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**MEETING STUDENT, INSTRUCTOR, AND INSTITUTIONAL EXPECTATIONS IN  
ONLINE WRITING COURSES**

by

**EMILY PROULX**  
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2014

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Writing & Rhetoric  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

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Major Professor: Stephanie Vie

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research in online writing instruction often focuses on student perceptions of learning and best practices of online pedagogy (Boyd, 2008; Dziuban, Moska, Kramer, & Thompson, 2013; Hewett & Warnock, 2015; Pigg & Morrison, 2016; Roby, Ashe, Singh, & Clark, 2013; Warnock, 2009). At the University of Central Florida, online learning research is especially important due to the increasing volume of both online and hybrid courses across the university (which is itself in response to increasing numbers of students enrolling but limited classroom space with which to teach). The current push from many university administrators for increased enrollment in online classes focuses on access and convenience; however, there is not as much of a conversation asking if the learning in the class is affected by the online course, or the different avenues for learning that these courses present. In this study, I noted that while scholarship discussed students', teachers', and institutions' roles in online courses, there was a lack of alignment in those areas.

To investigate this lack of alignment, I interviewed four students enrolled in online courses and three instructors currently teaching online courses through the Department of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Central Florida. Through a grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I identified areas of agreement and dissonance in both the creation of and implementation of online courses. Overall, students and instructors seemed to focus both their positive and negative perceptions and expectations around discussions as sites of learning, expectations of time/effort, feedback, and classroom community. These are common sites of benefits and disadvantages of online writing courses, which make this investigation important to the continuing conversation of how we better align our perceptions and expectations to improve student learning in online writing courses.

The conclusions from this study address the importance and difficulty of transparency in online courses and the need for consistency across the institution, the instructors, and the students. This research provides suggestions for implementing the findings of this research at the classroom and department levels.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

With a population of over 60,000 students, many of whom are taking classes out of state, and with classroom space at a premium, the University of Central Florida (UCF)—the research site of this study—is very familiar with online courses. Further competition for student enrollment among state universities has resulted in UCF’s focus on innovative technology use: it provides more than 60 online degree options to draw even more students to the institution. UCF is not unique in facing these pressures. Writing departments nationwide cannot escape the demand to offer online courses, as both students that are distance learners as well as traditional students find the convenience of online courses appealing.

Increased enrollment in online writing courses has encouraged many scholars to make these courses their sites of study. While some instructors initially believed an online course and a face-to-face course could be treated as the exact same course in separate mediums (Hewett & Powers, 2005), scholarship on online learning in writing studies has shown the necessity to treat these online and face-to-face courses as the different environments that they are (Bourelle et al., 2016; CCCC OWI Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction, 2013; Hewett & Warnock, 2015). Furthermore, as technology continues to advance and change, scholarship on online writing instruction (OWI) works to keep up with relevant studies, causing a constant need for new scholarship (CCCC OWI Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction, 2013; Griffin & Minter, 2013; Hewett & Warnock, 2015).

While Bourelle et al. (2016) have begun this research, they note how important it is for other researchers to continue this line of inquiry. The CCCC (2013) similarly called for continued research in OWI. Specifically, their position statement called for “qualitative studies

that investigate the processes of OWI or OWL interactions. . . Such studies might explore student and teacher/tutor behaviors, actions, and relationships” (p. 31). The growth of these online programs, as well as the constant development of new technologies that can be utilized in online courses, provides a kairotic exigence for this thesis project, which studied the perceptions and expectations that students and instructors have of online writing courses.

The exigence for this study comes also from my own experience as a student in online courses and taking a graduate-level course in how to teach online courses effectively. My own experience as a student in online courses has shown me that students do not always navigate the course as the instructor imagines them to. As a social learner, I struggled in online learning environments where the discussion boards never quite replicated face-to-face in-class discussion and spent a lot of time trying to manipulate the course to better fit my learning style. In this, I often wondered why online courses were set up the way that they were as it seemed like the practices I utilized as a student did not match the layout of the courses I was enrolled in. In graduate school, I encountered an opportunity to take a course titled “Teaching Online in Texts and Technology” which I felt would help me better understand the pedagogical decisions that come with crafting an online writing course.

While researching various topics of interest for instructors who teach online courses, I noted that there seemed to be a lack of emphasis on the learning that occurs in online courses. The current push from many university administrators to increase enrollment in online classes focuses on access and convenience; however, there is not as much of a conversation asking if the learning in the class is affected by the online course, or the different avenues for learning that these courses present. I noted that while scholarship discussed students’, teachers’, and

institutions' roles in online courses, there was a lack of alignment in those areas. My research hoped to address this lack of alignment by studying these three groups and their perceptions and expectations of online education.

This study investigates how students perceive the work they are doing in online courses through their own self-identification of learning practices, and how instructors who teach the courses are working with and working against these student expectations and perceptions. This produces an analysis that concludes with improvements in the development and training of online writing instruction at both UCF and other institutions. Overall, this study concludes with pedagogical suggestions focusing on transparency, access, and professional development opportunities for online writing instructors.

To conduct this study, I created research questions that guided my data analysis and conclusions. This study sought to answer the following questions:

- What are students doing in online writing courses?
- How can those practices provide insight into the learning that is occurring in these online spaces?

However, due to the research limitations discussed in Chapter Three, my data did not reveal insight into these questions. Throughout my research, I had to adapt to struggles often found in qualitative research, such as a lack of participants and time constraints. While the conclusions discussed in Chapter Five do not answer these research questions, the implications the research does provide is equally important for the field of online writing instruction. The conclusions from this study discuss implications for instructors of online writing instruction and suggestions for professional development at the departmental level.

## Overview of the Study

This first chapter serves as an introduction to the research study by articulating the exigence behind the research and the initial purpose of the research. In the second chapter, I review relevant literature from scholarship in the fields of online writing instruction and learning theory. In Chapter Three, I discuss the methodology used to collect data for this study and the coding schemes developed to analyze the data. Once I outline these coding schemes, I analyze the results of the data collection methods in Chapter Four. Chapter Five discusses the implications of the study and provides suggestions for how to incorporate these findings into online writing instruction at both UCF and other institutions.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In this chapter, I will present a review of the literature that currently exists surrounding online writing instruction (OWI). Much of the current literature surrounding online learning studies students' perceptions and expectations of online courses, and at times discusses pedagogical choices instructors should be making in online writing courses. Articles range from discussing best practices (Warden et al., 2013) to encouraging methodologies that study how students' perceptions of a course can impact their learning (Phirangee, 2016; Pigg & Morrison, 2016). Survey data has shown the field that there is a disconnect between how students want to participate in online courses and how instructors should facilitate these courses (Bailie, 2014; Boyd, 2008; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Some argue that this disconnect comes from students, institutions, and instructors treating online courses like a face-to-face course placed online (Dziuban et al., 2013). Other studies encourage writing instructors to view what teachers of online courses can learn from teachers of face-to-face courses regarding how to encourage collaboration and support learning goals (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich; 2006; Roby et al., 2013). A newer strand of research, however, encourages instructors and students to view online courses as an opportunity for learning about the ways we learn and teach, and encourages continued scholarship examining what teachers of face-to-face courses can learn from their online counterparts (Bourelle et al., 2016; Hewett & Powers, 2005; Hewett & Warnock, 2015). As enrollment in online classes continues to grow, there is a call—both interdisciplinary and more specifically in the field of writing studies pedagogy—to learn more about creating successful online classes (Bourelle et al., 2016; Lehman & Conceição, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). In 2013, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) released a

position statement on effective online writing practices, which drew from scholars' research in the field on common issues and benefits of teaching online writing courses. Created as a blueprint for continued research, the CCCC committee outlined instructional principles, faculty principles, institutional principles, and areas for further research and exploration. Overall, scholarship in writing studies currently argues that OWI must be explored more deeply and more thoughtfully than it has in the past, to ensure that students and teachers alike are getting the same level of learning experience in these online environments as they would in a face-to-face classroom.

One way that researchers of OWI have chosen to study these online environments is through survey and interview data. Some researchers set out to create a recognizable identity of the "online student" to be used to shape future online curriculum (Boyd, 2008; Lehman & Conceição, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). In one survey, Xu and Jaggars (2013) focused on the gap between online and face-to-face learning across a variety of subgroups: gender, age, previous academic performance, and ethnicity. While some statistics did not vary much across these groups, Xu and Jaggars found that "the gap between Black and Asian student performance was much wider in online courses than it was in face-to-face courses" (p. 17). In addition, women seemed to perform more successfully online than their male counterparts, and older students "performed more poorly in online courses than in face-to-face" (p. 17). Xu and Jaggars offered this survey data as a way for online writing instructors to anticipate the needs of online students from specific groups. However, survey data can often be misleading. Xu and Jaggars admitted early in their paper that although Black and Hispanic students perform more poorly than White



students in online courses, this may be because they tend to perform more poorly in college overall (p. 2).

Boyd (2008) conducted a similar study to further investigate students' perceptions of learning in online courses. The author analyzed survey results representing students' perceptions of their interactions with other students, their instructor, and the technology used in online and hybrid courses in first-year composition courses at Arizona State University. The survey was distributed to 19 sections of hybrid and online first-year composition courses during one semester. Boyd argued that many researchers simply look at their own perspectives or evaluations of students' work without asking the students how they perceived their online courses. In her study, she sought to ask student-centered questions to provide pedagogical suggestions for online writing instruction.

Overall, the students in the study saw value in an online first-year composition course, specifically regarding the discussion board function of the learning management system. Students stated that it was useful that they had to write out their ideas about the readings rather than speak them out loud because it was a writing course. The low-stakes discussion board work also helped them better understand the valuing of thinking of a specific audience while writing. However, students did not attribute their learning to these exchanges between peers and their instruction. They did not see peer feedback over email or on the discussion board as useful for their learning of the course outcomes. Overall, they missed the teacher interaction that is often present in a face-to-face course. Boyd argued that this interaction was present in an online course, but because it took a different form than a typical face-to-face course, students' understanding of this presence was not there. Boyd argued that the most important element

missing from these courses was students' understanding of why they were doing the work that they were completing. When the instructor provides meta-commentary about course design and course assignments, the students better understand the reasoning behind the work they do in an online course. When the students value the work, they see it as more connected to their learning.

Another way to investigate student perceptions is to investigate the way they talk about their online faculty members. Bailie (2014) collected faculty evaluation and survey responses from college students who took online courses frequently over consecutive semesters. He then compared the responses of those faculty evaluations to the survey results to identify what students want in an online course and how they perceived those needs being met. In his study, Bailie introduced the "student as consumer" model of education where institutions see students as consumers and knowledge as goods and services. Thinking of students in this way highlighted the importance of student ratings in terms of how faculty can reflect on their approach to instruction. Through the 62 students surveyed, Bailie concluded that students had certain expectations of an online instructor that may not be inherent to the instructor of the course. Students expected online faculty to be active in the course every day of the week and participate in the course visibly through discussion posts or announcements multiple times a week. They also expected online faculty to answer emails within 12 hours of the student sending an inquiry and grade small assignments within three days and major assignments within one week. Bailie concluded that students wanted timely and dependable communication from their online faculty, even if the student did not initiate or participate in the communication itself.

These studies examined students' perceptions of learning in online courses through survey-based research. While survey data is one way to examine student perceptions of courses,

many scholars have utilized other, finer-grained methods to investigate student perceptions of online courses (Bailie, 2014; Pigg & Morrison, 2016; Phirangee, 2016). For example, Phirangee (2016) conducted a grounded-theory-based research project that interviewed six graduate students who had taken multiple online courses. Her research focused on learner-to-learner interactions that weakened community in online courses in the College of Education at their university.

While peer interaction is typically seen as a positive in online courses, Phirangee noticed that there were many types of interactions that inhibited a sense of community in the course. One specific type of interaction that Phirangee discovered was what she titled the “keener.” This is the student who over-participates in an online course and replies to everything. Students did not like this type of interaction because they saw it as not genuine and silencing of other students in the course. Similarly, students felt unhappy with peers who went off on tangents in the discussion board, especially if it was about content not relating to the course. They saw it as a distraction and an inconvenience because they were often still required to respond to these posts because of the assignment guidelines.

Phirangee’s student responses challenged a lot of the work done by online writing instruction researchers, such as Hewett and Warnock (2015), who discussed online discussion spaces as a place for sharing and participating without the need for turn-taking. Phirangee concluded that online courses require new instructional strategies because the interactions that students discussed negatively in her research are often strategies that are promoted in online instruction. Additionally, some of the issues students have in an online course, like going off on tangents, are managed in a face-to-face class in real time by the instructor. In an online course,

an instructor may not be able to identify these moments until after they've already happened, and therefore these moments have already interfered with the sense of classroom community.

Another way that researchers have studied community building is through external tools, such as social media accounts. Rohr and Costello (2015) examined student perceptions in a large-enrollment human kinetics and recreation online course with Twitter integration. The purpose of the Twitter assignment was to create engagement and social presence for students in the course. The authors hoped that students would use the social network to connect the content from the course to their real-world experiences with health and fitness. Survey results showed that 30% of students reported feeling connected to their class, while 34% of students reported feeling closer to specific individuals in the course after the two Twitter events. The authors concluded that this percentage proved that Twitter is a useful tool for online classes, but Twitter use should be closely tied to the content of the course and other class activities.

Stacey Pigg and Brett Morrison (2016) mentioned the importance of looking at student perception and practices beyond surveys and post-course perceptions of instructions, because many have correlated students' perceptions of learning directly with their motivation to learn. Pigg and Morrison used a case study of an undergraduate history class to examine the perceptions and practices of a student in a "flipped" classroom model. In this "flipped" model, the students learn the material outside of the classroom through the online Learning Management System (LMS) and practice the material in the classroom. This examination is important because in a flipped model a lot of the learning that occurs for students is online, outside of the classroom. Pigg and Morrison noted that "practices that once were subject to direct observations within classrooms shift into informal locations of students' lives" (p. 131). This change in the

location of learning requires a different set of data collection methods, because of the change in environment.

Similarly to Pigg and Morrison's (2016) study, scholarship has connected practice-based courses where students "do" something in the course to the amount of learning that happens. Ambrose et al. (2010) discussed three important components to defining learning: "learning is a process, not a product"; "learning involves change in knowledge, beliefs, behaviors and attitudes"; and "learning is not something done to students, but rather something students themselves do" (p. 3). An important discussion comes from seeing how learning can be *doing* in an online course when students often perceive online instruction as something that happens to them. The conclusions of this study will touch on this idea in Chapter Five where I discuss my conclusions. Learning as doing is complicated in an online course, but arguably just as—if not more important—to focus on when thinking through writing pedagogy.

Although there are these complications in creating effective online learning environments, research has helped to shift the current perspective on effective OWI away from seeing it as something to avoid to "an opportunity for teaching various student populations in a distinctive instructional setting" (CCCC Position Statement, 2014, p. 5). Similarly, Scott Warnock (2009) asserted that "that online writing instruction provides the opportunity for not just a different approach, but a progressive approach to the way teachers teach writing—an evolution of sorts in writing instruction" (p. xi). This shift in ideology has encouraged researchers such as Andrew Bourelle, Tiffany Bourelle, Anna V. Knutson, and Stephanie Spong (2016) to encourage a conversation in the field that discusses "what instructors of an f2f classroom can learn from the online environment" (p. 55).

In Bourelle et al.'s study of students in their face-to-face and online classes, their research showed the importance of a multimodal curriculum for students' learning of rhetoric and composition. In these classes, students were encouraged to learn about audience and constraints and to create a multimodal project that would persuade an audience in a certain manner. The multimodal aspect of the assignment taught the students the importance of participating in an online environment and encouraged active learning through testing technology and reflecting on their choices.

To foster this environment of students practicing the work, rather than being lectured on how to complete the assignment, Bourelle et al. (2016) discouraged a focus on the teachings of these technologies in this space. They suggested, rather, that instructors provide low-stakes assignments where students can try specific technologies and provide students with tutorials on how to use the technology. This allows the class to stay focused on the topic of multimodality, while also allowing students to have opportunities to try new technologies and struggle without failing. This article asked scholars to shift away from the notion that a class is first face-to-face and then transferred online, and instead to see the two environments as the different learning spaces that they are.

Like Bourelle et al.'s (2016) discussion, Lenman and Conceição (2014) noted that online and face-to-face classroom environments "require different ways of thinking about designing instruction" (Lehman & Conceição, 2014, p. 18). Research has shown those students' difficulties in online courses range from issues with student motivation, to understanding online students' learning styles, to learning relevant technology, and recognizing students' needs and expectations (Lehman & Conceição, 2014). While these are similar issues that instructors face in

all classrooms, an online environment can often add another layer of challenges. It is useful for both students and teachers to understand that the instructional design of a course should differ if the course is taught on different platforms.

In addition to the discussion of designing instruction, scholars have discussed the importance of investigating the evaluation tools used to assess student satisfaction, as well as the tools used to train instructors to teach online (Dziuban et al., 2013; Hewett & Powers, 2005). In Dziuban et al.'s (2013) study of end-of-term student perception of instructor reports, researchers investigated the way that previous researchers have used these reports compared to how students are currently answering the Likert-scale evaluations. They concluded that students are often unsure about their satisfaction with instruction, and that Likert scales confuse this uncertainty with ambivalence. When discussing why students may be unsure about the quality of their instruction, Dziuban et al. factored in students' previous experience with instruction. This is especially prevalent for online instruction. When students become used to a specific model of instruction and an instructor does not meet that prototype, students are often unsure of how to react. Despite the uncertainty students have with instruction, Dziuban et al. insisted that student voices in higher education are becoming more important to an effective learning climate. Therefore, learning more about how students are adapting to changing course design and instructional satisfaction beyond the Likert scale is necessary.

A large issue facing online courses is the need to meet the "increased demands for flexible learning" as described in Lehman and Conceição (2014, p. 1). The rise in demand for online courses highlights the opportunities and constraints that these classes offer. There are various strategies an instructor must employ to successfully develop an online course, and

strategies that students must employ to participate in said course. One strategy they note is “to offer choices in what students could do for their assignments” (Lehman & Conceição, 2014, p. 21). This flexibility is important to accommodate the wide range of traditional and nontraditional students that may be taking the online class. While some students may have more flexible time that would allow for group work or the tech-savvy knowledge of a digital project, others have more rigid schedules. It is important for students to balance these schedules using strategies described by Lehman and Conceição, but it helps if the online course lends itself to that flexibility.

Technology is an obvious important component of online courses. As Warnock (2009) described, “Technology is increasingly becoming a given in instructional design—the question now is not if, but how teachers will use it” (p. x). Wei-Ying Lim, Hyo-Jeong So, and Tan Seng-Chee (2010) argued that with the development of a new Web 2.0 eLearning system comes a need to examine the social and literacy practices that are required to properly utilize this system. The focus has shifted to a learner-centric model looking at the way we learn as opposed to the content we are learning. This new system required a look at literacy practices as social practices that can incorporate the use of technologies to increase our abilities as knowledge producers (p. 205). However, the researchers’ study illustrated that there was still a problem with both students and teachers not having the skills or ability to fully utilize this potential. The case study in this article showed that lagging social practices are the cause of this limitation; researchers noted that peer-to-peer interactions were “mainly engaged in lower-level cognitive tasks rather than in critical collaborative discourse . . . despite the use of participatory web tools” (p. 215). To fix this, there was a need to redesign the socio-techno-spatial relationship in formal and informal learning.



With the growing use of technologies for teaching, there are no longer such simple binaries between these learning processes, so social practices and a shift in the cultural beliefs of learning are both required to make more meaningful interactions; as well, a reconsideration of our terms of learning are also required. Lim et al. put this into practice by calling for instructors who will bring collaborative tools into the classrooms with learners who want to share their cultures, knowledge, and experiences.

Another important aspect of online work is the understanding that as technology increases in online writing courses, the line is blurred between writing and reading. While these two practices were previously separate, Griffin and Minter (2013) described activities, such as social reading, that encourage students to use tools that combine writing and reading for maximum engagement. Going further into the changes in literacy, the authors described the effect the technological advancements of screens have on literacy. While screens used to be only for display, users now interact with screens, which impacts the way the field thinks about writing pedagogy. Students interact with writing courses on mobile devices, which can complicate the way instructors create their LMS because students and instructors will begin to have different experiences across different devices. With the acknowledgement of the different aspects that technology has brought to the classroom, Griffin and Minter also included some benefits and drawbacks of OWI for different student population. While online classes provide flexible schedules for students typically described as “at risk,” there is not enough data on how socioeconomic status impacts the technological literacies that seem necessary to succeed in an online class.

These gaps in knowledge call for the field of writing studies to continue to be diligent in their analyses of online environments, as well as the adaptation of pedagogy that will utilize the results of said research. A conclusion this study draws is that instructors of online writing courses should be more aware of the current literature surrounding this topic. Many of the scholarship discussed in this chapter would be useful to instructors who participated in this research, as well as others who did not participant. This research will provide recommendations for professional development and online classroom structures in Chapter Five that incorporate these findings.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

The previous chapter reviewed relevant scholarship in the field of online writing instruction and identified a call for future research on this subject. In this chapter, I will explain my data collection and analytical methods, which helped me explore this topic further.

### Research Site

The Department of Writing and Rhetoric (DWR) at the University of Central Florida (UCF) was chosen partially because of my connections as a graduate student in the department and partially because of the recent development of the major in Writing and Rhetoric. The major began in 2014 and has quickly increased its student population to currently 108 students declared in the major, with many others in the minor, certificate program, and graduate degree and graduate certificate in rhetoric and composition.

Along with the increasing number of students enrolled in these courses, DWR is also home to many online and reduced seat-time courses. In fall 2016, when the data for this study was collected, 16 of the 178 sections of courses offered by the department were online and 38 additional sections of those 178 were offered as reduced seat-time, meaning half of the time students are enrolled in the course is meant to be spent online. With so many opportunities to teach online, DWR faculty frequently win awards for their online instruction and present at national conferences on their experiences with online instruction. Combined with the fact that thirty percent of the overall sections of courses offered have some type of required online component, this made this department a relevant and timely site of study.

In this study, I conducted a series of interviews with students and instructors. These interviews were recorded using a mobile phone application. The location for the interviews differed between the student and instructor participants. The students were interviewed in an office on the third floor of Colbourn Hall where DWR is located. Because I share my own office with many other graduate students, some of who know my participants, I did not see this as a productive space. Therefore, an empty office in the department was used to conduct interviews with student participants. Only one student interview occurred off campus at a local Starbucks because she did not have access to an on-campus parking pass.

Interviews with instructors were conducted in their own offices for their convenience. Many instructors met with me right before or right after their office hours, so using their own private offices made the interviews more convenient for them.

### Participants

Participants were chosen based on my own contacts with the Department of Writing and Rhetoric. I approached student participants through email and faculty members through email and their office hours. I originally approached five students and five instructors to participate in my study, but only those who had time to commit to interviews were included in this project. The only criteria for being included in this study was being a student who was currently enrolled in an online course in the department during the fall 2016 semester, or an instructor who was teaching an online course. Table 1 breaks down the participants in this study by pseudonym, gender, and position in the department.

## Students

Students for this study were chosen based on my own connections to students and instructors enrolled in DWR courses. At the time of this research, I was a graduate student in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric and I had frequently encountered faculty and students through a variety of department events. One student was recruited using data collection methods from a prior study, which included posting a video asking for participants in an elective online course. Other students were approached because of my familiarity with them through department events. One participant was recruited by snowball sampling wherein one student asked their friend to participate. I originally collected five student interviews, but I did not include one interview because the participant had taken online courses in a creative writing program; this participant had such a unique experience in online courses it did not make sense to include her in this study. While all student participants are female, this was not intentional and only reflects my access to students in the department.

## Instructors

The website for the department includes a list of current instructors of online courses with their email and office hours. Three instructors were chosen from the list of online courses based on their availability to sit for an interview and their experience teaching online courses. To have access to a variety of data, I chose one instructor, one associate instructor, and one assistant professor. The instructor participants have a variety of experience teaching online, which was not something I sought out, but worked well for my project.

Table 1: List of Participants

Instructors	Katie	Female	Instructor in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric who recently completed IDL training
	Jake	Male	Associate Instructor in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric who has taught online for several years
	Stephanie	Female	Assistant Professor in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric who has taught online for several semesters
Students	Jessica	Female	Senior student majoring in Writing and Rhetoric
	Brittany	Female	Senior student minoring in Writing and Rhetoric
	Ruth	Female	Second-year graduate student in Rhetoric and Composition
	Ali	Female	Second-year graduate student in Rhetoric and Composition

### Data Collection Methods

This study adopted the constructivist grounded theory approach described by Charmaz (2006) to conduct research in which “we are part of the world of we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvement and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (p. 10). Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1998) discussed the importance of developing theory in this methodology. Grounded theory suggests that theory should come from the data, something that is important when discussing perceptions and expectations. Since I was focused on investigating the interactions between people and practices, grounded theory allowed me to develop a theory based on what I

found, not based on my own preconceived expectations. Grounded theory was in part chosen because I was unsure of what I would learn about online courses through my interview data and chosen also because of constraints of the study discussed in the limitations section of this chapter.

## Interviews

Charmaz (2006) highlighted the importance of allowing the identified research problem to guide the data collection. Therefore, since I only knew that I wanted to learn more about what students were doing in online courses, interviewing students who participated in online courses seemed like the natural place to begin. I conducted one interview with each participant that lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. Participants were asked questions based on intensive interview techniques outlined in grounded theory approaches (Charmaz, 2006), which ask researchers to respond with phrases such as “tell me” rather than words of affirmation or agreement.

The interview questions (Appendix C) centered on the learning that occurred in online courses and the student’s experience with online courses. I often deviated from the list of interview questions if a student began discussing an interesting component of online learning that I had not previously expected. I conducted each of the four student interviews first. These interviews were recorded using the Voice Memo application on my phone and were then transcribed by me.

After line-by-line coding of student interviews, which I will discuss in the Coding Scheme section of this chapter, I then interviewed the three instructors who participated in this study (Charmaz, 2006). These interview questions were focused around their training of online

instruction and perceptions and expectations of both students and themselves because of the results in the student interviews. These interviews were recorded using the Voice Memo application on my phone and transcribed by me.

### Profile Tour

Student interviews ended with a profile tour of their Canvas Learning Management System used in their online class. A profile tour is a tour of a particular digital space. Researchers often use this method to investigate identities or practices (Buck, 2012); the focus on practices made this a useful method for my study. The profile tour occurred halfway through the interview. Participants were asked to pull up the Canvas Learning Management system used in their online course on an incognito window of my computer. The software Screen-Cast-o-Matic was chosen to record the screen as students navigated through their course. This software was chosen because it is both easy to use and free for fifteen-minute intervals. Videos can then be downloaded and erased from the website to ensure privacy for the participants. The profile tour asked the participants to show which parts of the Learning Management System stood out as important to them during the semester. It was important to my research to see what the students valued, so I did not prompt them in any other way. I then pointed out parts of the Learning Management System that I noticed would seem relevant from my own experience as a writing instructor and asked questions about whether these resources seemed significant to the participants. Only students completed this portion because of the sensitive information about non-participants that would be at risk by looking at instructors' courses.

### Coding Scheme



Following grounded theory methodology, once the interviews were transcribed, I began to code for themes. Charmaz (2006) discussed coding in a grounded theory study in two steps, the first of which is line-by-line coding. In line-by-line coding a researcher looks at each line of the written data, in my case the transcriptions (Glaser, 1978). I began with line-by-line coding of the student interviews because I was unsure of what I was looking for in the data beyond my curiosity regarding how students were learning in online courses. Line-by-line coding encourages researchers to remain open to the data (Charmaz, 2006), which meant I did not develop further codes until I completed line-by-line coding each student interview. This was useful because of how differently the student participants in my study felt about online learning. If I kept the codes I thought I would develop in the first interview, they would not have worked with the data from the last interview.

In this first level of line-by-line coding, I focused on finding interesting moments in individual student transcripts by listening to the recording and watching the profile tours while I coded. From line-by-line coding, I noted a pattern in the importance students placed on feedback, assessment, and the comparison of face-to-face and online courses. Some codes, such as “outside of academic digital practices,” seemed initially important in one student interview, but were later removed because they did not come up in the other interviews.

These first patterns of interest helped me notice a focus on the perceptions and expectations of online courses. I often highlighted phrases such as “good online classes should” or “I expect my online professor to” in the transcriptions, which led me to my focused codes. Focused codes are “more directed, selective, and conceptual” (Glaser, 1978 as cited in Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). To categorize my data, I coded for expectations and perceptions in the student

interviews. I then created a table to input pieces of the transcription into, which separated student expectations and perceptions of online courses, online instructors, online students, and the learning management system of the institution. These sections were chosen due to the focus the students put on those elements of online courses.

Table 2 below shows an example of the table from one participant in the study, Jessica. Some pieces of the transcript were easy to identify as perceptions or expectations, such as the excerpt, “I was expecting just discussion posts,” while others such as “the fact that it’s flexible, the fact that I can open the module whenever I want to and like go and read through it” were less obvious. Throughout my coding process, I continuously went back to the data to ensure that I was being consistent throughout my coding schemes. The different forms these perceptions and expectations took were important for my research because they helped me notice how difficult it can be to identify expectations and perceptions.

However, not all interviewees discussed all aspects of the table; for example, I did not note any instance of Jessica discussing her instructor’s expectations, because most of our conversation focused on the expectations she set for herself and the perceptions of the instructor in the course. This part of the table was not removed because of its significance in other interviews conducted with other students.

Table 2: Focused Codes

	Perception	Expectation
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Online Courses	I like f2f better but I like the value of online classes. I think they're really valuable	I don't know I was expecting just discussion posts um but they weren't but I didn't expect them to be that long and I didn't expect to write as much as I did.
Instructor	I don't know if it's because it's an online class the professors are willing to compensate for the lack of f2f interaction but feedback is always really helpful really good like some of the best feedback I've ever gotten is from online classes.	
Self	I'll find myself on Hulu and then clicking back to Webcourses.	I wouldn't respond but I would check it. Like I would actively go and check to see if someone responded to one of the comments I made or like there were a couple of times were like I'm upset that I did this.
LMS	I think it's because I use my phone mostly for casual messaging. So it feels like more a casual response and something like a personal essay deserves something more thought out and I don't feel like I would think through my response so much on my phone versus my computer	the fact that it's flexible the fact that I can open the module whenever I want to and like go and read through it

This coding scheme was used to develop interview questions for instructors, and instructor transcripts were coded based on these schemes. The instructor interviews were transcribed using the perception and expectations codes, and focused again on online courses,

online instructors, online students, and the learning management system of the institution. After reviewing the data, I separated one participant, Katie, and coded her as both a student and instructor participant. This occurred because of her unique intertwined identity as a current instructor in the department and former graduate teaching assistant and graduate student, which helped me see how these codes worked together for the two populations of the study.

Once I identified the discussion around the expectations and perceptions surrounding online pedagogy, I realized these codes were not enough to examine what was occurring in the data. While they did allow me to see the expectations and perceptions of everyone's participation, I needed to develop another set of codes that would allow me to examine patterns across all the participants. I then developed theoretical codes, as seen in Table 3, which came from themes I noticed in both the expectations and perceptions of students and instructors. Theoretical codes allowed me to look at my focused code data with a better understanding of how I could answer my research questions (Charmaz, 2006). These themes focused on discussions as sites of learning, expectations of time and effort, feedback, and classroom community. These themes were adapted from Bransford, Brown, and Cocking's (1999) concept of lenses of learning. In their work, the authors identify learning as "learner centered, knowledge centered, assessment centered, and community centered" (as cited in Anderson, 2004 p. 35). While this categorization of learning made sense for their study, because of the focus on feedback and flexibility common in writing studies research and online writing instruction I had to adapt the codes according. I adapted the idea of learner-centered learning to expectations of time and effort, knowledge-centered learning to discussions as sites of learning, assessment-

centered learning as feedback provided or received, and community-centered learning as classroom community.

Table 3: Theoretical Codes

Theme	Explanation
Discussion as Sites of Learning	Discussions of online substitutions for f2f conversations/informal learning
Expectations of Time/Effort	Discussions of flexibility, access, or workload
Feedback	Discussions of instructor, student, or institutional feedback or assessment
Classroom Community	Discussion of student-to-student interaction or student-to-instructor interaction

While I originally anticipated the profile tours being useful pieces of data, students did not seem to navigate the Canvas site while talking. Instead, they often opened the Canvas course page and did not refer to it for the rest of the interview. Because of this inconsistency, the profile tours were not coded, but instead used to provide context for me to what the students were referring to throughout the interview. While listening to the interview during the coding phase, if a student referred to a specific place in the learning management system, I would open the profile tour to see what they were referring to. This did not happen often enough to justify a round of coding, but did occur sporadically across participants.

#### Issues of Privacy and Sensitivity

Many of my participants voiced concerns over the sensitivity of the information they discussed. At times, they were assessing other instructors, course content, or administration, which they feared would negatively impact them in their current and future endeavors. Because of these concerns, several steps were taken to ensure the conversations discussed in this thesis could not be tracked back to them. First, all names have been changed to pseudonyms chosen by me. However, many participants still worried that there were additional identifiable features, such as the classes they taught or the instructor they were describing. Therefore, all course names were changed simply to “graduate” or “undergraduate” courses, except for ENC 1102 (a first-year composition course) because of the large number of sections of this course being taught, which makes it nearly impossible for the instructor to be tracked by this course name and number alone.

The instructors asked to be allowed access to the transcription after the interview to be able to ensure that information could not be tracked back to them. Some of the original content of the transcription has been altered by both myself and the instructor for that reason, but significant effort was put forth to ensure that the spirit of the interview stayed the same.

### Limitations

This study began with data collection methods that would focus on one online course in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric. Originally, I set out to research what students were learning in online courses and asked for participants in my project in an online course via an embedded video in the course. Two students agreed to participate and were asked to complete an activity log (Buck, 2012), a screencast recording (Geisler & Slattery, 2007; Leon & Pigg, 2011)

and one interview after providing me with the activity log and screencast recording. However, throughout the semester the participants approached me and admitted that they did not have time to participate in the study. One student still completed one interview, which is included in this project, while the other student decided to drop out completely. This is not uncommon in qualitative research and seems to be a limitation of both the time constraint of a thesis project and the lack of access to compensation for participating in the study. Future research should take this into account when developing studies that rely on student participants.

Another limitation of the study was the lack of access to profile tours by the instructors. While this data point was not very useful for the students because of their lack of participation, I feel that conducting a tour of an instructor's Canvas shell would have been a useful accompaniment to the interview responses. The students were unsure of how to verbalize what aspects of the course shell were important to them, but instructors frequently brought up parts of the learning management system in their interview. Perhaps it is because, as instructors, they are more used to justifying and discussing their course design. Future research should consider this data collection method to examine what instructors do in practice alongside what they describe doing in their interview responses. In many places during the interview, the instructors would broadly reference how they structure assignments in all their courses. A profile tour would allow a researcher to get a closer look at an exact course, which would allow the instructors to better articulate specific details about assignments and design. An analysis of a profile tour of an instructor would be able to make more coherent claims about how and why their course was designed and how that was impacted by their expectations or perceptions of learning. As I stated

earlier, this was not possible because of the students enrolled in the course, but future research should consider a different approach that would allow for this data collection point.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

Throughout my data analysis, I identified moments when the institution's, the instructors', and the students' perceptions and expectations of online courses aligned and other areas where these perceptions and expectations conflicted. Overall, the students and instructors desired to participate in more effective online writing instruction, but felt that there were several areas where instruction could be improved. This chapter will discuss the findings from this study.

This chapter is separated into four sections. In the first section, I provide an overview of the Center for Distributed Learning (CDL), which is the facility at UCF in charge of online education for faculty and students. In the next section, I discuss my findings from the instructor interviews. In the third section, I discuss my findings from the student interviews. Finally, in the last section I discuss a unique participant, Katie, who combined perspectives from both instructors and students.

### Center for Distributed Learning (CDL)

When discussing online writing instruction, it is important to have conversations about the principles and processes that ground successful online training for writing instructors (Hewett & Powers, 2005). A large aspect of these principles comes from the institution where the instructors are trained to teach online. At UCF, CDL is the hub of online education. This center trains online faculty, participates in research on online learning, and offers resources and professional development to faculty before and after the completion of the training. Due to the focus on both student and instructor expectations and perceptions and the unique setup of UCF's

online teaching curriculum, it was necessary for this thesis project to also examine the institutional training that instructors go through at UCF.

At UCF, there are several different types of instruction (see Figure 1). CDL defines five types of course modality that range from completely Web courses to complete Face to Face instruction. Between these modalities there are Mixed Mode/Reduced Seat Time courses, which require both in-class attendance and online instruction. In fall 2016, UCF offered 818 course sections completely online and 540 Mixed-Mode course sections.

Course Modality	Description
W – World Wide Web	World Wide Web courses are conducted via Web-based instruction and collaboration. Some courses may require minimal campus attendance or in-person/proctored examinations.
M – Mixed Mode/Reduced Seat Time	Mixed mode/Reduced Seat Time courses include both required classroom attendance and online instruction. Classes have substantial activity conducted over the Web, which substitutes for some classroom meetings.
V – Video Streaming	Video Streaming courses are delivered over the Web via streaming digital video, which may be supplemented by additional Web activity, projects, or exams.
RV – Video Streaming/Reduced Seat Time	Video Streaming/Reduced Seat Time courses provide classroom-based content over the Web via streaming video and classroom attendance is not required. Other required activities that substitute for video instruction may include any of the following: Web activity, in-person or proctored examinations, and labs.
P – Face To Face Instruction	Face To Face courses have required classroom attendance and meet on a regularly scheduled basis. Students may encounter Internet and/or computer requirements in these classes.

Figure 1: Description of Modalities at UCF

Before teaching an online or mixed-mode (also known as hybrid or reduced seat time) course, instructors must enroll in IDL 6543—a graduate level award winning hybrid non-credit course that is run by the CDL with the goal to guide instructors into creating their own online course.

Throughout the semester that they are enrolled in IDL 6543, instructors meet face-to-face biweekly for half-day sessions and online weekly to develop curriculum for an online course. Instructors in IDL 6543 are also assigned an instructional designer who meets with them throughout the semester to help them develop the course shell on the Canvas Learning

Management System that UCF uses. The purpose of these designers is to help the instructor find useful tools and features in the Canvas LMS. The course ends with a presentation of a section of a fully designed online course, assigned by the department in charge of IDL 6543.

Instructors are chosen to enroll in IDL 6543 by being placed on a list by their department chair. A wait list is then sent to IDL 6543 and instructors await an opportunity to enroll in the course. Instructors cannot teach online or hybrid courses without first completing IDL or by passing the Online Faculty Readiness Assessment. This assessment was created in recent years to allow faculty with knowledge of how to design online courses to come to UCF and skip the semester-long course. However, the very creation of this assessment shows a gap in the IDL course. The IDL course is focused on procedural knowledge (how to make an online quiz, how to create discussion boards) without providing a theoretical base for the instructors to show how these steps correlate with knowledge making. This can be expected because of the sheer number of diverse instructors who enroll in IDL 6543. Because of this, along with the time constraint of one semester, CDL chose to focus the course around how to use and take advantage of the resources UCF offers its online instructors. This can be a useful beginning in the transition to online learning, but my own research suggests it should not be an end for instructors' learning, especially in online writing instruction.

While I was unable to participate in the IDL 6543 course, there are several documents on the CDL website that showcases the values of the institution. A course rubric (Appendix D) provided in the IDL 6543 course shows what UCF as an institution values in online instruction. The course rubric is paired with a module rubric and is said to be used for a variety of different circumstances, such as self-assessment, instructional designer consultations, and peer review.

The course rubric is broken down into seven categories, including course/instructor introduction, course tools, accessibility/copyright/FERPA, course/module objectives, course activities/interaction, assessment strategy, and course administration/student support. Similar criteria are listed for the module rubric with more specific guidelines outlined for this. Figure 2 shows a specific section of the CDL course rubric, which focuses on course administration/student support. The description of the rubric is broken down into stating the outcome and providing an example, which provides a teaching opportunity for the instructors who review the material. Since IDL 6543 is a mixed-mode course, in a lot of ways the materials emulate how instructors should design their own courses. Pairing a course objective or goal with an example helps the instructors see the guidelines as tangible pedagogical moves they can make in their own courses.

<b>Course Administration/Student Support</b>	
<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Identified</b>
Technical support information is provided for students ( <i>e.g.</i> , Online@UCF Support contact information, UCF Learning Online, Service Desk contact information).	
Clear tutorials, directions and student technical support information for using Webcourses@UCF tools ( <i>e.g.</i> , Webcourses@UCF Orientation) and 3 <sup>rd</sup> party tools are provided.	
Protocols for student questions (content/assignment/assessment) are clearly defined ( <i>e.g.</i> , 3-before-me, technical help discussion forum, office hours, Online@UCF Support).	
Tutorials are provided for students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knights Online</li> <li>• LMS Tutorials</li> <li>• UCF Information Fluency Modules</li> <li>• All 3<sup>rd</sup> Party tutorials (If applicable)</li> </ul>	
<b>Notes:</b>	

Figure 2: Section of CDL Course Rubric

The course administration/student support section from the course rubric was chosen as an example of the rubric. Each criterion is listed to the left of the rubric with a statement

followed by an example. The importance of this rubric is that it represents what “good” online instruction should look like at UCF.

An important observation to make is the language used in the rubrics and on the rest of the information provided by CDL. Phrases like “information provided for student” or “expectations are provided” focus on the instructor giving students access to information, but do not focus on the pedagogical foundations of how that information supports learning. The only reference to learning comes in the form of “promoting learning outcomes” and “promote learning on all domains of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.”

CDL focuses on delivering instruction to students in an accessible way. This isn’t a bad thing by itself, but without a strong focus on what learning looks like or how it is important for the students to be actively participating in their learning, these objectives make education seem like a service provided to students. This is further supported by CDL’s focus on providing resources and procedural knowledge, as well as their focus on new technology to make online learning seem fun through avatars and video games. Gamification has been recognized as a positive element of learning, but it certainly is not without its criticism and is not the only way to teach online.

Besides gamification, the technology shown in the CDL and IDL course seems aimed at controlling and managing instructor and student behaviors, rather than emphasizing practices of teaching and learning. The module rubric focuses on “clear tutorials, directions, and student technical support information for using Webcourses@UCF tools.” Again, the focus is on the tools and resources provided, but not how to make those tools useful for meaningful learning experiences. CDL seems to be operating under the assumption that if tools are provided and

instructors are told to match them to learning outcomes, then effective learning will take place. However, there is a large gap between telling instructors to use technology to support learning outcomes and instructors being able to do that in a meaningful way.

### Introduction to Analysis

The CDL website showcases what the institution values in online courses, but the conversations with DWR instructors and students showed a closer look at the day-to-day implementation of these values. Through the instructor and student interviews gathered in this research, I noticed a particular focus around learning in online discussions, expectation of time and work, and receiving feedback. This focus guided my theoretical codes; therefore, this analysis is organized by those components. To present the information, each theme is separated by the results of the instructor interviews and the results of the student interviews. Chapter Five will later discuss the conclusions I have drawn by combining these data analyses and discussing implications for the field of online writing instruction and departmental implementations.

### Instructors

Overall, the instructors in this study saw online courses as more time and more work for them and for students. They felt that the IDL 6543 course at UCF prepared them to teach online, specifically regarding procedural knowledge with the functionality of the Learning Management System Canvas. They did all, however, discuss that their online courses never seemed finalized, but rather seemed to be something that they were changing and adapting every semester they taught. While this is often the case of all instruction, the instructors of this study felt online

course revision was more time-consuming, ongoing, and more difficult than other courses taught in the department.

### Learning in Online Discussion

Per the CDL website, the LMS Canvas provides an “integrated system for focused and threaded discussions so that both instructors and students alike can start and contribute to as many discussion threads as desired” (“Using Discussions”). Discussions should be used for a variety of aspects, such as:

- Use Discussions to help students start thinking about an upcoming Assignment or class discussion.
- Use Discussions to follow-up on a conversation or questions that began in a face-to-face classroom.
- Use Discussions to test student comprehension of important points made in class.
- Use Discussions to debate contradictory ideas.
- Use Discussions to brainstorm different approaches to a class problem.

Instructors in this study explained that they used the “discussion board” feature for multiple purposes in the class, sometimes as sites of learning, and others as community building strategies. This section will focus on discussion as sites of learning, while a later section will focus on the role this function plays in building community.

Research has often discussed learning as a social endeavor, and it is accepted that it is important for students to be able to share and showcase their knowledge, to build it with others in the class through discussion. In a face-to-face class, this is accepted and a staple of writing

courses, especially in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric whose face-to-face and mixed mode courses are typically capped under 30 students per course. In a large university like UCF this is an oddity, but part of the reason for such small classes is that writing is social and communication amongst peers and the instructor is necessary to meet the course outcomes. The National Council of Teachers of English (2015) further discussed the importance of class size by correlating writing class size with academic performance, student engagement, long-term success, and teacher retention.

In an online course, instructors use discussion boards to try to mimic the kinds of conversations that often happen in face-to-face courses. In terms of learning, Katie, Norma, and Jake said they often used discussion boards to have students respond to readings, draft projects, or conduct peer review. Most of the instructors had students post by a certain time and date in response to a prompt written by the instructor and students then responded to their peers by a certain time with either commentary or furthering the discussion. In an ideal setting, students would interact with each other's ideas and confront issues they have with the content.

To facilitate this activity, Norma had students end their original discussion posts with a prompting question to encourage other students to discuss a specific topic from the reading. Because Norma saw learning as both being able to summarize information and respond to it with effective questions, she developed this discussion board prompt to showcase the content the student learned and focus their responses on a specific area of interest.

She thought this worked well in combination with the reading quizzes to encourage learning in her course because it required students to do something. She noted that "so then it [the discussion assignment] pushes them to actually do stuff whether they realize they're learning."



While this is the thought process behind her decision to require questions at the end of discussion posts, she noted she wasn't sure if students felt the same way. She said, "They could think I'm just making them jump through hoops. I don't know." For Norma, she valued students "doing" in her course, because of her connection between "doing" and "learning." Even if students weren't sure why they were completing parts of the assignments, she hoped that these discussion boards still facilitated learning in the course.

Unlike Norma, who structured these discussion boards for the students to be active participants in their learning, Katie attributed successful discussion boards to the amount of effort put forth on the assignment design by the instructor. Instead of having students create questions at the end of their posts like Norma, Katie set specific guidelines in her instructions for the assignment that asked students to respond to aspects of the reading in their posts and to focus their responses to each other in another structured way. Katie saw a direct correlation between the impact of discussion boards on the learning and the amount of structure provided in the design of the assignment.

Jake saw an issue with discussion boards because of the expectations students had in online classes that learning would just happen to them. He theorized that perhaps the digital medium encouraged this kind of thinking on the students' part because they are used to absorbing information online. However, as an instructor, he knew learning happens through effort and motivation, which pushed him to try to find new ways for students to engage with the material and each other in the online discussion boards.

Despite his efforts, he stated that both he and his colleagues still don't feel that they have created an online version of the work that happens in a face-to-face discussion. This makes

teaching online writing classes difficult, because in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric, and good writing pedagogy in general, collaboration and discussion are the main ways to get students to meet course outcomes (“A Position Statement of Principles and Example Effective Practices for Online Writing Instruction,” 2013). The question to answer then is WHY is this so difficult to accomplish? What about the online environment makes such an integral part of learning so difficult to accomplish?

For the instructors in this study it seemed to be a lack of understanding of how to make these discussion parts productive. As I will discuss later, the students agree with this issue and, echoing Norma’s concerns, students don’t always see discussion boards as important to their learning the objectives of the course. Scott Warnock (2014) wrote that “we don’t have to think about our virtual conversations as just as good as our onsite conversations—they can be better” (p. 68). However, the instructors and students who participated in this study did not feel as though they were capitalizing on the usefulness of online discussion boards. Warnock suggested using utilizing clear guidelines and multiple prompt options as ways for students to really feel as though they are conversing in the online discussion board. He wrote that students need to post more than one initial post and one reply during the week because that does not always contribute to the conversation.

One instructor participant, Katie, voiced her own issue with discussion boards as well by drawing on her own experience as a student of online courses. As a student, Katie noted:

I thought that the online discussions were artificial when they asked you to reply to your classmates, often, because the prompts were very vague, just reply to two of your peers; no directions on what kinds of things might constitute a good reply, or what kinds of

things you should be commenting on, or asking questions about. It was just very open-ended, and it seemed lazy on the part of the instructor.

As Warnock (2014) suggested, providing clear expectations for discussion boards was helpful; Katie also found that this was a solution for some of the common issues she saw with discussion boards as a student. Katie attempted to combat this student perception of online discussions as “artificial” by providing strict and explicit guidelines for students’ online interactions:

As a faculty member now, when I have all my discussions, I do still want my students to reply because I want us to try to build a sense of classroom community, and I want them to be engaging with each other like they would be if they were having a face-to-face class. However, I'm much more explicit in what kinds of replies would be good.

Katie’s version of explicit instruction seems to be focused around transparency. While it is often understood that transparency can be useful in education, as Dalsgaard and Paulsen (2009) discussed, “transparency is not a given, especially within online education. Students might work at a distance and individually, and thus, they are not necessarily aware of the activities of other students” (p. 2). While discussion boards attempt to bridge this, and make students’ work transparent to each other, instructors also must be transparent in their online instruction, beginning with the way we want students to learn and discuss in the online classroom. I will be discussing strategies for successful transparency in online courses in Chapter Five.

### Expectations of Workload and Time

One of the Center for Distributed Learning’s main testaments is that the purpose of online instruction is to provide students with quality instruction that is “convenient, flexible, and works

with their schedules” and that online courses also “assist the departments, colleges, and universities as a whole since it does not require brick and mortar spaces, parking, etc., for its course delivery.” The emphasis here encourages the “student as consumer” model (Bailie, 2014). The student as consumer model stems from an institution’s push toward offering a wider “variety” of course modalities in conjunction with the increasingly rising costs of higher education. This makes the decision an economic one, not a pedagogical one. Universities want to encourage students to enroll in their institutions and an attractive way to do this is to offer a “convenient and flexible learning environment.” This, however, creates expectations, which has frustrated instructors and deemphasized students’ required effort in the course, which was echoed by both instructors and students in my research.

In a poll of university faculty, CDL found that instructors stated that the success of an online class depends a lot on the preparation done by the instructor beforehand. CDL noted that “faculty should be prepared to spend more time on their Web course” as compared to a face-to-face class. Scott Warnock (2014) suggested setting particular times of the day when students know they can reach an instructor, whether that is by chat or email. This allows students to be able to know when to expect a response and also gives the instructor of the course time away from the students. However, he noted that this is not always easy for students to expect, and with the increase in informal writing assignments, instructors should still expect to be participating in an online writing course more frequently than a face-to-face course.

Instructors separated issues of flexibility into two categories—expectations of workload and expectations of time. In expectations of workload, instructors discussed the expectations they had for students in the course and the expectations students in the course seemed to have of

them. Jake seemed surprised that students did not always know that online writing courses would include more work:

They don't know that they have to do extra work. I tell them that any discussion that we would have in class we have to make it up through writing.

And you know some students take 5 hours to write a post when they could have read an Article, came to class and, talked in less time

Any work transitioning from a face-to-face discussion to online requires writing and consequently may require assessment. The instructors in this study spoke at length about the amount of work and time an online writing class took because of this change in modality. However, faculty might not always think about ways to use other technologies available online to ease the burden of writing all the time, as well as assist students in ways to learn in different modalities, such as videos or audio feedback. Jake attempted to utilize part of these technologies to ease the amount of feedback he gave, which I will discuss at more length later in this chapter, but other instructors in this study did not mention the implementation of these options. Faculty need training to help think through ways to reduce the writing load, in the same way that faculty teaching face-to-face for the first time often need help learning how to ease the grading load by not commenting on every single thing.

Norma discussed the high expectations she sets for her students, which requires more work in an online class sometimes. She contributed these high expectations and intense workload to relate to their learning, as learning can sometimes be difficult to witness in an online course:

Yeah, and that's unfortunate because I feel like in my upper-level class, I have some pretty high expectations, like so for instance, with this research report, when they had to

submit their references page, I was like this looks like a Google search. No deal. You know what I mean? You need to use the library resources. This is what you need to focus... And some students are like, well, how do I do this? I've had online students that could show up in my office and what do I need to do. How do I do this? So they are learning, but I do think that they can come in thinking they can coast. Like I'm telling you that you need to research paper and you do a Google search and plop that into the references page. That's why I scaffold it, so that I see that reference page before you turn it in, and I've already given them feedback, and I'm really honest. I'm like this looks like a Google search. This is not going to work. You have no academic sources, you know, those kinds of things.

In this section of the interview Norma spoke directly to the expectations students have that they can “coast” in an online course:

The thing that I think that they don't realize they're learning is like the reading quizzes, because I feel like they're just saying, oh, she just wants to make sure we're reading. Well, yeah, because I can't double check that like I would in a face-to-face class and say, how many of you guys had trouble with the reading, like I would do, you know, in my professional writing class face to face. I can't do that, so I have the reading quizzes so that I can see if you understand, but the thing with those is like, you can only give so much feedback. You know, it's like a genre is a system of classifications, true or false. Like you know what I mean? And they check the wrong thing or they check the right thing.

Norma and Jake expected online courses to be more work for both themselves and the students, especially in the writing-intensive courses that they teach. While some of this is due to the nature of writing, like Jake discussed, some of it is because of the loss of informal check-ins that Norma discussed in this portion of the interview. In her face-to-face courses, Norma can ask students if they understand a concept or struggled with a reading. However, in an online course this informal feedback becomes a formal (low-stakes) assignment. Norma saw this as identifying students' understanding of course concepts, something that is otherwise evident in face-to-face discussions. For these instructors, online course informal course discussion becomes formal online assignments, whether it is discussion posts, quizzes, papers, or other work. In addition to the expectation of workload, the time that an online course takes was discussed by the instructor participants at length. While CDL does prepare faculty for the additional time that online courses take, Jake was surprised that even with all the preparation he did before the semester started, he never seemed to catch up with his mediated or fully online courses:

I think some of the expectations are that are you available all the time. And I think they forget how much work you're doing behind the scenes because they can't see you. So I definitely think that goes underappreciated and undervalued because I find that in my online classes I tend to work way more. Even though I spend all that setup time before the semester to make sure I don't have to work as much it doesn't matter. They'll have a question here or there's an issue here or a due date will be slightly off. You know when you pull a shell into the next semester you might miss something. That and just keeping up with the grading. I feel like when I teach online I never ever stop.

Some aspects of time Jake expected, such as grading, but others, like students' expectation of access to their instructor, he was not prepared for. Despite specific language in his syllabus that discussed times he would be available online and in his physical office, he saw students wanting him to be available almost 24/7:

But I find that students just expect you to be like a little chat button. But if you ask them about that professor if they were in a f2f class they wouldn't say that at all. So I think the way they think about their education, about teaching and learning like their instructor is so different when they're online. I don't know if it's passive like if they just slip into that frame of mind but it's crazy because their expectations are bizarre.

Here Jake directly related students' expectation of his availability to their way of thinking about education, teaching, and learning online. Although he wasn't sure why it happens or how it connects, he identified that students "walk into" an online class with a different set of standards of the instructor than a face-to-face course.

Katie reflected that she has a different response time policy for her mediated or online courses than her face-to-face courses due to the lack of physical interaction that takes place. She saw a need for additional space for communication because informal discussion time, such as before class starts or after class ends, is not available to students in an online course. The language in her course materials stated she'll respond within 24 hours to most inquiries, but she said that she typically responds within a few hours. Her policy comes directly from the same expectations Jake discussed in his interview. As a student, Katie was discontent with any instructor who took long to answer their online students because of the idea that is promoted to students that online learning is on their own time. If it is truly on their schedule, Katie saw only



answering their questions during typical “school” hours as not supportive to these environments. Cuthbertson and Falcone (2014) agreed that it is important to be available in an online course, because it encourages student engagement and a sense of overall community in the course. However, this can be complicated by the sheer amount of work to do in an online course, which was emphasized by Jake.

Norma sets aside specific hours when students can reach her via Webcourses in the chat function, something she called “online office hours.” During this time, students can expect an almost immediate response unless she is working with another student. She also saw her online students come to her physical office hours, which speaks to the population at UCF who takes online classes. Because of this specific population, where students that take online courses are not always distance learners, Norma liked when students came to her office in person to work through their online assignments.

Norma brought up a good point that online courses are less flexible at times depending on the location of the online student. Issues like time zone and career can influence whether those due dates are convenient or not:

Flexibility, and being able to theoretically learn on demand, just as long as you do certain things within the span of seven days, you know. I think what's interesting is that people say accessibility, but I think one of the things that we just talked about was what really is accessible, the digital divide, all that kind of thing, so accessibility seems to be more of a complex issue than what you normally think about. Because like for instance, I have my students to do a video for their peer review, and one of my students emailed me and said I

don't have a microphone, right? And so it's little things like that you don't think about as far as accessibility.

This raises the question: is online learning as flexible as it is marketed? According to these online instructors, it really can't be considering existing models in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric. Because many instructors teach both online and face-to-face courses, they need to be available for both of those populations of students. It's unfair to assume instructors will be available by email so often that students can be guaranteed a two-hour response time, especially when most instructors are working with 100+ students. In terms of equity and labor also, instructors are not being paid more for online courses, despite students paying more to enroll in them. While this may seem small, disparities like this can create the expectations and perceptions instructors are finding themselves working with in online students.

### Feedback

To make up for the loss of class time, in which instructors can usually address common issues with a paper or writing assignment, Jake uses video feedback to discuss papers with his students. In these video comments, he focuses on just a few main points, emphasizing that as one of his key feedback strategies. These comments allowed him to save time while he is commenting on the higher quantities of work that students do in an online class.

He saw video comments as a way of combining feedback with personalization in the course. In addition to getting the feedback, which students want to improve their papers, they get to see his face and hear him speak. This makes the video feedback seem more like one-on-one conferences rather than comments. Students are then able to apply his video feedback into revisions of the paper, with a memo attached articulating how they incorporated the feedback he

provided to produce a better product. The purpose of this is to focus feedback on making students better writers, not justifying a grade, which is a large issue with instructor-centered feedback. Jake stated that from his own feedback from students they enjoyed the feedback because it was more retainable and more relatable.

The video comments came from Jake's need to negotiate student expectations of feedback with his own ability to provide timely, useful feedback to all his students. Katie's own approach to feedback stemmed from her own expectations as a student. She saw feedback on her work as a way to build connections between instructors and students and did not feel as though that often happened in an online course. She said she would often receive "some rubric clicks and a couple of comments on a paper, but I didn't hear from them with the discussion posts; hardly heard from them at all." Because of this, as an instructor she dedicates her time to a specific quantity of feedback on both low-stakes and high-stakes assignments, so that she can feel "heard from" by her students.

Norma balanced the feedback she provided based on what she felt the students need feedback on. She implemented reading quizzes in her online courses because she could see if they understood a concept from the reading. She noted that "there's only so much feedback you can give. . . like a genre is a system of classifications, true or false." To her and Jake, feedback seemed tied directly to helping the students improve as a writer, whereas Katie saw feedback as another level of community building in the online classroom.

### Classroom Community

Norma discussed building classroom community in her online courses. She noted that while some instructors chose to use mediums outside of the LMS to build community, she

wanted students to be able to separate their school and personal spaces if they wanted to. Therefore, this semester she tried a new thing where she created a discussion board which she called a “playground.” When asked if students were utilizing this space, she said more often she was the one who tried to engage the space:

Some. It's so funny because the first time I posted like a silly meme and then like, you know, people looked at it or liked it, and then I had a student post a video and she was like, I wondered what my classmates think. And I was like, the only one that responded even though like in the course announcements, I was like, your classmate posted something in the potentially related like playground area, you know, check it out. And nothing. And then, what was it a couple of weeks ago there was this like glitch why people weren't able to see their grades and then I figured out it was a button I had like clicked, so I posted the whole story in the discussion board, like look y'all, this is what happened.

Students in her class were more likely to respond to her weekly announcements than use the discussion board for questions.

Classroom community was important to Katie as an instructor because she noticed a lack of it in her online courses as a student. While she said that this lack of community did not inhibit her grades as a student, she admitted that it impacted her engagement with the course. Classroom community has been identified as important in a variety of scholarship (Bailie, 2014; Cuthbertson & Falcone, 2014; Lehman & Conceição, 2014), so it comes as no surprise that Katie saw classroom community as important. The desire to build community stems from a need to

again make online classes seem more like face-to-face classes. When asked why Katie chose discussions as a form of peer-to-peer interaction in her course she stated:

As a faculty member now, when I have all my discussions, I do still want my students to reply because I want us to try to build a sense of classroom community, and I want them to be engaging with each other like they would be if they were having a face-to-face class.

When listing the aspects of what she thinks what makes an effective online instructor, Katie specifically noted that “they’ll try to build classroom community.” *Trying* is an important aspect of what she is saying, though. As a student, she seemed to value the instructor’s efforts to build classroom community, more than the actual success of those efforts. However, this reflects the importance of student perception and expectations in a course. While she valued the attempts, an instructor’s pedagogical goals are not always transparent in online courses. Norma discussed this issue earlier when she noted that in face-to-face classes she can read a room and see if students are confused about why they are doing an assignment and then discuss the goal from there. However, this becomes more difficult in an online space where there is already so much content on a learning management system. It seems that listing the justification to every pedagogical decision would be redundant and unnecessary.

### Students

Many students in this study enjoyed online classes, which is on par with the surveys done through the CDL, but students still did not see online classes as the same sites of learning as their face-to-face classes. Students often evaluated online courses as “good” and “easy,” but were

afraid of the lack of consistency across instructors. If the online course did not seem organized to their standards, then they wrote off any learning that may happen in the course, assuming that the instructor just shouldn't teach online. Many of the participants were frustrated with the lack of availability of face-to-face courses because they feared taking important or difficult courses online. Overall, even the students who saw online courses as a positive aspect of their education at UCF still thought face-to-face courses were better for their learning.

### Learning in Online Discussion

A main division between face-to-face and online courses is that the discussion component is often transformed when moved to an online space. However, scholarship stresses that some sort of in-class discussion is vital for building community in a course (Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & Conceição-Runlee, 2000), and other learning scholarship insist that writing is social and discussion helps build knowledge (Rohr & Costello, 2015). The students in this study seemed to yearn for a version of their face-to-face courses in-class discussion, but were frustrated by the lack of success these online discussion boards had in replicating this.

Ruth echoed a discomfort with the discussion component of online courses. She stated that the formality of the weekly discussion posts made it difficult for her to converse with her classmates about her learning of the material. This idea of learning management systems as formal spaces was like the discussion Jessica provided about informal versus formal writing spaces. Jessica largely attributed this conflict to whether she was using the Canvas phone app or her laptop, stating that her phone felt more useful for casual messaging, while her laptop seemed more formal.

It appears all student participants did not feel comfortable learning in a formal writing environment, but instead wanted an informal space to collect their ideas before they were assessed on the learning that should be taking place. This issue with online discussions was important to Ruth because of the way she self-identified as a learner. She noted that:

I find that just being in my own head isn't mentally stimulating, that if I wanted to read something and think what I thought about it, I would read it and think what I thought and that I like other people's voices, especially because I feel like my perspective is always a little weird and I would like to see a normal person's thoughts also.

Ali similarly stated that she also wanted these in-class discussions to help facilitate her learning and didn't see that happening in any of her online classes. Both students held a strong perception that these online discussions were not for themselves or their classmates, but were just assessment measures made by the instructor. Because of this, Ali saw herself and her classmates "performing" more than creating knowledge in the Canvas discussion board.

Assessment was a key component of this discomfort. A crucial difference between online and face-to-face discussions, as pointed out by the student participants, is the evaluation portion of the discussion. In face-to-face courses, although some teachers do grade on "course engagement," this does not usually directly correlate to the same formal written post that comes from online discussion boards. Ruth states that:

It's not always clear, like, "Am I being graded on how professional I sound?" Or, "Am I being graded on the content of my ideas?" Or, like, "Is this...?" Let me put it this way, "Is this product work or process work? Does this need to look neat and clean and

professional, or is this where I hash out my ideas?” And that’s never... that distinction has never been made in any of my classes for the discussions.

Because Ruth wasn’t sure of her role in the class (should she be telling her classmates that their understanding of the reading is incorrect) or her stake in the course (how was she being assessed) she did not feel that the online discussions were facilitating her understanding of the material in the same way oral discussions in face-to-face classes are.

When asked about a potential solution to this issue, Ruth discussed how she would rather online courses try to emulate the process over product feel of in-class discussions. In fact, she mentioned how she prefers to not see her classmates’ posts before she makes her own response. Because of her issues with assessment, she admitted this would cause anxiety, but she felt like she would be more likely to produce an authentic response if there were opportunities for failure in the low-stake assignments.

J. B. Arbaugh and Raquel Benbunan-Fich (2006) asked teachers to question whether the collaborative model of teaching that has been proven most effective in face-to-face courses is the best approach to online learning. Similarly, Teshia Roby, Susan Ashe, Neha Singh, and Curtis Clark (2013) discussed that “a challenge for online instructors is to re-interpret student engagement for the online learning environment” (p. 30). Instructors continuously attempt to mirror their face-to-face activities and classrooms in an online environment, but are these crossovers having the same outcome in this very different medium? The students in this study said no. Ali suggested that instructors stop trying to make online discussions look like in-class informal discussions because it just doesn’t seem to work. She was unsure of what should replace them, or how they would be designed, but she did still feel the desire for a way to interact



with her instructor and classmates during their learning process. Many students felt that without that communication the online class would be too different from their other classes at the university. However, the current design of discussion boards was not ideal for many of the participants in the study. Whether it is the design of the platform or the execution, if we accept the assumption that online courses and face-to-face courses are different then we need to accept that the learning that occurs in these spaces will and should look different too.

### Expectations of Workload and Time

Flexibility, or “working on it on your own time,” was important to Brittany in online courses—she stated that was the main appeal of online courses for her. With this expectation of flexibility came with the idea that online courses should be “efficient” and “simple.” Brittany used these words to describe good online writing courses 10 times in her hour-long interview, and Jessica also used “simple” and “easy” as synonyms for good classes multiple times in her interview. Students did not anticipate spending more time in their online courses than their face-to-face. Because of this expectation, Ali and Brittany often referred to “good” online courses as those they did not have to re-learn how to navigate. For example, Brittany was very attached to the calendar function of the Canvas LMS. This was the main way she preferred to get her information about assignment due dates and expectations, and if this function was not utilized she immediately became frustrated in the online course. For her this was more than an inconvenience; it interfered with her time management strategies to balance a full load of online courses.

When discussing the preconceived expectation that students take online courses because they were flexible, Ruth admitted they are not that flexible. Like Jessica, who discussed that the

flexibility seemed more like a perception than an actual thing, Ruth stated that “they gave you flexibility, but depending on the class, it’s not that much flexibility, because you’re still required to do a certain amount of things per week.” The Department of Writing and Rhetoric’s online courses are not “work at your own place” courses, although they additionally are not completely synchronous. The students described the online courses as being flexible in the way that they could technically do the work at whatever time of day they wanted to, but it was still due at similar times as their face-to-face course work.

Jessica discussed a time when her online instructor had assignments due at noon on Tuesdays and Thursdays, instead of the typical 11:59 PM due date that many students at UCF are accustomed to. Jessica agreed with the thought process behind the change and appreciated her instructor’s transparency: he asked students to turn in assignments at noon because so many students have questions in the hours leading up to the assignment due date. A due date in the middle of the day when he was often in his office or office hours meant he could better be available for their questions. However, this abnormality created so many issues with submission times that it was eventually changed to 11:59 PM by the middle of the semester.

It was interesting to see so many students discuss how inflexible their online courses are when so much scholarship and marketing material surrounding online courses states flexibility as the main reason students enroll in the course (UCF Center for Distributed Learning). Cole (2000) made the claim that online flexibility allows students to learn anywhere at any time, even going as far as to say participants can collapse time and space (as cited in Anderson, 2004). However, the development of online courses that mirror face-to-face classes with submission

times and consistent weekly deadlines makes this extreme sense of flexibility false from the students' perspective.

What seems to be another complication is that students are asked for more work in courses that already, on average, have more workload than a face-to-face course. Ali noted that she was surprised at the amount of writing she had to do in an upper-level online writing course and Ruth discussed that she did not do well in a course because of the sheer amount of assignments due, even though she admitted that the assignments were not difficult to complete. What seems important though is that students in these online courses seem to need to see the value in the work they are doing. If they are, the additional work in an online class seems important, and therefore they seem more willing to complete it. Ruth shed light on this while discussing one of her first online graduate courses:

So, we read about it and then we had to use it. So, that felt more meaningful, I think. I think that was why it was easier for me to keep up with it. And she even had, like, optional homework that she wouldn't... of course she wouldn't check to see if you did it, but it would, like, help you. So, I found myself doing the extra stuff because it really did contribute to how I understood what we were doing.

Prior research conducted at UCF cites that students overall say that they are satisfied with their experiences in fully online courses and would take another online course. However, students also state that when they withdraw from online courses, it is due to technology issues, an underestimation of the amount of work required for course completion, and personal issues ("Distributed Learning Impact Evaluation"). Many of my participants echoed these same difficulties when encountering online courses, especially the expectation of the amount of work

they would have to complete. This issue seems to be even more prevalent in a writing intensive course. While the UCF survey data continuously says the approval rate of online courses is high, that was not reflected in the individual conversations in this study.

### Feedback

Feedback was important to students; the expectation was that online instructors would provide both feedback *in greater quantity* and of *higher quality*, which is in opposition to how some of the instructors of this study have discussed online course feedback. For some participants, this came from their experience in online writing courses. Jessica discussed feedback frequently as a positive attribute of online courses, inferring that her instructors gave more feedback in an online class to compensate for the interaction lost in that medium. She did not see feedback as an opportunity for two-way communication, however, stating that she never discussed her feedback with an instructor either through email, Canvas, or office hours. Instead she chose to implement the feedback she received, calling it an “I heard you” type of participation.

For Ruth, a lack of feedback and direction tied into her frustration over how she was assessed in an online class. As discussed earlier, Ruth was unsure about discussion board posts because she was never sure how she would be evaluated. Similarly, she found that feedback did not help counter this at all. She said that she would see her instructors nudging her to write more in discussion boards, especially in the case of one particular graduate-level course, but she did not see a penalty on her grade nor see the value for her learning by increasing the length of her responses. Because there was no intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, she largely ignored those types of comments.

Brittany noted that she didn't want to risk the chance of bad feedback and she stayed away from taking difficult classes online, noting that she saved her "easy" classes for online in case the course was not set up efficiently by the instructor. Brittany was unconfident in her ability to navigate different subject areas without the guidance of face-to-face interactions with her instructors. Oddly enough, she felt the same way about her sociology courses, which have hundreds of students enrolled in the course.

The students and instructors in this study provided interesting moments of agreement and conflict in this study. This became even more complicated when their responses were also compared to the information provided by CDL at UCF. In this chapter, I summarized my findings; in Chapter Five I will discuss the implications found from the data outlined in Chapter Four. I then provide classroom- and department-wide suggestions for incorporating the analytical results from this study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The instructors in this study noted that online courses are more work and they feel as though students do not expect to learn online in the same way that they expect to learn in a face-to-face. While IDL and CDL provide useful resources to instructors, writing-intensive classes seem to provide unique sets of issues and benefits that need to be further explored to improve current pedagogy. The university itself does have an award-winning online development program, but this thesis begins to question if the success of this online development program is effective for the high number of online writing courses. This is especially problematic with writing courses due to the small size of the classes and the strong emphasis on writing and collaboration.

One participant offered a unique perspective as both a previous online student and a current online instructor who completed the IDL training required by UCF. In the interview, Katie could move back and forth between these identities (student and now instructor) to reflect on how her previous expectations and perceptions about online courses as a student worked with and against her current perceptions and expectations as an instructor. Overall, Katie summarized her student experience with online courses this way:

That was a long tangent just to say that as a student I had some problems with online courses. I thought that they were easy. I thought that the instructor didn't do a whole lot. I felt like I didn't get a lot of feedback from the instructors. Maybe I'd get some rubric clicks and a couple of comments on a paper, but I didn't hear from them with the discussion posts, hardly heard from them at all. My mixed mode class that I took as an undergraduate was better because I had that face-to-

face component. I could talk to the instructor, ask questions face-to-face. She validated the things that I talked about during class. I just felt like I was able to make more of a connection. I would say, in general, that those feelings remained the same for grad school, I think. I took a class with a faculty member who also did not provide as much feedback as I would have assumed.

This unique perspective encouraged me to synthesize both the instructor and student perceptions and expectations of this study. While previously published research often looked at these two populations as separate entities in an online class, Katie's interview shows the benefit of bridging the gap using conversations surrounding transparency, access, and professional development opportunities.

### Transparency

Previous research acknowledges that students learn better when they are motivated and engaged in the content (Mandernach, 2009; Winkelmes, 2013), so it is in faculty members' best interest to be transparent about these working parts and continue to get feedback from what students are expecting and perceiving from online courses. Based on my research, I argue that it is even more important for online classes to be more transparent.

Mary Winkelmes (2013) pointed to two practices of transparency that seem to improve student learning in courses in the humanities. She said that in introductory courses instructors should:

- Discuss assignments' learning goals and design rationale before students begin each assignment (in classes ranging in size from thirty-one to sixty-five students).

- Debrief graded tests and assignments in class (in classes ranging in size from sixty-six to three hundred students). (p. 51)

Her research focused on face-to-face, often large lecture courses, which is not the same design as the participants of this study. However, the practices still seem applicable when compared to what the students said they wanted from their online courses. The instructors in this study were already debriefing graded assignments through individual feedback; however, large group feedback focusing on trends or common issues with the assignment may help students position themselves amongst their peers in an online course, something that doesn't often happen in those online spaces, but often happens in a face-to-face course. Based on my research, I found that a video announcement or discussion board post may be a place for this type of general feedback in an online class. An issue arises though when instructors try to ensure that students see the content they post on the classroom learning management system. An investigation of the impact of these general discussions of feedback would be an interesting way to continue the research from this study.

Additionally, discussing the learning goals and design rationale before students begin each assignment seems integral to the online course process. Jake, Norma, and Katie discussed that in the IDL course, their instructional designer walked them through the design of their online course and the resources that UCF offers. The presentation at the end of IDL asks instructors to present their completed module, along with a rationale that discusses why certain pedagogical decisions were made. This rationale does not, however, always make its way into the Canvas Learning Management System, which seems to impact the way students perceive their online instructors. Students who take online courses have been told to be self-starters and experts in



time management, but the ways that they do this for themselves sometimes are at odds with the setup of the course, which is frustrating for them.

This may involve an additional evaluation tool beside the student evaluations that occur at the end of the semester. Boyd (2008) spoke at length about the value of transparency in online writing courses. Her study of student perceptions found that students did not often understand the reasoning behind their online work, and therefore were not able to connect it to their learning. They missed typical face-to-face elements of learning, such as instructor interaction and feedback, and these were not appropriately substituted with the peer communication embedded in online courses. Boyd's results concur with my own from this study. Brittany, Ruth, and Ali often assumed that their instructors were being unhelpful or lazy in their interactions with the online course, and instead wanted to make the students do more of the work. Norma and Jake, on the other hand, saw that it was useful to student's learning for them to be doing a lot of work in the course, as they directly attributed writing to learning. This type of disagreement between instructors and students often occurs in face-to-face courses as well, typically in peer review or group assignments. The need for transparency then extends beyond just an online writing course, and can be useful for writing courses in all modalities. This lack of transparency seems to be a key aspect of the disconnect between these populations; however, transparency comes at a price.

As discussed earlier in this study, transparency would increase the amount of work and time that needed to be put into an online course. Again, unlike a face-to-face course, transparency cannot come through an informal discussion. Instead it must be written or discussed in a video and posted on the learning management system in a location that the students would see during their navigation of the course.

Many students in this study enjoyed an online class, which is on par with the surveys completed by CDL, but students still did not see online classes as the same sites of learning as their face-to-face classes. Instructors acknowledged this challenge and discussed strategies to increase student engagement in their courses, but still stated that they often began courses with the assumption that students are there to have learning done to them rather than to engage in the activity of it.

### Access

The instructors, students, and materials from CDL all mentioned access as a primary benefit of online education. CDL requires any online instruction course include material that is “accessible anytime, anywhere.” The question becomes, although access is a great thing to strive for, what is the access to? Most of the technology in the Canvas LMS focuses on distributing knowledge to students, assuming that learning is a one-way direction. CDL emphasizes using technology because it is available, by promoting the way array of tools and resources UCF offers its students and instructors. However, there is not as much discussion around how technology improves the learning in the course by way of improving student satisfaction.

Both the instructors and the students in this study used the words access and flexibility to show that they have been taught that these are the principal tenets of online education. Students did not, however, expect to be active participants of the learning experience in the online classroom; they instead expected information to be put on Canvas and then to be evaluated on their ability to repeat this knowledge. This is true even in a writing course, which instructors in this study, such as Jake, found particularly puzzling.

Freire's (2002) banking model of education helps us see the issue in providing technology just because it is available and the issue in striving for access over a meaningful learning experience. In this banking model, teachers teach and students are taught, because teachers are the ones with knowledge and the students are without. This belief shows students as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge by their teacher. By providing technology that simply provides content instruction to the students without thinking through the supplemental instruction or assignments that the technology is supposed to be helping, the online course shows students that knowledge is something the course *provides*.

Freire's discussion relates to Bailie's (2014) student-as-consumer model where institutions see students as customers who buy knowledge, expecting to be satisfied with the quality of their instruction and institution. CDL's focus on access and student satisfaction further promotes the belief that online education is about telling students information, rather than creating a learning environment. Without face-to-face interaction and because of outdated beliefs about how texts alone disseminate knowledge, online spaces seem to easily fall victim to this banking model. Students then are not provided a voice in their online courses and consequently don't feel like they are learning anything other than the ability to regurgitate content.

### Professional Development

One drawback of IDL 6543 is the lack of theoretical discussion in the course and the focus on procedural knowledge and access to resources. However, as discussed earlier in this thesis, with the diverse number of instructors who take IDL 6543, both from inside UCF and from other institutions, it does not make sense for this one-semester course to take on so many

different objectives. The instructors in this study, though, wanted to continue to learn about how to improve in their online instruction and were often in conversation with peers about how to improve common issues, such as the discussion board. CDL also provides instructors access to research being conducted at UCF about online learning and the types of students who are enrolling in online education; however, this again (like IDL 6543) is not directly tied to the discipline of writing studies' needs. The Department of Writing and Rhetoric faculty I spoke with especially would value professional development and research opportunities focused around how to improve learning in both their newly developed major courses and the hundreds of sections of first-year composition that instructors teach each semester. As shown throughout this study, online writing instruction is a rich field with many conversations occurring, and keeping up with this research through reading groups or workshops would benefit all the instructors in the department and consequently benefit the students.

Departmental support also seems integral to battle some of the drawbacks of online instruction. In terms of labor and equity, all the instructors in this study agreed that teaching online courses is already more work and unfortunately many of the implications of this study require more work to be done. By sharing resources and providing opportunities to discuss online teaching, though, the Department of Writing and Rhetoric can help ease some of the pressure on individual instructors. For example, the previously mentioned rationale of learning goals and assignment design does not have to be something an instructor writes every semester. With a committee in charge of helping research and design online instruction, the department could offer sample rationales or templates that would help instructors write these, depending on the assignment. A testament of online instruction is repetition and consistency, so it does not

seem to be problematic if multiple instructors format these rationales in similar ways.

Additionally, instructors in the department are already sharing assignments, instructional materials, and lesson plans, so it seems only natural that we also do this in our mixed-mode and online courses.

Overall, the research of and implementation of continued professional development seems important. At the time of this study, UCF's CDL was in the process of creating a second course to follow IDL 6543 at UCF. The instructional designers from CDL acknowledged the limitations of a single course for online instructors at UCF, especially because of the lack of discipline-specific instruction in IDL 6543. Therefore, CDL is testing another semester-long course, which would be voluntary, where instructors can continue the work they did in the IDL 6534 showcase. The implementation of this course was still in the testing phase at the time of this project, but future research at UCF should take this course into consideration when discussing the institution's values of online instruction.

### Implications

The participants in this study did share a common belief that online courses are different from face-to-face and need to be treated as such by the institution, instructors, and the students. Jake and Katie spoke at length about the issues instructors run into when assignments or activities they loved in their face-to-face classes may not work in an online medium. Jake said he often saw his colleagues forcing activities that just don't work in the space of an online course. This same issue arises in the conversation surrounding discussion boards as sites of learning. Hewett and Powers (2005) told scholars that "to succeed in online environments and with online

media, professionals cannot solely rely on methods deemed ‘successful’ in traditional, brick and mortar situations; rather they need new instructional approaches that address distinctive qualities of teaching and learning online” (“Training Principles”). This includes professional development opportunities beyond IDL 6543. Future research should investigate the presence of transparency in OWI and the effectiveness of certain strategies regarding student perceptions and expectations.

I noticed that many of the comments from instructors and students were issues frequently discussed in literature about online writing instruction. The main purpose of the study then seems to be a call for instructors to become more aware of current literature about online writing instruction. This literature can be an important resource for instructors who first become instructors of online writing courses, as well as instructors who have been teaching online for some time. The results from this study suggest that instructors would benefit from some professional development opportunities, such as:

- Reading groups focused around current online writing instruction scholarship
- Task groups that tackle a difficult aspect of online writing courses with multiple instructors in the department
- Sharing online instruction resources in a Web course shell
- Training about utilization of technologies (videos, audio feedback, etc.)
- Drafting assignment rationales and sharing them with instructors in the department

Instructors also agreed that there did not seem to be strong alignment between what UCF promotes in online courses, what instructors do in online courses, and what students expect in

online courses and discussed their interest in solving some of the common complications of an online writing course. Instructors struggled with student expectations and perspectives, and overall seemed to be unaware of how to deal with the struggle. This was particularly noticeable in terms of the expectation of workload and time, and LMS discussions as sites of learning. Future research should further investigate these specific themes to see how instructors are navigating these struggles.

This research has discovered the benefit of looking at expectations and perceptions of online learning in three locations: the students, the instructors, and the institution. An important aspect of this study that was not investigated, however, was what exactly we mean when we use the terms *expectations* and *perceptions*. This research was guided by the understanding that the three populations that were studied were defining these terms in the same way. However, in rhetoric and composition, scholars should be especially diligent about investigating the meaning behind the words and phrases that guide research. Future research should more fully investigate the meaning behind expectations and perceptions of online courses at the institution, in the department, and in the classroom.

While this study focused on online writing classes, other studies could use a similar methodology to discover their own departmental needs. This research can also be applied to hybrid or face-to-face courses. Many of the issues encouraged by the instructors in this study, such as student disinterest in work or time-consuming work of providing feedback, are also frequently encouraged in face-to-face courses. Like Bourelle et al. (2016) and Hewett and Warnock (2015), this study calls for more investigations into the ways that online writing

scholarship can continue to improve our pedagogy and the place of our department in the institutions in which they reside.



## **APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**  
**FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Emily Rose Proulx**

Date: **September 27, 2016**

Dear Researcher:

On 09/27/2016, the IRB approved the following minor modifications as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Modification Type:	Changes to the consent and protocol and additional study tool
Project Title:	The Literacy Practices of Students Enrolled in Online Writing Courses
Investigator:	Emily Rose Proulx
IRB Number:	SBE-16-12428
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patria Davis".

Signature applied by Patria Davis on 09/27/2016 04:49:58 PM EDT

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX B: IRB ADDENDUM**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**  
**FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Emily Rose Proulx**

Date: **February 02, 2017**

Dear Researcher:

On 02/02/2017, the IRB approved the following modifications as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Modification Type:	Addition of faculty interviews, changes made to the protocol and new consent
Project Title:	The Literacy Practices of Students Enrolled in Online Writing Courses
Investigator:	Emily Rose Proulx
IRB Number:	SBE-16-12428
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gillian Amy Mary Morien".

Signature applied by Gillian Amy Mary Morien on 02/02/2017 10:40:19 AM EST

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS STUDENTS**

## **RESEARCH INSTRUMENT: SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT**

### **Research Study: The Literacy Practices of Students Enrolled in Online Writing Courses**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Introduce self and project.

Introduce interview process: With your consent, this interview will be audiotaped. The interviews will be transcribed, and files will be stored in a security enabled computer file, to be accessed for reference if needed. You may also refuse to answer any questions or say that you need to stop the interview or the recording.

Describe project goal for the interview: At this point, you have graciously agreed to talk with me about your experience with online courses. The purpose of the interview is (1) to talk generally about your history with online courses; (2) to share current and past writing experiences and to compare and contrast these different these; and (2) to talk about your experience as a student in this course can be compared to your other experiences.

Describe eventual benefits: to help us better understand student needs in online courses, in order to better develop online pedagogy, specifically in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric.

#### **Initial Interview Questions for Students**

1. Tell me about your experience with online courses, either at UCF or another institution.
2. Tell me about any initial difficulties you have had with these types of classes.
3. Tell me about your own typical online practices.
4. Do you prefer online courses or face to face courses?
5. Does this preference change depending on the content of the course?
6. How often do you meet with your professor for an online course? Is this more or less than a face to face course?
7. How often do you speak with your peers in an online course outside of class assignments? Is this more or less than a face to face class?
8. How often do you anticipate checking Webcourses for this class?

## **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS**

## **RESEARCH INSTRUMENT: SAMPLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR INSTRUCTOR**

### **Research Study: The Literacy Practices of Students Enrolled in Online Writing Courses**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Introduce self and project.

Introduce interview process: With your consent, this interview will be audiotaped. The interviews will be transcribed, and files will be stored in a security enabled computer file, to be accessed for reference if needed. You may also refuse to answer any questions or say that you need to stop the interview or the recording.

Describe project goal for the interview: At this point, you have graciously agreed to talk with me about your experience with online courses. The purpose of the interview is (1) to talk generally about your history with online courses; (2) to share current and past writing experiences and to compare and contrast these different these; and (3) to talk about your experience as an instructor being trained to teach online courses.

Describe eventual benefits: to help us better understand student needs in online courses, in order to better develop online pedagogy, specifically in the Department of Writing and Rhetoric.

#### **Initial Interview Questions for Instructor**

1. Tell me about your experience with online courses, either at UCF or another institution.
2. Tell me about any initial challenges you have had with these types of classes.
3. Tell me what you feel like are the benefits of online writing courses.
4. What do you feel are the most important practices to ensure a student's success in online courses?
5. Why did you decide to become an online writing instructor?
6. Tell me about the process of becoming an online instructor at UCF. Are there additional requirements from the Department of Writing and Rhetoric?
7. What resources are available to you as an instructor of online writing courses? Have you taken advantage of these resources?
8. Walk me through your process for developing an online course. Do you consult other peers or instructors or scholarship during this process?
  - o If the instructor is comfortable they would then walk me through a Webcourses shell they created for their online class and discuss the thought process behind these decisions.



## **APPENDIX E: CDL RUBRIC**



## Course Rubric

### Course/Instructor Introduction

Criteria	Identified
Instructions are provided and clearly define where students should begin.	
Clear distinction of online expectations/activities is provided. (Also face-to-face expectations if mixed-mode.)	
Protocols for class behavior related to email, discussions, and class chats are included.	
Course Introduction or Instructor Introduction/Bio is provided (optional).	
Course Software/Hardware requirements are established for students.	
<b>Notes:</b>	

### Course Tools

Criteria	Identified
Webcourses@UCF tools and 3 <sup>rd</sup> party tools support a variety of interactions (e.g., student-to-student, student-to-content, student-to-instructor, and student-to-other).	
Webcourses@UCF Tools and 3 <sup>rd</sup> party tools support learning objectives and course activities/interaction.	
<b>Notes:</b>	

### Accessibility/Copyright/FERPA

Criteria	Identified
Syllabus or Protocols include a notification for students with disabilities to register with UCF's Office of Student Disability Services.	
The course content is accessible (Section 508 and ADA compliant), for example, alt text for images, captions for video, and table headings are included.	
Course content is copyright compliant.	
Course interactions and communications are FERPA compliant.	
<b>Notes:</b>	



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**Course/Module Objectives**

Criteria	Identified
Course learning objectives and outcomes are measurable and clearly stated.	
Module learning objectives and outcomes are measurable and clearly stated.	
Course assessment strategy aligns with expected course outcomes.	
Module assessment(s) measures module outcomes.	
If mixed mode (M), clear objectives for face-to-face and online expectations are provided.	
<b>Notes:</b>	

**Course Activities/Interaction**

Criteria	Identified
Student-to- <b>content</b> activities promote learning outcomes.	
Student-to- <b>student</b> activities promote learning outcomes.	
Student-to- <b>instructor</b> activities promote learning outcomes.	
Student-to- <b>other</b> activities promote learning outcomes ( <i>e.g.</i> , guest speakers, field trips).	
Activity instructions deliver clear student expectations and match course objectives.	
Activities/Interactions promote learning on all domains of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.	
Rubrics are used for activities/interactions with instructions to define expected outcomes prior to assessment grading (optional).	
<b>Notes:</b>	

**Assessment Strategy**

Criteria	Identified
Assessments match learning objectives.	
Course grading policy is defined in syllabus.	
Grading policy is clearly defined for each course assessment.	
Rubrics define activity expectations/grading (optional).	
Self-assessments are incorporated when applicable (optional).	
Instructor grading/feedback protocol is clearly stated with all activities/interactions. (When will students know their grades/progress?)	
<b>Notes:</b>	



**Course Administration/Student Support**

Criteria	Identified
Technical support information is provided for students (e.g., Online@UCF Support contact information, UCF Learning Online, Service Desk contact information).	
Clear tutorials, directions and student technical support information for using Webcourses@UCF tools (e.g., Webcourses@UCF Orientation) and 3 <sup>rd</sup> party tools are provided.	
Protocols for student questions (content/assignment/assessment) are clearly defined (e.g., 3-before-me, technical help discussion forum, office hours, Online@UCF Support).	
Tutorials are provided for students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Knights Online</li><li>• LMS Tutorials</li><li>• UCF Information Fluency Modules</li><li>• All 3<sup>rd</sup> Party tutorials (If applicable)</li></ul>	
<b>Notes:</b>	

**General Notes:**

UCF Online Course Rubric by [Center for Distributed Learning at the University of Central Florida](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](#).



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