

Chapter 11. Create, Support, and Facilitate Personal Online Writing Courses in Online Writing Programs

Rhonda Thomas, Karen Kuralt, Heidi Skurat Harris, and
George Jensen

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS (LITTLE ROCK)

Abstract: Building personal connections in online courses is an important part of facilitating learning and retaining students in online programs, as Borgman and McArdle note in their book *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors*. Drawing on focus group research collected from students and alumni in three fully online programs located in an independent rhetoric and writing department (a B.A., M.A., and graduate certificate), this chapter describes how teachers and administrators can forge strong personal connections with and among their online students. Students from these programs highlight the importance of creating personalized online learning spaces, as well as techniques for building a sense of community in both the courses and the program. Program administrators comment on how faculty can do the work of adding these personal touches in a gradual, sustainable way.

Keywords: online student retention, connecting with online students, community in online courses, visual design of online courses, online writing programs, independent writing programs, online student focus groups, personalized online instruction, presence in online writing courses, student interaction in online writing courses, online course accessibility, collaboration in online writing courses

Personal connection—the PARS -P element—serves as the foundation for best practice in accessible, responsive, and strategic course design. As Scott Warnock notes in the foreword to *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, and Strategic* (PARS), it “takes strategy and time to show your students how much you care about them” (Borgman & McArdle, 2019, p. viii). To design accessible content, be accessible instructors, and create responsive classes strategically, instructors must first be personal and “personable” instructors (Borgman & McArdle, 2019, p. 4).

Our department has long held making personal connections with students as a core value in course design and program administration, and our experiences and research over the last five years have reinforced that core value. We first developed our focus on personal connections with students in our

on-campus programs, and we wanted to ensure that personal connections were preserved as we developed our online programs.

The Department of Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) has been an independent writing department since 1993 when it split from the Department of English primarily over whether or not full-time, non-tenure track instructors should have voting rights. When the departments split, the new Rhetoric department faculty, composed of lecturers and professors in composition and rhetoric, took with them the first-year composition program and an M.A. in Technical and Expository Writing (which later became the M.A. in Professional and Technical Writing). In collaboration with the university's Journalism Department, Rhetoric and Writing then created an undergraduate major, the B.A. in Professional and Technical Writing, which had two tracks, one in rhetoric and composition (focusing more on technical writing) and one in mass communication (focusing more on journalism). In 2008, the two tracks were redesigned into a single program in Rhetoric and Writing with the option of taking some elective courses in the School of Mass Communication.

Being an independent writing department has afforded our faculty significant freedom in developing curriculum without having to include literature courses or appease literature faculty. Over the years, the department developed four major emphases in its programs: technical writing, editing and publishing, nonfiction, and persuasive writing. When the department redesigned its B.A. in 2008, several undergraduate and graduate courses had already been moved online, and faculty began to talk about possibly developing fully online programs. As these discussions progressed, the department, under Heidi's leadership, also developed the Graduate Certificate in Online Writing Instruction. The freedom of being an independent writing department made this move easier than it would have been if we were part of a more complex unit. (The Department of English, for example, has been slow to develop online courses or programs.)

Even with a faculty open to online instruction, it took Rhetoric and Writing about eight years to launch a fully online version of the B.A. and M.A. programs in Professional and Technical Writing. By 2016, as we were launching three online programs, our university, similar to many institutions across the country, began to experience a loss of enrollments. Because we could market fully online programs, we were able to continue small but steady growth. When the pandemic hit in spring 2020, the department was mostly hybrid or online. We were able to move the fully face-to-face (F2F) classes to an online format seamlessly. The department's experience with online teaching was critical in making this shift, as were our pre-existing efforts to train online faculty and retain online students.

Assessment data from our F2F programs frequently cited the benefits of personal connection between students and professors. When we started offering online courses, we knew that we would need to preserve this strength for our

online courses and programs to succeed. Now that we've offered three different programs fully online for four years, the timing seemed right to assess how well our online programs are performing so that we can maintain practices that are effective for our students and our outcomes and make changes where needed. Evaluating the success of our personal connections with online students is an important part of that assessment—and since interacting with students is central to building personal connections, naturally we realized we would learn the most by asking the students and alumni themselves.

In 2016, we received a CCCC Research Initiative Grant to conduct surveys, focus groups, and interview research with students, alumni, faculty, and administrators involved with online course/program development in the rhetoric and writing department. In 2019, we received a second grant from our social sciences college to conduct a second round of research that replicated the survey and focus groups with a different set of students and alumni from the 2016 study.

We four researchers/authors bring a rich variety of perspectives to interpreting the data from these studies, which we share in this chapter to illuminate the importance of strategic implementation (the PARS -S element) of personal connection (the PARS -P element) in course design. Karen joined the Rhetoric and Writing Department in fall 2000, just as the university was offering its first online courses. She served as our department's M.A. program coordinator from 2007–2019 and is now associate dean of the graduate school. George was hired as the department chair in 2004, serving in that role for twelve years; he was an integral part of the development of all our online programs. Heidi joined the department in 2013 and won a college curriculum innovation award for her design of the Graduate Certificate in Online Writing Instruction (GCOWI). She is now the coordinator of all the department's graduate programs. Rhonda is a graduate student who completed both the online B.A. and GCOWI programs. She is currently enrolled in the online M.A. program and was the research assistant for the 2019 study (Melissa Johnson served as the graduate assistant for the 2016 survey and focus group research). As a co-author of this chapter, Rhonda shares her student perspective on personal connection in course design. Feedback from our focus group and survey participants frequently echo Rhonda's experiences.

Why Is the Personal Important?

Being personal in online classes isn't simply having a good personality. Being personable, as Borgman and McArdle (2019) note, means being personal in designing and facilitating your class and, for online writing programs, personal in your administration of online writing classes and work with online faculty.

During both studies, our focus group and survey data suggest that students are more motivated when they feel a “personal connection” to the course and

the instructor. We define personal connection as those distinct moments in a course when students recognize links between their ideas and identities and those of the instructor. Personal connection can be fostered by student-instructor interaction, instructor presence in discussion boards, through outcome-driven feedback on student projects, and through instructor accessibility—the PARS -A element.

Student writers in classroom settings often feel they are being judged when they expose their writing to professors and to other students. Many lack confidence in their writing skills and in their ability to contribute to discussions, which is magnified when they move online into what can be experienced as a psychologically unsafe and less personal space. Students need connection and mentorship to thrive, and teachers should make a conscious effort to build connection and mentorship into online settings.

Rhonda explains why connecting with her instructors was important to her development as a writer:

Writing is personal. It is intimately connected to who we are. When we write, we expose ourselves on all fronts: we expose the quality of our writing and we expose the quality of our ideas. This is particularly true in an online writing class where everything we have to say seems, to some degree, permanently fixed.

As a non-traditional adult returning to college, I had zero confidence in my ability to write academically. There I was, spending an appreciable amount of time writing in my work life, yet stumbling to find my footing in class for two reasons: 1) because I didn't know my writer-self and 2) left to my own devices, I simply couldn't find a bridge between the everyday me and the academic me.

I believe to get the most out of one's education, one must write; and more importantly, one must be comfortable with her identity as a writer. While there are certainly students who have great confidence in their writing, I would stick my neck out and say many students do not; particularly, first year students.

Instructor-student interactions and personal connections, strategically placed throughout a course, can create opportunities to help students connect with their writer-selves through personal engagement. Students in our focus groups echoed the importance of mentorship in helping them develop as academic and professional writers. They identified several factors that made them feel more connected to their professors as mentors:

Being able to experience the presence of their professors online, to be able to get to know them personally as real human beings.

Being able to interact with professors regularly, both through feedback on assignments and through timely responses to student questions.

Getting the sense that professors actually *wanted* to hear from students, rather than treating their questions as frivolous or burdensome.

Being encouraged to explore, develop ideas, and make mistakes without fear of judgments or penalty (via low grades, critical comments, etc.).

One focus group participant valued that the professors in our online programs gave her “roots” in key writing skills and “wings to go and achieve anything [she] want[s] to achieve.” Another remarked, “. . . this is the first time in any program I’ve been in where every single professor . . . I’ve had, I trust, and I trust that they are knowledgeable because they are showing me they are knowledgeable, and I trust that they have my best interest at heart . . . and I haven’t experienced that in other programs that I’ve had.”

As these students explain, when professors take time to add personal elements to their online courses, students then become more comfortable trying new forms of writing and sharing their work and ideas. Even relatively infrequent personal connections can be surprisingly powerful for online students. Rhonda describes some of the techniques that helped her feel most connected to her professors:

Knowing what my instructor looks like and sounds like (e.g., audio/video) is important to me. Seeing or hearing that my instructor is an actual person and not just text on a screen gives her instant credibility with me. Suddenly this flat, online personality is a real human with observable dimensions. Getting to know my instructor forges that “personal partnership” Borgman and McArdle (2019) talk about.

Focus group participants in our study agreed with Rhonda about the techniques that help them develop early rapport with their online teachers. They cited three main factors that helped them feel connected to their online instructors as people, creating a feeling of safety that made them more willing to take risks necessary to their development as academic and professional writers. Those factors are identified in Table 11.1 and connected with practical suggestions for faculty who want to foster personal connections in their online courses.

Table 11.1. Establishing initial rapport with online students

Students feel personally connected to their online instructors when you . . .	Practical tips:
Help students get to know you as a person.	<p>Include a photo in your course shell.</p> <p>Create short introductory videos to introduce new concepts and assignments.</p> <p>Interact with students on social media.</p> <p>Participate in discussion boards calling students by name; post responses that show students you connect with their goals, ideas, and questions.</p>
Interact with students regularly; convey to students that you want to interact with them.	<p>Provide timely feedback on assignments at predictable intervals.</p> <p>Set up group or individual video chat times.</p> <p>Encourage questions frequently and respond to questions as quickly as possible.</p> <p>Provide multiple means of connecting with students (phone, video, etc.).</p>
Create a safe environment where students can explore and make mistakes without penalty.	<p>Use low-stakes collaborative activities and low-stakes assignments where students earn participation credit but not letter grades.</p> <p>Build in opportunities for learning through revision.</p> <p>Establish guidelines for commenting respectfully and kindly on class member contributions.</p>

Creating Personalized Spaces Where Students Can Succeed

Skurat Harris and Greer (2016) argue that “[t]o teach writing online is to design an environment” (p. 46). This takes forethought, strategy, and commitment. In the F2F classroom, students get a sense of whether they will enjoy the class and connect with their teacher from seeing and interacting with the professor in person. Online, that tone is set and mediated by the class website or LMS shell. Some questions to ask when setting the tone of the online classroom are:

- Does the course look inviting?
- Is the course easy to navigate?
- Are the links and assignments updated and functioning correctly?
- Does the course material support and measure the course learning outcomes? Does the instructor explain how it supports the learning outcomes?

Rhonda reflects on online course designs that worked for her:

The best writing instructors design learning experiences that help me find direction as a writer. They do this by making a personal connection with me in ways that demonstrate they are genuinely interested in who I am as a person. They find ways to be a bridge between where I am now as a writer and where I want to go with my writing. They also design online writing spaces that don't make me feel as if I'm a temporary guest in their inner sanctum; rather, I'm inhabiting a collaborative space where instructor and student are writing together.

Borgman and McArdle (2019) talk about how online writing instructors need to “make online spaces personal and inviting” (p. 18), because students interact with “inviting personalities” (see Intro, p. ix). Creating a personalized experience for students requires layers of strategic and purposeful communication with each student, applying what Borgman and McArdle (2019) refer to as “multiple means” of interaction. In *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why*, Scott Warnock acknowledges that “the tools of teaching online can seem to create a barrier between you and your students,” but that these same tools can “also allow you to expand and shape this personality in highly productive, imaginative ways” (Warnock, 2009, p. 180). In our focus group research, student and alumni comments about the design of online learning spaces clustered around three main areas:

Inviting visual design of an easy to navigate website or LMS shell.

Engaging multimodal course materials (with a preference for customized course materials created by the course professor for the specific students in this course at this university).

Easy to find, fully updated, and functional course materials that explain the purpose for class activities in the context of the learning outcomes.

In the following sections, we identify practical ways that you can implement the PARS method in ways that address these three primary student concerns.

Creating Visually Appealing Spaces

Rhonda explains that visual design is an important part of whether she sees online courses as personal spaces:

It's obvious to me when I step into an online learning environment whether it exists by design. A big clue is its visual appeal. Borgman and McArdle highlight how aesthetic appeal plays “a large part in the personalization of the online classroom” (2019, p. 20). Indeed, online spaces cannot be devoid of sensory cues:

When they are, they become “sterile and inaccessible to many students” (Ruefman, 2016, p. 5).

For students like Rhonda, sensory cues (the basics of document design, such as fonts, colors, and images) convey nonverbal messages within an online environment that substitute for those messages students have been conditioned to expect in F2F classes (nonverbal communication, modifications in the instructor’s voice, eye-to-eye contact, a smile).

Our focus group respondents agreed. “I expect [courses] to be visually appealing, user friendly, and easier to navigate through,” said one student. Another noted that in a program that teaches document design and user experience, visually attractive online materials should be the norm; a syllabus that looks like it was typed in the age of DOS does not make a positive impression.

Online instructors should think carefully about these issues to create an intentional design (Skurat Harris et al., 2019 call this “purposeful pedagogy-driven design”) for their online courses that conveys the instructor’s commitment to the course. The design doesn’t need to be elaborate, but it should have consistent elements (i.e., colors, bolding, chunking, labeling) repeated to help students navigate the course easily (see Appendix D for screenshots of an intentionally designed online course).

Creating Engaging, Multimodal, and Customized Course Materials

Just as teachers vary activities in the face-to-face classroom to keep students engaged, online teachers can personalize their courses by adding course materials in a variety of formats, including multimedia course materials that are specifically tailored for a course and its particular students.

Several of our focus group participants shared that personalized videos and presentations are particularly effective for engaging students and helping them feel personally connected. One respondent commented:

I really like the classes where the professors do a lot of video. I’ve had some where all they did was give you reading material. And it’s just like, here’s an article that you gotta read, and you open it up and you look, and the scroll bar is *this* big, and you know it just goes on and on forever. It’s very intimidating, very discouraging. So I like when they use a lot of technology and a lot of videos and multimedia stuff, [like] Prezis and different things.

Rhonda adds:

Instructors who design intentionally tend to create their own resources: a how-to technology video, for example, or a linked point-of-need Google Doc. I imagine there is a bit of front-end

work in designing personalized resources and hand-outs, but over time these instructors are able to provide resources designed with me in mind. When instructors take the time to design in this way, I feel their personal presence embedded in that design.

Not all online teachers have the time, pedagogical freedom, or technological expertise to create large amounts of personalized multimedia content. However, even instructors using pre-designed content can make online courses more personal through welcome announcements, short videos, and explanations of why and how students should complete assignments. In fact, explaining how a course works with the students—even if you’re using other people’s material—is a personal act, as is including descriptions of the videos that you’ve chosen and explaining why they are relevant to the class.

Making Courses Easy to Access and Navigate

Personalized course design also requires instructors to make their courses as user-friendly and accessible as possible, showing that the “personal” and “accessible” dimensions of PARS naturally feed into one another. Our student focus group participants explained that they felt their needs and their time were not respected when the online course interface made accessibility difficult.

Accessibility in this instance refers to the ease of getting to materials and the ability to navigate between materials when completing an assignment. Several students complained that instructors sometimes post too many types of materials in too many different places, making it challenging for students to know whether they have located all the assignments and deadlines.

One student explained:

There was Blackboard, there was Google Hangouts or Google Classroom and Google Discussion. I was confused about where I was supposed to go. I had so many places to go for this one class that I would find myself going, every day, to all of them just to find out where I was supposed to be. . . . [My experience of the course] was just very, very disjointed.

Along similar lines, several students noted that it’s possible to have too much uniqueness in course shells. Students can struggle when taking multiple online courses from different instructors, each of whom may use a different style for arranging the course or entirely different online course platforms. “[I]f you’re taking four or five classes, it’s difficult to remember. Oh, which one is this I am working on? Is there a website? Okay, wait a minute. I’ve got to stop and pause and regroup,” said one respondent. “[D]ifferent instructors hid different things [in] different places,” added another student. “I don’t think they did it on purpose, but like she said, I found it a little bit difficult.”

Courses are also less usable (and feel less personal) when links to materials don't work or aren't regularly updated. Rhonda reflects on this problem:

Instructors are busy. But I've lost count of how many broken links instructors have given me to online resources selected to *help me* complete an assignment. Sometimes the broken links are out of an instructor's control. Many times, however, it was obvious that an instructor was using the same old, dusty links—semester after semester—simply because it was the easy option. It starts to feel like these instructors are giving *the web* the responsibility of teaching me.

Focus group respondents agreed. For example, one program graduate pointed out that when professors forget to update the due dates on their syllabi and assignment links, not only did students feel the professor wasn't fully present in the course, but it created confusion about when the work is actually due. Another respondent said that seeing mistakes in the course materials actually made him more reluctant to approach his professors:

I almost felt scared to interact with them at times, especially if I saw the same mistakes over and over, whether it be typos, assignments not opening when they're supposed to open, [etc.]. . . . When you ask those questions, you kind of feel like you are bothering them. And then you're scared to do that because you think then it might affect my grade.

Online instructors can show they care for students by structuring accessibility (-A) into their course design. Instructors should:

- Ensure key information and tasks are as accessible and easy to find as possible.
- Post important deadlines and announcements consistently in multiple locations in the course shell (and reinforced through email) to minimize the chance that, in failing to find or look at a single page, students could miss the tasks on which their grades and their learning depend.
- Design through the mindset of novice learners who have not completed a task before, taking care to spell out task steps and make connections between what is assigned and the learning outcomes of the tasks.

Rhonda observes that “it's obvious when instructors have worked through each step in the process for an assignment they've asked me to complete. This is evidenced by how easily all the smaller parts of a larger assignment flow logically in a deliberate direction across time.”

Table 11.2 summarizes our recommendations for how online instructors can use visual design and content curation to build personalized online learning spaces where students can succeed.

Creating Connection and Building Community

Of course, the most important aspect of personal connection in any class is the interaction that takes place both between students and professors and among the students themselves. Developing the interactive components in a course requires strong application of the PARS -S element—strategy. Over time, these interactions build a sense of community and belonging that create a safe and welcoming space for learning to take place, increasing the likelihood that students will persist in completing their courses and their degrees.

Table 11.2. Using design to strengthen personal connections with students

The design of your online courses supports personal connection when you . . .	Practical tips:
Use document design to create an inviting, visually appealing space.	<p>Avoid forcing students to read long blocks of tiny text. Use short paragraphs with bold subheadings to label information and increase ease of reading.</p> <p>Include color and images that are appropriate to the course content; follow W3C accessibility guidelines for using colors and images (detailed at w3.org).</p>
Create engaging, multimodal, and customized course materials.	<p>Demonstrate the care and effort you have taken to choose course readings and activities by explaining why you chose those materials. What is unique or special about these materials? Why are they particularly good materials or activities for your students' needs?</p> <p>When possible, design personalized videos and handouts to explain assignments and help students succeed in completing assignments.</p> <p>Spell out details about how you expect tasks to be completed; make clear connections between tasks and the course's learning outcomes.</p>
Make courses easy to navigate.	<p>Create predictable, easy-to-find links to help students find course materials and complete tasks.</p> <p>Use the same organizational structure each week so that students learn where to look for key tasks.</p> <p>Post important deadlines and announcements in multiple places so that students can easily find them, even if they forget to look at every page in your shell or website.</p> <p>Double check your content for typos and due date errors; always check to make sure that key links are working and up to date.</p>

Our focus group participants told us that the sense of community in the department was vital to their success. “I would say that the first thing that comes

to mind when you ask about the Rhetoric and Writing Department is that we're a tightly knit community," said one participant. "I've developed a lot of friends through the program that I would have never even thought I would have had. It's just a very close community feeling, almost like a family." Another respondent echoed this sentiment, saying that a major factor in her satisfaction with the M.A. program was "feeling like you're part of something. The biggest thing I feel like I got out of this program was that I got this whole new group of people that I would have never met in a million years otherwise." Because of the clear interest that professors showed in their students, many of our alumni noted that their connections to the department community have been sustained long after graduation through personal visits, email, and social media.

Interacting with instructors was identified as essential to community building. One student commented that

The availability of the professors, the openness of all the professors [made me feel valued]. I didn't have a single professor that wouldn't take the time if you wanted to just stop . . . and talk, whether it was about the class or not. They would constantly interact. I think every one of them knew their students by their first name after just a couple of weeks, and it was a very interactive environment.

Yet another student added:

. . . by emailing my professors and asking questions for clarification, I started a relationship with them, and we began to communicate. And so now most of the professors that I've had . . . I wouldn't hesitate to email them and ask how they are doing . . . [W]e could have a conversation and it wouldn't be anything unusual.

These remarks show that students clearly value the time that their teachers invest in connecting with them. When they feel seen and appreciated by their instructors, they feel a sense of belonging in the writing course.

Research reinforces the importance of connection and community. Glazier and Skurat Harris (2020) found that when instructors were personable in online classes across the disciplines, retention in those online classes increased by 20–40%. Students in a high-rapport experimental condition were 20% more likely to self-report that they would stay in an online class after only 15 minutes of high-rapport activities.

Building a sense of community online requires two key components:

Developing a collaborative mentoring relationship between students and professors, in which the professors make an effort to get to know their students and also allow themselves to be known as people.

Creating opportunities for students to get to know one another and interact in ways that are enjoyable while also promoting social learning.

Rhonda emphasizes the importance of two-way collaboration between instructors and students in forging mentoring connections online:

Learning is a collaboration between instructor and student, and I learn best when I experience learning as a collaboration. While the student must want to learn and the instructor must want to teach for collaboration to work, it's important to me that the instructor wants to teach *me*, specifically. I need to see evidence of this in the written communications between myself and the instructor. This goes such a long way to making me feel like the instructor understands and appreciates why *I'm* in the class, what *my* goals are. This all boils down to my having confidence that the instructor is present in the online classroom and an equal partner in the learning experience.

Mentoring begins with asking students about their goals and then offering advice related to their goals. Expanding our teaching beyond generalized instruction to include personal mentoring encourages student confidence and persistence.

Instructors can foster mentoring connections by including course activities that help them get to know their students better. For example, including personal introduction icebreakers and getting-to-know-you questionnaires at the beginning of a course allows instructors to find out about students' writing and career goals. One of our focus group participants commented, "One thing that's really important with the online programs [at UALR] is all [my professors] specifically asked at the beginning what we were doing outside of our courses. Then they remembered that and brought that [to the classes they designed]."

As instructors learn about their students' interests and needs, to form a genuine connection, they must also reveal something of themselves. Rhonda observes:

To cultivate a trusting, constructive interpersonal relationship with me, instructors must also take risks; that is, they must be present and they must be *knowable*. Instructors who take the time to share personal details about themselves beyond the classroom creates positive vibes. Allowing themselves to be known, if only in some small way, humanizes the learning experience for me (Pacansky-Brock, n.d.). I'm suddenly not the only one taking risks. I believe this goes a long way in mitigating what can sometimes feel like an isolating experience.

Personal interaction with students can occur through a variety of mediums, including discussion forums, social media, email, asynchronous video, or syn-

chronous video conferencing. Teachers can share personal details, add photos, make videos, and respond politely to students, including giving prompt and friendly feedback on activities and assignments.

Discussion forums are particularly important, because they not only help instructors connect to students, they also help students connect to each other. They facilitate instructor-student connections because instructors can pose discussion questions that help them assess the class mood and see what students understand. Setting up an ask-anything discussion area creates a space for students to feel comfortable asking housekeeping questions and making comments (including pointing out broken links and asking about missing course materials when necessary).

Discussion forums offer spaces and prompts for students to interact directly with one another (Conceição & Lehman, 2016; Skurat Harris et al., 2016; Warrnock, 2009). Students can connect through conversation, activities, and assignments, including low-stakes collaborative assignments that gradually build toward higher stakes collaborations as their relationships and skills develop. “I’ve learned that I learn just as much from other students [as] I do from the actual coursework,” explained one focus group participant. Another described how genuinely interactive discussions were an important part of what made online courses enjoyable:

I love to go in and see what people have written about, you know, the video this week, and you get to know your classmates a little bit, and, “Oh, she’s always got something funny to say,” and “Oh, let’s look at this raccoon costume.” [Personal interaction produces] much, much, much more engagement with my peers and with the professors. You start to get like, favorite people on the discussion board, too. Like you just look for those people, “Oh, my favorite has posted. Let’s see.”

In the appendices for this chapter, Karen and Rhonda offer more extensive suggestions about how to structure discussions to make them genuinely interactive and enjoyable, rather than a chore that students and professors feel forced to endure. Table 11.3 summarizes our general recommendations on community building.

Making the Personal Sustainable Through Mentoring Faculty

We conclude this chapter by encouraging our colleagues to carry personal connections beyond the online classroom into the way we prepare and support online writing instructors. We want to challenge the view that mentoring online instructors is something that only happens one-on-one between the chair or WPA and an individual faculty member. Mentoring faculty, especially contingent faculty, should be viewed more as creating an inclusive communi-

ty. When most of the faculty teaches online, the community must necessarily have an online presence. One of the ways we have done this is through a departmental Facebook page where we post announcements about birthdays, faculty publications, student awards, and the work of alums in the world of work. The community should not, however, be entirely virtual. Faculty who teach online can become isolated and may therefore appreciate meeting F2F for training or celebrations. Community should also be conceived of as a set of shared values.

Table 11.3. Building community in online courses

Students feel they belong to a classroom community when you . . .	Practical tips:
Get to know your students as people and show interest in their goals.	Use icebreaker discussion activities or surveys that will help you get to know students early in the semester. Make yourself available for individual interaction with students and clearly communicate that availability. Use assignment responses, discussion responses, and one-on-one conversations as opportunities to mentor students, connecting class materials and activities to each student's personal and professional goals.
Create spaces that encourage students to ask questions, raise their own conversation topics, and have non-academic conversations.	Use open-ended discussion questions that allow students to present their own ideas, such as asking them to apply concepts from the reading to a situation in their own education or workplace. Include discussion spaces where students are regularly encouraged to ask questions about anything in the course. Provide opportunities for students to "shoot the breeze" in video chats or have "off topic" online discussions; give credit for discussion postings that promote social interaction and humor. Let students see your personality shine through in your discussion prompts and responses. Share information about personal hobbies, pets, or kids that will be relatable for students.
Structure discussion prompts and due dates to promote interaction among classmates.	Give students credit for responding to other student discussion posts. Consider moving student discussions to online environments that feel more friendly and personal by nature (for example, social media). For more detailed suggestions, see the appendices on structuring discussion assignments provided by Karen and Rhonda.

The department chair and WPA should pay attention to teacher burnout and stress, especially as teachers move from teaching F2F to online instruction. New online faculty may feel overwhelmed if they feel they have to adopt all these personalization strategies at once. Administrators can encourage faculty to have realistic goals for themselves as they make their classrooms more collaborative and community-focused, especially for first-time online instructors.

The best online courses and programs evolve as faculty and students become more comfortable engaging through digital spaces. The first time a teacher designs or teaches an online course, we recommend that they try one type of interaction that is comfortable for them and do it well. For example, the instructor might be involved in discussion boards, calling students by name, adding and directing conversations, and making announcements that include highlighting good ideas posted by students. In the next semester, the instructor might add small-group synchronous meetings or collaborative writing projects where students learn to use Google Docs (or another cloud-based drafting platform) to write collaboratively.

Just as students need mentoring and encouragement, instructors are more likely to support students if they feel supported. The culture of a department tends to develop top-down. The department chair and the WPA need to regularly talk with instructors about important values, such as student success, not just talk at faculty about the basic requirements for their online classes. They should emphasize sound learning principles rather than specific pedagogies. In other words, they need to speak about the importance of instructor presence while allowing instructors a wide variety of techniques for building presence into their courses. In the appendices to this chapter, Heidi and George describe how our department helped to support online faculty by offering monthly “Tech Jam” workshops that helped voluntary participants develop new skills without drowning them in prescriptive precepts.

Administrators (deans, chairs, and WPAs) need to ensure instructors have adequate resources—both hardware and software. For hybrid and hyflex classes, this will include classroom space that has web cameras—following best practice guidelines that classes be as accessible as possible to as many as possible (the PARS A-element). Administrators should also schedule training sessions in online pedagogy and new technology that go beyond the traditional institutional LMS training.

Finally, instructors will value mentoring students more if their work is recognized in annual evaluations and tenure/promotion decisions. For contingent faculty, encouraging connection and community building can be the center of their reappointment, and successful, student-centered innovation in online learning can be rewarded (Mechenbier, 2015).

We hope that our research will be valuable beyond our department as other departments establish and sustain online classes and programs. Not every instructor will have as much flexibility as we do, and not every student will be as well-versed in online learning as our students tend to be. But implementing any of the above recommendations can help build a strong community and support fully-online students and instructors.

Table 11.4. Taking a personal approach to supporting online faculty

Department chairs and WPAs can support their online writing instructors when they . . .	Practical tips:
Create opportunities for online instructors to interact as a community, both virtually and face-to-face.	Use social media or other online platforms to create group spaces for sharing announcements, accomplishments, birthday greetings, etc. Hold periodic non-mandatory gatherings on campus and/or video meetings for celebrations, professional development, or sharing pedagogy ideas and technology tips (see Appendix C for a detailed example from Heidi and George).
Mentor online faculty to help them develop realistic goals and avoid burnout.	Encourage faculty to develop the personalized aspects of their online courses gradually, rather than taking on too many time-consuming tasks immediately. Suggest that faculty add one new personal or interactive component per semester, giving them time to assess and tweak how each component works for them.
Ensure that faculty have access to resources that support online teaching.	Purchase hardware and software that support effective online teaching and personalization of online courses, including webcams. Provide technology training beyond simply learning the features of the LMS. Discuss sound learning principles and core department values, including student success.
Ensure that the work of online course development and instruction is recognized and rewarded.	Recognize online course development and instruction in annual evaluations and tenure/promotion decisions. Include effective online community building as a criterion for reappointing contingent faculty. Establish awards to recognize and celebrate innovations in personalized online instruction.

Final Thoughts and Application

If you take only three things away from this chapter, they are

- Students engage better in authentic experiences, so design for authenticity.
- Any writing is writing, so design for writing.
- Acts of personal connection facilitate acts of personal connection, so design for personal connection.

Design for authenticity: Design intentionally so that your online writing course feels authentic. Be on the lookout for opportunities to identify any gaps students may have in their writing (see Appendix B) Provide personalized, au-

thentic feedback that facilitates personal connection (-P). Be accessible to your students (-A) and respond quickly and thoughtfully to their concerns (-R). And remember—none of this happens by magic—it takes strategy (-S).

Design for writing: In the online writing class students need to be engaged. Create opportunities for students to write beyond major assignments. Keep in mind that any writing is writing. You can, for example, set up engaging, low-stakes discussions that facilitate instructor-student and student-student personal connection (-P). Experiment with other platforms that lend themselves to variation in engagement and multiple modes of engagement. Find one that works for your teaching style (-S). (See Appendix A.)

Design for personal connection: Instructors are people, too—and like students, instructors also want to feel noticed, valued, and supported. Creating personal connection (-P) extends to connections WPAs make with writing instructors. Set an example: Personally connect with instructors and help them personally connect with their writing students. Be accessible to instructors (-A) and responsive to their needs (-R). And now more than ever, create ways to identify instructor burnout and stress (-S). (See Appendix C.)

References

- Borgman, J., & McArdle, C. (2019). *Personal, accessible, responsive, strategic: Resources and strategies for online writing instructors*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PRA-B.2019.0322>
- Conceição, S. C. O., & Lehman, R. M. (2016). Students' perceptions about online support services: Institutional, instructional, and self-care implications. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 15(4), 433-443.
- Glazier, R., & Skurat Harris, H. (n.d.). How teaching with rapport can improve online student success and retention: Data from two empirical studies. [Manuscript submitted for publication].
- Greer, M., & Skurat Harris, H. (2018). User-centered design as a foundation for effective online writing instruction. *Computers and Composition*, 49, 14-24.
- Mechenbier, M. (2015). Contingent faculty and OWI. In B. L. Hewett & K. E. DePew (Eds.), *Foundational practices of online writing instruction* (pp. 227-249). The WAC Clearinghouse; Parlor Press. <https://doi.org/10.37514/PER-B.2015.0650.2.07>
- Pacansky-Brock, M. (n.d.). *Humanizing*. Michelle Pacansky-Brock. <https://Brocan-sky.Com/Humanizing>
- Ruefman, D. (2016). Return to your source: Aesthetic experience in online writing instruction. In D. Ruefman & A. Scheg (Eds.), *Applied pedagogies: Strategies for online writing instruction* (pp. 3-16). Utah State University Press.
- Skurat Harris, H., & Greer, M. (2016). Over, under, or through: Design strategies to supplement the LMS and enhance interaction in online writing courses. *Communication Design Quarterly*, 4(4), 46.
- Skurat Harris, H., Melonçon, L., Hewett, B., Mechenbier, M. X., & Martinez, D. (2019). A call for purposeful pedagogy-driven course design in OWI. *Research in*

Online Literacy Education, 2(1). <http://www.roleolor.org/a-call-for-purposeful-pedagogy-driven-course-design-in-owi.html>

Skurat Harris, H., Nier-Weber, D., & Borgman, J. (2016). When the distance is not distant: Using minimalist design to maximize interaction in online writing courses and improve faculty professional development. In D. Ruefman & A. Scheg (Eds.), *Applied pedagogies: Strategies for online writing instruction* (pp. 17-36). Utah State University Press.

Warnock, S. (2009). *Teaching writing online: How and why*. National Council of Teachers of English.

Warnock, S., & Gasiewski, D. (2018). *Writing together: Ten weeks teaching and studenting in an online writing course*. National Council of Teachers of English.

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by Design*. Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

Appendix A. Karen's Tip for Personal Discussions

Create more conversational, interactive, and personal discussion assignments using social media.

When I first started teaching online, my courses weren't always as interactive as I wanted them to be, partly because I developed a syndrome I now refer to as "discussion board dread."

I spent lots of time each semester trying to brainstorm creative and engaging topics and prompts for my discussion boards, and I began the semester with fresh energy. I was determined that this semester, I would finally keep up with all the discussion postings and make a point of interacting with every student. But invariably, that energy flagged out after the first four weeks, for both me and the students. Posts I meant to answer but hadn't would accumulate to the point that I dreaded the hours it would take to catch up. Students rarely responded to one another's posts. Interaction slowly but surely died out.

We didn't lose energy because the students didn't have interesting things to say, or that they weren't producing good writing. I could tell they put a lot of thought into their lengthy analytical posts. But because students needed so much reading and thinking time, they usually posted their responses late in the week. No one else in the class had time to read and answer: they were busy producing their own posts. When the following week rolled around, we were all ready to shift our attention to the new material; few of us had the energy to go back and look at the previous week's posts, much less write responses. My discussion boards turned into monologues, not the dialogues I'd intended.

I always wished my class discussions could be more like the social media conversations I saw my students having on platforms like Facebook. On Facebook, you could hear their personalities in the way they wrote. There was much more personal writing, even when they addressed intellectual topics, and much less tortured academic prose. There were memes and jokes and pictures of people's dogs. I enjoyed reading Facebook, and I did not enjoy reading my Blackboard

discussions. Why couldn't my discussions be more like Facebook?

In summer 2018, I was scheduled to teach a new topics course in Writing for Social Media—and at the same time, I decided there would never be a better time to try moving my discussion boards out of Blackboard and onto Facebook. I created a private group for the Writing for Social Media class so that students could have a space that was ours alone; they didn't have to interact with the rest of Facebook at all if they didn't want to. Our class made the leap to social media that semester, and the quality of our discussions improved dramatically.

Personal interaction increased immediately, both between me and the students and among the students themselves. Part of the improvement could be attributed to the platform amenities: students got automatic notifications when someone posted to the group, as well as notifications when someone responded to their postings. (This was a big improvement over Blackboard, where people had to remember to subscribe to threads to get email notifications when someone posted.) Facebook's mobile app was also more user friendly than Blackboard's, so moving discussions to Facebook made it easier for students to participate from their phones.

But improved interaction also came from the different conventions of social media. Student postings became less formal, less lengthy, and more conversational. The students and I used a broader range of personalization strategies in our posts, including photos, gifs, memes, emojis, videos, and web links—which created that feeling of variation and multimodality that students in our focus groups noted was important to engagement. Facebook made it easy for us to react to each other's posts, which gave us a way to show we had seen each other right away, even if we didn't post a comment right away—a reinforcing strategy that made many of us feel more seen and valued. For those of us who had already been active on Facebook recreationally, it made interacting with the class much more convenient. We were already there, and it didn't take much effort to respond, so many of us (myself included) were much more present in the class than we had been in other online classes.

These results were not universal, it should be noted. Students who had never been on social media or who actively didn't like social media did not embrace the class Facebook group with uniform enthusiasm. However, feedback from student evaluations suggested that over 75% of students who commented on the experience preferred interacting on Facebook to interacting on Blackboard; they felt it did increase their sense of personalization and connection in the course. I have since shifted all of my online discussions to private Facebook groups with no regrets.

Appendix B. Rhonda's Tip for Helping Students Get to Know Their Writer-Selves

Encourage stimulating, low-stakes, student-student discussions where the instructor is a participant, not a moderator.

Warnock (2009) argues that “[w]e, as writing teachers, are highly empowered in this environment to help channel the natural writing that students are doing anyway into a class experience” (p. 180). I will add to this that, to get better at writing, students need to be writing (and, of course, reading). The discussion forum lends itself well to both activities. As soon as students step into the discussion forum space, they are writing and they are reading (and, in the process, narrowing any gaps they may have in habit or skill in this area).

The main point I’m making here runs parallel with a pet peeve I once had with discussion forum participation; that I put a lot of work into a post and no one reads it—or, at the very least, they only scan-read it. Warnock has a low-stakes exercise that I feel gives respect to the hard work and thought students put into their posts: He has students look back at their peer’s posts from previous weeks and has them pick one out to critique. I think this is a brilliant idea: It creates a kind of extrinsic motivator for students to put more into their posts—knowing their classmates will be looking back at and scrutinizing them.

I believe for a student to grow as a writer, reader, and critical thinker, the organization of the self must be challenged and this is precisely what happens in a discussion forum. It’s easy to convince ourselves we have this or that figured out when sitting in safe, unchallenging environments of our own design—environments that we control. It is when we step out and into a space where the ideas of others have equal merit that we learn and grow. The discussion forum is an idea platform for students to get practice writing, test their ideas, and learn to have productive conversations with peers.

Appendix C. Heidi’s Tip for Fostering Community and Conversation about Online Learning at Faculty “Tech Jam” Fridays

Bring instructors together to build community and learn best practices for online teaching.

We are fortunate to have small, tech-savvy faculty in our department. When I was hired in 2013, one of my favorite activities was to talk about online classes, to see other’s classes, and to share teaching tips with those colleagues.

A few years ago, our department began hosting “Tech Jam” Fridays. Once a month, typically before our monthly departmental meeting, some of the faculty brought their lunches and met in our Critical Rhetorics and User Experience (CRUX) lab. The Tech Jams were designed as informal spaces where Rhetoric and Writing faculty could demonstrate different tools they used in their online classrooms. Generally, one person who was pre-selected would start off with a particular tip or tool that s/he used. Then, the floor was open to anyone else who wanted to share. The meetings were not restricted to full-time

faculty, anyone who taught in our program could feel free to attend and share, and our remote instructors would come in via Zoom to present their ideas and listen to others.

Tech Jams were very popular for a few reasons. First, they were offered at a time that was generally convenient and easy to remember. Department meetings were held in the same space, so faculty could come, camp out for a few hours, and talk to each other.

Second, they were largely unstructured. A person would start the jam, and then others would join in and share as they wanted. It was less like a formal tech training and more a tech sharing—less like Catholic Mass and more like a Quaker meeting. No one was required to share, but some people shared every meeting.

Third, the ideas shared helped to make our program more consistent and streamlined. If someone demonstrated a new way to use Google Sheets to grade discussion forums, others could do the same and the students would have a consistent experience across classes without top-down mandates.

Tech Jams were opportunities to learn new ways to teach online that were proven to work with our students. However, perhaps more importantly, these sessions developed community and connection with colleagues who were mostly teaching online and didn't see each other as often as they would in traditional faculty positions. Tech Jams allowed us to maintain our departmental community and become better online teachers.

Appendix D. Screenshots of an Intentionally Designed Online Class

This course, taught by Heidi Skurat Harris at UALR, demonstrates how to create student-friendly course spaces. Figure 11.1 shows the course schedule, which includes links to the course website in the first column, links to readings and materials in the second column, a list of assignments (numbered by week and assignment number) in the third column, and the due dates in the final column. Students can—and have—used this schedule as the primary way of navigating their online course. However, they can also navigate the course by clicking links to course materials sent in the weekly welcome announcement (via Gmail), through Blackboard, or through the course webpage.

Figure 11.2 is the landing page for the course shown in Figure 11.1. It showcases the use of color and white spacing for emphasis, includes a photo of the instructor, and gives directions for getting started with the class, including a welcome video that walks students through the features of the course and helps them understand how the course navigation works.

**University of Arkansas at Little Rock --- RHET 7373: Writing for Online Instruction
Spring 2018 Course Schedule**

This schedule is subject to change at the professor’s discretion. **All work is due by 11:59 p.m. CST on the deadlines indicated (unless otherwise specified).** Note: Central Time (US) is the working time zone for the class.

Readings **MUST** be read in order to effectively complete discussions and assignments.

Week	Readings/Learning Materials	Assignments	Due Dates
Introductory Materials	Syllabus Course Website Major Project Assignment Description	0.1 View Welcome Video 0.2 Review Syllabus and Course Schedule 0.3 Review Major Project Assignment Description	ASAP
Week One: January 16 - 21 Learning to Read and Write	Week One Workbook: Introduction to Writing for Online Instruction (Your personal copy shared with you through your UALR email account. Create a folder in your Google Drive where you can save this document for easy reference.)	1.1 Discussion Board: Learning to Read and Write	1.1 initial post by Friday, January 19. Discussion concludes Sunday, January 21.
		1.2 Workbook Activities: Week One	1.2 complete by Sunday, January 21. You do not need to share this with Dr. Harris because she will already have access to your copy.
		1.3 OWI Self-Assessment Grid	1.3 complete by Sunday, January 21.


Figure 11.1. Example of a weekly schedule in a writing for online instruction course.

RHET 7373: Writing for Online Instruction

Welcome to RHET 7373: Writing for Online Instruction! My name is Dr. Heidi Skurat Harris, and I will be your instructor for the course.

This course will prepare you for writing instructional materials, assignments, and video scripts for online instruction, whether that course be at the university or in corporate training or other online instructional environments.

In order to write effective online instructional materials, we will start with a focus on how reading works.



To Get Started in this Online Course

Watch the video welcome to our online course. The video contains specific instructions that will help you set up your learning environment to prepare for this online course.




Figure 11.2. Homepage of Google Site for the writing for online instruction course.