Uncovering Student Perceptions of a First-Year Online Writing Course

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Abstract

This article examined student perceptions of the Writing Program Administrators (WPA) learning outcomes for first-year writing through a fully online first-year writing course. A second research question explored how the course content focused on technology, visual rhetoric, and social media impacted students' overall perceptions about their learning. The method used in this study is qualitative in nature, based on a Likert-scale survey and end of semester open-ended surveys with students. The findings indicate that students perceived their abilities to improve not only in the four areas delineated by the WPA outcomes, but also through the ability to see writing as the primary method of communication and have more time to reflect in an online environment. Findings also suggest that instructor feedback and relevant course content both positively impact student perceptions of an online course. This article concludes with encouragement for additional research and studies relating to first-year writing courses in an online environment.

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1. Introduction and Background

It is impossible to turn on the television or scroll through a web browser without seeing infomercials and advertisements for online degrees and online courses. With the rise of MOOCs (massive open online courses) and for profit universities, it is no wonder that online courses are often touted as a convenient, individualized educational experience. Many of the advertisements for online programs, and particularly online courses, publicize ease, convenience, and independent learning. Beyond the glamorous brochures, television advertisements, and lure of for-profit universities, faculty at institutions of higher learning need to consider pedagogical practices of online courses, particularly writing courses. Although there is some research about effective methods for teaching writing online, there is a need for educators to develop, research, and cultivate a first-year writing (FYW) course that speaks to the Writing Program Administrators (WPA) national outcomes for students. In addition to concerns about meeting outcomes for an online FYW course, there is also the question of course content, and how that shapes students' experiences with online writing instruction (OWI).

Based on data from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the frequency and availability of first-year online writing courses are rising (Rendahl & Breuch, 2013). In addition, there are questions of how to design online writing courses in effective and rhetorically-minded ways (DePew, 2015). Yet, research about these courses and how to effectively teach them do not align with the demand for them. Based on the significance of FYW and the increasing institutional demands to offer courses online, this IRB approved study examines student perceptions of a fully-online first-year writing course. This study engages with the following research questions:

- What are student perceptions of learning the WPA outcomes for FYW?
- What are student perceptions of course content focused on visual rhetoric, technology, and social media paired with an online writing environment?

Because there are not many studies of fully online first-year writing courses and this was my first semester piloting this course, I considered broadly student perceptions of an online writing course as they progressed through this course. To assess student perceptions, I used the WPA outcomes, which are nationally recognized outcomes for first-year writing classes across the United States. The second question explored crafting first-year writing content thematic to how technology impacts communication practices. To pursue these research questions, I employ a qualitative study consisting of a mid-semester survey and end of semester reflections from students. These reflections are the results of this preliminary, exploratory study to more closely examine the outcomes of online writing courses. Before describing the methods and findings, I review literature relevant to online first-year writing courses and student success in these courses.

2. Research Relating to Online First-Year Writing

Prior research has been conducted on online writing classes, but little research has examined first-year writing courses online. Early on, Harrington, Rickly, and Day (2000) raise three main issues about teaching writing online that compositionists continue to address, which include: 1) The challenges of interactions online; 2) The benefits of text-based environments for teaching writing; and 3) How new technologies impact pedagogy. The first and third areas concern communication and the nuances of Learning Management Systems (LMS). Prior studies relating to teaching writing online have also examined student success in online environments. In a study conducted by William West, B.R. Simon Rosser, Salma Monani, and Laura Gurak (2006) at the University of Minnesota, faculty compared responses from 60 students in sections of online courses in scientific/technical writing with those in face-to-face sections to determine that for students in online courses, "their assignments averaged half a grade above the face-to-face assignments" (p. 535). Even further, West et al. discovered that "it was students' behaviors or study habits that were the primary influencer of their success, rather than personal characteristics or learning environments" (p. 300). This specific finding indicates one of the primary motivators for success in an online writing course: student motivation and responsibility external to an environment or the instructor.

Not all research suggests that online courses are more effective or offer students more opportunities. Research relating to FYW demonstrate that national organizations are cautious about online courses. Members of formal writing associations, such as the WPA and NCTE have indicated that online FYW cannot accomplish what occurs in face-to-face environments. Policy makers at NCTE declared that "alternate routes to satisfy first-year writing requirements, such as online courses, test-out options, or dual enrollment coursework, can offer students useful preparation for FYW courses. However, such instruction cannot fully replicate the experiences of FYW (First Year Writing, n.d.). Through word choice, NCTE indicate their stance on teaching FYW online as they claim online FYW courses "disrupt the traditional face-to-face FYW courses that strengthen students' writing abilities and play a key role in orienting students to post-secondary study." NCTE's claims can be explained by seeing face-to-face versus online courses as a binary, the former superior to the latter. Such claims by governing bodies are well-intentioned, but limit opportunities for researching and exploring online FYW courses more fully. This study directly responds to these claims of online courses as "disruptive" or as "alternative" and instead aims to provide specific feedback about student perceptions of these course outcomes.

Based on the need to develop a course that speaks to the WPA outcomes and to indicate that this course is substantiated in commonly accepted practices in the field of Composition, it is necessary to define and fully explicate the WPA outcomes. The outcomes for first-year writing are delineated into four main categories: 1) Rhetorical Knowledge; 2)