Six Practical Approaches for Teaching Writing Online

THIS SPRING, THE COVID-19 pandemic forced many to make a sudden transition to online teaching, a field with its own rich body of research, best practices, and good ideas. While few of us have had time to fully immerse ourselves in this literature, we can take a few lessons from the field. Rather than thinking about what doesn't work online, we can instead think about what does by focusing on the "affordances" of the online teaching mode—the things that online teaching enables us to do. By keeping in mind that different modes of teaching, like different modes of writing, have "particular affordances that offer potentials and limitations for communication and representation," we can make better use of our new online teaching spaces (Alexander, Powell and Green 2012, 2).

Here are six practical approaches that embrace the affordances of online teaching from our composition and business writing classrooms:

Don't Ditch the Workshop:

If you normally teach using hands-on writing workshops, you may worry that the online classroom is too cold or impersonal to support your practice. It can be, but it doesn't have to be! While the asynchronous environment tends to reduce the spontaneity of unravelling a writing challenge while sitting around a table, it provides more time to reflect.

Take advantage of this by using your LMS's discussion board to allow students to answer questions that will help them reflect meaningfully on their work and the work of their peers. Ask students to identify the main strands of argument in their partner's paper, for example, and then put together a reverse outline. By so doing, you'll provide much-needed structure while also inviting students to dig deeper into their peers' work, more so than they might do during a more free-flowing face-to-face workshop. Finally,

you'll engage students in meaningful reflection, which has been shown to improve learning and retention (Chase, Germundson, Brownstein, and Distad, 2001).

Keep It Hands-On:

With a little planning, you can reproduce the key lessons of your face-to-face writing instruction using screencast software. If you would normally show students how to effectively break down and analyze a piece of evidence during a student workshop, you still can! Ask for a student volunteer to submit their work a bit early, select a passage with particularly strong evidence, and then open it up in Word. Record yourself making the same changes you'd make in class, offer the same helpful commentary, and end with the same types of suggestions for further application. You can then share the screencast with students as content or incorporate it as part of your discussion board workshop instructions. If you're not comfortable making your own videos, there are many videos on YouTube and elsewhere that you can share with your students—the key is to do so in response to help them overcome specific learning challenges.

Employ Exemplars.

To write effectively across disciplines, students must produce writing that is strategic, audience focused, efficient, and precise. To help students understand how to do so—a particular challenge when transitioning to online learning—instructors should provide examples of the desired completed writing assignment, especially examples of past graded work. As Pytash and Morgan note, "The study of models provides students with quality examples to inform their writing" (2014, 94). These exemplars make expectations clear, so they can be a great basis for helping all students meet expectations. Instructors can then facilitate an examination of a range of graded papers asking students to share their analyses, via

discussion board or web conference, of what they think is good or bad about the papers reviewed. This offers students the experience of critically thinking through what is required to produce a passing paper, and greatly advances student success.

It is important that students understand how their work will be graded. In addition to the exercises outlined above, students can benefit from support provided by the writing lab, where they can explore examples of memoranda, letters, informal and formal business reports, etc.

Self-Directed and Peer Revision:

Mastering writing requires both repetition and critical analysis by the student to enhance understanding and to minimize future errors. One effective technique is to require students to conduct a self-assessment of their writing assignments prior to submission; this type of self-assessment builds valuable metacognitive skills (Zhao et al 2014). Grammarly is a resource that

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Summer 2 - classes begin - Jun 24
All grades due - Jun 25

students can apply to their writing to help them catch some spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors at no cost. Students can copy and paste their paper in Grammarly and reflect on the mistakes they made by comparing the initial version score with the final version and score. They should be asked to include in their reflection common errors discovered and the steps they will take to avoid repeating the mistake(s). This reproduces the kind of self-analysis many of us employ in face-to-face courses.

Proofreading the writing of other students can be an excellent way for students to enhance their understanding of effective writing. One useful approach is to pair students and require they proofread the writing of their partner. Students can be informed that both the author and proofreader will receive credit for the assignment. A rubric on expectations and how students will be graded should be provided.

Encourage Revision, Progressive Grading, and Extra Credit:

Providing opportunities for students to improve their skills by providing opportunities for revision, by weighting later assessments higher than early assessments, and by submitting extra credit assignments are useful techniques for promoting writing success.

Embrace Multimodality:

One of the greatest benefits of teaching writing online is the opportunity for faculty and students to engage new modes of writing. Since students will already be completing all work in digital format, you can easily incorporate multiple modes of expression. At the simplest level, you might encourage students to upload a brief response video when offering feedback to other students. You might make the assignments themselves multimodal by incorporating video or text, or give students multiple options for completing a given task.

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