



Teaching with Instructional Assistants: Enhancing Student Learning in Online Classes

Tiffany Bouelle^a, Andrew Bouelle^{a,*}, Sherry Rankins-Robertson^b

^a *University of New Mexico*

^b *University of Arkansas at Little Rock*

Abstract

This article details a pilot project incorporating instructional assistants (IAs), or upper-level undergraduate writing tutors, embedded in the courses of an online writing program at a large land-grant university. The curriculum, called the Writers' Studio, focused on heavy process and portfolio assessment. Students were asked to create multimodal projects for public audiences in an effort to prepare them to participate as literate citizens beyond higher education. As a result of the multimodal emphasis and process-centered curriculum, the students needed additional instructional support to successfully demonstrate understanding of the learning outcomes for the course. Recognizing that digital writing environments can increase workload, the instructional team had to reconsider ways to manage the instructors' and students' needs. The answer was the incorporation of undergraduate teaching assistants, or instructional assistants. In online classes where students write several drafts for each project, instructor feedback on multiple drafts was simply not possible with the number of students assigned to the teacher, no matter how she managed her time. The use of IAs provided what instructors could not: a chance for students to receive feedback on their writing throughout the actual process of writing. Although students still maintained interaction with the instructors, the IAs gave them additional individualized attention. In this article, we provide an in-depth look at the pilot project, including a detailed description of our IA training practices, as well as comments from students about the benefit of the instructional assistants.

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Because of state-wide budget cuts, the provost of Arizona State University asked faculty to think of innovative approaches to redesign curriculum so that courses reduced costs while retaining or improving student learning and maintaining or decreasing faculty workloads. The assistant vice provost brought together a team of writing faculty to investigate approaches to redesigning first-year composition course sequences, ENG 101 and ENG 102, and the advanced one-semester course, ENG 105, to accommodate an increased student-to-teacher ratio while maintaining quality of instruction and managing teacher workload. As proponents of small, intimate environments that foster learner-centered opportunities and facilitate the writing process, we were concerned about losing one-on-one personal contact with students. We were faced with questions about how to offer pedagogically sound courses that would provide opportunities to engage in critical thinking and enhance writing skills with a substantially increased number of students. As a result, we developed a series of online first-year composition courses called the Writers' Studio for the School of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: abouelle@unm.edu (A. Bouelle).

Letters and Sciences that focused on process-heavy, learner-centered pedagogy. In the first-year composition courses, we incorporated an instructional team that included peer mentors, called instructional assistants (IAs), to enhance students' experiences and reduce instructors' workload. In this article, we offer an explanation for how adding IAs can benefit instruction in numerous ways. We begin the article by providing the context at our university to add instructional support. We then provide details on the educational support given to prepare the instructional assistants to work as leaders within the first-year composition courses. Finally, we illustrate sample comments from students about the help they received from instructional assistants.

1. First-year composition course redesign

During our pilot semester, our goal was to locate a more cost-efficient way to offer writing classes that were pedagogically sound. While we developed this curriculum prior to the publication of the [Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee](#) for Best Practices in Online Writing Instruction's March 2013 *Position Statement*, our goals were in line with the principles detailed therein. In particular, principles 3 and 4 were especially applicable: "Appropriate composition teaching/learning strategies should be developed for the unique features of the online instructional environment" and "Appropriate onsite composition theories, pedagogies, and strategies should be migrated and adapted to the online instructional environment." We recognized the importance of using existing pedagogical strategies for the classes, but we also felt we needed to develop a new strategy for the unique features of our online environment.

Nearly half of the first-year composition classes within the School of Letters and Sciences were moved online to accommodate the space needed to grow sections beyond the physical classroom spaces. Because writing courses at our institution typically held 24 students per section, one way to conserve funding was to avoid offering sections that contained less than 24 students. For example, one teacher who teaches four sections might have one or two full sections of 24 students and then a section or two with 17 or 12 students; however, the Writers' Studio maximized the teaching potential of each faculty member by offering larger sections, then adding teachers once the enrollment had met the need, rather than offering sections that relied on student enrollments. These courses were called "mega-sections" because they could house more students and were sometimes taught with more than one instructor. Three mega-sections were moved online with approximately 200 total students enrolled in all three courses, including one section of ENG 101, one section of ENG 102, and one section of ENG 105, in which all students enrolled in a course were taught within the same shell. We allocated one teacher for every 96 students because teachers at our institution are assigned four sections of 24. Once a class exceeded 96 students, we brought on another teacher to team-teach the course. An example of the largest course in our pilot project was ENG 102, which housed approximately 120 students. Two instructors worked in the same shell together, one teaching his full load and another teaching the equivalent of one section. As an organizing mechanism and to maintain a small classroom feel, those 120 students were divided into cohorts of about 15 students. The other courses, English 101 and 105, were organized similarly; even though these courses had fewer students, we divided the class into cohorts of 15 to maintain an intimate classroom community.

The increased student-to-instructor ratio within the Writers' Studio had the potential to amplify instructor workload, as did the online format of the course. Instructors teaching online for the first time often think that the online format will save time due to the removal of face-to-face time spent in an actual classroom. Perhaps even more prevailing is the notion that students work less in an online classroom; however, the reality is that online courses can, in fact, create more work for both parties. David [Reinheimer \(2005\)](#) indicated that teaching online composition is a grueling process because of the interactive nature of one-to-one instruction:

In addition to group activities such as bulletin board discussions, teaching the writing process requires teaching activities—providing feedback, conferencing, and so on—that are one-on-one events. Thus, in an online student-centered paradigm, a teacher's workload is more likely defined by the individual student rather than the class as a whole. (p. 460)

Recognizing Reinheimer's claims, when redesigning our new first-year composition courses, we had to think about ways to manage the workload of online instruction. The answer was the incorporation of teaching assistants, or what we call instructional assistants (IAs). Adding IAs to the online classroom allowed teachers to have access to upper-level writing majors and education honors students who, once trained for the course curriculum, could help enhance student learning and support teachers to manage their workloads. To ensure that our first-year students would receive the

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