



Writing in Web-based Disciplinary Courses: New Media, New Disciplinary Composing Expectations

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Received 27 February 2012; received in revised form 5 September 2012; accepted 10 April 2014

Abstract

Scholarship in Online Writing Instruction has offered many suggestions to facilitate web-based writing pedagogy; however, little research examines how faculty in other disciplines use writing assignments and related technologies for web-based courses in their own discipline. This article reports on the findings of two surveys of disciplinary faculty at a large Midwestern, state-supported university regarding composing assignments they use in upper-division courses, particularly differences in assignments and assessment criteria related to the course delivery mode—classroom-based versus web-based. I identify a handful of distinctions of writing assignments used and expectations of composing skills in web-based upper division disciplinary courses compared with such classes delivered via the classroom environment. These include: the kinds of composing assignments used, digital literacy expectations and where such skills ought to be learned, and criteria deemed important. Also, I discuss how class size, instructor training in web-based pedagogy, training in assessment of multimodal projects, and the degree to which a program has web-based offerings can affect these attributes. These findings and related discussion encourage further focused study on composing demands in web-based coursework. Such research can help writing faculty understand on which particular skills to focus instruction in first-year writing courses, given the proliferation of web-based courses, and it can help program administrators develop strong survey instruments to facilitate assessment at their own institution.

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Keywords: Online Writing Instruction; Web-based courses; WID/WAC programs; Digital literacy; Survey research

Increasingly, institutions are trying to engage students in work-related skill sets as part of their college experience through initiatives like internships and service learning projects. First-year writing courses tend to focus on development of academic writing skills to prepare students for the kinds of writing they will be doing in other coursework; however, that other coursework integrates disciplinary-related forms of writing. Studies by scholars such as Michael Carter (2007), and Cornelius Cosgrove and Nancy Barta-Smith (2004) found particular kinds of writing were emphasized in disciplinary coursework, and they theorized ways writing pedagogy could prepare students for that writing.

However, their work emphasized classroom-based pedagogies. Many institutions are offering more upper-division, disciplinary courses via the web to remain competitive and to facilitate convenience for students who have to work two part-time jobs or a full-time job to complete their education. Research has not yet examined the kinds of writing and composing disciplinary faculty require of students in web-based coursework. Scholarship in writing pedagogy recognizes differences between the classroom and web-based teaching environments; indeed, this scholarship has

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2014.04.002>

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spawned a subfield of composition scholarship related to Online Writing Instruction (OWI) (Blythe, 2003; Depew, Fishman, Romberger & Ruetnick, 2006; Hewett, 2004).

Studies report on student performance in web-based writing courses or on best practices for facilitating writing instruction via the web. The [College Composition and Communication Conference Committee on Best Practices in Online Writing Instruction](#) recently studied practices for web-based writing instruction (2011a). They found that writing instructors use some different assignments online than they use in classroom-based settings (cf. [Jaschik, 2010](#)). These different assignments, further, tend to require more multimodal and digital composing skills than traditional writing assignments do. Likewise, understanding what other disciplinary faculty may be doing in their web-based courses is also important to understanding any skills related to writing for courses delivered there and how to prepare students for them.

There are not many studies looking into the writing expected of students in web-based disciplinary coursework like those studies reporting on such in classroom-based courses. [Ruth Kistler, Kathleen Blake Yancey, Kara Taczak, and Natalie Szysmanski \(2013\)](#) acknowledged that, among 31 proposals they received for publication consideration in a special issue of *Across The Disciplines* on program assessment, very few “integrated digital technologies into their programs in any explicit way” (para. 17). Further, of the articles published in that special issue, none pertained to writing expectations in web-based coursework. However, as digital technologies become part of the delivery method for instruction, it is important to ascertain how they may be affecting writing expectations in disciplinary coursework and how writing programs can prepare students for those demands.

In this article, I report on the findings of two surveys of disciplinary faculty at a single institution. One survey focused on particular skills expected of students in upper-division, writing-intensive courses, most of which are delivered in classroom-based settings and those not so designated; while the other considered assignments and skills expected in web-based disciplinary courses. I report on some similarities and differences in the findings from the two studies, calling attention to differences in composing assignments and expectations associated with web-based courses. In particular, I report on differences related to the kinds of composing assignments used, criteria used to assess composition, digital literacy expectations faculty have of students, and where faculty perceive is best to teach those digital literacy skills. Generally, faculty who teach via the web use more multimodal composing assignments than those who teach in the classroom, include visuals among important criteria in assessing compositions, and expect students to have certain kinds of digital literacies that they also feel are appropriate to teach in first-year college writing courses. I also report on some dynamics related to faculty disciplines and training in web-based pedagogies that contribute to these differences; the more formal training one has in web-based pedagogies, the more likely they are to assign multimodal compositions and expect particular digital literacies.

While specific findings of such institutional research cannot be generalized beyond the local institution, my hope is to encourage further study of these differences across delivery modes, given the proliferation of web-based courses and programs. This information can help writing faculty understand what kinds of assignments and criteria faculty in other disciplines tend to use in assessing student writing in upper-division coursework delivered in either setting—classroom or web-based. Such information will help faculty focus more attention on developing particular composing skills in their students. This information, also, can help program administrators understand how to develop similar assessments at their own institution

1. Web-based writing instruction

Since 2000, writing scholarship has theorized ways to facilitate effective web-based writing pedagogy ([Blythe, 2003](#); [Boynton, 2002](#); [Brady, 2001](#); [Cargill-Cook & Grant-Davie, 2005](#); [DePew, Fishman, Romberger & Ruetnick, 2006](#); [Harrington, Rickly, & Day, 2000](#); and [Hewett, 2004](#)). For example, Stuart Blythe (2003) noted that interaction amongst students in web-based contexts needs to be similar to the interaction they experience in a classroom setting. This prompts certain uses of discussion boards that facilitate certain kinds of writing activities to include in course grading. Also, Beth [Hewett \(2004\)](#) observed challenges related to distinguishing web-based pedagogy from classroom pedagogy. She stated that “such comparisons may contribute to a tendency to try to fit OWI into the mold of f2f writing instruction, where differences seem to be interpreted as OWI not doing what it is supposed to do” (Hewett, “Literature Review,” para. 18)

Indeed, web-based pedagogies require a different approach to writing assignments that integrates the influence of related technologies by which the pedagogy is affected. As writing programs try to prepare students for the writing they

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