

Proposal for Research
Online Education in the First-Year Composition Experience

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Abstract

Online courses are a reality at SJSU and previous experiments with MOOCs and smaller online classes have not been successful. If the English and Comparative Literature Department does not want the Administration to force our composition courses into the MOOC format or another online format that does not fit the needs of our students and faculty then we must create a plan with the rationale and best practices to support it.

Background and Significance

In the face of the relentless push for online education, the English Department needs to know the best practices for teaching English composition online. California Governor Jerry Brown started 2013 by telling higher education “to change their ways” (York 2013). One of the three bullets in the “Higher Education” section of Brown’s “Education” webpage states, “the introduction of online learning and the use of new technologies should be explored to the fullest...” In short, he is demanding more classes online (York 2013).

Previous SJSU experiments with MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and smaller online classes with edX and Udacity have not been successful (Hiltzik, Rivera). Students are failing the courses or not finishing them (Hiltzik, Rivera). Twice, in both spring 2012 and spring 2013 semesters, the Office of Extended Studies (also called “SJSU Online”) tried to enlist composition instructors to teach composition online with no success. Dr. John Engell, English Department Chair, said that he supports this project because “we need to accept the fact that more online classes are in the future of the university.” Freshman English composition is one of the most important courses on campus because all students are required to take this class. Strategically moving the course online is of the utmost importance because large numbers of students are affected. Many of these students are being represented by the AANAPISI grant. If we do not want the Administration to force our composition courses into the MOOC format or another online format that does not fit the needs of our students and faculty, then we must create our own plan with the rationale and best practices to support it.

Administrators may have an idea of how they want online teaching to be, but the English and Comparative Literature Department should be the one that brings the knowledge of our field when planning Freshman Composition. Research will help move into teaching freshmen writing online in the best way for all parties: the university, the students, and the instructors.

Project Description

The Writing Program Director requested that best practices for teaching composition be the focus of this project so we can learn from the successes and failures of other universities move to online composition. Two of the most reputable sources in the field, the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) and CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication), will be culled for this part of the project.

Details of online instruction, such as class size, will also be a focus. When SJSU online was first presented through the College of Extended Studies in spring 2013, Jessica Gonzales reported that class caps would be something that instructors and their “department chair would decide.” At the same time, the pay scale was based on number of students enrolled in the course, which might motivate instructors to try to teach too many students at once. NCTE has a position statement on class size that says, “Ideally, classes should be limited to 15” (1987). For online instruction, CCCC states that “OWCs should be capped responsibly at 20 students per course with 15 being a preferable number” (2013). Quality of instruction goes down when teachers are trying to teach too many students. Online class size should be established by the entire department and not by the instructor who may have ulterior financial and/or the department chair.

The length of the course is also important to understand. In spring 2012, SJSU Online scheduled a ten-week course, significantly shorter than the regular semester at SJSU. Students must have adequate time to absorb material and practice skills to become proficient writers.

Teacher workload is also important because it is directly related to the student experience. Teachers face a different work load when they teach composition online. Dr. Cavanaugh of Wright State University reports that while teaching online, he invested “over twice the amount of time spent teaching in-class” (2005). We cannot add workload to composition instructors who are already carrying a heavy load of 200,000 words of writing per course per semester, or students will suffer.

Paid time to design and prepare the course is another key component of success. Ward advises that online instructors “prepare as much as you can before the semester starts” (2012) which he follows with “That may seem obvious, but an online class can be difficult to catch up on if you fall behind” (2012). It would be helpful to know what our composition instructors already know about teaching online and what they want training on.

Teacher training also need to be implemented, which is not something that is often discussed in terms of online teaching. CEE (Conference on English Education) Executive Committee offers a Position Statement in its “Beliefs about Technology and the Preparation of English Teachers” that states: “Professional development for teachers and teacher educators must be ongoing, stressing purposeful integration for the curriculum and content, rather than merely technical operation” (2013). The English department should prepare to request funding from the SJSU Administration for teacher training.

Students’ role in the success of online composition cannot be dismissed. Numerous studies cite “no significant difference” (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education 2001-present) between online and onsite courses. One encouraging study found that the students’

performance was not substantially different, but they did find “‘intriguing relationships’ between students’ prior knowledge, attitudes, and learning styles and the Web-based writing environment” (Mehlenbacher, Miller, Covington, Larsen 2000). A plan to train students for the online experience is essential, because some “students are well prepared for the online course and some are not” (Sussman and Dutter 2010). Sapp and Simon report that “students underestimate online course workload” (2005) and recommend that teachers “build in accountability in course performance and grading” (2005) and to be “vigilant in student retention efforts” (2005). It would be helpful to know what schema our students already have about the online learning experience so we can prepare them best.

Methods

My first goal is a literature review on the most current best practices for online freshman composition. The SJSU English and Comparative Literature department has no specialists at the PhD level with current expertise in online freshman composition. To fill that gap, I will focus on only the most reputable sources such as the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) and the CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication). This information will give us a rationale and strategies for online freshman composition. In addition, Kelly Harrison, Director of Writing Programs, has invited me to attend the Writing Program Administrators meeting for affiliates in April, which will provide me with very current information about freshman composition online. This very current information will make our online courses most innovative.

My second goal will be to survey current composition instructors to find out how much experience they have with online instruction, what interest they have in it, and where they have gaps in knowledge. I will also be asking how they would prefer training to be scheduled. My survey will go to the Writing Program director and the Department Chair for approval. A link from SurveyMonkey.com will be sent to all freshman composition student in March 2014 via the English department faculty listserv.

The third goal will be to survey current freshman composition students to understand what they know about and expect from online instruction. This information will help us prepare students for the online experience in the best way possible. My survey will go to the Writing Program director and the Department Chair for approval. A link from SurveyMonkey.com will be sent to all freshman composition student in March 2014 via the English and Comparative Literature Department.

My last goal will be to interview some teachers in the field who are currently teaching freshmen composition online. Because composition is more commonly taught online at community college, I would most likely be interviewing instructors from West Valley College, De Anza College, and/or Ohlone College. Information from them will be helpful but will need to be adapted for the 4-year CSU system.

I will present my project to the English Department Curriculum and Composition committees, Department Chair, and the English Department Writing Program Director, the Writing Requirement Committee, and the Department of Linguistics and Language Development. The project will also be made available via the AANAPISI and English and Comparative Literature Department websites.

Project Timeline

February to April: Literature Review.

During this month, I will spend hours culling the databases for information that relates specifically and directly to freshman composition online. With such a specific focus, the information will have to be carefully assessed. The Eric database as well as the NCTE and CCCC databases will be the focus.

March: During this month I will design the surveys and adapt them based on any feedback from the Writing Director and the Department Chair. For the freshmen survey, I will need to work with English department administrative support to get it to students. Once the data is collected, I will need to analyze the responses, report back to the Writing Director and the Department Chair and possibly consider follow-up surveys.

April: Trip to Sacramento Writing Programs Administrators meeting

I will attend this meeting at Sacramento State University with the Writing Director to obtain the most current studies and experiences on online composition from Writing Programs Administrators.

April: visits to West Valley College, De Anza College, and/or Ohlone College to interview instructors and other leaders in online English composition at those schools.

This month, I will reach out to other campuses for information.

Additionally, I will be finishing the project by combining all the information in the literature review and the surveys, the meetings, and interviews.

April to May: Compile and conclude report and report/present to the English Department Chair, the English Department Writing Program Director, the English Department Curriculum and Composition committees, the Writing Requirement Committee, and the Department of Linguistics and Language Development.

Please note: This project timeline is for a one-semester project, but if the plan goes well, I will reapply to request additional projects and funding.

Potential Contribution to Improvement of Education

This project is a good investment for the AANAPISI grant since its students represent 33% of the SJSU student population (Institutional Effectiveness and Analytics 2013). As a CSU in Silicon Valley, the heartland of technology, we feel pressure to be leaders in the use of technology, but using technology without careful consideration, planning, and rationale is not the best road to success. Our leaders, Governor Jerry Brown and SJSU President Qayoumi, are pushing hard in this direction, with Qayoumi saying “We want to fail fast, learn from it, and move on” (Young 2013) but speed is not the best approach when failure means student failure. Education ultimately needs to serve the students, but it also needs to support the instructors and be supported by the administration. Looking at the research of best practice for teaching freshman composition online and making a careful plan that supports those practices will ensure the best results for all parties and will lead to the most success for the students and in turn the school and all its instructors.

Necessary expenses

SurveyMonkey.com: \$17/month for 4 months = \$68 total

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