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Distance learning: From multiple snapshots, a composite portrait

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Abstract

This article discusses the current state of distance learning in composition by reporting on and interpreting a 2005 survey that assesses trends and workload conditions in distance learning. Areas examined in the article include attitudes of faculty and administration, faculty demographics, student demographics, online course and program development, course caps, course delivery and management tools, technology support, course design freedom, impact on writing pedagogy, and institutional DE profile. The article concludes by summarizing the current DL picture, identifying areas of need, and providing research recommendations for the future.
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Keywords: Distance learning; DL incentives; DL platforms; Degree completion programs; Course caps; DL politics; Online learning; Online courses; Composition; Pedagogy; Assessment

1. Introduction

As distance learning has gained a more prominent role in composition pedagogy over the last ten years, numerous predictions, fears, and concerns have surfaced. Many scholars have expressed skepticism about the quality of DE, speculating about long-term negative effects on the teaching of writing. Others worried about the changing roles of both students and teachers. Would students become disenfranchised? Would instructors of online classes be marginalized in P and T considerations, saddled with heavier course loads and class caps, and have their academic freedoms trampled upon by requirements to teach courses designed and prepared by others? While some administrators looked to DE to deliver huge profits with low overhead, others, considering DE to be merely a fad, predicted that online learning would simply fade away.

Have such ideas come to fruition as distance learning continues to evolve? Some of these issues have been recently addressed by composition scholars. Kristine Blair and Elizabeth

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Monske (2003) explored the question of who benefits from online learning, specifically examining the impact of DL on teachers and students. Patricia Webb Peterson (2001) looked at three potential areas to be significantly affected by DL: "teacher roles, education goals, and student learning." She also "debunked several common faculty fears" (p. 359). Susan Miller (2001) recommended a theorized approach to the shifts in pedagogy that occur in online courses. Laura Brady (2001) examined the challenges of teaching online by discussing potential problems with access, perceptions of instructor roles, and retention. Though this research gives us a partial picture of the state of distance learning, it is not so clear what is actually "going on in the trenches." How many of those predictions, fears, and concerns are being realized by instructors teaching composition at a distance?

To discover what colleagues in composition and other writing intensive classrooms are experiencing, we conducted a detailed, informal survey with questions designed to assess the working conditions of DL instructors and the political climate for DL at their institutions. We supplemented this information with several personal interviews. The 37 respondents to our survey represent a wide spectrum in terms of geographic location, rank, type of institution, years of teaching experience, and years of experience with DL, casting significance on what might at first seem like a small sampling (see Figure 1).

Our respondents from these distinct geographic regions of the United States are associated with the full complement of Carnegie Classified higher education institutions. We've heard from faculty members and administrators as far distant as New Zealand, and stateside from as far west as California and Washington, from East and West Texas, from Idaho and Kansas, from plains areas and mountain foothills and river towns, from private and nonprivate East Coast schools, from northern and mid-Atlantic schools; from administrators and faculty in community colleges and at primarily four-year baccalaureate institutions, and from graduate-degree universities and virtual colleges.

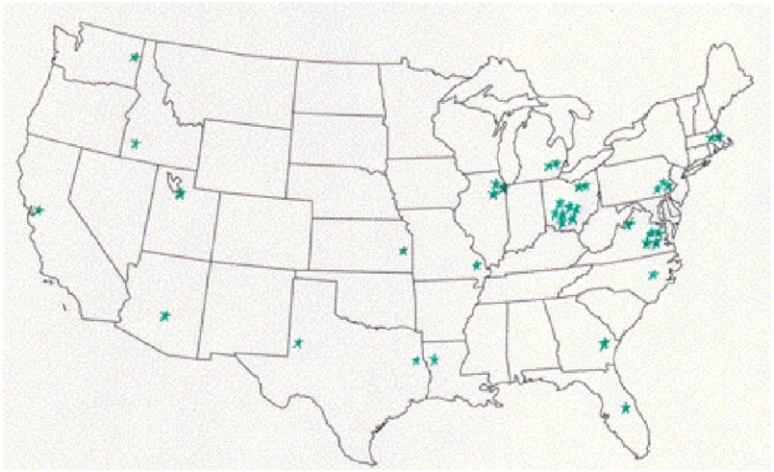

Fig. 1. Location map of survey and interview respondents (not shown: New Zealand university).

From the wealth of information provided by our surveys and interviews, we have chosen to focus on 11 primary areas critical to the online teaching of writing. Although these survey results are not empirical in nature, they serve as a lens through which prominent features and a holistic composite portrait emerge, providing significant insights into the role of distance learning in composition pedagogy.

2. Administrative attitudes toward DL

Not so long ago, in Chicago's Palmer House, 1998, a composition teacher shared her very real fear about her ability to understand, as quickly as possible, how to create distance learning from what she knew of composition pedagogy. "The president of our university wants us to have our entire program online by the end next quarter, and we have no idea what we are doing. No one in our department has ever taught an online class. We have no idea how to design one. In fact, we do not even know what technology we will be using," commented this frustrated potential DL instructor at that CCCC session 7 years ago. A second individual at a different session presented a different but equally disheartening discovery: "I have just spent the last year designing what I thought was going to be my department's first online composition course, but my department chair will not let me teach it. He refuses to believe an online course could be as good as the f2f version."

Have the attitudes of administrators changed or become more realistic? According to our respondents, the resistance to online learning seems to be lessening, under certain circumstances. "Five years ago, my university decided not to get into the business of offering courses online. About three years ago, administrators did an about-face. I think they became aware that quality online courses could be developed, and could prove financially as well as pedagogically viable," comments an associate professor from a major private East Coast university. A recent study commissioned by the Sloan Consortium cited the following results: When administrators in higher education were presented with the statement, "Online education is critical to long-term strategy," 66.8% were in agreement; 12.7% were neutral; and 19.5% disagreed. When these same administrators were asked to compare quality between online and f2f courses, 12.3% felt it to be superior; 44.9% found it the same; and 42.8% perceived it to be inferior (Allen & Seaman, 2003). Although acceptance of DE seems to be growing among administrators, quality is still an area of skepticism.

Administrative concern about quality was a recurrent theme among our survey respondents, as well, with most citing administrators as supportive, as long as instructors could prove that their online classes are equivalent to their f2f counterparts. Of course, this notion begs the question, how does one determine the quality of an online class? Too little has been written regarding the formal assessment of online composition courses, indicating a need for more scholarship in this area. However, the CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments (2004) provides basic guidelines for courses, faculty, administrators, and writing programs. Perhaps the most valuable advice in the CCCC document is in their citing of Arthur Chickering and Stephen Ehrmann's statement of "Good Practice," which "encourages contacts between student and faculty," "develops reciprocity and cooperation among students," "uses active learning techniques," "gives prompt feedback,"

"emphasizes time on task," "communicates high expectations," and "respects diverse talents and ways of learning" (CCCC, 2004).

Another common thread was the observation that administrators who became involved in online learning or at least made themselves aware of what was really being offered moved from a resistant stance to a supportive one. "Most administrators who are aware of/involved in online education are aware that the quality of online is generally the same as f2f." This statement from a Writing Programs Administrator in the Midwest is representative of many similar comments. The administrators who maintained the most resistance were those who refused to have anything to do with DL or to even look at the online courses designed by instructors in their departments and universities. Surprisingly, only 6% of our respondents reported such extreme levels of resistance. Some of this resistance also seemed to be based in a fear of technology, as indicated by the following statement from an instructor in the Midwest: "My department sees technology and DL courses as 'not real education.' They feel that students cannot possibly get the real experience of education, and instructors who succumb to the use of technology are selling out."

One notable area of change seems to be the recognition that online learning is not a trend and is certain to be an integral part of higher education for years to come. Several faculty report that administrators who previously ignored DL are now giving it their attention and support. As one online teacher from a virtual school in the Southeast states, "In the last two years, acceptance has grown, and many former skeptics believe that elearning is here to stay and they might as well jump on the wagon." To consider the overall growth of distance learning, the Sloan Consortium study cited "an annual compound growth rate of over 25% for the three year period," when considering enrollment data from Fall 1999 and Fall 2002 (Allen, 2003). The same study predicted a 20% growth rate between 2002 and 2003, according to self-reported projections from institutions in the study (Allen & Seaman, 2003). This is consistent with findings from the U.S. Department of Education that indicated a 78.3% growth rate from Fall of 1994 to Fall 1997, showing an increase of 26.1% per year (Kiernan, 2003). Even in the face of such growth, a little over one third of our respondents (37%) indicate a climate of neutrality where attitudes range from positive, but with little support, to guarded acceptance to "benign neglect." A byproduct of this environment seems to be departments, programs, and entire colleges where no real plan exists for DL. Perhaps a few online classes are offered here and there, but there are no complete programs online and no plans for further development. While some institutions are engaging in DL, they have no idea why. A professor from a major university in the West characterizes the situation this way: "It has been put into the strategic plan but with little understanding of why or how. Online learning is supported in concept, with the idea that it would show that the university is keeping up with the times, and of course with the hope that it will open enrollment to new students and thus increase admissions."

An element that seems to be disappearing from the DL picture, particularly in composition, is the administrative belief that online courses are going to be huge money makers that will solve a number of administrative problems, including dwindling resources, insufficient classroom space, and lagging enrollment. In fact, institutions find it difficult to calculate the cost efficiencies of DL because of expenses that are not readily apparent, such as costs of support staff, technology, and resources, along with other hidden variables (Carr, 2001; Valentine, 2002). However, a general recognition seems to exist that DL programs are not going to rescue

institutions financially. Citing results from six cost studies conducted with online programs at Drexel University, Pace University, Pennsylvania State University, Rochester Institute of Technology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and University of Maryland University College, "those who assumed it would be possible to create new sources of revenue from online programs quickly—or even to sustain the programs without financial scrutiny—will be disappointed" (Carr, 2001). Only 6% of our respondents indicated an extreme push towards DL by administrators with unrealistic expectations.

Unfortunately, many administrators still fail to recognize the workload online courses require for both teachers and students, as stated repeatedly in the survey responses. We were struck in particular by a quote from one instructor in the Southwest who stated that an upper level administrator at the college "thinks faculty just stay at home and work in their pajamas." Again, administrators who become involved with online learning or are well informed about what faculty are doing seem to have more of an understanding of the work involved. A community college associate professor from a western state explains that she made her department chair sit down so that she could walk him through her class, which was his first experience with an online course. Afterwards, he took an online course designed to teach administrators about distance learning. His doing so resulted in a greater respect for the work involved in online learning. Blair and Monske (2003) pointed out that "technology based pedagogies require significant labor in design, development, and delivery. Much research shows that fully online courses require more up-front planning, more detail in design, and just as many, if not more, contact hours with students than traditional, classroom-based courses." They further contend that even though this increased workload is generally known among faculty who engage in DL, very little discussion or research regarding this issue is present within the literature in our own field of composition (Blair and Monske, p. 447). Extended research and documentation of workload issues related to online courses seem crucial to a better understanding for administrators and faculty outside DL.

3. Faculty attitudes towards DL

While there are certainly those faculty who remain wary of DL, almost half of our respondents indicated that online courses had gained acceptance in their departments and universities over the past five years. Only one person reported faculty attitudes that had grown more negative. As one community college instructor from the Northeast stated, "Yes, there seems to have been resistance, and now people at the college are beginning to be more accepting of online learning." Another instructor from a college in the Southwest reiterated, "I think there is a growing acceptance that they [online classes] are here to stay (not just a fad). More faculty are interested in knowing what we [online instructors] are doing." Such findings seem to coincide with survey results from the Sloan Consortium study, which found that 59.6% of participants were in agreement with the statement "Faculty accept the value and legitimacy of online education"; 21.3% were neutral; and 18.7% disagreed (Allen & Seaman, 2003).

Still, resistance to online courses certainly remains. "Some faculty seem to feel that online instruction is used to get out of actual teaching," commented an assistant professor from the West Coast. "From its inception, traditional educators have been wary of online learning.

Many believe that it is an easy A," said an instructor from a virtual school in the South. As with many administrators, as noted in the previous section, some faculty question the quality of online courses, but tend to know little about the courses they are criticizing. Sometimes such resistance has had a negative effect on programs. "In our department, they [negative attitudes towards DL] have caused our DL course numbers to stagnate. We could easily have doubled our number of online composition courses by now, but we have stagnated."

Stagnated growth of online learning seemed to be a common theme among our respondents. Many of them cited situations where colleagues are supportive of the online teaching in their departments, but have no desire to engage in it themselves. "Faculty who had no interest in teaching online five years ago still have no interest," stated an associate professor at a community college on the East Coast. Several faculty who are currently engaged in online teaching speculated as to reasons behind the reluctance of their colleagues. "The number of faculty going online seems to have stalled. The amount of work these classes require for both development and delivery may be why," theorized one English faculty member from a West Coast community college. The director of composition at an East Coast university stated, "Many [faculty] really want nothing to do with teaching them [DL courses] as they probably realize how much work developing and teaching an online course entails." Another instructor from a university in the Midwest commented, "Most [faculty] are reluctant to embrace the technology, and the added work." As expressed by the previous quote, some respondents also cited fear of technology as a reason for faculty reluctance. The following quote from a community college instructor in the Midwest further illustrated this point: "Others [faculty members] are very insecure and afraid about the impact of technology on their own teaching." Because the stagnation cited by our participants seems to directly contradict the research regarding overall growth in DL, as previously presented, further investigation of this phenomenon is essential with this research question in mind: Could this apparent stagnation be limited only to composition, and if so, why?

With the exception of the additional work involved for an online course, much of the resistance to online learning seemed to be rooted in misconception and lack of knowledge about DL. As with administrators, when faculty began to familiarize themselves with online courses, their resistance began to break down. At the University of Illinois, a committee consisting of 16 professors conducted a year-long study to educate themselves and the university community about DL. After listening to guest speakers from across the United States and Canada and reviewing literature in the field, some of those who were initially opposed to DL changed their positions upon realizing that quality teaching could occur online, as expressed in this quote from one participant: "I really started thinking, maybe there really is something to this, that online can be as good, or even better in some ways, than face to face" (Young, 2000).

3.1. Academic profile of online faculty

As to the particular face of the educator, or rather, the academic rank, true heterogeneity reigns. While about half of our respondents are instructors of nontenurable rank, more than half of these nonsenior faculty hold fulltime positions, less than 25% being part-time adjuncts or teaching assistants. Our survey sampling, likewise, shows that while an individual school

may rely heavily on teaching assistants, delegation of online teaching to graduate students may not be the norm, and when graduate assistants do teach online in concentrated numbers, they generally do so within a closely mentored system.

Nearly half of our survey respondents are tenure-line faculty, and slightly more than 25% of these tenured or tenure-eligible faculty members teach at schools awarding baccalaureate through doctoral degrees. Visiting instructors and adjunct professors, sometimes hired for the express purpose of teaching online courses, complicate perceptions of rank in our composite portrait, but even with overlapping categories—ranks interpreted differently depending on academic program range or institutional classification—our survey suggests that distance education at a wide variety of postsecondary institutions is not the province solely of younger or less experienced faculty. The number of practitioners with decades of teaching experience is high, and it seems that those who add online formats to their teaching methods do not abandon the practice. One simple indicator: among respondents, the average number of years teaching was 19.9, the average years teaching online 5.2, a little more than 25% of a not inconsiderable tenure as a professional educator.

This decidedly mature profile as far as average years teaching corresponds to a modest representation of online adjunct and graduate assistant part-time instructors. Compensation is not a consistently reliable incentive, as later discussion will show; the investment, therefore, of so many experienced instructors may well reflect that those who teach online do so despite sketchy recompense because doing so agrees with firmly held notions of the purposes and possibilities of higher education, and for a smaller but undeniable segment, because DL is the available part-time or general education teaching opportunity.

3.2. Incentives and rewards

Compensation for embarking into unknown territory and committing to the research, study, and trial period of adapting personal style to sometimes unfamiliar technology-rich pedagogies evinces a hide-and-seek pattern, appearing and receding in program descriptions. Course preparation and design continues to garner the lion's share of compensatory recognition. Institutional practices that formerly rewarded locally innovative work for both new course design and the initial run of the course may drop the extra compensation for teaching the course, as many have tended to do, after the first year or two. Sometimes this is a sign of growth, indicating that programs once idling or recently piloted have sprouted what environmentalists studying natural habitats call an ecotone or edge environment (Golley). Edge environments absorb some characteristics of the neighborhood beyond, while sheltering flora and fauna that become uniquely adapted to life in a marginal zone. Edge growth in DL has depleted initial development stimulus funds, and distance education participants may feel neglected, though perhaps not more neglected than other writing programs which garner less than full support from academically contiguous programs.

Workload reassignment or stipends were reported by 50% of the survey respondents, with more reassignment time than stipends, which commonly ranged between 1,000 and 2,000 dollars, but were sometimes much lower or took the form of honorariums for technology training. Occasionally, as with 10% of our respondents, the bartering system is suggested, too, with the mention of computer upgrades and laptops as rewards for teaching distance education.

Some creative blends have been negotiated, too, like a combination at one community college of paying 350/credit hour for initial course development, and adding to that one extra credit hour per delivery each time the class is taught online.

The dedication of writing teachers made an appearance, too, in responses to the query about existing incentives. Considering the average age of our respondents, it was surprising and humbling to read colleagues' comments that they do what they do simply for "personal pleasure" or such modest hopes as "better summer enrollment" or being "recognized in annual evaluation" or the more altruistic hope of making "so much accessible to students." One respondent felt it worth noting a "one-time double part-time course pay" to attract coverage for an online class, and one representative optimist could report no concrete incentive of record but gamely offered that the institution was still engaged in a "three-year discussion about more money for technical expertise."

In short, no one is making retirement plans based on income from online teaching, and faculty generally do not stop teaching online when incentives dry up, but the lessening of incentives for new practitioners is a serious impediment to the growth of online programs and courses.

3.3. Patterns of online course and program content

Despite often minimal incentives, these diversely drawn educators are among the busiest of instructors, sometimes only available to teach online in overload arrangements. The status of the online writing courses they teach is one part of a larger picture—the profile of distance learning as a whole at any given institution. Summarizing data from an Educause sponsored 2002 survey of distance learning in the United States, Paul Arabasz and Mary Beth Baker (2003) estimated that approximately 70% of all U.S. institutions were then offering fully online courses, while 80% offered hybrid courses, with a large gap existing between the high estimate of associate degree offerings and the considerably smaller showing of baccalaureate institution counterparts. However, estimates of hybrid postgraduate course offerings at graduate degree institutions rivaled, in the 2002 survey, those of two-year colleges, so the more sluggish move toward distance or distributed platforms observed in four-year institutions contrasts sharply with a concurrent movement of deep or complex content into online formats.

Our 2005 survey includes about 50% chiefly four-year institutions, a figure considerably higher than the 27% four-year institutions with online offerings projected by Arabasz and Baker's (2003) summary of the Educause study. Arabasz and Baker reported more explicit findings of broad but shallow instances of discrete offerings within a wide variety of programs. Our more recent survey, too, shows similar patterns of baccalaureate institutions offering isolated classes, a section here and there, rather than full-blown certificate or degree programs, although some growth is apparent within individual institutions. Although most distance course offerings are typically clustered in education and human services areas, one Midwestern institution offers seven programs in five colleges, including a nursing program completely online and one English certificate program in Professional and Technical Writing, typifying distance learning's range and penetration at institutions offering chiefly baccalaureate degrees. Though the number of online writing courses has doubled at this institution in the past two years,

the figure remains below double digits. At the same time, an initiative to put a full complement of required general education courses online is being reconsidered with more ambitious parameters, following modest success five years ago and subsequent dwindling of incentive funding. This rocking forward motion, this push-me/pull-you pattern of advancement is slow but perceptible at this institution and elsewhere.

Among the most challenging situations reported: a Midwestern institution employs distance learning specialists, visiting instructors, who teach several sections of first year writing in an initiative that increases the community outreach already inherent in distance learning programs. Advanced high school students attend class in remote locations with access to a college distance-learning classroom, so that traditional and nontraditional class members—high school and post-high school students—study first-year college writing in a hybrid class together, synchronously and asynchronously. This situation heightens the potential isolation of distance teaching, as instructors from this institution carry a 21-credit teaching load per year, but because all the distance instructors in writing courses are adjuncts and all the distance classes are taught in the same distance learning lab, very little interaction with other department members occurs. The innovation of blending this diverse student community points out a further challenge, the need to find ways to extend more professional collegiality to those who may not routinely share the same physical space with their f2f-teaching colleagues.

Still other online programs serve chiefly nontraditional students whose records of past college credits, once abandoned artifacts of personal history, become revalued as the start of an online degree completion program designed for working adults. These latter programs continue a century-plus tradition claimed by institutions located in large part in the Midwest and Pennsylvania, that is, in public universities in Iowa, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ohio. Some of these universities began as land-grant institutions with clearly egalitarian concerns and vested outreach missions, mirrored in open universities established in the UK, the Far East, Western Europe, and South Africa (Moore, 2003). The longstanding tradition of distance education in the aforementioned states partly explains why the Midwest's dairy and farming states figure more prominently than one might expect in current location maps of distance learning.

Among the most developed programs reported by our survey respondents, a southern coastal institution offers degree completion programs and a variety of master's degrees in health sciences and newer technology fields like technology coordination, certificates in web management, and a graduate certificate in distance education.

Degree completion programs of several respondents involve collaboration and consortium arrangements between community colleges and baccalaureate-awarding institutions, along with complete degree programs covering all credits, often offered at an accelerated rate so that an undergraduate degree may be earned in two to three years' time, a part of the southern coastal university's program profile.

At the state institution of a survey respondent in the Pacific Northwest, Distance Education has an inviting web page with a prominent button linked to "Information for Educators." Listed graduate courses cover an array of violence, substance, and behavioral problem awareness and related classroom strategies for educators. At a Midwestern institution upper division undergraduate students matriculate a hybrid social work class whose online components of rich interactive media provide case study immediacy unknown in traditional formats. A number

of institutions now offer criminal justice programs; a snapshot of distance learning is a snapshot of current employment opportunity areas and up to the minute cultural concerns.

Probably the clearest sign that distance or distributed education has gained ground overall is the fact that institutions across the board now speak of and label course offerings as fully online or web-based; hybrid; or web-enhanced—a traditional course with technology elements. This tacit understanding and acceptance of the Internet and other technologies as part of course experiences means the door to further cyber-based programs is, if not gaping wide, wedged firmly and solidly open. How widely it swings within writing intensive programs is usually a factor of the bigger picture, of how far distance learning has penetrated into full degree and certificate programs.

3.4. Student-faculty ratios: A construct of needs, pedagogies, resources

Herbert Baxter Adams, founder of the American Historical Association, is credited with instituting seminar style teaching to which students brought topics and participated in establishing curriculum and assignments. Adams was, in addition, a strong proponent of extension lecturers for "scholarly discourse open to a cultivated public" (Higham, p. 1231). Adams, then, was interested both in dialogic, personalized teaching forums, and in extending opportunities for learning and intellectual stimulus to ordinarily remote parties. Teachers of online writing, like their colleagues in f2f writing classes, value small class size for the seminar levels of attention Adams instituted, and they add to this another of Adams' enthusiasms, extending access to other audiences.

Faculty respondents in our survey and in other literature have been somewhat more successful in approaching seminar numbers in their classrooms than their colleagues in f2f writing classes. Online writing classes cap more often at twenty, the figure cited in a CCCC (1989) position statement as the upper good practice limit for composition studies; the more ideal class size noted was fifteen, stipulated as the maximum advisable class size for developmental writing sections. Just over a third, or 34.3%, of survey respondents reported a cap from 2 to 7 less than in comparable f2f classes, with a low of 15 students reported by 2 chiefly four-year degree institutions, and most of the rest in this group ranging between 15 and 20 students per section.

A nearly equal segment, 35% of our respondents, reported a class cap that is the same as that in a comparable f2f class; more than half of these "same" caps ranged from 23 to 30 students. A half dozen of these caps, at 20 and below, though, exposed the limits of the survey question. These seemingly aberrant figures represent classes that match online class caps to caps for wired classrooms. Technology supported learning in networked classrooms renewed emphasis on lower student to faculty ratios, and has had, in some cases, a residual effect on distance learning practices. Reported instances of caps of 10 (graduate course), 15, 16, 17, and 20 in our survey directly related to typical computer classroom configurations at the reporting institutions. From two groups—those reporting equivalent caps and those reporting lower caps in their online courses—an intersecting group emerges: 40% of our respondents reported teaching in classrooms approaching CCCC (1989) recommendations on size, before considerable concern about technology rich classrooms became part of the teaching and learning of college writing.

Course caps tend, not surprisingly, to be higher at community colleges, most often hovering around 25 or 27 students. One exception in the Southwest was the sole reporting community college capping at 20 students. Far more typical of our survey findings are figures from Matt Miller's 2003 survey of faculty compensation and course sizes in 17 Texas community college online consortium programs. Online class size at these institutions is most commonly set between 25 and 30. Three of the 17 institutions' writing classes enroll as many as 50 students, but there is a compensatory formula in place for each student after the first 25 that at least offers some recognition of the extra workload. These three colleges offer a per capita increase in pay of anywhere from a small percentage of course compensation (in one case 8.333% of base pay) to $50 or $100 for each student above the ordinary f2f cap. The additional pay ends when the formula produces a 100% increase, which happens anywhere from 15 to 25 students above the first 25 or 30, depending on the standard f2f cap.

Among respondents to our survey who noted a reduced online class size, a third mentioned struggling to articulate—or to find a sympathetic audience for—the argument for a lower cap, and cited a gradual creeping upwards of course enrollment limits. In such cases, when the difference was not more than two students, an increasingly common situation, several instructors called the cap comparison between their online and f2f classes "same" in their data reporting, despite reporting two different numbers, indicating that when figures represent a difference of 10% or less, the mollifying effect disintegrates—enrollment reductions have a threshold before effect is realized.

An online program may begin with no concern for enrollment limits, in the excitement and novelty of attracting the first students. The director of a college rhetoric program in one college of a New England doctoral university is the instructor of record of a course designed as an extension offering in an urban branch of his university. He admitted in follow-up interviews that because the program pilot involved a single section of ten students facilitated by another instructor, he has been able so far to review assignments before signing off on grades. However, with a projected growth of 1000% in the next year or two, he understands that he will hardly be able to continue close scrutiny of individual exchanges and assessments. Thus, enrollment limit policies not carefully defined at the outset may require revisiting as programs grow.

An instructor whose distance teaching environment has in the past included thirty-student sections of online college writing commented that course enrollment policies that allow such numbers bring an additional, academically unfortunate, allowance: "nonparticipation." It would seem we need to revisit current pedagogies and expectations for writing intensive classrooms and articulate to others how we determine optimal course size in language that speaks to the goals of our colleges and universities.

Optimal course size can vary, though, from one institution to another, because program provisions are diverse. A Southwestern institution with a fully online graduate rhetoric program puts a relatively high cap of thirty-five on undergraduate hybrid writing classes, staffed by 85% graduate teaching assistants. This, however, is a uniquely developed program: first-year composition grading is a collaborative effort guided by a master rubric applied, for every section, by a pair of instructors who are not the instructors of the sections they grade together. Graduate students work at grading before beginning to teach their own sections in an innovatively

structured effort. The initial number shock that suggests 75% larger (than optimal) numbers served per instructor is tempered when limits of part-time loads and the pro-active support of the writing program database construct and close senior faculty guidance are factored in. These same graduate student instructors, however, matriculate in full degree online classes that cap at ten students.

Joe Cuseo (2004), Director of Freshman Seminar at Marymount College in Palos Verdes, California, argues convincingly in support of smaller classes as part of a better crucial first-year experience, citing consistent research data reflecting student satisfaction and degree of academic engagement afforded when class size remains low, specifically, at around 15 students. Cuseo would encourage a curriculum that urged first- and second-year students to take a minimum of one small-size class each term. He explains some possible re-engineering of first-year education to meet such goals, which include more courses and course components online, complemented by personalized tutoring and mentoring. Seminar size courses might be in subjects like composition and other writing intensive or similarly personal and dialogic academic areas. Smaller class cost might be partly offset by other classes gaining size, courses perhaps never intended to function as a writing intensive or highly interactive forum, but effectively supplemented online, and facilitated by graduate and peer teaching assistants.

Stronger support of undergraduate programs, Cuseo suggests, is appropriate to institutions that consistently rely on undergraduate programs for baseline support. In other words, smaller undergraduate courses, including writing intensive ones, would in many cases be supportable if an institution decided to return more of the profits of undergraduate programs to undergraduate program development.

3.5. Tools of the trade

Like issues of enrollment caps, course delivery Internet tools and systems challenge students, faculty, and support staff to critically consider the tool's capacities for facilitating interactive learning opportunities. Among our respondents, the attitude is a blend of resignation to what is available and innovation or reaching beyond to supplement the provided course delivery mechanisms. WebCT and Blackboard are the major players among course management systems reported, and are used, respectively, by 48.4 and 41.9% of the survey respondents. Some are satisfied, but some suggest a degree of imposition, as one who called WebCT use part of a "Catholic marriage" conjoining WebCT with a portal system of vital services, bringing the respondent to conclude that "divorce would be ugly." At our own institution we use WebCT with some satisfaction and some disgruntlement, content that students have few problems and that WebCT is quite robust and well-supported on campus, disgruntled that design layout still seems quirky and less easily modifiable than it might be, and that groups making decisions about teaching technologies need to comprise a more reasonable team demographic so that such decisions don't feel—and are not—imposed from without.

Such a CMS is often the only software noted, but a large complement of those using what may be courseware not of their direct choosing provided simple to sophisticated qualifiers about their use of WebCT/Blackboard, and listed additional programs that they use in integrated fashion within and outside the larger courseware engines.

A typical respondent's list of complementary tools includes WebCT, streaming video, web pages, email; "web pages" or "web space" listed separately from WebCT/Blackboard signifies ambiguously, but could reasonably include instances of Internet links, independently authored pages, and portal-sponsored course web pages that duplicate some CMS features but extend and simplify others. The separate listing of email suggests continued use of proprietary university or personal email programs outside those incorporated in a CMS. This use of more than one email tool, or of ignoring the CMS-included mail tool, can effectively disorganize the location of student contact and dialogue records, but serves as a persistent reminder of the entrenchment of email preferences and the likelihood of choice based on longstanding protocol support.

In fact, 75% of the WebCT/Bb users responding to the survey listed additional Internet connectivity tools, and in nearly half of all institutions represented, regardless of software used, 48.4%, nearly half, named at least two other software programs or networking affordances that work alongside or within the main CMS to coordinate sharing of information and learning objects in online study. The movements toward Open Courseware and Open Software Systems are still chiefly the province of early adaptors, but handed tools of some usefulness, many online instructors have adapted these mega course system tools, and have extended or applied them, sometimes fitfully, more often with imaginative efficiency, supplementing them with other tools rather than blindly adapting to them. A typical complaint: WebCT and Blackboard are not designed with enough emphasis on discussion. Major brand CMS creators do not seem to understand how important discussion becomes in an online writing intensive class, and how beneficial a truly superior and innovative discussion tool would be for writing teachers and students.

The more detailed the listing of Internet technologies used for online teaching and learning—the more awareness the respondent displays of a variety of electronic communication and composing technologies—the more likely that senior faculty are involved in distance education at that same institution. The list reaches the greatest degree of sophistication at the aforementioned southwestern university with an online graduate rhetoric degree and a core of graduate students teaching undergraduate hybrid composition courses. This school's partial list of acknowledged online technologies moves from WebCT and Webboard through streaming video and MOOs, to a locally authored database system and proprietary program servers, with associated web pages, email, and IM, in addition to two conferencing tools and two commonly applied programming languages. A briefer yet highly specific listing—Blackboard, Horizon Wimba, MediaSite Live, Tandberg video conferencing, email, Internet—delineates the online software profile from an upper East Coast public university where faculty staffing comprises chiefly tenured professors. In fact, among respondents who named a half dozen sophisticated communication tools, all but one indicate that senior or tenurable faculty are invested in their distance education programs.

Although CMS giants claim a huge market share among reporting institutions, the degree to which instructors also identify other software and protocols suggests not only that instructors are familiar with other tools, but that they will bend a tool to their own uses and supplement an officially sanctioned CMS with other technology of their own choosing. Furthermore, the greater the role of tenured and tenurable faculty and administration in distance learning, the higher the likelihood that an array of tools and software are available and supported to some degree for online teaching applications.

3.6. Tool philosophies, attitude girding

The point where educators' ideas about tool use and technologies converge with their attitudes toward distance learning may be the concept of technologies as either separate from, or part of, the self. Tamise Van Pelt (2002) believes the distance, or lack of it, that one observes and validates between self and technologies—the tool as separate or inseparable from the user—defines a continuum of philosophical stances that progress from humanist, to antihumanist/constructivist, to posthumanist regard. In the posthumanist view the subject is not separate from technologies used to observe it, yet conclusions reached by the observer have not altogether abandoned values derived in some part from an earlier humanist appreciation of tools. This makes for philosophical unrest for those more comfortable with pure attitudes and less complex needs.

If that isn't enough to make some users just a bit leery of technologies, or of too overtly endorsing their uses, Van Pelt closes on another level-of-comfort issue when, discussing new digital media, she reminds us that "[l]ike the viewer of digital images, the enduser of electronic media is always on a different level than the developer" (p. 316). An important feature of "the late print age" Van Pelt says we are in is that we are thoroughly capable of creating texts in the older print media much more readily than we can recreate much of the digital media surrounding us. Creating a text akin to familiar printed texts is a simple matter for most literate people. Yet, very many could not as easily create the web page or more sophisticated multimedia text they may scan (visual sense) with comprehension, appreciate, and critique. This inculcation of technologies involves some novel power upsets, and it is common to dislike feeling less than empowered.

There are, though, those who blend rich media in their composing, teaching, and research, and who offer technologically rich and pedagogically inclusive courses of tremendous value both to small classes of advanced media students, and to countless other educators and students, through online access to samples of these course materials. Consider, for example, courses Anne Wysocki (2005) composes and teaches in graphics and visual rhetoric, and the work of others in digital media. Many whose listening and reading abilities outpace their composing skills when it comes to integrating technologies are nevertheless ready for instructive classroom lessons in new media. Cheryl E. Ball and Kristin L. Arola (2004) explain the useful appeal of these genres in their introduction to *ix visual exercises*:

> There are things you can't do in a book. You can't manipulate images. You can't change colors, drag images around to make your own argument, or watch a movie. We created this CD-ROM because it makes sense to introduce the fundamentals of visual composition in this medium—and we hope it helps you read and write about all kinds of texts.

As Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher (2004) put it quite plainly,

> . . . if literacy educators continue to define literacy in terms of alphabetic practices only, in ways that ignore, exclude, or devalue new-media texts, they not only abdicate a professional responsibility to describe the ways in which humans are now communicating and making meaning, but they also run the risk of their curriculum no longer holding relevance for students who are communicating in increasingly expansive networked environments. (p. 233)

Such thinking has led to progressive, stimulating texts for first-year writing classes like *Picturing Texts* (Faigley, George, Palchik, & Selfe, 2003), which encourages examining and using visual rhetoric.

Distrust of online education stemming from basic conceptual arguments about the value of tools and our control relationships with them is not the only underlying influence on DL orientation. A strongly related factor may be ambivalence toward the role of the Internet itself in academic work, a subject Jeffrey R. Young (2005) discussed in a report of a 2004 nationwide survey of 2,316 faculty members conducted by communication professor Steven Jones and graduate student Camille Johnson-Yale. Responding professors complained of plagiarism and of a more automated style of language creeping into student writing, and 42% stated the Internet contributed to a decline in student work, while only 22% cited Internet related improvement. Conversely, faculty overwhelmingly (82%) felt the Internet had a positive effect on their teaching, and 73% noted increased contact with students. In a way, this broader assessment of Internet use in academics becomes another version of some educators valuing a tool most when control is more simply defined and personally guarded. A reductive paraphrase: *When professors use it, it's a good thing, but when students use it, it's more likely to be a bad thing*. A more useful inferred subtext is that many academics know they haven't yet learned to apply the technologies they have eagerly adopted for personal (more controlled) uses to the more complex interactions and work of teaching. The irony, of course, is that so many pedagogies have moved toward more shared control and decentering of the classroom environment, and technology can provide many pathways to new forms of empowerment.

3.7. Technology support patterns, interwoven layers

Most of us, whether we identify with the craftsman's separation from, but artful control of, the tool, or of working in tandem with—or undergoing change effected by—our technologies, are grateful for assistance at key moments: setting our technology systems up; training to use them; researching with and teaching through them; relying on them to manage mundane and unwieldy tasks.

Of the 90.3% of respondents using those two major CMS brands, 54.8% describe the support they receive from IT staff and their departments and colleges in terms that include "good" or "excellent," not including any comments with clearly mixed content such as "generally good, but not always as responsive as needed." Overall, satisfaction (good to excellent ratings) with academic technology support from respondents not using WebCT or Blackboard comprised an 48% of these responses which, together with the support-positive WebCT/Bb respondents, suggests that the support picture at many institutions is steadily improving.

Where support is better, a clear but variegated pattern is emerging. Institutions with richer technology use profiles, such as those where senior faculty teach online, also tend to have more sophisticated and varied support measures. Centralized university computing support is still a standard arrangement, and centers for teaching and learning specialize in both classroom technology planning and, sometimes, assistance with pedagogical emphases, depending upon the expertise of the center's human resources. In addition, though, support for technology concerns has become increasingly diversified, with overlapping layers responding more flexibly to the widespread needs of students and faculty.

Within university-wide computing and networking support, first-contact tiers of student workers commonly staff help desks and respond to mail and phone queries under supervision that includes senior-level student help and fulltime staff. In addition to centralized tiered support, colleges and departments also appoint or hire their own technology coordinators and gurus. The current College of Liberal Arts Technology Coordinator at one Midwestern public institution is the second holder of a post originally created five years ago. She is knowledgeable in a number of teaching technologies and extensively supplements the work of both a centralized computing and networking staff and a Center for Teaching and Learning, whose staff specialize in WebCT and assorted multimedia support. Faculty members and departmental support staff are reassured that their college technology coordinator is completely familiar with standard desktop resources and also with typical pedagogical needs of the college and its newer portal related tools. Additional one-on-one student assistance is available through yet another college supported program of technology internships. Queries addressed to the help desk travel in many directions, many to specific specialists, but collegial overlap provides more flexible backup among central computing help, the college technology coordinator, the CTL, local gurus, and student help.

High levels of temporal availability of support staff typify the diversified tech-support "portfolio," too, with some variance in what counts as high-frequency availability, and 24/7 help still more an ideal than a reality. Respondents from a community college in the Midwest whose online faculty are chiefly (90%) adjuncts identify high levels of satisfaction with available distance learning technology support services that are responsive to local conditions and missions. This Midwestern college's respondent spoke appreciatively of 12-hour IT staff availability by phone or email, and more localized, or locally specialized, support, such as lead instructors within departments who both mentor and model online practices, and departmentally designated designers among learning center support staff. In addition, program level gurus at some institutions handle related tasks, such as coordinating program and department web pages that enhance major CMS capabilities and provide for independently authored materials. Availability 24/7 becomes less important when the help is so diversified and well-placed, since increased efficiency ensues when support is simply more visible and visibly diverse during peak working hours.

This more organic handling of course technology needs is supported by findings in studies that "challenge the linearity embedded in much of the professional development processes associated with ICT [information and communication technology]" (Triggs and John, p. 426). This particular study depicts "communities of practice" comprising "teams of teachers, teacher educators and researchers" bent on challenging a "schematic. . . based on a cultural gap"—the "us versus them" scenario too often played out between faculty and IT support vying for control of distance education courseware decisions. Conducted in 2002, the InterActive Education Research Project involved both Math and English studies, whose institutional stakeholders shared concerns about development and implementation of teaching materials. Researchers (designers and programmers) and "practitioners" (teachers) met and conducted research in a variety of venues without circumscribed roles to achieve new understandings of "issues of hierarchy, relative power, discourse, roles, identity and knowledge transacting and transformation" (p. 429) as part of SDTs, Subject Design Teams, egalitarian from inception through clearly articulated mutual purpose: increased learning value in educational platform developments.

This productively collaborative style of research is a best practice that deserves iteration. Layered technology support is similarly useful, and helps account for the more than three-fourths of our respondents who report satisfying levels of support. About 10.8% of respondents reported generally "good" or "decent" support, but tempered the praise with a modicum of criticism. Respondents in this group variously added that support staff are "not always responsive," or that technicians often know more about features like quizzing and automated grading, of less frequent use in writing intensive pedagogies. An additional 14.2% reported limited, nonexistent, or poor support, which the instructor sometimes augmented by reliance on a colleague who knew a little more.

Sometimes individual single-digit numbers tell the tale, as in the report of "one support person who handles all general technology needs as well" at a community college in the Midwest, or the mildly improved situation of two technical support staff at an eastern community college that offers over a hundred courses in more than thirty different majors. Although figures on numbers of online students are not recorded, the web pages of these two colleges report serving main campus students numbering 29,000 and 26,000, respectively, suggesting, with the numbers of online courses catalogued, a fairly large community of online students with remarkably low levels of support. Still, a West Coast community college with an equivalent slate of online offerings that depends on "just an email list of peer online instructors" would probably consider one or two dedicated support staff an unfathomed luxury. Historically, faculty members at two-year institutions fight uphill struggles on many fronts, so it is unsurprising that they represent all of the low-end support responses in our survey.

The community college story, however, is not completely bleak, since an equal number of respondents from associate's degree colleges reported good to excellent support, with active centers of teaching and learning and many of the same inroads into layered, more locally responsive support systems that are improving the quality and working environment of online teaching and learning at colleges and universities of all types.

3.8. Course design freedom

Since the inception of distance education, many have worried that teachers of composition, especially adjuncts, would be forced to teach "canned" courses designed and marketed by either premier ivy-league universities or by solely economic-minded institutions with no regard for sound pedagogical practices. Another common concern involved adjuncts being further exploited by being forced to teach courses designed by others. According to our survey responses, such fears have not been realized, except perhaps in isolated cases. None of our respondents reported predesigned courses being forced upon them from outside sources. An unexpected 55% of instructors indicated that adjuncts were allowed to design their own online courses. Another 20% stated that adjuncts were permitted to design certain aspects of online courses they would be teaching. Only 14% said adjuncts had absolutely no freedom to design online courses or materials; most of these responses came from community colleges. Another 11% were unsure if adjuncts could design courses at their colleges. Though we suspect that there are institutions where the previously mentioned fears are being played out, these would appear to be isolated cases, and overall academic freedom and pedagogical responsibility would seem to be the norm.

4. Student demographics

One area of our survey asked respondents for information regarding student demographics. Unfortunately, upon reviewing the survey results, we were left with more questions than answers, although one fact is disturbingly clear. As far as formalized statistics and records are concerned, we have no idea whom we are teaching in our online classes. Only one respondent indicated that detailed records were kept and was able to cite information from those records, "We keep very strict records of student demographics. 85% women; most between 20–40 years old, most have 1–4 kids." Another instructor said such records were kept, but she did not know the numbers. One third of respondents stated that no student demographic records were kept for online courses. Another 56% were unsure if such records were kept, while 6% cited university-wide records and indicated that their classes mirrored those numbers.

Certainly, the online educators involved in the survey had a wealth of anecdotal information and impressions regarding their students. As one might expect, 80% of respondents characterized most of their students as nontraditional, older, returning students who were sometimes in remote locations and were often more motivated than traditional students, while 20% described their students as being mostly traditional and living on campus, mirroring the populations of their f2f sections. Although these characterizations provide some insight as to the profile of online students, much information is missing.

We are left, then, with some disturbing questions. How can we really serve the needs of online students if we do not truly know who they are? For example, if we do not know the economic status of our students, which may be different from f2f students at the same institution, how can we judge what type of technology is realistically accessible to them? This information should make a difference in our course designs. After all, what is the point of including streaming video if it will be inaccessible to most of the students? Information involving diversity, the physically challenged, gender, age, and family status should play a role in course design and pedagogy. The following quote is reflective of many responses we received, "I am sure such records are kept, but I am not sure where." If this is true, online instructors need to be more proactive in seeking this information, and institutions should be more responsible in communicating the statistics to those who are teaching online courses. Institutions that do not track student demographics for online courses need to become more cognizant of the need for such information. How can we be truly effective as online educators without complete student demographic knowledge?

5. Impact on writing pedagogy

As with student demographics, the participants in our study had very little statistical evidence to share concerning the impact of online courses on the teaching of writing, but they had a variety of anecdotal responses. One quote in particular expressed the opinion of many respondents, "Teaching writing online presents huge opportunities for interactivity and building writing communities. Peer writing groups, publication, and designing individual learning plans to address strengths and weaknesses are more effective and produce better results than

traditional classroom practices." Other respondents cited the following effects from online education:

- Growth of enrollment and program
- Responsibility for learning shifting more to the student
- Increased technological literacy among faculty and students
- Inclusion of other media forms in writing
- Increased accessibility to education for remote students
- Better developed relationships with online students, as opposed to f2f students
- Increased diversity
- Online courses positively influencing f2f classes
- More emphasis on visual aspects of writing
- Increased expectations of what students will produce

A number of our respondents observed no impact on the teaching of writing from online courses. One respondent felt that "online teaching of composition diminishes the effectiveness of composition," but gave no reasons why.

What is clearly missing is any discussion of formal assessment of online courses. As previously mentioned, more research into and engagement in the assessment of online courses is a necessity. Commonly, developing more appropriate and useful assessment of online writing intensive teaching and learning remains unfinished business, well-begun and then left untended for periods. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools' Higher Learning Commission statement (2005) includes the following among values that help them "flexibly evaluate new forms of delivery" (para 6):

- that education is best experienced within a community of learning where competent professionals are actively and cooperatively involved with creating, providing, and improving the instructional program
- that learning is dynamic and interactive, regardless of the setting in which it occurs
- that instructional programs leading to degrees having integrity are organized around substantive and coherent curricula which define expected learning outcomes
- that institutions accept the obligation to address student needs related to, and to provide the resources necessary for, their academic success
- that institutions are responsible for the education provided in their name
- that institutions undertake the assessment and improvement of their quality, giving particular emphasis to student learning
- that institutions voluntarily subject themselves to peer review

These guiding principles remind those formulating distance learning assessment models to begin with values that predate concerns with delivery format, yet these values seem harmonious with effects reported by our respondents. Admittedly, the last bullet is the crux: education of

value rivaling that delivered f2f is happening online, but its assessment is lagging. As elsewhere in education, this creates drag on the coalescence and dissemination of best practices in the field.

6. Web as reflection of institutional DE profile

Although assessment of DL's methods and capabilities is lagging, we can perform a layman's assessment of the position DL holds at any particular institution. We "google" to measure recognition because web presence both validates an entity's existence and extends a form of acquaintance. Similarly, an institution's DL web pages indicate the local regard for distance learning and its stakeholders. Single or multipage sites may be accessed from main menu links titled "Distance Learning" or, alternatively, "Distributed Education" or "Distributed Learning," the latter terms' semiotic distinction signifying that students who register for online courses may or may not be distant from a flagship campus. This echoes a history of searching for, in today's commercial lingo, the right 'brand' language, such as when the National Home Study Council, founded in 1926 of "more responsible" correspondence schools, determined in 1994 that this organization had evolved beyond the original home school concepts and was overdue for its renaming as the Distance Education and Training Council (Moore, p. 14).

Institutions with a long history of distance education stateside and abroad reflect a more inclusive view of distance education in their web page hierarchies in several ways. Distance education information is commonly found within one or two "clicks," or selections, from an institution's homepage, often accessed under an "academics" or "outreach" parent menu with the subsequent fly-out or rollover menu providing the distance education link.

The Pennsylvania State University's web pages (Pennsylvania State University, 2005) show additional signs of respectful regard for distance education, beyond the "second-click" access to information. First, the distance education homepage strongly mimics the university homepage design, featuring the stolid classic academic lion, the stone image even larger here than on the homepage. This presents the distance education arm of the university not as neglected orphan, but as vested, recognized entity. Two top-level links—purposive redundancy, another sign of regard—offer two paths to the destination. Distance or online learning occurs on the submenu as a third item for Prospective Students, and as the first item on the Outreach submenu. Accessing the distance learning link triggers seemingly related graphic and URL changes: on the DL homepage, the lion moves prominently into close-up range, in a newly center-justified page, while the URL's domain name diverges from psu (<http://www.psu.edu>) to worldcampus.psu (<http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/wc/index.shtml>). The coordinated image zoom and domain name change together suggest the global reach of the program and the distribution effect of bringing the world closer to the student.

Stakeholders at institutions can verify much of what they know, and learn even more, about the prevailing distance education climates of their own and other institutions by searching institution web pages for evidence of regard for and range of involvements within distributed or distance education opportunities.

7. Conclusion

In the end our investigation of distance learning in writing intensive classes has reinforced old themes in new variations. Online education patterns are diverse, but similar lessons are being learned in different locations, scaled to demographics of diverse institutions. Quite simply, distance education has us looking in the mirror again: it returns us to the geographies of our discipline in general. If there have been curiosities and irregularities in the P–T process, or nonproductive schisms within departments, or a lack of support for cross-discipline instruction, similar histories repeat in distance education. Where university wide support staff and administrators have limited or too strongly *de*limited dialogue with faculty about university missions, power rather than access becomes the focus, with competing funding issues ensuring the tendency.

Immersed in our equivalent to the environmentalists' ecotone, in the growth that takes root along the borders of more dominant environments and develops its own unique characteristics, we find some answers to our original questions and can examine what is "going on in the trenches" of distance education. Many of the fears and predictions regarding online learning have not been realized, and conditions overall for DL instructors are better than we might have anticipated. Still, large areas of concern do exist. We need to be cognizant of the trend toward rising course caps and the effect this increased workload will have on instructors and students, examining the lack of progress toward such goals in f2f classrooms as well, and determining what the relationship between f2f and online class sizes should ideally be. Support of teaching technologies should continue in patterns of multilevel approaches. Furthermore, the development of improved technology platforms demands that counter-productive divisions between IT and teaching staff need special attention to foster a harmonious team approach. The collaboration we promote within the classroom should be lived in ways that benefit the students whose welfare demands our best collective efforts.

Incentives and compensation need to be more commensurate with workload, which, at institutions awarding four-year and graduate degrees, means negotiating improved support of undergraduate programs and students, and strategizing recognition for the important role of the writing intensive classroom in early academic success and subsequent student retention. Research demonstrating the importance of undergraduate education in general, and of distance learning's part in institutional missions in particular, is directly related to our ability to achieve appropriate consideration for the labor of online teaching in departmental and college P and T processes. To determine the quality of online courses, further research on assessment is necessary, along with the development of appropriate and effective assessment tools, designed specifically for composition and other writing intensive courses. Better student demographic records need to be generated, both to arrive at better practices within online teaching, and to put the existing variety of human faces on the arguments we make in the name of the student communities we serve.

Finally, as online educators, we need to insist on quality online teaching from ourselves and our colleagues, if DL is to gain the full respect it deserves from faculty and administrators. The old adage that traveling teaches one more about home is also true in distance learning. The bridges we build and pathways we explore forge connections in widening circles, but also serve to reinforce the need to work well with near neighbors. Strengthening our institutional

home base environment is a must if we are to continue to invite students from all walks of life to travel with us along the road to lifelong learning, and infuse a new academic welcome into the Irish wish "May the road rise up to meet you."

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