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### **Facing the Challenges Inherent in Teaching Online: A Case Study**

In twenty-first century America, more and more Americans are attending college and university in a desperate attempt to get that coveted piece of paper -- the college diploma. One result of this push by Americans of all ages to get degrees is that it is getting crowded on college campuses. To address this issue, community colleges and universities have found that they can increase their enrollment with very little impact on their budgets by providing courses online. Rob Jenkins says, "At many community colleges, online classes constitute the proverbial cash cow" (Jenkins). For many students, the ability to take courses from the convenience of their own homes and study at times of the day that fit their schedules is ideal. Online education, known as distance learning, may be the only way some students are able to get a college education.

Distance learners often have family and work responsibilities that make it impossible for them to attend a physical, brick-and-mortar campus. But while online courses seem ideal to students, some educators are not as easily convinced. The numbers paint online courses in an unfavorable light with "countless studies showing success rates in online courses of only 50 percent—as opposed to 70-to-75 percent for comparable face-to-face classes" (Jenkins). So while students

jump at the chance to take classes online, the retention rate is much lower than in traditional face-to-face classes.

With statistics like these, it is easy to see why academic faculty members and administrators are wary of providing courses online; nevertheless, the demand for Internet-based courses continues to grow. Teachers want their students to succeed, but traditional methods of instruction are not proving as effective with distance learners as they are in the face-to-face classroom. Therefore, teachers of digital classes must learn new strategies to hold their students' interest. "The instructor must shift from the role of content provider to content facilitator, [and] gain comfort and proficiency in using the Web as the primary teacher-student link" (Smith, Ferguson, and Caris). This is problematic for many instructors who "feel as if a lifetime of teaching skills goes by the wayside. They cannot use their presence and their classroom skills to get their point across. Nor can they use their oral skills to improvise on the spot" (Smith, Ferguson, and Caris). But difficult as it is for many teachers, it seems obvious that the onus is on them to learn new ways of connecting with their students when they teach online.

In this brave new world, long-time teachers find themselves at a loss. The virtual environment is unfamiliar, but with the demand for online courses continuing to grow, it is increasingly likely that teachers will be asked to teach online at some point. In this paper, I attempt to discover and define the issues facing teachers of online classes today. Beginning with a discussion of "best practices" in the digital classroom, I will give a brief overview of the reasons behind the reluctance of English teachers to offer composition classes online. Then, using an English 1301 course at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) as an example, I will look at the issues faced by the teacher and students of this class. This portion of the discussion

will place special emphasis on the context of the learning management system (LMS) tools that are available at SHSU. Then I will discuss the extant opportunities and alternatives that may be employed to assist both the teacher and students of this online class, and I will make suggestions to improve upon the problems defined in the previous section of the paper. Teachers and administrators bear the responsibility of learning new ways to engage students in the online environment. In order to retain students and see them to the successful completion of the many new courses offered online, administrators must establish best practices to guide their teachers; teachers must be familiar with the tools at their disposal and keep up with emerging developments; and students must display initiative and take advantage of all the tools and assistance that is available to help them.

When it comes to teaching online, some subjects naturally lend themselves to the digital medium. “At many institutions, administrators are realizing that creating a state-of-the-art multimedia course out of, for example, ‘Introduction to Psychology,’ which may enroll up to five hundred students, represents a major improvement” (Anson 808). However, English composition courses present unique challenges in the online environment, and Anson points out that the debate about how computers should figure into the comp curriculum has been raging since “as early as 1984 [when] some compositionists were already critiquing the role of computers in writing instruction” (814). Twenty-eight years later, online instruction has finally come to composition classes too, but composition instruction online is still far from the norm. At SHSU, in the Fall 2012 semester, there were fifty-eight English 1301 (freshman composition) sections offered. Of those, only two sections were offered online.

There are several reasons for this reluctance on the part of English professors to teach composition classes outside the boundaries of the traditional classroom, most important of which is probably the reliance of teachers and students on the interpersonal interaction that guides the traditional composition learning process. Anson explains that “few theorists strongly advocate a pedagogy in which students write alone, a guide of lessons and assignments at their elbows” (807). Traditionally, the comp class has relied on “rich face-to-face social interaction—fueled by active learning, . . . energized by writers reading each other’s work, powered by the force of revision and response” (807). Another concern among professors is that lower paid adjuncts will replace them since they sometimes labor under the misguided belief that online courses only require monitors because the course materials are all developed in advance. This raises further concerns that “‘service professionals’ . . . are hired into low-paid, non-tenure-track positions with poor (or no) benefits” (813) and then exploited as ever greater demands are placed on their time by the extra requirements inherent in online instruction. These time requirements develop because online students often need more one-on-one instruction than students in the traditional classroom. Additionally, “the lack of a face-to-face persona seems to divest the professor of some authority. . . . [and] students are sometimes aggressive and questioning of authority in ways not seen face-to-face” (Smith).

With demand for online instruction continuing to grow, no department is exempt from the need to provide some of its core courses online, and since all reputable colleges and universities have a mission to provide students with a quality education, their online course offerings must meet the same quality standards their traditional classes are held to. Unfortunately, not all online classes are currently meeting this goal (Jenkins). In response to this situation, Lawrence Ragan,

Director of Instructional Design and Development for Penn State's World Campus (their online program), recognized a need for a set of "best practices" to guide online instructors and help them to provide high quality online instruction. He says, "One senior faculty, well vested in the domain of online education, responded to my approach by saying, 'if you don't tell us what is expected, how will we know what to do to succeed?'" (4). Ragan's key points stress that the online classroom cannot manage itself; therefore, the teacher must be online and available regularly. In addition, the teacher must take a proactive role in managing the course by establishing regular patterns of course activities, which help both instructor and students to manage their time. Ragan suggests that the teacher have a contingency plan to keep the course on track if she is unavailable for more than four days, because timely instructor feedback is essential. Teacher responses to student inquiries should always be carefully thought out, and feedback for graded assignments should be turned around within two-business days. For security, course communications should be conducted using the learning management system (LMS) provided by the institution. Teachers should monitor and make any corrections needed to course materials in a timely manner and should test all aspects of the course from the students' point of view before making it live (4-24). These guidelines are fine as far as they go, but teaching writing online brings its own set of challenges, and "professional development opportunities for online writing instruction are irregular; currently, there is no set of standards or best practices upon which to call" (Hewett xv).

There is a common misconception among the uninitiated that online courses run themselves, and that once the course materials are developed, there is no longer any need for a professor to be associated with those classes. This, however, is proving not to be the case. Rob

Abel discovered in a 2005 study of the common denominators for success in Internet-supported learning that “a quality online learning experience still has much more to do with the faculty member teaching the course than anything else. It’s still the teaching, not the technology” (76). With that in mind, I interviewed the two professionals on the SHSU campus who are most directly involved with the English 1301 course, and I monitored the Fall 2012 online 1301 and 1302 courses. My interview subjects were adjunct professor Barbara Jones, and instructional design specialist, Jay Wilson. The biggest issue Jones told me that she faces is retention. Of the 50 students who started her online 1301 class this semester, only 31 finished, and of those, seven never participated at all. Therefore she has an effective retention rate of approximately 50 percent. According to Wilson, retention is not as big a problem with online classes in other departments, and she speculates that the retention issue in the English composition classes may be due to students falling behind. She suggests that if deadlines for quizzes and assignments were more rigid, it might help students to keep up with the work. While this is probably true, the issue is more complicated than that.

Jones is well liked, though the majority of her students have never actually met her face-to-face. Her ability to share her personality in the online classroom speaks to her experience in that environment as well as her empathy with her students. She said that she has been known to adjust deadlines to accommodate all sorts of special needs, from the births of babies to serious illnesses and injuries. This, however, once again raises the question of establishing firm deadlines to help students stay on track. Where should the teacher draw the line between establishing hard and fast rules and expectations and bending those rules to accommodate special

circumstances? As Ragan points out, in the online environment, instructors need to monitor their students more closely than they do in the traditional classroom:

The online instructor can help create a successful learning experience by practicing proactive course management strategies. These strategies include . . . monitoring assignment submissions, communicating and reminding students of missed and/or upcoming deadlines, and making course progress adjustments where and when necessary.

(7)

The reason for this extra oversight in the digital environment is that students often need help with time management, particularly since they do not receive the same signals that students receive in the traditional classroom. The keys are establishing good communication between the instructor and the students, and “refining the course management is a continual ‘work in progress’” (Ragan 8).

As students drop the class or simply stop participating, it can become difficult to conduct the peer review portion of the class (Jones). Jones has her students carry out their peer reviews using the e-mail system that is built into Blackboard, the SHSU learning management system (LMS). Students are directed to scroll down the list of names under “select recipients” until they come to their own name and then they are to send their papers to the students whose names appear directly above and below theirs on the list. Jones provides the students with a list of questions to answer, which guides them through the peer-review process as they read each other’s papers. If they do not receive a reply by a given date, they are to select the next name up or down the list and repeat the process until they get two responses.

## 1. Email Information

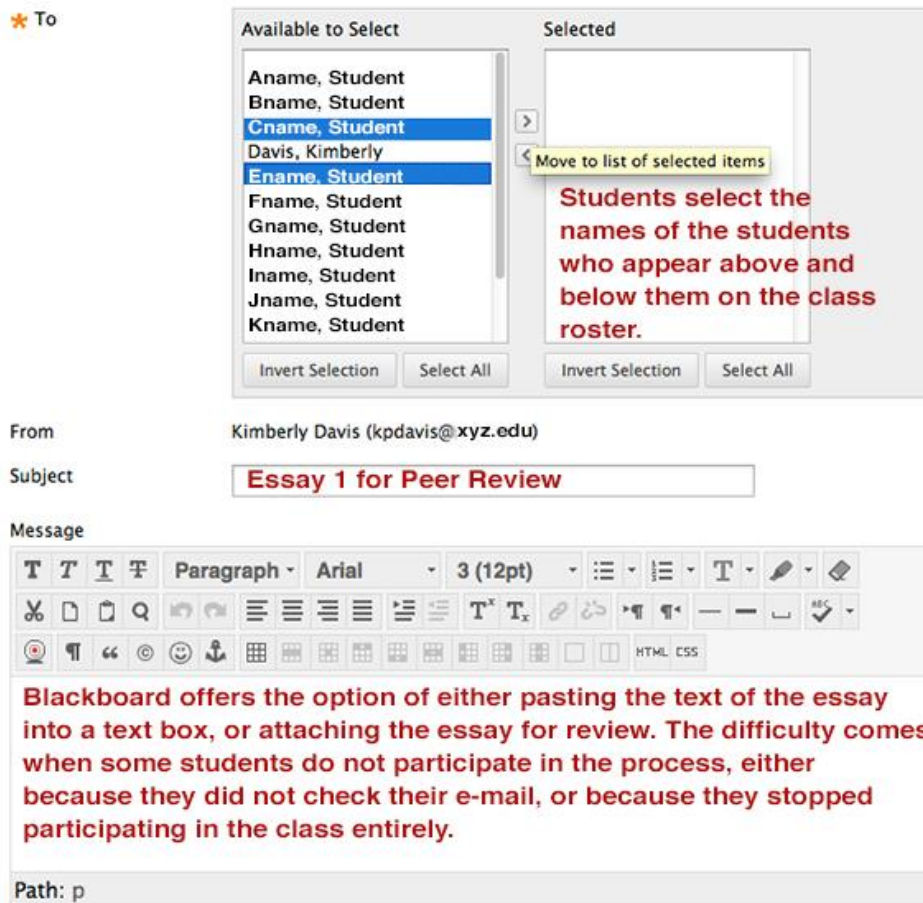


Fig. 1. An example of how Jones' students sent their papers for peer review.

Jones expressed that this system is clumsy and time-consuming. It is a prime example of a tested practice that works in the face-to-face classroom where students physically exchange papers, but the process has not translated well to the online environment. In response to this issue, Jay Wilson pointed out that the Blackboard system also offers blogs, wikis, and journals, any of which might provide a better solution for peer-editing. In their article about the ways in which wikis are being used in business education classes, Sunil Hazari and Tiffany Penland point out



that “instructors who are comfortable using technology are more likely to offer innovative technology-based instruction, while those who are less familiar with technology may choose routine instruction” (15-16). Hazari and Penland explain that “wikis can be used for several different types of collaborative course assignments” including peer review (16). Blackboard offers many more options than most instructors, online or off, can come to grips with in a single semester, and the process of rolling out new features seems to be ongoing at SHSU. One of these new features, Blackboard Collaborate has not yet been fully implemented, and in Jones’ 1301 class, the older collaboration software, Elluminate, is still in place. This is what was supposed to have been used by Jones’ students for this semester’s oral presentation, because “Sam Houston State University’s accreditation requires that students in this course present a five minute oral report as preparation for like requirements in advanced courses” (Jones). Unfortunately, a number of students had technical difficulties with the software, and that portion of the course had to be modified. Wilson says that the new Blackboard Collaborate will be fully implemented by the end of the Spring 2013 semester. Jones says that more thought will be required in planning this portion of the course in the future. One of these new features, Blackboard Collaborate, was supposed to have been used by Jones’ students to make oral presentations at the end of the semester, however the process proved problematic. Jones explained the confusion her students experienced while trying to use Collaborate:

Using the screen sharing features — activating the video and audio aspects — proved difficult, as no directions were readily available. Four icons with various purposes under each participant’s window replaced labeled buttons; ascertaining the intent for each of these took experimentation and, thus, time. The audio icon led to another page, a volume-

leveling device, which only guesswork could activate. Once back on the initial page, the student would experience a delay after clicking the video icon before a picture appeared; some would panic and click on various other features. Those students who had a minimum of computer literacy often decided to return to the help desk for further instructions. Then, by time they understood the process, the session had ended. (Jones)

As this example illustrates, although university administrators may have provided tools to address the needs of online classrooms, further training is commonly needed for instructors as well as students to make efficient use of those tools. In the case of Jones' class presentations, there was not enough time to familiarize the class with the new software before their projects were due. Like peer reviews, the process of conducting online student presentations comes with new challenges not previously faced in the traditional classroom.

Plagiarism in the online classroom is another major concern, and it can occur in new and innovative ways in the digital environment. In the traditional English composition or literature class, as they write their essays, students are monitored by an instructor or proctor, but in the online environment, special measures have to be enacted to assure that the person writing the exam is in fact the person who is registered for the course. At SHSU, the software that is used for this purpose is Tegrity Remote Proctoring. When the student takes an exam using Tegrity, he begins by using his computer's camera to take a picture of himself holding his school identification card with the photo showing to verify his identity. Then, Tegrity films the entire time the student is taking the test. It films what is happening on screen and picks up any sounds in the background. Problems can arise when students try to claim that they had technical difficulties and therefore couldn't take the test. To avoid this, Jones requires her students to take

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a practice exam the week before the actual final exam. In addition, there is an easily accessed log that allows instructors and administrators to see all of the logins by each student. It is important to plan ahead and be aware of excuses that students may offer. For this reason, instructors should add very explicit instructions to the syllabus with regard to verifying that assignments have been successfully turned in, and explaining how to report technical difficulties in a timely fashion (Wilson).

**SHSU Online** ENGL 1301 53 & 54 F12 Composition I Instructor: Barbara Jones

gradebook email live doc sharing dropbox weblibrary tech support help

**Course Home**

- Syllabus
- Orientation
- Lesson Plan
- Theme Blocks for All the Assignments
- Required Textbooks
- Professor Information
- University Policies
- Technical Requirements
- 24 x 7 Tech Support
- SKYPE at TWC
- IDEA Survey

**WEEK ONE**

**WEEK TWO**

**WEEK THREE**

**WEEK FOUR**

**WEEK FIVE**

**WEEK SIX**

**WEEK SEVEN**

**WEEK EIGHT**

**WEEK NINE**

**WEEK TEN**

**WEEK ELEVEN**

**WEEK TWELVE**

**WEEK THIRTEEN**

**WEEK FOURTEEN**

**WEEK FIFTEEN**

**Course Home - Orientation**

*Welcome to English 1301! I, Barb Jones, am your instructor.*

On the first day of our semester, I want to make certain that you get off to a good start, so I want to guide you around the course home page!

Before we look at this home page, I want to reiterate the importance time management plays in an online course. I see too many students drop this course after they have fallen behind. Our schedule parallels the classroom offering, but you do not have the personal reminders that you would have in a classroom. Because of this, I plan to send Monday memos to remind you what you have on the agenda. Heed the warnings! Stay on track!

I do ask that my students work with the tutors in the SHSU Writing Center on each of the four major research papers. I realize that this session adds thirty minutes to your busy schedules, but I feel that the one-to-one attention improves students' letter grades by at least 10%. Students who have other classes on campus will find the facility in Farrington 111; those remote from campus will work through SKYPE. Failure to complete this step will net a deduction of 10% for that assignment. Potentially then, you could net a 20% reduction on that one assignment. Humor me!

With that caveat in mind, let's relax and familiarize ourselves with the set-up of e-Campus, this learning management system.

As you view the opening page, please note that you will primarily use two menus: the horizontal icon menu across the top and the vertical menu on the left side. The written headings on the left will lead you week by week through the schedule. You will use the icons at the top as you move through these assignments.

Begin by reading the information in the eight links in the Course Home. These items, particularly the syllabus, will give you a general overview of the course. I do want to note that, despite my listing my cell phone, the quickest way to reach me is through e-mail. While I am in class, which is most of the day, I turn off the cell phone. I check for messages when I am free, but as I teach in computer labs, I have frequent opportunities to check my messages. Both means of communication cease around 9:00 p.m., but I arise at 5:00 a.m. every morning; I then answer any messages that you send during the night. By the way, I do text. :-)

Please note my suggestion concerning the **textbooks**—compare pricing! Off-campus bookstores are generally less expensive than Barnes & Noble on campus, but they all package extra books into your purchase which I do not use. I suggest that you check out amazon.com or cheapesttextbooks.com. (I know there are other sites on the Internet). Order these books today to allow for shipping time. Strive to purchase only the text and handbook. At the end of the semester, sell the text, but retain the handbook. You will refer to it often as you move through your upper division courses.

For any technical problems, please contact tech support. I can answer questions about the curriculum, but problems with software are beyond my expertise.

I am always available for questions sent by e-mail or phone. Please do not hesitate to ask; no question or discussion is stupid!

I would like you to post a short biography in that **doc sharing** link. Include family responsibilities and job demands so that I may understand your situation during this demanding schedule.

Please complete the readings as they establish a foundation for our studies this semester.

We will begin our first assignment on Friday, August 31, 2012.

Fig. 2. The old course interface design for Barbara Jones online courses.

One final point of discussion that came up with both Jones and Wilson was the question of design and layout of the interface that students see. Jones explained that Wilson has been helping her to rearrange the navigation for the course's graphical user interface (GUI), and she was not sure she liked the new version. At present, her 1302 class has been redesigned, but the 1301 class has not, so it was easy to see the difference (see fig. 1). While Jones expressed the desire to continue using the week-by-week navigation she knows and has used for her classes in the face-to-face setting, Wilson sees that style of navigation as confusing. Instead, in the new layout, she has used standard web design theory to make the page more user friendly. The most important change Wilson has made involves the navigation down the left side of the page (see fig. 2).

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The screenshot shows the course interface for ENGL 1302 24 & 26 F12 Composition II, taught by Barbara Jones. The top navigation bar includes icons for gradebook, email, live, doc sharing, dropbox, webliography, tech support, and help. The left sidebar lists course home items like Home Page Orientation, Syllabus for 1302, and various assignments. The main content area features a 'Welcome to ENGL 1302' message with a word cloud and contact information for Barbara Jones. The right sidebar contains 'Announcements', 'Upcoming' events, and a 'For Review' section listing assignments such as Practice Exam, Oral Report, and MLA Research Paper with submission dates and review status.

Fig. 3. The new course interface designs for Barbara Jones online courses.

In the old version, the links are broken up by weeks, and in order to find specific assignments, students have to know in what week the assignment was made. The new version, by contrast, uses short descriptive phrases to help students find what they are looking for with key assignments visible immediately. Wilson has used web design theory which holds that “the main

navigation block itself should be clearly visible on the page, and each link should have a descriptive title” (Beaird 5). Wilson has made three other notable changes with the redesign of the interface—she has made the text larger, and by adding a third column, she has reduced the width of the central text area, which reduces the length of each line of text, thus making it easier to read on the screen. The overall effect is that the page is easier to navigate and read, and the new right hand column with dynamic content gives the course a more active feel.

The final element in the online instruction equation is the student. Working through an online course takes self-discipline and an ability to work alone. Colleges and universities provide a wealth of resources for these students including online learning modules and tutors through writing centers. However, it is possible, although many administrators do not wish to admit it, that not all students are good candidates for online classes, and “software companies now market products designed to determine, up front, whether students can handle the workload, the pedagogical approach (heavy on reading), and the technical demands of the online environment” (Jenkins). This unsuitability of some students for online studies may have a great deal to do with the poor retention in online classrooms, but it remains to be seen how many administrators will implement any sort of screening procedure for prospective online students.

On college and university campuses across America, online courses are growing in popularity with students and administrators, but they are perhaps less popular with teachers. Administrators favor digital courses because the more classes they can provide online, the healthier their bottom lines become. Digital classrooms can be added with little or no extra overhead expense. Meanwhile, students crave the convenience of doing their studies online at times of the day that are convenient to their schedules. This is particularly true for students who

work full-time or have family responsibilities. Unfortunately, the reality is that success rates for online students are not as high as those of their counterparts in traditional face-to-face classes.

In an effort to determine why the statistics are so unfavorable with regard to retention in the online classroom, many colleges and universities have attempted to establish “best practices” for online instruction, and at present the Internet is teeming with articles on the subject. Few of these articles, however, are backed by research. The field of online instruction is simply too new, and the tools at the disposal of institutions and instructors are changing too rapidly. Discussions of best practices remain largely anecdotal with the focus on common sense measures such as being available at regular times to answer student questions via e-mail or instant messenger, and returning graded papers within a few days. The University of Michigan’s Center for Research on Learning and Teaching offers a good collection of research based resources for those designing online courses on their website, [www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tsot](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tsot), and San Juan College offers another at [www.sanjuancollege.edu/pages/2825.asp](http://www.sanjuancollege.edu/pages/2825.asp).

Teachers have a great deal of preparation to do before the first day of class, since all the course materials need to be prepared in advance, but once class starts, the teacher’s focus shifts to moderation. Online instructors need to watch for signs that a student may be falling behind or struggling with some aspect of the course materials. The best way of doing this is by establishing firm deadlines, and keeping the lines of communication open. Teachers may also assign supplemental work using online modules, or require students to make use of the tutoring services provided by their school’s writing center. These services generally have some provision for students who are unable to come to the campus in person. SHSU’s Writing Center, for example, provides online tutoring sessions via Skype, and SHSU’s freshman composition classes contain

an element that makes use of Bedford's companion website to provide supplemental grammar lessons.

Online instructors have access to a wealth of resources through the learning management software provided by their institutions. SHSU uses Blackboard, which is equipped with a variety of modules designed to help students and teachers communicate effectively and efficiently, but these modules only work if the teacher sets them up, and to do this, he must learn how to use the features that are available and then test those features in advance, from the student's point of view, to make sure that all the materials presented are functioning correctly and can be easily understood. And finally, the students who enroll in online classes need to be motivated enough to actually do the work the course requires in a timely fashion. The teacher will do everything in his power to help that student, but at the end of the day, just like in a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom, whether or not that student succeeds is up to them.



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