Keep Your Focus!

All golfers get training, whether it's working with a golfing coach regularly, taking lessons occasionally, or having a full-out caddie and golf coach like professional golfers do; everyone needs training to hone their skills.

Online writing instruction design and facilitation is no exception. Over the past decade, preparation and training have continued to be an issue facing OWI at institutions across the country. What we like about Bethany Mannon's chapter is that she has laid out a clear, replicable, and holistic training course for new and existing online writing instructors. Her use of the hyperdoc to keep the training organized is innovative, and we really like how she focuses on ongoing professional development for her staff.

Chapter 8. Transitioning Online Writing Instruction from Crisis to Sustainability

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Abstract: This chapter advocates for online writing instruction (OWI) training that responds to the specific needs of a writing program, grows out of faculty perspectives, and aims to create a sustainable approach to online teaching. To make this case, I outline how I implemented such an approach at Appalachian State University. Part I describes a place-based study of rhetoric and composition (RC) faculty who launched online writing courses at App State in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews aimed to understand how faculty perceive student growth and achievement in OWI and how our RC program should train and support faculty teaching these classes. Part II describes four professional development modules to support future OWI instruction that I developed following those interviews. I also share results of a pilot in which twelve OWI faculty completed the modules and assessed their effectiveness. Part III proposes implications of this research for other writing program administrators (WPAs). I contend that professional development, assessment, and writing curricula grounded in program self-study serve the needs of faculty and support effective instruction.

Keywords: online first-year writing, writing program administration, faculty perspectives, writing pedagogy, professional development, assessment

Historically, my rhetoric and composition (RC) program resisted teaching first-year writing online. When I joined Appalachian State University in 2018, writing faculty and writing program administrators (WPAs) worried that online spaces would not allow collaboration and connection among students and faculty, and therefore would not support effective teaching. Moreover, they saw little student or faculty interest in online first-year writing (OFYW). When we all converted our courses to synchronous or asynchronous online modalities in spring 2020, we viewed this shift as a short-term response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, student and faculty demand for OFYW persisted that semester and beyond. As faculty discovered that online teaching actually suited them quite well, and as students flocked to online sections, we as a program saw a call to assess our established practices and envision a new direction for our future.

This rapid shift to online instruction caused an interruption and an opportunity to research the factors that support faculty and student success in online writing classes (OWCs). The research I describe in this chapter was initially a response to a global health crisis, but our questions about online writing instruction

(OWI) matter beyond that context. Natural disasters or regional emergencies are possible, even likely, to interrupt face-to-face course delivery in the future. We saw this happen in 2019 when a hurricane caused flooding that closed another campus in our state for several months. Even more important, though, our shift online propelled critical self-reflection from our teachers and program-wide conversations. As Phoebe Jackson and Christopher Weaver (2018) argue in the introduction to *Writing in Online Courses*, "the online environment calls into question the 'givens' of the traditional classroom and opens them up for interrogation and analysis" (p. xviii). Our RC program saw a need for ongoing professional development and an intentional, sustainable approach to OWI that would be personal, accessible, responsive, and strategic. We envisioned a time when faculty could instead elect to teach in this modality because of its advantages in pedagogical and work-life balance. They could thoughtfully design their OWCs rather than adapting their materials with short notice.

This chapter describes a self-study of the online pedagogy and curriculum in the RC program I direct. This project has two takeaways for readers. First, it will provide WPAs, especially new ones like myself, with a model for studying OWI and building professional development in their programs that can then equip them to advocate for program self-direction. Second, it brings attention to faculty experiences and perspectives, important sources of insight into OWI. I contend that professional development, assessment, and writing curricula can best serve the needs of faculty and support effective OWI when they are grounded in faculty experience.

Theory and Practice

In fall 2020, I designed a place-based study of RC faculty who launched online writing courses at Appalachian State University that semester. This project responded to our program's need for an OFYW curriculum, but my own goals as a teacher and WPA motivated the study and shaped its design too. Unlike many of my colleagues, my prior experience had convinced me that these courses could be fruitful for faculty and students. At previous institutions (including the university that Stuart Selber, Daniel Tripp, and Leslie Mateer describe in their chapter in this collection-chapter 5), I had seen online students collaborate with each other enthusiastically, thrive through one-on-one interaction with me, and connect with our material in ways that were personally meaningful and academically rigorous (Mannon, 2019). I sang the praises of OWI to anyone who would listen.

As I planned this study, I sought to align the research with my professional goals. I was in my first semester as the director of composition (and in my first year on the tenure track), and I wanted opportunities to get to know my fellow teachers. As a relative newbie to the WPA role, I hesitated to move forward with my agenda—convincing the RC program that OWI can be great for teachers and students—without first learning what my colleagues thought of online teaching.

I also wanted to start involving undergraduates in research. I pictured a study of online teaching as a project to which undergraduates could contribute in authentic and integral ways.

Along with my own perspective and goals, two questions steered this study:

1. How do faculty perceive student growth and achievement in online first-year writing?
2. How can our writing program effectively train and support faculty in OWI?

I focus on faculty perceptions of student learning, though there are certainly other productive ways to frame study of OWI. For example, scholars have considered how the online environment affects writing and learning (Bourelle et al.,2016; Jackson & Weaver, 2018) or students' self-assessments of their own learning (Boyd, 2008; Litterio, 2018). Others have described course designs that facilitate student participation and community (Borgman & McArdle, 2019; Mannon, 2019), and the field has established effective practices for course design and implementation (CCCC OWI Committee, 2013). While features of the online environment and student perceptions of the online modality do come up in my research—because faculty mentioned them—I prioritized faculty perspectives and experiences. What did they see happening in their classes?

To explore how faculty implement best practices and their perceptions of student learning online, I interviewed 17 faculty members who had taught a full semester of OFYW during fall 2020. Some were teaching online for only the first or second time. Others had years or semesters of OWI experience but were, of course, responding to students' evolving needs. Broadly, my goal was to understand their experiences so I could make that information the basis of our professional development and curriculum going forward.

We asked our interviewees the following questions, which we provided in advance:

> In your OFYW courses, where did you see students growing as writers meeting course goals and outcomes? List as many areas as you want.
> - Did that growth happen at particular points in the semester or throughout?
> - What aspects of the course were challenging for students? List as many as you want.
> - Did they encounter that difficulty at particular points in the semester or throughout?
> - Which assignments did your OFYW include?
> - Did you feel you could connect with students successfully?

- Were there times in your OFYW course when your teaching was particularly effective?
- Which parts of the course were challenging for you to teach?

In your online courses, did you observe any differences in how students met course goals and outcomes compared to face-to-face classes?

For first-time teachers: what was it like for your first semester to be online?

In the future, when you can choose between face-to-face, hybrid, or fully online courses, what experiences from this fall will help you make that decision and design that course?

These interviews balanced open-ended questions with focused or directive ones, a balance designed to elicit both concrete information and narrative responses.

I say "we" as I talk about this research design, and that "we" includes three talented undergraduate researchers. Ali and Elliot completed human subjects training and then scheduled interviews, interviewed faculty, checked transcripts, and helped code our data to identify where faculty experienced successes and struggles. A third undergraduate, Georgia, had assisted me with interview-based research in the past. I asked her to join this study to train our new researchers in interviewing and coding. In fact, I designed the study around interviews, rather than class observations or assessments of student writing, because undergraduate researchers could contribute to this stage even as they were honing their interview skills. I would recommend a similar design to other faculty planning to study OWI.

These interviews provided the major findings I would go on to use in professional development. Initially, we coded deductively using the *Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction* (2013). We turned each principle into a code and noted where speakers alluded directly or indirectly to the principle, and what they said about it. We initially planned to do two "passes" through the transcripts, with two researchers checking each other's work (Saldaña, 2013). However, we noticed that the codes based on *Effective Practices* overlooked the most interesting parts of our interviews. These codes did not, in practice, help us understand the challenges and successes our faculty encountered.

This bump in the research process actually redirected us to analysis that aligned more closely with the PARS principles than with the CCCC statement. We switched gears to re-code inductively based on the important or recurring points we found in the interviews. Those codes included the following:

discussion, technology, flexibility, community, connection, judgment, feedback, essential knowledge, student engagement, peer review, course structure, writing as a process, reflection, inclusion, and planning. This was a helpful and necessary shift away from program structure and toward the PARS focus on faculty practices and course design.

Reading and coding these interview transcripts revealed the following trends in faculty experiences with OWI:

- Faculty rarely observe spontaneous moments of enthusiastic discussion or exploration of ideas. That is, they rarely felt the lively, surprising environment of a face-to-face classroom at its best. However, an intentional, even scripted style of teaching that suited online modalities could still support discussion and exploration.
- Our faculty like teaching online! They find it fits their teaching style and allows work-life balance, which is especially valuable for some non-tenure-track lecturers teaching four (or more) sections.
- Faculty hypothesized that the online environment has advantages for student learning. In their experiences, students felt autonomy and ownership over their writing, and they transferred skills from low-stakes writing to high-stakes writing more readily than in face-to-face classes. One instructor reported that students participated in discussions of power, privilege, and social justice more openly in online discussion boards than they had done in face-to-face classroom spaces.
- Faculty developed multiple, varied, largely successful strategies to make their courses personal and collaborative.

These findings are surely just the tip of the iceberg. The advantages to students and faculty (points 2 and 3) are particularly pertinent to research, course design, and professional development, and merit follow-up in a future article.

With these initial findings in mind, with funding from a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Emergent Researcher grant, and with mentoring from Casey McArdle and Jessie Borgman, I created professional development modules to support OWI. I aimed to create a training that would a) meet a gap in the online instruction landscape, b) fit a community with a wide range of interests, preparation, and availability, and c) respond to the experiences and material constraints of our program. I discuss each of these goals in the following sections.

Meet a Gap in the Online Instruction Landscape

Several of our faculty had participated in in-depth, months-long (and sometimes expensive) training for online teaching that came from national organizations or our state university system. Others had completed professional development on campus. My colleagues and I knew these trainings were available, but we saw drawbacks in each one. Only rarely did these workshops focus specifically on OWI;

more often, they reviewed technology or guided participants in thinking about on-line teaching apart from the content or pedagogy of their discipline. The existing on-campus trainings tended to be one-off events lasting an hour or an afternoon. To address this gap in the OWI professional development landscape, I envisioned a sequence of modules that would ask participants to think about teaching writing and develop materials rooted in the PARS philosophy—and do so over a timeline of weeks. My review of research in the field and my conversations with Jessie and Casey confirmed that I wouldn't be "reinventing the wheel" with this design.

Be Flexible Enough for Faculty with a Wide Range of Interests, Experiences, and Available Time

My interviews showed me that some faculty would have time and energy to delve into effective online pedagogy; others would complete readings and activities in the slivers of time between their responsibilities as teachers and caregivers. This training needed to be explicitly useful and customizable, responsive to the fact that future participants might have previous experience (both positive and negative) and training.

Reflect the Experiences of our Faculty and Material Constraints of our Program

When I embarked on this study in fall 2020, my RC program had already done professional development and self-study around diversity, equity, and inclusion. Workshops by our own faculty and external speakers had explored alternative assessment and other ways of moving away from syllabi based on standard academic English. Many of our faculty had built social justice and rhetorical ethics into their classes, and I hoped that an OWI training could reflect that work and add to those conversations.

This training was also motivated by a desire to maintain RC program autonomy in the areas of curriculum, qualifications, and professional development. In fall 2020, our campus had no required qualifications to teach online courses. At the same time, communication from campus and system administration expressed concern about the quality of online courses and told us that students wanted to be back in the classroom (these concerns were vague and had unclear foundations, as our faculty senate pointed out). I hoped developing an in-house OWI training could help us get ahead of any top-down requirements for or limits on online teaching. Fortunately, such limits never materialized, as I will discuss in my next section, but this research did help keep some of our autonomy.

Based on my goal of a flexible, responsive OWI training, I created a hyperdoc divided into four "detachable" modules (see Figure 8.1). Faculty could complete them in or out of sequence, together or individually, according to their needs and preferences.

Online Writing Instruction for Expository Writing & Writing Across the Curriculum at Appalachian State		
Introduction Welcome to OWI Training in the App State RC program! 1 hour	Using this hyperdoc: Over these four modules you'll discuss key concepts for teaching online and create materials for your online writing courses. We'll have a mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities focused on: • Thoughtful online course design • Adapting RC course goals for an online modality • Inclusive online teaching • Effective writing assignments We'll start by introducing ourselves to our colleagues and thinking about how we'll introduce ourselves to online students.	
	Create: Instructor information and bio	Readings & Resources: App State Vertical Writing Model
Module 1: Course Design (synchronous) Goals & Outcomes 4-6 hrs., depending on prior experience	Activities: Reflect on experience & knowledge and set goals for this training Participate in 1 hr. synchronous Zoom discussion of instructor backgrounds and PARS model Create: Online writing course syllabus	Readings & Resources: PARS Model Overview "Hybrid and Fully Online OWI" from Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction Learn more (optional): Access and Design in the Online Writing Classroom OWI Effective Practices & Principles
Module 2: RC Course Goals (asynchronous) Goals & Outcomes 4 hours	Activities: Discussion forum: Pedagogical tools Workshop: Provide feedback on your team's syllabi Reflect: Impressions of synchronous and asynchronous learning, team-based discussions Create: Informal assignment	Readings & Resources: "Beyond the Discussion Board" - Kevin De Pew Kevin's ignite talk handout Kevin's ignite talk slides "Cohort-based Discussion Forums" Research findings: Building Community in Online Courses
Module 3: Accessibility & Anti-racist Pedagogy (synchronous) Goals & Outcomes 2-3 hours	Activities: Collaborative reading: Performing Antiracist Pedagogy 1 hr. synchronous discussion of inclusive, antiracist writing pedagogy online	Readings & Resources: Performing Antiracist Pedagogy Research findings: Inclusive Teaching Online "Antiracist Practice in the Online Writing Classroom" - Jude Miller Jude's ignite talk handout Jude's ignite talk slides

Online Writing Instruction for Expository Writing & Writing Across the Curriculum at Appalachian State		
Module 4: Assignments & Syllabi (asynchronous) Goals & Outcomes 3-4 hours	Create: Formal Assignment 1 Activities: Discuss: Explore an assignment from a colleague's course Reflect: How effective is your own assignment?	Readings & Resources: Assignment Gallery Syllabus Gallery Spreadsheet: Assignments you can reference and App State resources you should know
Going Forward	Research Cohort: Feedback on Modules Mid-Semester Check-in End-of-Semester Check-in	Readings & Resources: Meet RC Course Coordinators

Figure 8.1. Online writing instruction hyperdoc.

I piloted this training in December 2021 and January 2022 in order to assess its effectiveness and offer professional development to interested faculty. A cohort of 12 full- and part-time RC lecturers completed the modules and provided anonymous feedback on the format, activities, and resources immediately after finishing. They gave feedback again in May 2022 after teaching a full semester of OWI and implementing ideas from the training. Here are their assessments of the training, which might be helpful for fellow administrators looking to create OWI professional development:

1. The training was relevant and "good at covering the basics," as one respondent put it. However, another stated that the modules made the most sense for people new to online teaching. Others seemed to agree, based on their requests for more readings on innovative practices and activities to encourage critical thinking about teaching.
2. Participants liked Modules 2 and 4, in which they created and shared syllabi, assignments, and activities. They confirmed what I had anticipated: that creating and workshopping immediately useful course materials would make this training responsive to the limited time and possibly extensive prior experience of faculty.
3. Similarly, participants liked the easy-to-navigate hyperdoc. "The design was visually easy to see the workload," one reported. Others expressed interest in using our learning management system (LMS) rather than Google Docs and folders. I had purposely avoided incorporating the LMS because new faculty are sometimes unable to access it right after they're hired. I will make this consideration explicit for future cohorts, and I take those participants' point about using dynamic online spaces.

4. Finally, participants commented on the limited interactivity of the training. I designed modules to give participants a feel for asynchronous and synchronous activities, Zoom conversations and discussion boards, and the roles of both teacher and student. To facilitate discussions and feedback on materials, I placed participants in teams of four; several responded positively to this format.

The majority of participants asked for more interaction between participants and with the facilitator (me, in this case). One reported that "Others didn't participate as much, from burnout, which made some assignments hard to complete." They offered specific recommendations for increased interaction: more small group activities, opportunities to see one another's LMS sites, and opportunities to continue connecting with their small group cohorts after the training is over. One participant shared that they would like to learn more about others' passions.

These assessments of the training modules made me rethink my initial goals. Does our professional development aim to ensure a certain level of quality teaching? Create community? Think creatively and innovate course materials? My "a bit of all of the above" approach led to limited interaction among this cohort and limited engagement with new, innovative ideas. As an online teacher, I discovered that cultivating community and collaboration at times has more value than covering content. I see a parallel with faculty development. My next step is to fine-tune this training for a target audience of knowledgeable teachers looking to connect and collaborate with one another.

These interviews and pilot training suggest a future direction for OWI at Appalachian State. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, we are invested in teaching online because of the clear benefits to faculty and to students. I met my goal of getting to know the program, and I found that faculty had already seen that OWI could be successful and rewarding. However, the interviews and pilot ultimately showed me how additional steps could continue to create a sustainable OWI curriculum:

1. Assessment of student writing could put interview findings in conversation with concrete observations about student learning in OFYW. In May 2022, five faculty who had done interviews joined me in reading portfolios from online sections and evaluating how they met course goals and outcomes. We returned to a longstanding question in OWI research—assessing student learning—with an explicit interest in how those findings align with or diverge from faculty experiences and perceptions.

2. We are ready for pointed discussions about our online identity and qualifications to teach online. In spring 2023, a team of online teachers is meeting biweekly to have these conversations, mediated by a longtime friend of the program in the university's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning for Student Success.

Conclusion and Takeaways

My research showed that when we moved online faculty responded to complex challenges in creative and thoughtful ways that reshaped our writing program. They became more intentional in creating opportunities for students to bring their personal selves to their writing, and more attuned to student autonomy and voice. They considered the elements of their online course design and, in many cases, became more conscious of the personal challenges and circumstances that affected students' work in OFYW. These faculty members elected to teach online out of necessity, not preference. However, they had a more positive experience of online teaching than existing research led me to expect, perhaps because of the autonomy and support in our program.

The study and pilot presented in this chapter have three implications for WPAs. First, I offer a model for WPAs looking to study and guide OWI in their programs. Fellow WPAs are welcome to consult or borrow from the modules (the hyperdoc) that I share. I hope they also push back against my approach to design and implement professional development that reflects the specific needs of their programs and advances in OWI and writing studies—especially as these fields expand their consideration of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in online courses.

Second, this research helped our program advocate for online courses when administration urged us to go back to exclusively face-to face classes. While top-down requirements for qualifications to teach online never arose, RC had to defend our right to decide how many online and hybrid FYW courses we offer. A fellow WPA and I successfully made this case by pointing to my external grant from CCCC, our research, and our in-house professional development. Assessing student writing and pairing those findings with faculty perspectives will help us to continue making a strong case for offering a number of composition sections online.

I continue to advocate for including faculty perspectives in OWI research. Whether that research takes place in internal self-studies or in data collection for outward-facing articles, it should inquire into faculty experiences and perceptions of student learning. Faculty have deep knowledge of strategies to minimize the obstacles to connection and collaboration, and their experiences help WPA researchers place these pedagogical strategies in the reality of instructors' lives. I am thinking particularly of the intense and growing demands of responding to first-year students who come to us with heightened mental health issues and spotty writing, reading, and thinking skills after multiple semesters of high school online. At many universities, faculty knowledge is rarely included in making decisions and policies for online courses. OWI research can avoid making that same oversight and instead tap into one of our richest sources of insight about the online writing classroom.

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