Using Technology to Build a Community of Writers in Developmental Writing

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Using technology in a developmental classroom, particularly a classroom platform such as WebCT, can help provide a sense of community in a developmental writing course. The rationale for designing a hybrid developmental writing course is discussed as well as the ways in which students perceived themselves as "real writers" as a result of the way that their writing was submitted and critiqued on WebCT. A blended learning environment has become an integrated component of writing instruction at the two-year branch campus that is the location of this study.

As the lead developmental writing instructor for our campus, I took the opportunity provided by our campus's Title V grant to explore the use of WebCT in a developmental writing course. Our campus is a two-year branch of New Mexico State University (NMSU) and provides students with both beginning and intermediate level developmental writing courses. Students testing into the intermediate level writing course in which this study was conducted have scores that range anywhere between 38-70 on the COMPASS placement test.

I face a significant challenge in my writing courses, since the learners in my classroom do not perceive themselves as legitimate writers. As Shafer (2003) points out, the challenge in writing courses is to get "…students to imagine themselves to be writers – rather than servants of academic protocol" (p. 16). In order to address concerns and to develop a community of writers, I decided to use WebCT in my developmental writing classroom; this was accomplished through inclusion of interactive activities online. The decision to use online-

based technology for the purposes of enhancing instruction is supported by a recent study by the League for Innovation in the Community College (2006), which points to the need for high quality online basic education. The following benefits were anticipated: an increase in active learning strategies, peer-to-peer contact and learning, an increase in teacher-student interaction, and a focus on learner-centered online activities (Carpenter, Brown & Hickman, 2004; Rose, 2004; Graham & Allen, 2005).

Identifying as a Writer

In addition to teaching in a community college and adult literacy setting for ten years, I consider myself a writer, not only because I write (poetry and short stories as well as academic writing such as this) but also because I write in specific ways. I write to learn by taking notes in meetings, in-services, and classes. I write to express my point of view to specific audiences. I write to figure out how I feel about a topic. Because I engage in these activities on a regular basis, I view myself as a writer.

I also view my students as writers. Every assignment that I require in my classes has writing as a core element. My students write to learn, take notes, write in small groups, and share their writing with each other or with me. In both of my developmental writing classes, the class begins with five minutes of directed writing. I make it clear to my students from the first day of class that these writing exercises are intended to warm up their brains and ensure that they are present in class and in the moment. It is the chance for the students to do some mental stretches and to be aware of where they are (in the classroom) and why they are there (to write). In addition, through active participation in the learning process, students develop a sense of belonging to a writing community. Writing products (essays, short paragraphs, etc.) are treated as genuine writing artifacts for critique, discussion, and revision.

I encourage my students to view the writing that they do, no matter how informal that writing is, as writing that exists within a community. This includes writing that is peer reviewed, shared

with a tutor, or shared with the teacher. I also encourage my students to think of writing as an exercise in constructing language and communicating thought. This broadens their understanding that community-based writing includes their comments on their blogs, their email messages, their text messages, even messages on MySpace – in short, any activity in which they engage in written communication. Thus, my challenge is that of helping my students envision themselves as a community of writers: a group of students interacting together, sharing ideas, learning together, building relationships and in the process improving their writing skills.

Technology and Transformation

In my second semester at NMSU-A, I began a pilot project to incorporate WebCT, an online classroom environment, as part of a core component to my CCDE110 (General Composition) course which is the second-level developmental writing course for our program prior to students enrolling in credit-level English. I have included WebCT as a part of my course for the past three semesters, and the pilot work that I and other instructors teaching CCDE110 have done is being used as a model for our institution's credit level Freshman English course. I've continued to include this component in my course because of my students' responses as well as the sense of community that the technological tools engender. In the following section, I will overview the tools available to the instructor and students in WebCT.

WebCT

WebCT is an online classroom environment designed to support either an online course or a hybrid course that incorporates some online elements. In CCDE110 classes, I use four primary tools: email, discussion board, class schedule, and the syllabus. Both the class schedule and syllabus are areas where the basic business information of the course can be posted. Students are required to check the schedule on a regular basis to find out when assignments are due. I hand out one paper copy of the course syllabus at the beginning of the semester; subsequent copies may be downloaded

from WebCT. I use email to communicate with students about missed classes, send them class notes, or send them copies of their essays with my feedback. The discussion board feature is the tool most used by students in my class to post asynchronous discussions using discussion threads. I can control the discussion threads by posting the initial topic, reading and participating in the discussions, and then subsequently closing the topic for discussion at the end of the discussion period.

Semester 1 – Spring 2006

The first semester that I used WebCT in a course, I assumed that my students were technologically savvy since they already constantly made use of email and the Internet. I did not perceive a significant difference between writing in these environments and utilization of WebCT. However, I quickly found that the most challenging part of the project was overcoming student resistance to learning a new technological environment.

In large part, this was my fault. I provided very little support in how to use WebCT in the class. I had too much other content to cover to spend time on how to conduct a discussion online, how to chat, etc. I was also facing the learning curve of figuring out WebCT. While faculty are well-supported in the area of technology, taking advantage of that support takes time. Since I have taught using other platforms online, I did what I do best: clicked on buttons, looked around, and used trial and error to design my course.

I expected my students to do the same, and, more or less, this strategy worked for most students. One student had consistent problems with logging into the WebCT system as well as the institutional network, which detracted from his ability to participate consistently. However, it was not until several weeks into the course that the student was able to adapt to the online environment.

During the first semester, students completed the following online activities: reading discussions, peer critiques of essay

assignments, and writing exercises. Students worked in small groups of three or four students. The students chose their own groups, and (adding an element of team building to the assignment) named their groups so that I could use the group name to identify the discussion thread online.

Reading Discussions. Throughout the semester, students were required to respond to three essays from their textbook (*The Best American Essays,* College Edition) using the online discussion board on WebCT. Each essay in the book was a model for a similar essay that students were required to write. Students were asked to: 1) Post individual responses to a specific reading discussion question for the essay questions focused on specific elements of organization and content for each essay; 2) Respond to each other's thoughts on the discussion board; 3) Summarize the group's discussion at the end of the week.

Peer Critiques. Students wrote three essays during the semester and were required to post the draft of each essay to the WebCT discussion forum. Students reviewed the drafts of those peers who were in their reading group. Students were then asked to write a one to one and a half page letter to their peer discussing content issues and providing suggestions to make the essay stronger.

Writing Exercises. Students also posted writing exercises on WebCT related to specific essays we were reading for the class. One such assignment was a writing exercise in response to Annie Dillard's essay "The Stunt Pilot." Though students most often worked within their small groups, all students in the course could read each discussion going on in WebCT. As a result, many students would post comments in everyone's groups and provide very insightful comments. None of the students were bothered with this; in fact, the discussions seemed more organic and natural when this occurred.

At the end of the semester, I surveyed the students to find out what they thought. While students tended to complain about WebCT (not comfortable with the technology, too difficult to use,

took too much time), they seemed to recognize it as the tool for which I had intended - a place where community could be built.

Student comments included the following:
   a. I am a shy person so using WebCT helped me to talk to other students and not be as shy in what I had said. It helped me see what others were trying to tell me about my writing.
   b. It helped to know how and what my classmates were thinking.
   c. It helped me look at things from someone else's point of view.
   d. I felt that it was an open place to express my thoughts and learn or read what other students were thinking. I felt that my thoughts were easier to express and were well developed because I was communcating them through words and not just verbally. I also had 24-hour access to my peers. I enjoyed reading my classmates' reactions or thoughts about my writing but more than that, I enjoyed reading my classmates' essays.

The ability to consider how someone else thinks, to look at an alternative point-of-view, or to read what someone else writes for pleasure - all are things that writers do on a regular basis. Having a forum in which students were able to communicate their thoughts was invaluable in helping these students see themselves as a community of writers.

Semester II – Summer Session 2006

After the first semester, all instructors decided to make WebCT a permanent component of this course. Students were required to complete one hour per week of WebCT work in addition to attending class for five days a week for two and one half hours per day for five weeks during the summer session. WebCT was used for peer review and writing exercises.

One significant change made between spring and summer was the inclusion of several opportunities for students just to read each

other's work. I asked students to post a mini-definition essay in the fourth week of the course and then to read each other's. This activity was distinct from the reading discussions and was used as an opportunity for students to appreciate each other's writing efforts.

At the end of the five-week session, I gave students the same end of class survey as I had given students in the previous semester.

Students said the following about WebCT:
   a. I became very knowledgeable about how others think.
   b. You were able to get good feedback.
   c. They [classmates] have helped me present my ideas in a way my peers understand.

Session III – Fall 2006

During the third semester of the project, I worked toward building better scaffolding to help students use WebCT in real and meaningful ways in their writing community. I began by providing students with an interactive tour of the site. I also set up stations in each area within WebCT so students could practice discussion skills, emailing, and creating and posting attachments.

During this semester, I taught two sections of CCDE110 which ended up being very different from each other. One section consisted of five students who shared their writing spontaneously during class, outside of class and during lab, which is a fifty minute period of time that students are required to spend in a computer lab with the instructor, in addition to class time. Because students were already sharing their work in such ways, WebCT became a hindrance rather than a useful tool early in the semester, so I used it primarily to check their progress for particular writing elements. The second section of CCDE110 was a special class since it was my writing course paired with a reading course. Students in this course took writing on Tuesdays and Thursdays for two hours and five minutes (including lab time) and reading on Mondays and Wednesdays for one hour and fifteen minutes. They became a cohesive community quickly and easily and readily shared their work. However, because

of the class size of eighteen students, we continued to use WebCT to complete peer reviews, as well as reading discussions, as this allowed us more class time to discuss the writing process and work on specific content relative to the students' writing practice. Interestingly, the students chose to use the synchronous chat function on WebCT to conduct a reading discussion while in the classroom computer lab during one session. They chatted with each other using the online chat function but also talked directly to each other at the same time, which had the interesting effect of providing them with both written and oral feedback.

I found that students began to have a change in attitude about the process of writing. They learned to make conscious choices about how to write for different audiences realizing that writing for me is a different kind of writing than writing an instant message on their cell phones. They also learned the value of sharing their writing with their peers and being part of an active writing community.

Conclusion

WebCT has become an integral part of CCDE110 and is now being used by other instructors in our developmental writing courses, as well as our Freshman Composition courses. Using WebCT as a tool in CCDE110 has enhanced instruction and promoted a writing community. Students are engaged in the writing process and quickly adapt to reading each other's work as peers and colleagues. As I continue with this project for the fourth semester, I have noticed how students have begun to respond in similar ways to their peers as I respond, to focus during online peer review on issues of content and clarity, reading classmates' papers as actively engaged readers. Students no longer write comments such as "It's good" but now elaborate on what specific elements of the text make sense and which specific areas need further work so that they, as readers, can understand the point that the writer (their peer) was trying to make. I will continue to integrate this kind of technology in the classroom, while exploring other opportunities to use technology to enhance students' self-identification as writers.

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