe and Hawisher, help instructors determine how comfortable their students are with writing and digital technologies and make learner-centered diagnoses early in the term. Literacy narratives do not represent a reversion to modes-based personal narratives or expressivism. Unlike the traditional personal narrative, which requires only that the writer recount a personal experience, and unlike expressivism, which holds that all writing comes from within the individual, the literacy narrative intends, as its goal, that writing students begin their studies by describing literate practices in their lives, families, and communities; consider



their first experiences with technology, and how those experiences may have influenced their current attitudes toward technology; and evaluate the power dynamics associated with digital technologies and literacies in an information-based society (see Selfe and Hawisher). Literacy narratives help students recognize the social nature of literacy and underscore the importance of collaborative writing.

Internal dialogic writing technologies might include word processing, which allows writers greater freedom in collecting, arranging, and revising their material, demonstrating that internal dialog happens throughout the composing process. Similarly, using the Internet as an exploratory or research tool could foster an internal dialog, in which a writer forms new schemas based upon contributions of many authors. They may also serve as good opportunities for students to learn how to upload files to the LCMS's assignment submission feature, often known as a drop-box. Digital literacy narratives require very little, if any, research and collaboration (although both of these may enrich the experience) and also serve as a diagnostic assessment.

Blogs are increasingly appearing within common CMLSs. In "Blogs: Where the World Wide Web and the Writer's Journal Meet," Vie considers blogs as a hybrid of the journal, diary, and daily news that mash up features of Web sites, bookmarks, commentary, and social networks and are frequently updated, dynamic, and fresh (71). Because of their dual nature as both personal and public, Vie maintains blogs are the next evolution of the writer's journal. Vie notes that because of blogs' similarity to the daily news, instructors may encourage daily

writing, which many writing instructors require in their writers' journals ("Blogs" 77). In terms of persistence, blogs form another connection point for students who may feel isolated in the online environment ("Blogs" 74-75).

While blogging might seem non-collaborative, it may help students persist by promoting peer-to-peer affiliation when students read, reference, and hyperlink each other's blogs. Vie notes, "As bloggers link to each other's work, they form complex networks of relationships" and continues, "Hyperlinking between blogs can reinforce for students that blogging is truly writing within a community" ("Blogs" 75, 79). Blogging may be the ideal writing technology for literacy narratives and other types of reflective writing that give fellow readers insight into the authors' lived experiences. Students may realize that their peers are also transitioning into the academic environment; struggling with conflicting personal, professional, and academic demands; and entering courses with varying levels of technical adeptness.

### *Collaborative Digital Pedagogies*

Collaborative digital pedagogies are at the very heart of persistence-based instruction. Rayle and Chung found that those students who feel more social support and connections generally feel a greater degree of mattering and less academic stress (31). In online writing courses, peer connections begin through collaboration facilitated by a number of common LCMS tools. Instant messaging allows learners to interact synchronously with their instructor and their peers. Email allows learners to interact asynchronously by sending messages, drafts, and hyperlinks to peers and others involved in the research process, such as librarians,

tutors, and interview subjects. Discussion boards allow instructors to facilitate whole and small group forums. However, technology alone does not foster collaboration; many discussion threads in online courses are simply individual responses to an instructor's prompt (see Moran).

Rather, LCMS tools, such as instant messages, email, and discussion threads, become collaborative when student writers use them to negotiate meaning, form consensus on issues, and exchange ideas for individual and group projects. LeFevre's contends, "Invention may be at some times a joint social enterprise, and at others, an interaction in which people's efforts are aimed at enabling one primary agent to invent" (66). M. Ellen Wendt describes collaborative invention strategies in synchronous chatting in her article "When Two (or More) Heads Are Better than One: Collaborative Writing and Technology in the Freshman Composition Classroom." Wendt credits the informal, dialogic nature of instant messaging with allowing student writers to experiment with language, exchange ideas, and clarify concepts with less embarrassment or performance anxiety (92). Susana Sotillo studied two groups of students, including 12 and 13 students respectively, in computer mediated writing courses. Sotillo found that instant messaging replicates many of the syntactic features of in-person dialog, whereas email exchanges form opportunities for lengthier, more developed, and more complex exchanges, both of which can benefit tentative writers who are practicing rhetorical and linguistic skills in low-stakes exchanges (106-7). Synchronous chatting can aid in collaboration, especially as peers work through invention exercises.

Similarly, in “Bringing Outside Texts in and Inside Texts Out” Jane Mathison-Fife notes that online discussions involve learners who may otherwise hesitate to contribute (37). Mathison-Fife encourages de-centering the instructor by using student-generated discussion prompts (39). In a course evaluation, Mathison-Fife’s students noted that “writing in an online discussion forum seemed informal to them, like participating in a chat room” (43). This kind of informality may elicit greater participation and, therefore, satisfaction and community building, critical for retention efforts. Thus, rather than simply asking students to post their earliest memory of using digital technology in school, instructors can prompt more collaboration by asking students to compare their experiences to those of other students or to determine the collective level of digital literacy across their cohort and extrapolate how to raise everyone’s level of expertise, democratically offer technical tips, or provide the best types of peer reviews.

Warnock examines the uses of message or discussion boards and other digital media for sharing ideas, practicing concepts, and implementing low-stakes formative assessment. He describes the beneficial nature of semi-informal message boards:

Writers pay more attention to detail . . . than they would in a chat or text-message environment, but the occasional informal grammar or even Internet-based shorthand is acceptable, as those types of writerly moves sustain the board’s dialogic liveliness. (“Low Stakes” 98)

Warnock describes, in particular, the benefits of online discussions and message boards in terms of their equitable nature, authentic audience, volume of posts, and shared construction of knowledge (“Teaching” 70-71). He asserts, “Although I will stop short—but *just* short—of calling them the holy grail of writing pedagogy, message boards provide a means of facilitating the *efficient* sharing of writing” (“Teaching” 69). This sharing of writing with a legitimate audience is perhaps the hallmark of online writing instruction. Warnock focuses on this key opportunity, noting that “. . . online students will read a lot of their colleagues’ writing in the course. This reading material can have a much larger presence in an [online writing] course than in an onsite course” (“Teaching” 63). Here, for perhaps the first time, students are writing to a true audience—aside from their instructor—that could include the larger “public” of the World Wide Web.

Bender describes two arrangements of discussion posts: chronological and thematic. Thematic postings, also known as threaded discussions, allow learners to contribute to multiple discussion threads and, therefore, follow multiple conversations (32). Bender warns against becoming overly routine, writing “A semester is a long time, and it might become heavy and cumbersome if the entire time is spent opening up new discussion forums to correspond with new mini-lectures” (118). To avoid this routine, it is pragmatic to engage learners in numerous types of digital projects, building upon skills acquired in prior projects, so that the projects become progressively more challenging.

While online writing instructors note the value of collaborative technologies, and they fall within social epistemic notions of writing, there is

scant research that connects collaboration to longstanding peer-to-peer relationships. There is no guarantee that asking students to collaborate will result in the sense of peer affiliation that supports persistence. However, there is research, such as the works of Wendt, Mathison-Fife, and Warnock, that demonstrates that students feel comfortable using these tools to share information, exchange ideas, and experiment with writing. Writing technologies are the primary means of student interaction in online courses. Instructors can use them in ways that foster collaboration on persistence-based writing assignment content, such as transition plans, and offer opportunities for students to identify with other students, such as reading each other's literacy blogs. The intersection between writing topics and writing technologies may be a powerful way to help students persist.

### *Collective Digital Pedagogies*

The cooperative and collective perspectives overlap. Asking students to reference discussion board postings to determine the collective level of digital literacy within one cohort and make inferences encourages students to work collaboratively on something that affects the collective. However, they are not working collectively on the same singular artifact or product. To differentiate between two overlapping concepts, collaborative work results in individual (but peer-influenced) products whereby collective work results in a singular product with multiple contributors. One of the most accessible tools for collective writing is Google Docs, which allow learners to share their documents in ways that foster brainstorming, critique, peer revision, and group writing, while allowing students

to use word processing programs with which they may already be familiar, such as Microsoft Word. In “Learning From Coauthoring: Composing Texts Together in the Composition Classroom,” Michele Eodice and Kami Day explore the benefits of coauthoring in digital formats. They emphasize that students can do more than sew together individual writing but actually negotiate writing down to the word and see the evolution of changes through versions (194).

An example of the differentiation between collaborative and collective writing technologies is between discussion boards, which mirror collaborative dialog, and wikis, which mirror the collective writing. Discussion boards are intended to be read and *responded to*, while wikis are intended to be read and *amended or revised*. Similarly, while discussion posts are attributed to a solitary author, wikis are attributed to groups. Wikis are collections of hypertext pages to which a multiplicity of users can contribute. Unlike other software and Internet technologies, wikis do not require specialized design or coding knowledge and make it easier for students to begin writing and join the conversation. In “Using Wikis as Collaborative Writing Tools: Something Wiki this Way Comes-Or Not!” Susan Loudermilk Garza and Tommy Hern suggest that the immediate visibility of wiki changes allows writers to accommodate personal, stylistic, and technical differences, as well as encourages students to recognize that writing is a social, collaborative act. Garza and Hern discuss ways in which wikis make collective writing less threatening, more flexible, and more process than product oriented.

According to Albert and Kussmaul, there are more than one hundred wiki engines, but many instructors rely on those provided by their LCMSs (51). They

describe wikis as emphasizing text and content over layout and design and offering contributors the ability to view previous versions (51). They write, “Wikis can provide a clear visual map of a text’s features. Students can mark specific textual features with different formatting styles and comment on the text interlinearly within the page or intertextually, creating hyperlinks to related pages such as glossaries” (52). Albert and Kussmaul recommend wikis for peer review because they are easily accessed and modified; are used for several rounds of review; provide a “clean” version of the composition; and allow the author to retrace the changes and make revisions (54). Thus, they write, “students can then learn not only from the critiques they receive on their writing, but also from the process of critiquing and responding to critique” and when peer reviewers disagree, student writers are forced to confront conflicting recommendations (54-55). Furthermore, wikis provide the ideal tool for process-based formative assessment by allowing instructors to view changes, revisions, and progress (55).

Garza and Hern stress the social nature of wikis. They write, “Wiki technology is a tool that enables writers to get into the mess and the social nature of writing.” They assert that wikis provide a means to negotiate collaborative practices. Users must negotiate the titling, structure, and procedures necessary for their work to be started, amended, and completed. Because pages can be added, edited, and adapted at any time, wikis focus on writing as a process, not in terms of isolated drafts and completed products. Although wikis may initially seem complicated to students and instructors, they enhance learners’ digital literacies in relatively low-stakes but highly collective ways.



While wikis offer much by way of social epistemic writing pedagogies, they become persistence tools when instructors use them to foster peer relationships based on writing assignment topics that support persistence. Amaury Nora surveyed 893 “representative” students across three southwestern universities. In “The Role of Habitus and Cultural Capital in Choosing a College, Transitioning from High School to Higher Education, and Persisting in College among Minority and Nonminority Students,” Nora reports that identification with peers contributes to students’ affiliation and, subsequently, persistence (202). Therefore, asking students to chunk their work together in a wiki is neither fully leveraging the epistemic nature of writing nor prompting persistence. However, by asking students to collectively produce transition and persistence plans with hyperlinks to peer blogs that provide insight into digital literacies, instructors are connecting persistence-based writing assignment topics with a tool that encourages students to build rapport and relationships.

#### In Summary

As online writing instruction becomes increasingly common, it is possible that instructors may revert to anachronistic pedagogies that are perceived easier to implement in online formats, such as current traditional rhetoric and a reliance on discourse modes, arrangement, and syntax. What may be lost, or at least go unleveraged, is the opportunity to reinvigorate the social epistemic nature of invention through collaborative and collective work. Collaborative and collective work allow learners to construct knowledge; build rapport and affiliation; see

commonalities in their backgrounds, beliefs, and situations; and extend relationships beyond the online writing course.

By recognizing that online writing instruction is underpinned by notions of social constructivism; by understanding that online writing can be more collaborative, inclusive, and democratizing; and by acknowledging that online writing instruction epitomizes learner-centered instruction and persistence-based instruction, instructors are able to build digital curricula that cultivate student connections and, as the next chapter explores, foster a sense of place and presence.

## Chapter 6: Engaging Virtual Learners by Fostering a Sense of Place and Presence

There is little research on the extent to which Web 2.0 technologies can help students persist, yet year after year the number of enrollments in online courses increases, and it is clear that the Internet itself is providing more access to education. It is also clear that digital natives, who are used to Web 2.0 technologies, are a larger portion of the students in online courses. Selfe and Hawisher write,

Yet in the twenty-first century, many of us cling to the familiar educational tools of the immediate past and continue to teach the rhetorical means to manipulate limited alphabetic representations of reality. Some of our students . . . raised on visual media find school increasingly irrelevant—often a burden to be endured to obtain degrees that will enable them to pursue their goals. (57)

Meanwhile, institutions are adopting social networking to help students build their social networks, one of the key ways to foster student persistence.

While there is no definitive connection between the utilization of Web 2.0 technologies and student persistence, there is an imperative to utilize electronic environments in post-secondary studies (see the WPA Outcomes Statement and Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing). In addition, a number of researchers have pointed to specific benefits of Web 2.0 technologies, composition pedagogy, and student networking that, together, may promote student persistence. As indicated in the first chapter, Zepke and Leach's analysis of 146 persistence studies demonstrates that "outcomes improve[d] where

institutions promote[d] personal contact outside classrooms,” especially in settings that promoted social integration, minimized alienation, and provided learning communities (49-52). These social factors are also present in what Gee describes as “affinity spaces” and what Lehman and Conceicao refer to as “telepresence,” both of which are related to Web 2.0 technologies.

In this chapter, I examine ways in which online writing instructors can go “beyond” the virtual classroom, into cyberspace, to foster community and place. There is a gap in scholarship on the pedagogical benefits and implications of leveraging Web 2.0 technologies in online writing courses, largely due to the rapid evolution of these technologies. I demonstrate how Web 2.0 environments support learner-centered instruction and student persistence based on theoretical work on affinity spaces, telepresence, and technology gateways. Finally, I conclude by offering recommendations on integrating Web 2.0 technologies into online writing courses.

### Exploring Web 2.0 Technologies

In the previous chapter, I discussed the movement away from the notion that online writing is a solitary, self-paced activity toward the notion that it is socially situated, collaborative, and epistemic. In particular, I focused on different LCMS features, such as instant messaging, discussion threads, email, blogs, and wikis that can foster collaborative and collective writing. Nevertheless, LCMSs are less compelling than other digital environments with which students are increasingly accustomed, such as Facebook, Youtube, and Second Life, which are highly customizable, filled with dynamic user-generated media, and perceived as

an extension of oneself, respectively. Weimer notes, “When students are in a classroom environment that they prefer, they achieve more” (101). While cultivating collaboration through LCMS tools is important, does it sufficiently engage learners and help them transfer their learning into more dynamic Web 2.0 environments? While it may be sufficient to utilize LCMS-contained Web 2.0 technologies, and even preferable, from a student information security standpoint, such technologies may lack the authenticity students experience when uploading media to Youtube or the permanence of updating a blog that is truly public and, therefore, able to be contributed to long after the course ends.

Although I defined Web 2.0 technologies in the last chapter, it is worth revisiting that definition here as any discussion of technology can be contentious. Web 2.0 technologies extend beyond computers into the realm of mobile devices and often refer to the nebulous social areas where data can be both stored and retrieved. For this purpose, I have adopted Sorapure’s definition of Web 2.0 as a platform and a site of active participation (60). More specifically, in Web 2.0 technologies, content is rarely decoupled from a delivery mechanism; that is, content involves a distribution channel. Contributors distribute their material to readers and viewers who find their work through user connections, hyperlinks, and search results.

Today, however, many digital natives participate electively in much richer Web 2.0 environments that may very well be open on their desktops as they toggle back and forth to their LCMS-contained writing courses. Although the LCMS is the place where learning is supposed to happen—or at least get

documented—there are, arguably, more engaging spaces where knowledge is constructed and where students spend more of their time. In particular, it is worth examining three of these “places”: e-magazines, user-generated social media sites, and social networking sites.

### Translating Theory into Practice

There is mounting consensus that technology aids learning. For example, John Bransford, Ann Brown, and Rodney Cocking, authors of *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School*, wrote that technology can help learners experiment and receive feedback, visualize information, access and retrieve information, and integrate local and global contexts and communities into their work. Burnett argues that popular culture, including popular technologies, provides a central component of the lives of many traditional-aged students and should play a role in their learning experiences. He notes that cultural experiences provide the basis for engaged critique. However, pedagogical training for instructors in the integration of Web 2.0 technologies is scarce; this is in part, perhaps, because those technologies are evolving so rapidly. While such scholarship is beginning to emerge, Jennifer Sheppard, author of “The Rhetorical Work of Multimedia Production Practices: It's More than Just Technical Skill,” notes that “. . . much of it has been theoretically oriented, leading to difficulty translating these ideas into classroom pedagogy and rhetorically purposeful production practices” (123). In many cases, the scant theoretical work has raised more questions than answers, including: “How do Web 2.0 technologies affect student persistence?”

In short, there is a gap between the emerging body of theoretical scholarship on Web 2.0 technologies and minimal practical application of those technologies into instruction. In fact, Internet-based technologies are rarely addressed in curricula and materials development. According to James Dean Brown, author of *The Elements of Language Curriculum: A Systematic Approach to Program Development*, they are often considered under the broader term “technology,” which may be subsumed within “teaching aids” and includes computers, audio-visual aids, and the blackboard (197). Writing curricula often focus on traditional print formats (books, workbooks, journals) and only briefly touch on other forms of technology, sometimes under the guise of “computer software” (Brown 158). In the absence of literature on specific pedagogical practices related to Web 2.0 technologies, instructors turn their intuition into innovation. In a survey of 72 doctoral-granting programs in rhetoric and composition, Paul Anderson and Heidi McKee found that innovation in the implementation of new media does not come from the discipline, the institution, or the program, but from the individual instructor. They write, “These teachers reported being largely on their own as they planned, implemented, and assessed multimodal learning experiences for students: 97% reported that they trained themselves how to implement multimodal pedagogies into their classrooms” (Anderson et al. 74). This illustrates that although there is scant research connecting theory with practice, small communities of practice have emerged.

In “Datagogies, Writing Spaces, and the Age of Peer Production,” Joseph Moxley proposes what he calls *datagogies*. According to Moxley, datagogies are

dynamic networks of instructors who use social media to develop pedagogical communities of practice without expert theory, peer-review, or publication (182-183). Moxley argues that because composition instructors are often early adopters of teaching technologies and are interested in pedagogy, there are “numerous benefits to constructing datagogies, particularly datagogies in university writing programs . . . [where they] can harness the energy of teachers and students, creating a dialogic space that empowers teachers and students as co-developers of online learning communities” (196).

Two excellent examples of datagogies are “Teaching Digital Rhetoric,” or DigiRhet, and “Writing in Digital Environments,” or WIDE. “Teaching Digital Rhetoric: Community, Critical Engagement, and Application” was written by scholars participating in a Michigan State University professional writing course entitled “Digital Rhetoric” or simply “DigiRhet,” which has become the byline for the article. DigiRhet holds that digital rhetoric promotes “the understanding of both writing and technology as complex, socially situated, and political tools through which humans act and make meaning” and encourages “students to recognize that composing takes place within, is shaped by, and serves to shape social, educational, and political contexts” (246). DigiRhet asserts that writing technologies offer new types of writing spaces that change processes (the ways in which one writes) and communication interactions (the dynamics between fellow writers and their products) (234). Moreover, the authors argue that “digital writing tools and techniques allow for deeper and often more collaborative and interactive means of publishing, distributing, and responding to writing” (235).



DigiRhet posits that writing technologies themselves are important but their real significance is “the possibilities for connection and communication—framed by convergence [whereby] writers . . . access and participate more instantaneously within digital spaces and . . . distribute writing to large and widely dispersed audiences” (238). Scholars have long identified the digital divide as the divide that exists among those who have access to technology and those who do not (often based on socio-economic status), or those who prefer technology and those who do not (often based on age). However, DigiRhet points to additional digital divides between those who can retrieve and understand multimodal writing and those who can actually produce it through “true interactivity and collaborative meaning making” (236). DigiRhet asserts that networked communities allow students to “engage in genuine collaborative acts within those communities that incorporate the digital rhetoric principles and practices they are trying to master, which gives real purpose to course projects and allows students to connect to others inside and outside of the classroom” (243). Clearly, this type of collective writing, where a digital artifact such as DigiRhet or Wikipedia comes to garner a voice, an audience, and a sense of authorial authority, indicates a new frontier in socially constructed meaning making and sophisticated digital literacies.

The collaborative team WIDE (Writing in Digital Environments) published a collective titled “Why Teach Digital Writing?” The WIDE authors argue that networked computers have changed the writing process and the rhetorical dynamic between writers and readers. The authors write, “We reject the idea that all writing is the same, whether it is produced with a pencil, a typewriter,

or a networked computer. Our view sees writing not merely for its conveyance properties, but for its communicative properties: Writing is not a container.” The WIDE authors assert that technology has reinvigorated the canons of rhetoric:

In the writing classroom that teaches with the rhetorical modes, arrangement still centers upon narration, exposition, and argument. However, in networked realms . . . there isn’t one set of arrangements that we can teach students that will prepare them for the rhetorical exigencies and purposes they face in writing in digital environments.

Moreover, digital writing explores the many nuances of rhetorical situations that writing students face today in academia, the workplace, and cyberspace.

The WIDE authors suggest that technology provides for what they call implicit and complicit collaboration. Implicit collaboration involves borrowing and building upon the ideas of others and complicit involves doing so within a community of writers. Therefore, writing technologies play a significant role in meaning making, production, and distribution. WIDE emphasizes the importance of developing new theories for digital writing, using technology to some degree in writing instruction and cultivating “critical consciousness” about technology and its uses in composition courses. More specifically, WIDE recommends a pedagogy that is:

- Situated in contexts of rich affordances for writing
- Rooted in a rhetoric that is technological, social, and cultural
- Linked to a thoughtful, critical consciousness of technology

- Framed by learning how to learn
- Anchored by multimodal approaches to writing

How the dearth of peer-reviewed scholarship amidst the emergence of datagogies will affect writing pedagogies and writing students is unknown, but some scholars point to student abilities to consume, but not produce or critically evaluate, Web 2.0 digital artifacts, and others report that students are unprepared for the production tasks they will face in upper division coursework, graduate school, or the workplace (see Clark). Disconcertingly, many writing instructors might dismiss the use of Web 2.0 technologies altogether, integrate them in haphazard ways that do not leverage their full power as instructional tools, or fail to align them with important instructional outcomes. Moreover, they might fail to understand how the inclusion of these may be theoretically situated. Toward this end, it is useful to turn to Gee's work on affinity spaces.

#### Leveraging Affinity Spaces to Enhance the “Whereness” of Online Writing Courses

Today, digital spaces are a common part of students' lives. Many spend significant time accessing media, participating in social networks, and participating in mobile and immersive virtual worlds. In these places, they experience the convergence of learning, technology, and culture—three things, Gee theorizes in *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*, so deeply intertwined that it is impossible to separate any one from the others. Gee proposes putting performance before competency; in other words, to encourage learners to play before demonstrating mastery. This play may take the

form of forming or participating in communities of practice, including those tied to digital literacy.

In “Semiotic Social Spaces and Affinity Spaces: From the Age of Mythology to Today’s Schools,” Gee argues that when people electively go to digital environments for their pleasure, they are participating in affinity spaces. Gee asserts that affinity spaces are virtual places where communities of informed peers provide ongoing, informal learning through their burgeoning relationships, shared practices, and collective knowledge. While an online writing course could become an affinity space, it does not entirely fit Gee’s notion of a student-selected space, where participation and tasks are elective, aligned with participants’ interests, and peer-directed. Why would it be desirable for an online writing course to be an affinity space? For two reasons: first, affinity spaces are places people like to visit, and getting students to like visiting online courses would positively affect persistence; and second, affinity spaces are places informed by communities with shared practices, which is exactly what educators are striving for by asking students to write about familiar concepts using collaborative and collective writing technologies based on social constructivist epistemologies. Gee suggests that learners need to be able to shift their skills and ways of thinking to fit a climate of ongoing professional change; he encourages instructors to recognize first-year students as forming their own discourse community and as acquiring new production and consumption literacies that, properly leveraged, can set the stage for their *flexible* academic success across disciplines (see *Situated Language* Gee). By adopting principles of learner-centered instruction and

aligning content with learner experiences, online writing courses can *lean toward* becoming affinity spaces, and by integrating legitimate Web 2.0 affinity spaces, such as Facebook, Youtube, and Second Life, that learners electively visit, the online course itself can become a larger trans-affinity space that merges multiple affinity spaces into one larger space.

Affinity spaces also provide a sense of presence that may be missing in online courses. In *Creating a Sense of Presence in Online Teaching: How to “Be There” for Distance Learners*, Rosemary Lehman and Simone Conceicao write about cultivating presence in online teaching. They write of two types of presence: “Telepresence in the online environment happens when learners have the impression or feeling that they are present at a location remote from their own immediate environment. Social presence means interactions with others in the online environment” (3). Telepresence is particularly important in online writing courses as Lehman and Conceicao assert that “social presence also means there is a willingness on the part of participants to engage in communication exchanges” and these exchanges are central to collaboration and social constructivist epistemologies (5). Lehman and Conceicao describe a model of presence that they call “Being There for the Online Learner.” The model can be visualized like the layers of an onion: the exterior is the actual online interface and materials; the next layer is an environment within that is based on immersion, realism, suspension of disbelief, and involvement; the next layer provides an inviting social environment; and the core positively affects the thought, emotions, and

behavior of the learner (22). While the learner is at the center of the model, the outer layers provide the scaffolding for learning to take place.

Together, the notions of affinity spaces and telepresence foster technology gateways. Selfe and Hawisher describe technology gateways, or those “. . . places and situations in which individuals typically gain access to computers for the purposes of practicing digital literacy” (85). Online writing courses are certainly one of these places, but they are not the only places. Students enter technology gateways when they go online; contribute to social networking and social media sites; and produce or consume information on email, blogs, and wikis. In fact, online writing courses are technology gateways explicitly intended to help learners to practice and improve their digital literacy. Selfe and Hawisher assert that technology gateways can also serve as paths to educational and career opportunities (179).

Affinity spaces help integrate online instructional spaces with digital spaces in which many learners are already deeply engaged. Learning is no longer isolated, contained, and separated, and digital social environments no longer become forbidden spaces, or spaces outside of learning; they become part of the online learning environment. While Gee’s notion of affinity spaces is closely tied to his work on gaming, it may be expanded to apply to several types of virtual spaces that people visit voluntarily to share information and digital artifacts, including e-zines, social media sites, and social networking sites.

## *E-Zines*

Tim Lindgren, who wrote “*Blogging Places: Locating Pedagogy in the Whereness of Weblogs*,” warns that “For many students, beginning college is a dislocating experience as they encounter different social contexts and discourse communities as well as being physically displaced by the move to college” (“*Blogging*”). This is consistent with scholarship on persistence, in which such dislocation results in an uncomfortable transitional period for learners (see “*Dropout*” Tinto; Schlossberg). Online students may feel even more dislocated than students who have ready access to physical campus resources; therefore, providing them with virtual spaces that are dynamic, connected, and authentic may cultivate a sense of belonging. Lindgren examines how Weblogs are situated as places writers “visit” and are well suited to helping build presence. Unlike blogging tools that are part of LCMSs, mainstream or public blogs allow learners to continue to participate long after the particular course has concluded. Alternately, students may not participate in public blogs but view them and evaluate how they shape culture.

Despite having sometimes only one author, weblogs are nevertheless communal in their ability to prompt responses and social in their public commentary on personal experiences. Lindgren has observed and participated in Weblogs that have productively allowed dispersed writing groups to read and respond to each other’s posts and build communal dialogue on places throughout the wired world. He theorizes that place-based blogging emerges from the desire to “. . . construct a meaningful sense of place in the midst of widespread social

mobility and rapid environmental transformation” (“Blogging”). Constructing a sense of place, or presence, is exactly what affinity spaces—and many persistence-focused online instructors—aim to do.

Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt discuss the construction of online learning communities in *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*. They write,

Because community is no longer simply a place-based concept, we are seeing it recontextualized and are even applying the concept of place-based communities to online communities. For example . . . the creation of community in an online class is much like a neighborhood because the class community would fit within the larger concept of community at the institutional level. In other words, the institution forms the larger community and, where attention is paid to community building in an online class, each class becomes a neighborhood within that community. (27)

They note that communities can also be formed around issues of identity and values that emerge when “a group of people share common practices, are interdependent, make decisions jointly, [and] identify themselves with something larger than the sum of their individual relationships” (27). Lindgren describes blogs as places akin to the neighborhood writing group: “a rhetorical place where writers can bring works-in-progress to a like-minded group of writers who will offer feedback and dialogue” (“Blogging”). The “whereness” and “whoness” of



blogs might prove to be invaluable to online learners, who could connect to their peers geographically and in collective cyberspace writing communities.

In “Abdullah's Blogging: A Generation 1.5 Student Enters the Blogosphere,” Joel Bloch remarks that

the burgeoning interest in blogging has aroused the interest of teachers who see blogging as a simple and low cost way of giving students access to publishing and distributing their writing on the Internet, as a method of providing them with the experience of writing in a digital format, and as a means of discussing issues related to their classroom work and their lives. (128)

Blogs need not be lengthy or complicated. Microblogs, for example, are blogs that limit the number of characters that a contributor can include in a post. Sid Dobrin promotes teaching concision in technical writing through micro-blogging, which he defines as short, character-limited blogs associated with social networking sites. Dobrin has moved away from traditional list-serves to Twitter accounts and requires his students to convey their message or question in only one post, using standard written English, and no abbreviations, to help them focus on concision. He suggests, “Don’t just tell your students to be concise, show them how concision functions.” This is an excellent example of aligning the use of technology to the learning outcome.

Prior to blogs (and other Web 2.0 technologies), hypertext used to be a relatively static conveyance of information connected by hyperlinks. Students often accessed hypertext, in the words of Scott DeWitt, “as a way to support

claims” (39). In *Writing Inventions: Identities, Technologies, Pedagogies*, DeWitt asserts that hypertext should be a place where one goes as much to write as to read, thereby transforming research into a reciprocal process of inquiry, discovery, and meaning making (39). DeWitt finds a striking similarity between hypertext and composition theory. They both are used to construct knowledge through nonlinear, social processes using inquiry, making discoveries, and finding connections (113). Such invention and interaction is more possible today than ever before, now that hypertext has evolved into a rich assemblage of digital technologies, including blogs. Some blogs gain such a following and such frequent updates that they become digital magazines, known as “e-magazines” or “e-zines.”

Robert Samuels writes about mingling traditional academic writing and multimodal writing in “Integrating Hypertextual Subjects: Combining Modern Academic Essay Writing with Postmodern Web Zines.” Samuels is a proponent of e-zines, and his writing students operate as primary and collaborative composers for their e-magazine, “The Daily Brewin.” Samuels observes that

hypertexts offer the possibility of constructing an alternative mode of student writing centered on collaboration, non-linearity, multiple perspectives, and a transformed sense of the author, the audience, the content, and form of traditional and modern prose.

(“Integrating”)

Through public, digitally-published writing, Samuels’s students have a genuine audience and purpose, making their writing experience more authentic,

collaborative, and socially-situated. In short, their writing is more *relevant*.

Samuels asserts,

hypertexts offer the possibility of constructing an alternative mode of student writing centered on collaboration, non-linearity, multiple perspectives, and a transformed sense of the author, the audience, the content, and form of traditional and modern prose.

(“Integrating”)

E-zines emphasize the social, communal, contextual nature of knowledge construction. Samuels exemplifies this in a pedagogy in which students directly link their work to that of their peers: “Since the students . . . link these essays up to other student essays, they are motivated to closely read each other’s articles and locate the places where their own work links up to other students’ work”

(“Integrating”). This provides opportunities for students to negotiate different viewpoints; learn digital citation; conduct deeper, meaningful peer reviews; and write about issues relevant to their lives and, in this case, their peers’ lives.

Asking students to compose e-zine articles is not a superfluous exercise; it is closely aligned with disciplinary concerns and course outcomes and transfers to other types of academic, personal, and professional writing.

Most importantly, by visiting an e-zine, whether it is to read, link, comment, or contribute, online student writers are joining an affinity space that has the potential of promoting social presence and telepresence. Instructors may choose to archive these e-zines, year after year, so that current students can

reference the work of their predecessors. In this way, e-zines become similar to authentic e-zines and students can see the longevity of their online writing.

### *User-Generated Social Media*

User-generated media, also known simply as social media, is media that is conceptualized, submitted, and viewed by anyone with access to a user-generated media site, such as YouTube, Flickr, or Wordle, sites devoted to video, photography, and informational graphics, respectively. Instructors should not dismiss them as peripheral to traditional writing; navigating these sites takes a fair degree of digital literacy, and contributing to them takes even more. They provide something that many forms of classroom-based multimodal writing do not: an authentic, global, and responsive audience.

Vie notes that social media sites “have much to offer compositionists interested in engaging students in the act of composition—broadly defined. They allow students practice in writing their own content . . . , appropriating others’ content . . . , and remixing content . . . .” (“Digital” 20-21). Multimodal writing and the production of media elements, Sorapure argues, help students “gain a better understanding of how arguments and ideologies are embedded in particular design choices” (60). In the article, “Integrating Multimodality into Composition Curricula: Survey Methodology and Results from a CCCC Research Grant,” the American Council on Education defines multimodal compositions as “compositions that take advantage of a range of rhetorical resources—words, still and moving images, sounds, music, animation—to create meaning” (60). User-

generated social media involves three components: multimodal writing, distribution, and critical evaluation.

Three of the most common types of multimodal compositions are movies, podcasts, and informational graphics. All of these are what Sarah Arroyo calls heuristics, which enable “us to understand something while also participating in its invention” (246). Arroyo, author of “The Medium Is the Medium: Heuristic Writing with Digital Movies,” explores the experiential essence of multimodal writing. By way of example, she notes, “It is not possible to master Flickr by first learning about it and then working in the site. Users must participate in the site to learn about it . . . *participation* is required” (247). This necessary but elective participation characterizes affinity spaces and is similar to that required in online writing instruction. Arroyo describes the communal nature of social media interactions: “Posting student-made digital movies to sites such as YouTube, and especially creating on-the-spot communities through these movies, are important realities for us and for our students” (248). Arroyo emphasizes the importance of participation to students by suggesting they post movies to public forums, writing, “Making digital writing public is crucial; I cannot imagine digital writing in the ‘real’ world that is not public, so all of students’ works should be made public in some manner” (250).

Connie Snyder Mick integrates podcast production into her multimodal writing courses and describes the results in “Podcasts and the Teaching of Writing: Recasting Student Voices in the Composition Classroom.” She asks her students to produce audio essays for National Public Radio’s series *This I Believe*

(231). Snyder Mick observes that podcasts are often connected to places and groups them into four categories: undefined, stationary, touring, and abstract. Only undefined podcasts do not take the author's or listeners' locations into account; stationary podcasts are about specific, tangible places; touring podcasts are about a series of specific places; and abstract podcasts are about conjuring up a sense of ambiance or environment (237). Similar to place-based e-zines, place-based podcasts may transport learners and listeners to environments far afield from their own and help them understand the contexts from which their peers are writing. They may also direct students to heretofore unknown affinity spaces, such as National Public Radio's Web site.

User-generated media also takes the form of data, charts, and graphs. Sorapure calls this sort of information visualization "infovis" and argues for encouraging students to produce as well as consume it. Infovis is informational images that convey complex messages. Sorapure asserts,

For writing teachers, projects that ask students to visualize text, personal data, and social data can provide compelling entry points into Web 2.0 as students learn about existing tools and sources of data, produce their own visualizations, and then analyze the insight that they and others can gain through seeing data represented visually. (68)

One of the easiest entry points to Infovis is Wordle, which organizes text based on the frequency of the words occurring in it. Thus, it is a type of corpus with a visual design. By contextualizing the relative frequency of words, Wordle allows

viewers to conduct data analysis around the linguistic features of writing as well as contemplate how visual design enhances semiotics.

Sorapure emphasizes that Web 2.0 technologies are attractive to digital natives, promote critical thinking around software and media, provide generative opportunities for students to participate in their work, and allow student creations to be consumed by real audiences (60). Sheppard promotes the incorporation of peers to help students evaluate and negotiate their audiences, designs, and messages. Such peer involvement is where multimodal writing meets social media distribution. While providing a delivery venue for media is not generally within a writing instructor's purview, Youtube, Flickr, NPR, and Wordle provide easy opportunities for students to distribute their work on the World Wide Web or to critically discuss notions of public versus private, the permanence of digital publication, and the authority of authorship. These social media sites also become affinity spaces that extend the online writing classroom into larger trans-affinity spaces, removing the "classroom" boundary and seamlessly merging online writing with the digital "real world." While evoking these trans-affinity spaces may not necessarily promote persistence on their own, they are providing a more relevant, dynamic sense of place and promoting peer collaboration in ways that scaffold persistence efforts.

### *Social Networking*

Gina Maranto and Matt Barton, in their article "Paradox and Promise: MySpace, Facebook, and the Sociopolitics of Social Networking in the Writing Classroom," urge educators to recognize that there is a cultural imperative to

address social networking technologies in the composition classroom due to their sheer prevalence in American culture and society, with some students spending as much as eight hours a day on Facebook (38). Facebook has become the de facto affinity space. Alexandra Rice, author of “Students Push Their Facebook Use Further into Course Work” in a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, notes the rise of social media by college students and as a means of communicating about college coursework. She notes that ninety percent of college students use Facebook and a quarter of college students think it is valuable to their academic success (“Students”). Failing to integrate these types of technologies—or worse, ignoring them—risks widening the digital divide that increasingly separates the academy and its students. Maranto and Barton discuss the benefits of social networking sites; these sites engage students in certain levels of abstract thinking, collaboration, and peer review, skills that could translate well to the writing classroom (44). Social networking sites represent rich affinity spaces with strong senses of telepresence. In many ways, they represent the online course space of the future, where students are representing themselves in virtual space in authentic, original, and ever-changing ways that are visible to their peers and instructors.

Vie notes that members of “Generation Media” spend a quarter of their day interacting with media (“Digital” 10). While students may log on to Web 2.0 sites numerous times each day, “many instructors resist what they see as the pervasive encroachment of [this] technology . . . into composition” (“Digital” 18). By leveraging affinity spaces, they become a part of the course rather than a



forbidden space. In “Digital Underlife in the Networked Writing Classroom,” Derek Mueller advances the term “digital underlife” to describe the illicit communication and the elusive, underground discursive activities proliferated with the aid of digital technologies; it evokes an inexact sphere for extraneous, hyper-threaded interchanges—between pairs of individuals or among crowds of users. (241)

Mueller connects digital underlife to the concept of a backchannel, which he defines as “distal communication activity associated with a central event, often circulating beyond the apprehension of a focal speaker” (242). In this way, texting, chatting, emailing, and posting have become the new “note passing” and “whispering,” slightly beyond the grasp of the instructor, but perhaps more pervasive, more distracting, and less detectable than either.

Mueller urges composition instructors to develop an understanding of the purposes and functions of these technologies; find ways to support multiple, nonconventional attention structures rather than trying to suppress them; and integrate digital underlife into curricula. Mueller describes a productive digital underlife as acknowledging a range of attentional demands, reflectively enacting attention getting and giving, incorporating life beyond the academy into academic work and welcoming promising adaptations of digital underlife across the curriculum (248-249). Underlife and backchannels allow for a subversion of convention and an evocation of unique identity, traits not particularly at odds with either college campuses or rhetorical studies in general. Indeed, as students participate in social networking sites, they often write more publicly and more

prolifically than in their academic pursuits. How can such thinking and writing be leveraged, and perhaps rhetorically analyzed, in the composition classroom? To what extent might it provide a more authentic, purposeful experience for writers?

### Evaluating Web 2.0 Integration

Materials development and adaptation can be difficult, especially utilizing Internet-based technologies, the uses and availability of which are highly variable and situation dependent. Accordingly, it may be helpful to design and evaluate online writing courses using criteria that guide curricula development.

Referencing the WPA outcomes statement and using rubrics provided by associations such as Quality Matters are two ways of making sure that online writing courses are aligned to disciplinary outcomes and instructional design standards. However, they may not help instructors evaluate to what extent their integration of Web 2.0 technologies is learner-centered and instructionally sound. In this section, I offer a heuristic that is based on the work of Scott Warnock, James Dean Brown, Brian Tomlinson, and Beth Hewett, and Christa Ehmann. As these works, collectively, address online writing instruction and language curricula development, they provide a synergy between the process of designing a curriculum and the criteria upon which it may be evaluated. Together, these works form guideposts that curricula developers and instructors may find particularly beneficial in devising technology-based activities, materials, and curricula that meet their institutional and instructional outcomes. This heuristic recommends that curricula based on Web 2.0 technologies must be aligned, authentic, generative, equitable, and accessible.

### *Aligned*

Perhaps the most significant aspect of any course material is that it supports and facilitates course outcomes and lesson objectives. One way to establish this alignment is through a design blueprint that aligns outcomes to assessments and establishes how materials, content, and activities promote mastery of these assessments. Such a blueprint requires instructors to determine whether outcomes are best achieved through Web 2.0 technologies or by other means. Brown describes a materials blueprint as providing “all the information obtained in the needs analysis, objectives setting, and testing stages of program development” (146).

Instructors will need to consider the intensity of contact with the technology. For instance, will students be required to contribute to or evaluate blogs? Will they produce multimodal writing or participate in the evaluation of it? Should Web 2.0 technologies be a means of meeting course outcomes or offer opportunities to gain extra-linguistic proficiencies, such as computer or digital literacies, which may indirectly support students’ mastery of outcomes and lifelong learning? Finally, how will Web 2.0 technologies be assessed, integrated into the sequence of instruction, and evaluated for their efficacy?

### *Authentic*

What is authenticity? In *Materials Development in Language Teaching*, Tomlinson contends that authentic materials are those that provide opportunities to use language to achieve communicative purposes, especially those in which the “content, strategies, and expression of the interaction are determined by the

learners” (15). Moreover, Web 2.0 materials expose learners to writing in authentic use, rather than controlled practice. Activities that immerse the student in the creative process, such as interviewing a subject on camera or recording a podcast, can be far more immersive than many traditional writing activities. In addition, authentic materials are relevant to learners in their daily lives, and available to a legitimate audience, and legitimize the role of the author. Web 2.0 is, by its nature, an authentic, communicative approach to learning because it relies upon tools that students might encounter in real-world writing situations. In “Discourse, Artifacts, and the Ozarks: Understanding Academic Discourse,” Linda Blanton suggests that drawing upon students’ personal ideas and experiences, including their vernacular, stimulates their senses of authority in ways that the standard academic essay often fails to do (231). In turn, Heidi Shetzer and Mark Warschauer, authors of “An Electronic Literacy Approach to Network-Based Language Teaching,” propose that Web 2.0 technologies offer learners the opportunity to become adept at interpreting and contributing to a plurality of authentic “communication opportunities in the form of presentations, Web sites, and traditional publications accessible to local and global audiences” (Shetzer and Warschauer 176). Bloch finds that “unlike the scripting of hypertext, which tended to de-center the author . . . blogging seems to have reinstated the centrality of the author as the primary creator of the text” (129).

### *Generative*

Perhaps one of the best uses of Web 2.0 technologies for students is simply to get them to write more frequently, that is, to generate more writing and

revision. Warschauer points out that sharing writing the traditional way, on paper, whether for instructor feedback or peer review, does not allow the reader to easily interact with the text, particularly when the writer is seeking real-time feedback and for revisions (“Computer Mediated” 472). Therefore, while journals and free writing are good expressive exercises, they are less helpful for the collaboration necessary to simulate the rhetorical situation or to enable learning (Warschauer, “Computer-mediated” 472). Sheppard describes the opportunities for revision inherent in multimedia productions, noting that there is a significant iterative design process that involves an ongoing evaluation of the rhetorical situation (124). She advises instructors to “interrogate instances of conflict about a project’s intended purpose or audience” and to “discuss with students what shapes their expectations of academic and/or professional multimedia texts versus those of personal or social texts” (128-129).

### *Equitable*

Susan Kirtley, who surveyed 129 students in first-year composition for her study “Students’ Views on Technology and Writing: The Power of Personal History,” stresses that educators cannot make assumptions around students’ prior experience or comfort with technology. Kirtley points to the socioeconomic class differential in access to writing technologies and how prior access informs present feelings (215, 219). She warns that “computers shouldn’t be an invisible part of the process.” (219). Rather, instructors must learn how much access their students have and how their students feel about computer-mediated communication (223). Nevertheless, Web 2.0 offers a level of personalization that supports a wide range

of learner abilities, styles, and digital literacies. Some scholars argue that Web 2.0 actually promotes equity and levels hegemonic power relationships. For example, Lee Sproull and Sara Kiesler, authors of *Connections: New Ways of Working in the Networked Organization*, analyzed published research studies and concluded that in-person discussions result in roughly 50% less equality among people of varying status groups compared to electronic postings (61). In fact, high status groups do not dominate electronic discussions, and their contributions are not necessarily deemed superior, particularly in the decision making or consensus processes (Sproull and Kiesler 61). Sproull and Kiesler summarize the results of six experiments and show that electronic mail is far more equitable, in terms of participation, than face-to-face communication (61).

### *Accessible*

The issue of accessibility is multi-faceted when designing Web 2.0 curricula. First, which technologies are readily accessible to all students? Second, how will they access these technologies? Third, which technologies does the institution support? Fourth, which technologies are students likely to be familiar with, find appealing, and use without extensive background knowledge? Fifth, which technologies is the instructor familiar enough with to provide technical support? And sixth, which technologies, by minimizing resistance and anxiety, are likely to be the most emotionally accessible to students? Student preparedness is critical in implementing Web 2.0 pedagogies. Herein lays one of the hidden complexities of using Web 2.0 as curricular materials: adapting it to meet the needs of diverse students. However, the collaborative nature of Web 2.0 may

alleviate this concern; students may work together co-authoring writing tasks or collectively reading and responding to them. One special consideration is how much support students will need in accessing technology, acquiring technological adeptness, and troubleshooting technical problems if they occur. Every class is certain to have students of varying proficiency at various Web 2.0 technologies; this situation will require instructors to select technologies with which students have some familiarity, such as email, and to provide guidance around technologies with which they may be unfamiliar.

#### In Summary

Students are not only encountering digital and writing technologies in their studies; they participate in the evolution of these technologies through their daily participation in ways far more sophisticated than what they realize and in ways that instructors can leverage by integrating certain Web 2.0 technologies into curricula, especially to foster affinity spaces, communities of practice, and place-based writing. Together, these types of efforts can bolster student connectedness, increase engagement and relevance, and foster lifelong learning, therefore promoting persistence. In particular, Web 2.0 can help students consider their audiences and practice writing for authentic audiences.

Instructors may be wary of integrating Web 2.0 technologies into their online courses for fear of violating student privacy or inadvertently putting students at risk by having them publish their writing to a larger audience, which is addressed further in the final chapter. These are legitimate concerns and may result in a conservative approach to implementing Web 2.0 within one's curricula.

By offering students Web 2.0 as an alternative to some traditional paper-based work, instructors can provide pragmatic opportunities for students to engage with writing technologies without requiring submission to distribution channels.

Alternately, instructors can avoid public distribution by encouraging students to compile eportfolios to archive and share their academic work. In “ePortfolio Technology in the Second Language Writing Classroom: Reflections on Praxis,” Carolyn Sterling-Deer describes the benefits of eportfolios in helping students compile, evaluate, and share their academic work. Eportfolios are electronic storage spaces that allow students to upload, save, and reflect upon their final writing artifacts. They may be used to build a portfolio of their work in one class, across several classes, or throughout their academic experience. In particular, Sterling-Deer notes the benefits of using e-portfolios for reflective work: “Without reflection, the ePortfolio is simply a repository of written work” (306). Reflection is also a part of persistence-based instruction, prompting students to reflect on their transition, struggles, and successes. An Eportfolio can be an excellent tool for retention as it allows students to focus on their circumstances as students. With sections specifically designed for their resumes and their educational goals, students can organize work they can then use to help them acquire transfer credits or help them reference a larger body of academic work for future employment purposes. Finally, though instructors may try to incorporate Web 2.0 technologies simply for their entertainment or engagement value, it is important to integrate these technologies in ways conducive to composition theory and persistence scholarship.



## Chapter 7: Recognizing Challenges and Minimizing Risks

In the previous chapters, I have drawn connections between persistence and learner-centered instruction in online writing instruction, offered strategies for promoting student involvement and collaboration, provided a heuristic for integrating Web 2.0 technologies to foster communities of practice and affinity spaces, and recommended an approach to content that makes issues of persistence transparent to first-year writing students. In this concluding chapter, I examine the challenges of implementing such persistence-based practices within online writing instruction and offer recommendations for minimizing risks. I conclude by offering directions for research, in particular around scaling the model I have proposed across larger sections of students.

Although challenges are unique to every instructor, student, and institution, there are several challenges that most online writing instructors will face. They include anxiety and doubt on the part of the online learner; student resistance, unresponsiveness, and general lack of preparedness for the self-directed nature of online courses; student apprehension at the sheer volume of reading and writing that is required in the online writing course; ethical concerns about the distribution of student writing in digital formats; and, of course, adjusting to the administrative and technical nature of online writing instruction.

While there is no single panacea for meeting these challenges, they need to be acknowledged by any writing instructor who is or will be teaching online. The solutions offered in this chapter are by no means comprehensive, and many of the challenges pose opportunities for significant research in the future. By

highlighting these challenges, educators are better able to prepare themselves to enter the online writing course with realistic expectations about the level of difficulty that accompanies even the most well-intended, strongly structured, and theoretically based pedagogies.

#### Student Anxiety and Doubt

One of the biggest risks that students face is anxiety over technology, online courses, and their perceived writing and academic abilities. Anxiety can be heightened in online writing courses, where students may be unfamiliar with academic expectations; uncomfortable with Web 2.0 technologies; have preconceived notions around their writing abilities; and feel vulnerable presenting their ideas, in writing, to their peers. Laura Rendón, Catherine Matthews Pavia, and Page Ware each write about the unique anxieties experienced by nontraditional students, basic writers, and students who are inexperienced with technology, respectively. Similarly, Laurie Olson-Horswill notes in her article “Online Writing Groups” that asking students to put their thoughts and feelings into writing for others requires trust in those reading their words. In an electronic classroom, building trust may seem more challenging since students’ faces and voices are often invisible to instructors (Olson-Horswill 190).

Rendón notes that it is

important to recognize that nontraditional students enter the academy consumed with doubt about their ability to succeed. At every transition point, from the first year of college to the first year of graduate school, [such] students . . . are quite vulnerable to in-

and out-of-class experiences that humiliate . . . or reinforce doubt.

(4)

Certainly, composition instructors recognize the intimidation that many first-semester students face when starting writing courses and, in particular, when asked to share their ideas, opinions, and drafts. What can instructors do to alleviate anxiety and support students?

Catherine Matthews Pavia conducts a case study of two writing students in “Issues of Attitude and Access: A Case Study of Basic Writers in a Computer Classroom.” She questions what computer-related anxieties students bring with them to writing courses that may complicate their writing processes or products. She finds that her subjects’ positive attitudes toward computers in general do not translate to writing with computers. Although they may feel relatively good about using technologies such as word processing or the Internet, they may be apprehensive about using these types of tools to conduct academic research and writing. She notes that basic writers often lack both experience writing and experience using writing technologies.

Similarly, Ware has written about learners’ many different (and all too often negative) perceptions of online writing practices. In “Confidence and Competition Online: ESL Student Perspectives on Web-Based Discussions in the Classroom,” Ware notes that while some students consider online writing to be a performance for the instructor, others consider it to be competitive, and still others consider it to be a place where they may be publicly evaluated and criticized (457). Ware reported that students embrace or dismiss technology based largely

on their previous experience, identification as writers, and comfort with their peers (463). Therefore, instructors must consider students' prior experiences when implementing online writing courses.

What can online writing instructors do to alleviate students' anxiety, especially in the first few weeks of a course? Pavia suggests a pedagogy, consistent with the work of Selfe and Hawisher, which begins with technology narratives and progressively introduces more advanced digital literacies so that inexperienced technologists are not put at a disadvantage (496). Digital literacy narratives also allow instructors to diagnose their students' levels of comfort using certain technologies and provide resources, scaffolding, and learning communities responsively. By understanding students' attitudes and prior access to technology, instructors are better able to sequence assignments, particularly those that leverage LCMS and Web 2.0 technologies, more strategically. They are also better prepared to direct students toward resources such as specific directions, tutorials, FAQs, and tutoring or other academic support services.

Instructors may also choose to integrate LCMS and Web 2.0 technologies in a highly scaffolded way, starting with more familiar tools, such as email, chats, and discussions, and then moving toward shared documents, blogs, wikis, and social media. Warschauer points to evidence that chatting online via instant messaging tools allows many students to be more expressive than in other forms of written composition where, he believes, "every sentence weighs heavily on their minds" ("Computer-Mediated" 472). In other words, start simple and build into more sophisticated activities after students have mastered the basics.

Some of the best encouragement in the first few weeks of any writing course comes from students who have already completed the course. Laurie McMillan, author of “Students Write to Students about Writing,” asks her students to complete the term by writing letters to students who will be enrolled in her sections in the next term. She cites one student who began her letter, “Last fall, I was where you are, wondering how I was going to be able to handle writing all the time and the work,” and she concludes, “Although at times it may seem difficult to get through the work load you will be able to in the end” (qtd. In McMillan 90). In between, this student offers straightforward advice about how to persist in the course: staying on schedule, giving and receiving feedback, and the revision process. McMillian observes that these texts are central to her new students’ understanding of course expectations: “. . . students are predisposed to listen to other students for practical information about a course” (91).

#### Student Resistance, Unresponsiveness, and Unpreparedness

While some students may struggle with anxiety, others may seem resistant to course activities, deadlines, and directions or unresponsive to their instructors and peers. The reasons for such behavior are difficult to discern; however, instructors may struggle with these students, in particular at the onset of the semester, if they are charged with encouraging persistence past a particular deadline to receive state or federal funding. While this may be a larger institutional problem based on enrollment and placement issues, which are out of the scope of this dissertation, there are a few things that instructors can do to try to understand and reach these students.

In “Critical Computer Literacy: Computers in First-Year Composition as Topic and Environment,” Barbara Blakely Duffelmeyer surveyed 140 first-year composition students to learn about their attitudes toward technology-enhanced and technology-based courses. She found that students fall into one of three theoretical camps in their thinking about technology: hegemonic-dominant, oppositional, and negotiated (290). Those with hegemonic-dominant views believed that technology was inevitable and unavoidable; those with oppositional attitudes preferred to avoid it; and those with negotiated perspectives recognized the need to use technology to meet certain needs. Duffelmeyer recommends making technology a subject of scrutiny and rhetorical inquiry to address these notions straightaway (306). In addition to requesting digital literacy narratives, instructors may begin their courses with surveys to reveal their students’ feelings toward certain technologies, access to technologies, and academic habits and histories. This data may shed light on why students are unresponsive or resistant and allow instructors to modify pedagogies, curricula, and policies accordingly.

Resistance and responsiveness may result from lack of unfamiliarity with web-based writing tools or unpreparedness to take online courses. Although proper placement may be within the domain of the WPA or other institutional officers, online writing instructors will experience the detriments of ineffective placement procedures and unprepared students. While instructors can provide access to resources, it is unrealistic to think that they will be able to triage every student issue given their other responsibilities.

One way that instructors can encourage student responsiveness is to spark motivation. Stiggins draws on studies that demonstrate that “Students who have positive attitudes, the motivation to try, and a sense of internal control of their own academic well-being are more likely to achieve at high levels than those who are negative, lack desire, and see themselves as victims of a hostile school world” (306). In *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, John Biggs promotes four categories of student motivation. The first, extrinsic motivation, is promoted by the expectation of a positive outcome; the second, social motivation, is promoted by what other people value; the third, achievement motivation, is promoted by enhancing a learner’s self-concept; and the fourth, intrinsic motivation, is promoted by the process of completing or doing something (1-3). Each of these can be fostered by learner-centered instructional techniques and the other affective and interpersonal recommendations I have advanced in terms of a persistence-based pedagogy.

While motivation is important for instructors to understand, other scholars point out that post-secondary students, who enroll electively, should bring a level of self-motivation, self-directedness, and readiness to their studies (Hewett and Ehmann 11-12). Therefore, while it may not be necessary for instructors to cultivate motivation, they may need to understand what motivates students. Hewett and Ehmann describe these motivators as things “related to life goals” (11). Thus, online writing instructors may see enhanced motivation if they can “hook what [students] are practicing to what they already know and can do” (12) as I discussed in chapter 4.

## Apprehension over the Volume of Reading and Writing

Ironically, once students are engaged, motivated, and participating in the online writing course, instructors risk losing their attention by overwhelming them with high levels of reading and writing. Some scholars cite concern over online reading and writing activities, such as information overload, limited accessibility, and recognition that *more* writing does not necessarily equate to *better* writing. In some cases, electronic communication requires so much reading and responding that it's questionable how much actual reading takes place. According to Charles Moran, who wrote, "We Write, But Do We Read?" many exchanges become one-sided monologues in which students simply begin ignoring other responses (54). Bender also asserts that the sheer volume of online reading and writing may be overwhelming, which could lead students to skim readings (31), and Alan Hirvela, who studied the extent to which online discussions facilitate communication among students in two writing courses with a total of thirty-three second-language writers, found that in less than a quarter of online discussion postings, students actually responded to other student posts (42). Many students did not seize the opportunity to interact with the author of an assigned text, indicating that the students made posts primarily to satisfy minimum course requirements (53). Similarly, Ware found that, when confronted with misunderstandings, student writers avoided collaboratively developing topics and just began working through their assignments as isolated tasks. Their work showed a lack of authentic interaction and was marked, instead, by time pressure



and other constraints. This isolation, Ware notes, resulted in moments where students became disengaged and missed opportunities for exchange (19).

To avoid this kind of information overload and promote quality reading and writing, instructors may focus students on a subset of posts, teach the practice of skimming, and discuss when it makes sense to read more deeply to reference specific peer work. George Collision, Bonnie Elbaum, Sara Haavind, and Robert Tinker write about strategies for moderating online learning experiences, and in particular the movement from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side” that is familiar to traditional instructors schooled in composition theory, pedagogy, and history, for whom this has been the norm for four decades. Unique to the model advanced by Collision et al. is the notion of interventions. “We call the carefully crafted interactions of the moderator . . . *interventions* to emphasize the difference between a leader on the sidelines and one playing a more central role” (34). They ask: “Will teachers be able to support students as expert information brokers in twenty-first-century classrooms—modeling how to sort through seemingly infinite resources to target those that are most useful, current, and credible?” (36). While it may seem counterintuitive, instructors may need to reduce nonessential readings, recognizing that contributing to discussion boards, conducting research, and evaluating peer writing are all time-consuming, reading- and writing-intensive tasks. Hewett and Ehmann find that undergraduate “views about education and learning are more utilitarian in nature than theorists previously have envisaged” and many students are simply doing what is most efficient in terms of course or task completion (35).

## Ethical Concerns about Digitally Distributing Student Writing

Maranto and Barton warn that social media and social networking should be used with caution in the writing classroom due to the divulgence of personal identity information. They offer that, “teachers should not try to colonize these spaces, but rather should enact pedagogical practices and theoretical approaches that employ them as a means of teaching students about identity construction and social networking” (38). However, social media and social networking are not the only technologies that pose distribution risks to online learners. Even within the LCMS, students’ work is visible to their peers and able to be downloaded and distributed without their knowledge. Therefore, students may confide personal stories or unexamined opinions to far wider audiences than they had intended.

Rogers, Trauman, and Kiernan suggest that instructors institute assignments that are essentially “document proposals” and “inquiry contracts” that formalize expectations around student work and the peer review processes (204-206). By doing so, students are establishing a clear picture of their object of inquiry, final artifact, audience, required resources, and any permission that is expressly required. This formality also protects the instructor from ethical violations and allows the learner to reiterate his or her understanding.

In “Ethics, Student Writers, and the Use of Student Texts to Teach,” Anderson and McKee suggest several guiding principles for writing instructors to adopt, including: “Students should control what they disclose about themselves and to whom; students should control the circulation and distribution of what they generate; students should be respected and protected from harm” (63-64).

Anderson and McKee emphasize the importance of being transparent about who—not only the instructor, but their peers and potentially the public—will see the texts that students produce (65). They recommend that students provide explicit permission for the sharing of their texts and that they understand that texts can continue in cyberspace long after they intend and can outlive the opinions that they hold (66-68).

Anderson and McKee warn “We should also inform students about the archival nature of the Internet,” suggesting that digital communications do not necessarily disappear when deleted (68) and that even, “. . . text loaded at a course class-management site that can be accessed only by class members can often still be downloaded and shared outside of class by any of the students enrolled” (69). Moreover, Anderson and McKee stress the need to make sure that students are getting permission for the full possible range of distribution that the Internet enables (that is, if they receive permission to interview a family member, that family member must provide written consent for the use and distribution of the interview). The artifact may end up displayed or distributed on the Internet or a social networking site (72). They provide the following guidelines:

1. Tell students clearly at the beginning of the course about any sharing of their texts that will occur
2. Ask permission in the least coercive environment possible
3. Get permission in writing
4. Give students the choice between using their real names or pseudonyms

5. Ask students how they would like third parties in their texts represented
6. Let students know they can withdraw permission later by contacting you
7. Even with permission, consider possible negative impacts on the student writer
8. Plan the way you will present a student's text
9. If in doubt about sharing a student's text, find or make a substitute. (75-77)

#### Administrating the Online Writing Course

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges that online writing instructors face is simply the pure volume of administrative tasks: designing materials and curricula; setting up their course shell and assessments; responding to student emails; reading through the high volume of student posts, collaborative work, and final artifacts; and maintaining evaluation records. It is commonly and increasingly understood that teaching online takes more time than teaching courses in person. What can instructors do to focus their time on instruction and evaluation and minimize the time that they spend administering their courses? While every instructor who has taught online would likely provide excellent answers to this question and while books have chapters devoted to this very concern (for example, see Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, and Tinker's *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators*), I propose only three actions: recognize the change in the instructional role, divide students into smaller

sections, and work with institutional administration to adopt programmatic changes.

Rita-Mae Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson, authors of *Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction*, argue that the single most important role that the instructor takes in an online course is to engage the students and encourage their interaction with each other and course materials (5). This may not seem particularly novel to writing instructors, but it does stray considerably from the prospect of an instructor as the dispenser of course content and evaluator of essays. Collision et al. describe the shift of the instructor's role away from providing content to moderating discussions and facilitating resource brokering. They describe the moderator's voice as "really a tool that facilitates others' reflections and pre-presentations of their ideas, with the purpose of moving the dialogue or learning forward" (105). They describe moderators as generative guides, conceptual facilitators, reflective guides, personal muses, mediators, and role players but not the deliverers of content (106). For example, "Though superficially resembling the voice of a lecturer or tutor, a Conceptual Facilitator voice focuses specifically on elements of participants' postings, perhaps including juxtapositions from readings, and not on the delivery of content material in the intervention" (108).

When facilitating large courses or multiple sections of courses, it may be advantageous to divide larger classes into several smaller groups, especially around discussion, peer review, and collaborative writing (see Bender 120). This makes reading, responding, and grading easier and may also promote persistence,

as it enables students to form closer bonds within a peer group, and while the initial assignment creation may be daunting, Carter emphasizes keeping it simple (19). She recommends structuring introductory assignments to gather important information about learners (19), emphasizing student reflection (in this case on the differences between face to face and online classes), and encouraging students to collaborate. Because the stakes are lower in many assignments, there is a focus on process, and the anonymous nature makes it less anxiety provoking (23). If instructors keep assignments simple, and extend learning where it fits instructional goals, they can leverage online writing instruction to enhance the rhetorical situation, provide a sense of place, and extend learning into a broader digital community that may continue long after the last class.

Finally, in “Ten Commandments for Computers and Composition,” Todd Taylor recommends programmatic changes to addressing strategies in writing programs. While these may seem outside of the purview of many online writing instructors, they are excellent guidelines to acknowledge and to promote to WPAs. He offers ten tenets that include: keep people first, identify and build from program principles, start simple, invest heavily in hands-on instructor training, revise strategies for instructing students, consult with others, expect the crash, consider access, be critical of technology, and use technology as a lever for positive change. Just as it is important to put faculty, services, and curricula that is most learner-centered in the first year of study to help students adapt, transition, and persist, it is important to prepare those who are teaching first-year courses in how to help students persist (Crissman 138).

## Persistence-Based Pedagogies in Action

Over the course of the previous chapters, I have argued for a persistence-based pedagogy for online writing students. I have proposed a framework that includes adopting principles of learner-centered instruction, such as diagnostic teaching and ongoing assessment; acknowledged the importance of instructor valuation of student work; offered suggestions for how to make student writing more relevant and more focused on transition, persistence, and goals; promoted ways to foster collaborative and collective writing to foster peer affiliation; recommended opportunities to use Web 2.0 technologies to build affinity spaces, telepresence, and technology gateways; and acknowledged some of the many risks associated with these strategies and with online writing instruction in general. In doing this, I have drawn on the work of numerous scholars, including Vincent Tinto, Nancy Schlossberg, Maryellen Weimer, Peter Elbow, Karen Burke LeFevre, James Gee, Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher, and many others. To tie all of this work together into a tangible set of materials, I would like to offer an example of how these various strategies form two types of pedagogies: a central pedagogy in which all writing assignments are focused on persistence and a peripheral pedagogy in which persistence issues are lightly brushed upon over the term.

First, I offer ways in which a persistence-based pedagogy may form the core of an online writing class. As Rankins-Robertson notes,

If all projects within the FYC sequence can be interconnected by a theme and if the skills required for each project can build upon one

another, then students can see how what they are learning in previous projects aids them in their current as well as future projects. Students can also more readily demonstrate learning as a response to the WPA OS. (88)

In this case, all student writing will be valued by the instructor, relevant to the learner, and collaborative or collective in order to promote affiliation and will integrate Web 2.0 technologies in ways that build the online course presence. Thus, in the traditional sixteen-week term, if students respond to weekly discussion threads and submit at least four substantial writing projects, a persistence-based pedagogy may, at a minimum, include: a digital literacy narrative submitted via the LCMS drop-box; a course blog focused on professional and career aspirations; a wiki with persistence advice, tips, and strategies for current and future students to reference; and a final publishable piece of multimodal writing that can be distributed via a social media site or social network or uploaded to a student portfolio, the subject of which is meaningful for the student in terms of his or her future goals, persistence, or specific plans and may be as concrete as a research-based persistence action plan. Throughout the term, students should be contributing to discussion threads focused on the transition into academic life and how this transition is directly related to their literacy skills.

However, it may not be preferable to adopt a persistence-based pedagogy wholesale; instructors, departments, or institutions may choose to implement it as a peripheral pedagogy, whereby it is a focus for students, but not the primary



focus for student writing assignments. As Andrews Knodt notes, the pedagogical orientation of writing programs may vary greatly and the requirements that these pose—whether they be classical rhetoric, current traditional rhetoric, or professional writing—may prevent instructors from thoroughly implementing persistence-based instruction (see Andrews Knodt 148-151). In this case, elements that I have presented may stand-alone—such as asking students to write a literacy narrative, respond to discussion threads about transition and persistence, or devise a wiki that is focused on student success. By offering these examples, I suggest that there are things instructors can do to promote a positive affective experience for their students without transparently focusing on persistence, such as using learner-centered assessment, providing frequent constructive feedback, and promoting collaboration and affiliation.

#### Directions for Future Research

In the first chapter, I narrowed the scope of this dissertation to address the factors that relate to student persistence that instructors can address: affective and instructional factors. In the subsequent chapters, I did not address those factors that instructors cannot control, such as students' prior academic experiences, socioeconomic factors, and institutional policies. Therefore, this dissertation involves those items for which an instructor or WPA can exercise a degree of control: instruction, student writing assignments, building learning communities, promoting place, and valuing student writing. Furthermore, much of the research upon which I have drawn pertains to instructors who are teaching one or two sections of a writing course.

As more course sections move online, and instructors are managing upwards of fifty students, and in some cases more than one hundred students, significant research will need to be conducted on how to make these large-scale implementations successful. Future research will need to help answer questions such as: How can online courses be scaled in ways that make them manageable for the instructors? How should sections, and communities within those sections, be determined? How should the first few weeks, rife with absences and course changes, be structured? How can volumes of emails around technical issues be managed? How can learning communities (and instructor time) be managed effectively in self-paced courses? How can tutoring models and grading software benefit online writing students? How can WPAs prepare students to enter the section best suited to their academic needs and prepare instructors to further organize sub-sections of courses in ways that help all students succeed, while minimizing their administrative workload? Moreover, how does the changing nature of online writing instruction alter the professionalization process of doctoral students, who may face these issues for the first time after receiving their first position?

While my dissertation offers recommendations for writing instructors to modify their pedagogies to foster persistence, it does not address these larger issues around sweeping programmatic changes that WPAs may face as they move more and more sections online. While many of my recommendations in the preceding chapters should work well in larger programmatic implementation, some may require reconsideration, including the notion of whether (or to what

degree) online writing courses should be self-paced. Clearly, this adds complexity to learning communities, discussion threads, and peer review and undermines the notions of a strongly collaborative course based on a social-constructivist epistemology. These are all excellent directions for further research, and relevant to the pedagogical and programmatic futures of composition instruction.

Finally, it would be particularly useful to conduct empirical research to see how each of the strategies that I propose would affect persistence in practice. What would drop-rates look like in sections of persistence-based online writing instruction compared to other online writing sections, including traditional, face-to-face sections? Which strategies might be most important, which might be least important, and which might be transferable to other first-year courses? Such data could greatly improve the efficacy of instructional practices.

While many questions remain unanswered, by adopting the principles I have set forth in this dissertation, I hope to have offered writing instructors insight into the complexity of student persistence and to have provided them with some of the theoretical insight to put pedagogical practices in place that will help their students persist. By rooting pedagogies in both theory and in practical considerations of student persistence, online writing instructors may begin to consider the role that their instruction has on student persistence, while acknowledging that this is but one of many contributors to students' choices around whether or not they will complete a course, term, or degree. Although online writing instructors must recognize that their individual efforts are linked to their institution's efforts to retain students, they must not cede all responsibility

for student persistence to higher powers. Rather, they must realize that they are active partners, alongside writing program administrators and institutional student success efforts, at ensuring that students persist. While composition instructors have long been considered institutional gatekeepers, by aligning theories and practices with persistence strategies, instructors may find themselves reversing this interpretation to keep more students within their institution's virtual gates.

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