“Sometimes I Forget I’m in an Online Class!” Why Place Matters for Meaningful Student Online Writing Experiences

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This essay argues that “place” and “space” are a critical conceptual framework in the online writing classroom and leads students to have meaningful writing experiences. Drawing on what Eodice et al. describe as “personal connection” for writing students, the author invites online writing instructors to pay attention to how the concepts of “place” and “space”—as both natural/material and constructed/metaphorical—might inform our disciplinary understanding of online writing instruction.

Introduction

A few years ago I taught my first fully online writing course. Early in the course, students participated in an activity where I asked them to share their experiences with and expectations of being in an online course. Specifically, I was interested in learning from students what factors contribute to them feeling a sense of belonging to an online course and whether the work they engaged in was meaningful to them. To this end, one of my students posted “sometimes I forget I’m in an online class!” The student went on to share that because there is no physical meeting space, they are not engaged in online courses, especially if they miss reminders for when assignments are due. This student experience seems representative of Mauk’s call for the field to pay attention to the “emerging spatial crises in academia” and the effects of this “apparent placelessness” on students (370). Initially, I could not fathom how anyone could forget being enrolled in any course, even if there were no physical meeting room. But then I realized that this student perhaps did not feel a sense of belonging to that particular online course, a sense of belonging which is often attributed to bodies being present in some material space. I also questioned the relationship between a sense of belonging and students’ writing experiences. In other words, the student’s comment suggests a connection among experience, meaningfulness, and place, which clearly influenced how and if they participated in online courses. This likely connection made me question my own conceptualization of what it means to teach and participate in an online course and whether my course content and pedagogy fostered for students a sense of belonging and meaningful writing experiences.

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Fast forward some years later, and I continue to rethink my approaches to online writing instruction (OWI) and the factors that contribute to how my students experience the course.[1] This has become especially complex with the global pandemic shifting most writing instruction to online spaces, a move which heightened my awareness of students' sense of belonging and their constant experiences with technological systems that might problematically suggest a false sense of neutrality. For many students, they were neither prepared for nor oriented toward online learning; yet here we all are. Recognizing that many of my students are already "unsituated in academic space" because "academic space is not an integral part of their intellectual geography" (Mauk 369), I imagine that many students have struggled with thinking of our online class as a classroom, a complex location in and of itself. Instead, and perhaps especially because our class meets primarily asynchronously, I grew concerned that students might perceive the class as simply submitting assignments as opposed to a space where they are immersed in an online writing experience that promotes belongingness and meaningful writing with technologies that produce effects. My institution relies on Moodle as its learning management system (LMS) for teaching and learning, and Moodle is described as a "digital classroom space" (Moodle Policy). This idea of the LMS as a "digital classroom space" is important to how teachers then conceptualize the classroom because it informs how we teach and how our students engage with and in those spaces. Yi-Fu Tuan reminds us that "Space and place are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted" (3). Of course space and place do not cease to exist when we teach and learn online. In fact, when students learn online, the physical and virtual spaces they simultaneously inhabit become even more impactful toward their writing experiences.

Despite these complexities, I believe that in online classes, we do take place and space for granted. Tuan asserts that we all have a "range of experience of knowledge" (6) when it comes to place. For example, my experiences designing the online class, including the places I inhabit when doing this work and determining which features of the LMS I believe will best support my students in achieving course goals, would be significantly different from my students' experiences engaging in the same course. As Tuan argues, "Experience can be direct and intimate, or it can be indirect and conceptual, mediated by symbols" (6). Even my own experiences with the digital classroom space is mediated by the instructional designers' choices, choices that then mold my and my students' sense of place in the class. Of course, the technology and the experiences of students interacting with these technologies are not mutually exclusive. In fact, my conceptualization of OWI does not exist outside of the technologies and interfaces my students and I rely on. In other words, considering the effects of the materiality of these technologies on my teaching is important because

it invites me to be accountable to my students for the inequalities exacerbated by the digital tools with which I ask them to engage.

As writing instruction increasingly gravitates toward virtual spaces due to the global pandemic, OWI warrants a critical consideration of how place and space impact students' writing experience. I argue that place and space form a critical conceptual framework allowing students to engage in "meaningful writing" (Eodice et al., *Meaningful*). Eodice et al. assert that "meaningful writing" occurs when students are invited to (1) tap into the power of personal connection; (2) immerse themselves in what they are thinking, writing, and researching; (3) experience what they are writing as applicable and relevant to the real world; and (4) imagine their future selves. I posit that valuing students' meaning making processes means paying critical attention to the places where this work happens and the technologies with which they engage. Thus to create meaningful writing experiences for my students, I draw specifically on what Eodice et al. describe as "personal connection." This approach to OWI invites students to study how they understand their environments and themselves as writers within it.

There is a need for the field of rhetoric and composition studies to further consider the variety of ways in which scholars might pay attention to how the concepts of "place" and "space"—as both natural/material and constructed/metaphorical—might lead students to have meaningful writing experiences and inform our disciplinary understanding of OWI. In the sections that follow, I first present the disciplinary exigence for this project. I then share how place and space as a critical conceptual framework for OWI responds to the exigence. Next, I discuss the effects of this pedagogical approach on creating meaningful writing experiences for students in my writing course. Lastly, I conclude with implications for adopting such a pedagogical approach.

Disciplinary Exigence

Scholarship on online literacy and writing instruction has increased in recent years (Borgman and McArdle; CCCC; Ehmann and Hewet; GSOLE; ; Kynard; Martinez et al.; Nakamura). Even prior to the global pandemic, Seaman et al.'s 2018 study revealed that distance education enrollments continue to rise despite lower enrollments in higher education. While this evidence is not specific to OWI, it is valuable to scholars in rhetoric and composition studies, especially considering that even prior to the global pandemic, "online courses increasingly are a primary means of instruction for many first year composition students" (CCCC). Because OWI is increasing, scholars in the field have called for more theoretical understandings of what it means to teach online. For example, Ehmann and Hewett call for "viable theories of OWI as a philosophy of writing and as a series of strategies for teaching and learning

to write in digital settings" (517). Also, the CCCC Committee for Effective Practices in Online Writing Instruction has revealed that there is a "crucial need for a deeper understanding of OWI." Some scholars have also noted the need for OWI to draw on research-based approaches as opposed to relying on checklists without carefully interrogating them (Oswal and Meloncon).

Online writing instruction, like much of the approach to teaching writing face-to-face (f2f), is rooted in the belief that knowledge is socially constructed (Hewett and Ehmann). While social constructivism provided a theoretical foundation for OWI, the CCCC OWI Statement offer suggestions on "how best to teach writing online" (CCCC). CCCC offers specific examples connected to each principle so that instructors are guided as they make choices about their online writing course. And while the best practices provide a strong support for new and returning instructors, I argue that these principles should also be considered in context of the theories or assumptions that ground them. For example, CCCC explains that "OWI provides an opportunity for teaching various populations in a distinctive instructional setting" (5). More than 20 years ago, however, Cynthia Selfe advised us not only to use technology, but also to think about its implications; it behooves us now to think about this "distinctive instructional setting" and the implications of our actions within this setting. While writing instructors are equipped with practices for teaching online, our field seems to assume that instructors have an awareness of the complexities of this "distinctive instructional setting," including the material conditions that instructors and their students bring to these spaces. To take a case in point: though some f2f pedagogical practices might successfully transfer online as suggested by principle 4, relying solely on this migration might not create meaningful teaching and learning experiences, particularly because instructors won't have considered what these practices mean in a new, online context.

In addition, the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators (GSOLE) devised four principles, with principle 1 indicating that "Online literacy instruction should be universally accessible and inclusive." For GSOLE, attention to accessibility and inclusivity means that "The student-user experience should be prioritized when designing online courses, which includes mobile-friendly content, interaction affordances, and economic needs," among other principles. I focus on this principle because of its attention to the students' experience, a principle which corroborates Eodice et al.'s assertion that these qualities should be built into the course from the outset because they lead to meaningful writing experiences for students.

For example, I worked as a writing program coordinator at my former institution, where one of my major responsibilities was to work with the writing program administrator at the beginning of each school year to organize and

execute a one-week orientation for new graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). At one of our orientations, I had conversations with new instructors about what it means to teach first year writing at the institution using Canvas as the LMS. Though most of the new GTAs had used an LMS as a student, only one of the thirteen instructors had used an LMS to teach. In one session, one of the new GTAs asked, "So, do I just use Canvas to have students turn in papers?" I was happy to receive this question because I was certain that many other instructors had a similar understanding of Canvas. Typically instructors use an LMS as a technological tool or an online system with standard functions, such as for posting materials and assignments, grading, and creating discussion forums (Witte). However, the LMS can also serve as a material and metaphorical ecology (or as a complex interface) that produces effects. Thinking of an LMS in this way enables students and teachers to experience how inhabiting virtual spaces--as opposed to simply using them --can yield complicated results (Ulmer). That said, the LMS alone does not account for the complexities in students' learning, especially since students are always shifting between material spaces each time they access the LMS. These always shifting spaces, in turn, affect how they are able to participate in the course. Thus, I contend that the field needs a conceptual framework of place and space for OWI because it provides an opportunity for students to draw on what they bring to the online learning experience, so that this experience, and the writing they do, are meaningful. Drawing on the work of Eodice et al., I contend that place and space as a conceptual framework in OWI creates meaningful writing experiences for students.

Place and Space as a Critical Conceptual Framework

In thinking of place and space as a conceptual framework to create among students a sense of belonging and to engage them in meaningful writing, I draw on key interdisciplinary work in feminist theories, critical and cultural geography, and rhetoric and composition. In *Belonging: a Culture of Place*, bell hooks takes up belonging as a culture of place, emphasizing the effects that different geographic locations have on one's "habits of being" and arguing that a sense of belonging is connected to nature and an inherent relationship with land, especially for black people (13). For hooks, there are significant connections between black people's well-being and the well-being of the earth, between "black self-recovery" and a "renewed relationship to the earth" (40). Elsewhere, in *Ecocomposition: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches*, Christian R. Weisser and Sidney I. Dobrin likewise rely on an ecological framework but to examine the field of composition studies. They critically challenge how scholars teach and support students in engaging the material world. For Weisser and Dobrin, ecocomposition is about

the relationship between written discourse and the environment (physical and constructed) that it encounters. This is the important work that Nedra Reynolds attends to in *Geographies of Writing*, where she argued that our field needs "material literacy practices that engage with the metaphorical—ways to imagine space—without ignoring places and spaces—the actual locations where writers write, learners learn, and workers work" (3). Corroborating the need for scholars to critically engage the relationship between writing and our environment, Gregory L. Ulmer examines how the internet and technological tools challenge our thinking about writing. In *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy*, Ulmer affirms the importance of rethinking our choices about technology so that we can explore what it means to write in electronic spaces. More specifically, Ulmer invites us to critically consider what it means to inhabit virtual places rather than to simply use them. The effects of inhabiting virtual spaces is central to Lisa Nakamura's arguments in "Feeling Good About Feeling Bad," where she argues that technological platforms have caused material harm to people from historically marginalized groups because of the racism and sexism embedded in these systems in the name of technological advancements.

These field-leading interdisciplinary conversations offer exciting and productive opportunities to understand online literacy and writing instruction, and they also demonstrate why place matters to OWI. When we invite students to study writing through place and space as a conceptual lens, they can learn more about themselves as learners and their sense of belonging to material and constructed spaces. Importantly, students can also learn about how digital technologies create harmful material conditions that impact how they engage in such places and spaces. Geographer Doreen Massey recognizes this dynamic relationship between environment and language, noting that place is "open" and "woven together out of ongoing stories" (131). Massey further explains that what is special about place is a kind of "throwntogetherness," which involves the challenge of negotiating a "here-and-now...and a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and nonhuman" (140). This negotiation within and between the human and nonhuman is what students in online writing classrooms should be asked to consider, primarily because they might not be accustomed to thinking of the complexities of online learning--including how their bodies and the places they inhabit shape the work they (can) do. What they then realize is that place matters. Mauk says it perhaps most succinctly: higher education "is based on an intersection of the material and conceptual, of the real and the imagined" and of students' "interpretation or creation of academic space" (368). Recognizing that online learning has material consequences reveals the dynamic coexistence between material and virtual spaces. My experience is that when teachers design online writing class-

rooms with place and space as a conceptual framework, it affects the kinds of questions they ask and shifts the kinds of expectations they have about student writing. Experience also tells me that when we invite students to develop or enhance their online literacy, they learn how to navigate through and interact with systems that challenge their thinking about the power embedded in these systems. My goal is for my students to do more than write about place. I strive for my students to pay attention to the kinds of writing they are able to do because of the personal connections they have with the virtual and material places and spaces they inhabit. This is one way to support them in ensuring that writing is meaningful.

Applying Place and Space to an Online Writing Course

Some Background

In fall 2019, I earned an excellence in teaching and learning grant from the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at my institution. The purpose of the grant was to redesign a first year writing course and identify the effects of place and space as a conceptual lens on student writing. My hypothesis was that place and space as the conceptual lens through which I ground OWI would make students' writing and learning experiences meaningful by inviting them to leverage personal connections. I also hypothesized that the metacognitive practice of studying place and space as foundational course values would help students become more reflective about the virtual and material places in which they are learning and therefore more successful in responding to the rhetorical contexts in both places.

The majority of writing courses at my current institution are listed as "partially online," which means anywhere from 10%-30% of the course is online. My pilot course, however, was hybrid, so 50%-75% of the course was online. There were 15 students enrolled in this course, and 13 of the 15 consented to participating in this study. During the first two weeks, I met with my students every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to orient them to the course. Starting in the third week, my students and I met f2f only on Mondays. I was physically present in class on Wednesdays for students who preferred to attend class f2f on that day. Throughout the semester, the same 5-8 students attended f2f class on most Wednesdays while the remaining students attended online. After the third week, Friday classes were fully online for all students. This hybrid course was intentionally designed to account for my students' preference in learning modality. I wanted to be mindful of the spaces and places my students would choose to inhabit each week and the role of technology in their personal choices. Through weekly e-learning logs, which I will discuss later, all my students reflected on these choices to engage with the course either f2f

or online on Wednesdays and also how the course's conceptual lens and their own material conditions informed those choices.

Place and space as a critical conceptual framework informed the design and teaching of this hybrid course in order to create meaningful writing experiences for my students. To do this, I

1. provided students with readings that oriented them to a variety of ways of conceptualizing place and space;
2. asked students to write about a place and space that had personal meaning to them and;
3. asked students to continuously reflect on the places and spaces of the course that emerged for them as they write.

The course itself was divided into three units that each ask students to draw personal connections to their experiences, relationships, and topics of interests in a variety of material and virtual places and spaces. Unit 1 was titled "Writing about Self and Place." In this unit, students wrote a personal paper that explored a place that had shaped a particular aspect of their identity. Writing about place is inherently personal, which is one of its strengths; this also accords with studies showing that students' writing is meaningful when they can connect it to personal experiences (Eodice et al.). In Unit 2, "Studying Text and Place," students researched and annotated relevant sources in preparation for the final research project, which was a digital writing project in the form of a public service announcement (PSA). This PSA was about a social issue they cared about that was connected to place and space. In the final unit, Unit 3, students created their PSAs informed by their Unit 2 research. Each unit builds on the one before and each draws on OWI social constructivist's roots. Finally, toward the end of the semester, students created an electronic portfolio, where they reflected on the connections among their three projects and discussed possible areas where the work they did might transfer to other sites. Davidson reminds us that e-portfolios "build ethos" for those who "dwell" in virtual spaces; thus, the e-portfolio provides a space for further self-expression and for students to assess their own meaningful writing experiences.

In the section below, I demonstrate how the "Writing about Self and Place" unit, coupled with the e-learning logs my students wrote throughout the semester, helped create meaningful writing experiences for my students that were grounded in place and space as a conceptual framework. I adapted meaningful writing criteria from three aspects of Eodice et al.'s work: that students are able to "make and extend personal connections to their experiences or histories, their social relationships, and/or subjects and topics for writing"

(320). Drawing on Eodice et al., these personal connections were tied to three forms of influence:

1. individual factors, including the ways they connected to their development as writers, their sense of authorship, their vision of future writing or identities, their desire for self-expression, and their individual experiences;
2. social factors, including family, community, and peers; and
3. students' interests in and passion for the subjects of their writing, and their sense of the importance of those topics (326-327).

Writing about Self, Space, and Place

Asking students to write about themselves as learners whose identities are shaped by the places and spaces they inhabit provides an inherent opportunity for students to have personal connection and engage in meaningful writing. To prepare students for this writing assignment, we read and discussed the introduction to Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Students grappled with the concepts "space" and "place," drawing from their own experiences with the two and complicating it with Tuan's ideas. Students also read excerpts of Nedra Reynold's *Geographies of Writing.* Reading Reynolds was intended to challenge students' thinking about spatial metaphors, which I anticipated would show up within their writing. Thinking about spatial metaphors also invited students to engage more critically with online literacy. For example, we discussed how virtual classrooms are often described as online "environments" and online "spaces," concepts which are derived from material places (Reynolds)-- a dynamic repeated in this very article. I wanted students to pay attention to how applying these spatial metaphors without paying attention to their material effects might lead to neglecting their connection. Through the readings, I invited students to pay attention to both the possibilities and the limitations of spatial metaphors. Prior to reading Tuan and Reynolds' work, most students shared that they believed the two concepts were interchangeable. However, the readings equipped them with the language they needed to express their understanding of how space and place shaped them. Students agreed that spaces become places when meaning is applied to them. It is this understanding of place as the relationship between experiences and spaces that my assignment sought to explore.

For example, Jean's description and analysis of growing up in multiple places reflect her contested experiences with place and placelessness. Jean had to spend time in two places due to her parent's separation; of that experience, Jean writes:

> My personal favorite [feature of the house] was the princess stickers I put all over my bedroom that my mother was never able to remove. By the time we moved in 2011, the roof was falling apart, and the house was left with an unfinished bathroom and yard that needed more TLC than anyone was willing to give.

Jean's account highlights the social and family influence of meaningful writing criteria. For Jean, one of the homes she grew up in as a child, specifically her bedroom, was the place that had a significant impact on her. Jean's focus on the wall decor along with the connections she made between the physical changes of the house from past to present emphasizes the "social process" that exists between writing and learning (Eodice et al. 331). Jean further writes:

> Living in a town that had less people than the high school I graduated from meant that people didn't have a lot of experience with other ethnicities. In elementary school, we had less than a handful of kids that identified as a minority, myself included.

When Jean moved to her dad's home city, her experiences with place and self-identity became more evident. Through her writing, I was able to see her shift away from what seemed like a feeling of placelessness in the earlier excerpt toward a sense of place, belonging, and struggle. She continues:

> Being in such a culturally rich city made me get in touch with my Mexican heritage. Whenever I am there I always feel that sense of pride and I am more willing to learn about my culture.

What is notable in Jean's response is the inherent role of racial history and dynamics in a sense of belonging and self identity (hooks). In other words, her sense of belonging to a place is not separate from her racial and ethnic heritage. Jean's experiences in the city her father lived drew her closer to her self identity. Her writing was connected to a combination of family and social factors and her own confrontations with cultural and linguistic identities rooted in place. hooks writes that "geography more so than any other factor shaped [her] destiny," and I see this perspective reflected clearly in Jean's response. Moreover, Jean's awareness of her embodied practices in her dad's home city exemplifies the personal connection that Kynard highlights between geography and language. Drawing on the work of critical geographer Kathrine McKittrick's, Kynard reminds us that geographies are always infused with distinct yet multiple knowledges and language systems: "Since space and place are always much more than just vessels that contain peoples and

their social relations, geographies represent connective and connected sites of struggle" (334).

Jean's relationship between cultural identity, language, and place is similar to the importance of individual and community influence on place that three other students in the course discussed. One of these students, Kelsey, attributed a sense of place to her religion. Kelsey wrote:

> Where you live is not what makes it a home, but wherever you are with your family. Learning and experiencing life together, is what made that space become a place that you now call home, whether that being a city, a park that you all go to once a year, or your family's favorite ice cream shop. In the same way, Zion no longer is a building but a people, and a feeling.

In writing about place, Kelsey developed a deeper understanding of her connection to her church community and the feelings that emerge when she is a part of her religious community. Eodice et al. reminds us of the importance of allowing students to draw on those experiences that are integral to their communities because "[d]evaluing personal connections can devalue whole communities of people, their experiences, and their knowledge" (336). What is also evident from Kelsey's response is how she transformed a sense of community from a physical material structure to a feeling that coincides with "learning and experiencing" as she describes it. As Dobrin affirms, how we name and understand places is a rhetorical act informed by ideological assumptions (23). These ideological assumptions, I argue, inform how our students then practice the writing we ask them to do based on the places in and about which they choose to write.

There were also instances when students made connections to place and space that initially seemed superficial, but later revealed more in-depth connections. For example, two students drew connections between place and their field of study. Noah wrote the following:

> My first experience with construction and carpentry was at this cottage, helping build an addition to the deck and creating an entire new enclosure on the side of the cottage facing the water. It seems fitting that now my mark is on our beautiful cottage forever just as it has left a permanent mark on me. [...] That first experience with carpentry is what got me interested in my major of mechanical engineering because it made me realize that drawing out plans and then seeing those plans come to life in some space is one of the greatest feelings in the world.

Noah identified a personal connection between place and his identity as a student, including placing himself within the larger mechanical engineering discourse community. As hooks argues, "We are born and have our being in a place of memory. We chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic. We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering" (5). Noah's responses above also show a sense of authorship and a personal connection to a vision of future writing or identities. As Eodice et al. indicate, "we often ignore the role students and their identities and experiences play within the larger discourse community of higher education" (323). Noah's own experiences show this and corroborates Eodice et al.'s assertion that students develop agency when they write about subject matter that is of personal and professional interests to them and that they truly care about. People's experiences in the places they care about is what invites a sense of belonging to other places, and it is the ability to make these connections that makes place and space as a conceptual framework important to OWI.

Like Noah, Jasmine also drew connections between experiences in one place informing choices in another, which led to her field of study. Jasmine wrote:

> I had my senior year ripped away from me, having to spend hours in a courtroom...that courtroom became more than a dingy, small room, it became a stage... It was in this courtroom that I realized my voice really did have an effect. It is when I realized how strong of a person I am. In a small, unfamiliar place, I learned to speak up for what I believe in, and what I know is right.

Jasmine is a nursing student, and in her response, she wrote about how important it was for her to advocate for others who might have had difficult experiences similar to hers. Eodice et al. argue that students having the agency to control their writing and construct their learning is valuable; however, this matters less "amidst the challenges of the social and material conditions they face" (33). Jasmine delved into a difficult past experience and drew a connection between that experience and her current professional goals. What this experience reveals is the connection between place and students' "passion for the subjects of their writing, and their sense of the importance of those topics" (Eodice et al. 326-327). This passion and sense of importance also invites us to recognize the embodiedness of writing and the ways in which teaching and learning environments might problematically reinforce a mind/body binary (Perl).

Reflection on Self, Space, and Place

When we shifted to a more hybrid and online teaching and learning modality after the first few weeks of class, my students and I participated in robust discussions about what it means to inhabit virtual spaces. I drew on Ingold's understanding of place as a way of inhabiting the world, which means living "in the open" where life isn't "contained within bounded places" (1796). Ingold makes an important distinction between what it means to "occupy" the world versus what it means to "inhabit" it. An occupied world, for Ingold, "is furnished with already-existing things. But one that is inhabited is woven from the strands of their continual coming-into-being" (1797). Ingold's views of place are apt in conceptualizing place and space as a lens through which to view OWI because our students tend to "occupy" the online space but not "inhabit" it, especially when the online space is seen as co-identical to the course LMS. However, in conversations with my students, we discussed our online class as a process of "coming-into-being" that requires us to recognize that what matters is not only the LMS through and with which they interact, but also their surroundings and how they experience the course, which is always ever changing.

To respond to this idea, students wrote a weekly e-learning log exploring questions such as:

- What places are you inhabiting as you work through this course? What relationship exists between those places and the work you are able to do online?
- What assumptions do you think the technological interface makes about you, the student, about how you learn? How do these assumptions affect how you engage with the course, your classmates and/or the instructor?
- What places do you take for granted? How does writing about place in an online class help you reassess your relationship to those places?
- What roles/responsibilities are you asked to perform and what roles/responsibilities do you choose to perform in the places you inhabit while working in this course? How do those roles shape your writing online?
- As you inhabit our online classroom, what or who seems to be privileged through the design of the interface with which you engage?

The series of questions I propose for students' logs vary, and they function as possibilities--not directives--for students to consider. The goals of the logs are to support students in developing metacognitive awareness (VanKooten) of writing about place and to reflect on their online learning in relation to place. Importantly, the goal is also to promote deep thinking about how the techno-

logical platforms students engage with, including social networking as places and spaces, potentially pose harm to students from historically marginalized groups by exacerbating systemic oppression upon them (Nakamura). For example, prior to the global pandemic, most online students were already accessing their courses from home ("Research in Online Literacy Education"). While it is certain that even more students are now learning from home, the ways in which this happens might be even more complex. Many students are also working from home and have relatives to care for, so how they experience place and interact with the writing course has shifted tremendously. They are moving in between places and roles connected to these places; thus, experiencing places as "woven together out of ongoing stories" (Massey 131). Their backgrounds and motivations for engaging in an online writing course speaks to their culture (St.Amant), a foundational part of their engagement in online courses, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important that those stories are validated and that students see those stories as an integral part of their writing experience (Martinez).

The e-learning logs my students write invite them to grapple with these ways of being. Notably, while students complete the e-learning logs each week, some have spent more time in the f2f classroom on Wednesdays while others chose to engage with the class virtually for the majority of the week. By asking students to reflect weekly on questions related to place and space, I strive to create a sense of belonging among my students and within the course. I also aim to draw on Weisser and Dobrin's identification of the relationship between written discourse and the constructed environment. For example, in response to one of their e-learning logs, Noah noted the following:

> Writing about place in an online environment really creates a unique challenge that I had never experienced before because my writing is not tied down to one physical location. Now I think about each location when I write and it adds another dimension to how I feel in the place, especially when I am not in class.

Noah's description of online writing as posing a "unique challenge" was tied to his recognition that writing online has material consequences shaped by inhabited places. This idea shows the power of reflection because it demonstrates that students can develop a deep sense of responsibility to the course even though they were not physically in class.

What Noah's response also shows is the reciprocal relationship between mind, body, and spaces. Fleckenstein (1999) terms this the "somantic mind: a permeable materiality in which mind and body resolve into a single entity which is (re)formed by the constantly shifting boundaries of discursive and

corporeal intertextualities" (286). The "permeable materiality" shaped by "shifting boundaries" of which Fleckenstein writes helps me make sense of the virtual and material spaces where my students' identities are "(re)formed reciprocally" (286) in the online writing course. The concept of the somatic mind recognizes, as Fleckenstein (1999) points out, that students in online courses inhabit at least two places at once, their virtual classroom and their physical site, while keeping in mind that "virtual locations are always layered with multiple physical locations" (163).

Another student, Alex, admitted being skeptical about learning online initially sharing that:

> Online learning was always challenging. Reason being is because I am a procrastinator. And because I am a procrastinator, I would prefer face to face interactions. But through studying place and writing about place, I am motivated to change my relationship with online learning.

Notably, Alex also revealed in a subsequent response that writing about places he cared about made him think about his writing as "not just an assignment I am completing for a grade" but as an assignment that had a broader meaning and purpose. This level of reflection, I argue, allows us to challenge problematic notions of online education. Place and space as a conceptual lens through which students write and reflect about their subjectivities allows the field to challenge the "ideology of normalcy" embedded in online education (Moeller and Jung, par. 2). This occurs when we create the space for students to recognize the material effects associated with online education and the implications of these effects with how they then engage in the online class. In other words, students do not simply acclimate to online learning; they engage in the active work of disrupting the status quo by first deciding when and how to participate in online education and subsequently studying their own internalized attitudes about learning online and its privileges and consequences. In order for students to feel a sense of belonging to an online course and have meaningful writing experiences, they should investigate what it means to be embodied in spaces, particularly online spaces, and what this embodiment reveals about their rhetorical writing practices. This embodiment can also reveal their choices in the kinds of places where writing happens or their various "modes of experience" that emerge as they learn online (Tuan, 3).

Conclusion

Eighteen years ago, Jonathan Mauk asked "What happens to writing pedagogy, and the practices of learning to write, in the absence of traditional

university geography?" This question has critical implications today with the majority of our students inhabiting places and spaces that do not primarily include the brick and mortar classroom. Thus, it behooves us to recognize that our students will likewise continue to inhabit virtual spaces even as they make their way back to the physical classroom space. In these times, "a sense of *where*" (Mauk 369) is imperative to the work our students do in the online writing classroom. We can begin by assessing our assumptions of students in online learning spaces and what these assumptions lead us to believe about how our students learn, what they value, and how our teaching impacts these two ideas.

Place and space as a conceptual framework in online literacy and writing instruction recognizes the foundational role that students' lives and experiences play in their learning. When carefully integrated into an online writing course, this conceptual framework helps students craft new relationships to these critical concepts, write and reflect more deeply on the places of their lives, and more purposefully inhabit--instead of just occupy--the spaces in which they learn and write. Additionally, methods for understanding students' meaningful writing (e.g. Eodice et al.) are helpful for identifying how students relate to space and place as along a number of axes, not the least of which is personal connection. All students should have the opportunity to connect their literacy practices to the places they inhabit through personal connection. In other words, students deserve meaningful writing that engages their experiences, beliefs, and aspirations. As scholars in rhetoric and composition studies, we understand the importance of students' experience in OWI; however, it is time for us to direct our attention to ensuring this experience is a meaningful one that is informed by a more critical interpretation of place and space.

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Notes

1. I follow Beth Hewett in defining OWI as "using computer technology to learn writing from a teacher, tutor, or other students and by using it to communicate about that writing, to share writing for learning purposes, and to present writing for course completion purposes" (36).

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