



Pergamon

Computers and Composition 18 (2001) 423–430

**Computers
and
Composition**

A review of research on distance education in *Computers and Composition*

Susan Kay Miller*

Mesa Community College, Mesa, AZ 85202, USA

Abstract

This article provides a review of the research published in *Computers and Composition* about teaching writing with distance-learning technology. The purpose of the article is to assess what research has been conducted in the context of a prominent journal in the field. Distance education is an emerging focus in the field of computers and writing, and the goal of this review is to provide a foundation for further analysis that begins to locate research gaps. I outline research published in the journal from 1994 (the date of the first article dealing with distance education in *Computers and Composition*) through 1999. Through analysis of twelve articles published in the journal during these six years, I describe two emerging categories of research in distance education: articles that theorize distance education in the context of writing instruction and articles that describe distance education in practice. In addition to describing the research already conducted, I include suggestions for further research that would build upon this foundation. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Composition studies; Distance learning technology; Educational technology; Online composition

1. Introduction

The expanding influence of distance education¹ is encouraging administration and faculty to consider the possibilities for distance-learning technology in higher education and adopt distance-learning delivery for instruction. This influence has reached the field of composition, where scholars and teachers in computers and writing are beginning to examine the impact of distance education on writing instruction. Several are calling for critical examination of new technologies for writing instruction (Anson, 1999; Selfe, 1999), specifically the possibilities and limitations of using distance-learning technology.

* *E-mail address:* susan.miller@mail.mc.maricopa.edu (S.K. Miller).

Although inquiry into distance education in the context of writing instruction is still somewhat limited, the field is building a foundation of research on the impact of distance-learning technology on composition. This article reviews research in distance education and composition, focusing on research published in *Computers and Composition*. Although other journals publish research on distance education that impacts the field of composition, *Computers and Composition* remains the most influential scholarly journal in the field of computers and writing.

The first article addressing distance education in *Computers and Composition* appeared in 1994, introducing a thread of research focusing on distance education that continued to develop over the six-year period examined in this review (1994–1999). I found twelve articles that discussed the impact of distance-learning technology on writing instruction. Close examination of the articles revealed two emerging categories: articles theorizing distance education and articles describing distance education in practice. As I discuss in the conclusion, these categories are problematic and the lines are somewhat blurred; however, I find that they are helpful for providing an overview of past research and current questions. I categorized articles as “theory” or “practice” based on whether they focused more on thinking about distance education outside of a specific context (theory) or working out the theory in a specific context (practice). Following the description of the research published in *Computers and Composition* that falls under the two broad categories of theory and practice, I draw conclusions about what research gaps remain.

2. Theorizing distance education

The first article to deal with online distance education in *Computers and Composition* appeared in 1994. Robert Royar (1994) offered a call for the critical theorizing of the possibilities for interface design, delivery systems, and support structures in online teaching and learning. Royar perceived several problems in the way distance education is conducted at the institution described in his article (the New York Institute of Technology), and he expressed a concern about current approaches toward distance education that seem to rely on transfer of traditional face-to-face methods combined with a “correspondence school” (p. 95) approach. He reported that the implementation of online distance-education courses at NYIT fostered a *loss* of flexibility, unlike most claims that distance education provides more flexibility for students and teachers. Finally, Royar called for the development of new online paradigms for instruction and interaction.

Royar’s article provides a fascinating starting point for the discussion of distance education in *Computers and Composition*. Although he does not address writing instruction specifically, Royar’s call for the critical theorizing of distance education resonates with the trend toward critical use in computers and writing research. This thread of critical theory seems to continue throughout the other three articles that think through the implications of distance education in generalized situations, tying them together as the authors reconceptualize writing instruction in light of distance-learning technology.

Dan Quigley (1994) was one of the first to discuss the possibility of reconceptualizing the nature of writing classes when they are taught online. He accomplished this by discussing his

experience with teaching a composition course online and the complications he encountered with adapting a traditional classroom syllabus for an online course. Quigley used classroom practice as a means for moving into a theoretical discussion of the nature of online syllabi, and because he took this step toward theory even though his starting point was the context of his online writing class, I have placed his research under the category of theorizing distance education. Through the discussion of his online writing class, Quigley raised questions about the nature of syllabi for online courses, proposing an evolving syllabus for online writing classes instead of a traditional syllabus created prior to the beginning of the course. The development of an evolving syllabus for online classes led into a proposal for incorporating evolving syllabi in traditional writing classes as well.

Joanne Buckley (1997) also discussed how teaching online can change the nature of classes, but she specifically focused on the alteration of physical cues present in traditional classrooms. By using anecdotal descriptions of her own experiences with teaching online, Buckley theorized the impact of the loss of body image in online teaching and learning and related it to her own experience as a teacher with a physical disability. Buckley focused on the physical and psychological advantages of teaching online to a physically disabled teacher, calling on feminist theories of body image to support her narratives. She described the “equality of access” (p. 184) that teaching online offers to both students and teachers, and she contrasted her students’ perceptions of her role as a teacher online with their perceptions in a physical classroom.

Susan Lang (1998) introduced another important subject that redirected the discussion about online teaching and learning: Once a teacher has developed a course online, who holds ownership rights for it? In her article, Lang offered no easy answers, but she raised several questions that teachers must consider when developing online courses:

Who has historically and contractually controlled course materials created by faculty members? Who owns course materials developed for particular courses? Why should the transition to networked computing environments change the nature of course materials ownership? Are there substantive differences between materials created for a traditional composition course and an online course? (p. 215)

In addition, Lang pointed out that these questions are also related to the overall question of how the educational system is changing in general, and she urged teachers to consider the implications of this change.

These four articles provide four distinct but related starting points for theorizing the use of distance-learning technology in the context of writing instruction. Royar (1994) introduced critical questioning of the nature of online writing classes, and Quigley (1994) expanded that inquiry to question the nature of online syllabi for writing courses. Through his expansion of that inquiry, Quigley also drew comparisons between online writing classes and face-to-face writing classes, encouraging us to extend our questioning of online writing classes to our methodology and assumptions in the face-to-face classroom. Buckley (1997) introduced critical theorizing of the subject position of the online writing teacher, and Lang (1998) raised questions of intellectual property. Each of these issues would draw merit from further inquiry, but these four articles provide a basis for the development of theories of distance-based education for writing instruction.

3. Describing of distance education

The remaining eight articles on distance education in *Computers and Composition* focus on offering descriptions of instructional practice. Although all eight are connected to writing and writing instruction, they cover a wide range of instructional possibilities. Five of the articles discuss the possibility of linking two geographically separated classes through technology—two focused on linking college-level classes (Bennett & Walsh, 1997; Harris & Wambeam, 1996) and three focused on linking college-level and secondary-level students (Mason, Duin, & Lammers, 1994; Whitaker & Hill, 1998; Yagelski & Powley, 1996). Three deal with the implications of distance-learning technology for discussing and studying issues of difference (Bennett & Walsh, 1997; Pagnucci & Mauriello, 1999; Whitaker & Hill, 1998), and two discuss possibilities for collaboration across a distance (Fey & Sisson, 1996; Stacey, Goodman & Stubbs, 1996).

Lisa Mason, Ann Duin, and Elizabeth Lammers (1994) marked the introduction of discussions in *Computers and Composition* dealing with both computers and writing and distance education (published between Royar's and Quigley's articles mentioned previously). In addition, it was the first of a series of articles to explore the possibilities of linking geographically separated groups of learners. Mason et al. described a course designed to provide college-level students with the possibility of tutoring secondary-level writing students by using distance-learning technology. The primary goal of the article was to explore the possibilities for developing a college course providing mentoring opportunities to college students and providing a link between colleges and secondary schools. As a result, the conclusions of the article dealt more with the power relations between universities and secondary schools than with the impact of distance education on writing instruction. Although the authors focused on the advantages of distance-learning technology in providing links between learners, they also mentioned the negative impact of not having face-to-face communication on the mentoring process. In the end, the authors concluded that the primary issues in writing instruction are not issues of technology alone.

Following the model of the “mentoring via telecommunications” course that Mason et al. used, Robert Yagelski and Sarah Powley (1996) described a similar project connecting university education majors with high school writers. As a result of their experience, Yagelski and Powley cautioned us about the centrality of technology in writing classes that incorporate computers and distance education. Yagelski and Powley encouraged teachers to critically examine possible accomplishments with networked technology, and they echoed the conclusion reached by Mason et al. that “the most crucial issues in teaching writing ultimately have little to do with computers themselves” (p. 32). Instead, they proposed that the central questions should still address our purposes in teaching writing.

Continuing the trend of using distance-learning technology for teacher education, Marion Fey and Michael Sisson (1996) described the development and operation of an electronic seminar and support group for student teachers. Unlike the courses of Mason et al. as well as Yagelski and Powley, the course designed by Fey and Sisson facilitated communication between student teachers instead of between teachers-in-training and high school writers. Fey and Sisson claimed to further both the dominant and antidominant discourses that Ellen Barton (1994) outlined by describing both positive and negative effects of the use of

technology to facilitate the seminar and discussion group. Positive effects included furthering collaborative pedagogy, disrupting traditional teacher-centered models of supervision, and giving authority to students to construct knowledge, while the negative effects included lack of access to computers, the possibility of administration substituting the electronic seminar for face-to-face supervisory visits, and the increased workload created by students' email responses.

David Stacey, Sharon Goodman, and Teresa Stubbs (1996) marked the first mention of the term "distance learning" in an article in *Computers and Composition*. The version of distance learning described is loosely structured, however, in a three-way collaboration between the authors (a professor, a doctoral student, and an undergraduate student) to discuss critical linguistics in a mentoring/tutoring situation, not in a traditional class situation. The article is written in the form of a narrative with multiple voices, allowing each of the three authors to describe their experiences with the project separately. Although the descriptions and conclusions did not address questions of course-level distance learning, the authors posed questions about using email for tutoring and opening up possibilities for teaching that would be otherwise impossible because of physical distance.

Leslie Harris and Cynthia Wambeam (1996) introduced a quantitative empirical design not prevalent in earlier *Computers and Composition* distance education research thus far. Their study connected two writing classes at different universities through regular meetings in a MOO. In addition, the students were asked to keep an Internet journal chronicling their experiences. The goals for using internet technology were to encourage frequent writing practice for a specific audience, emphasize discourse communities while developing individual voice, introduce a new communicative form, and develop positive attitudes toward writing. The results of the experiment were assessed through two writing attitude questionnaires (one at the beginning and one at the end of the semester) and a questionnaire that assessed attitude toward Internet journal writing. In addition, timed pretest and posttest writing samples were collected from all of the students and scored holistically by a team of composition instructors unfamiliar with the research goals. The results of the experiment indicated that using Internet-based communication between classes helped the instructors achieve their objectives. In addition, the authors encouraged other researchers to incorporate similar pedagogical methods in their own classes and to replicate this experiment to verify or challenge the results.

Contributing toward discussions of how online teaching affects traditional physical cues, Michael Bennett and Kathleen Walsh (1997) described an effort to join two geographically separated classes for discussion similar to Harris and Wambeam's experiment in facilitating class discussion on the Internet. Bennett and Walsh's purpose, however, was to join their classes to achieve a racially diverse student population for discussion of a literary text, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Using a model for achieving diversity in the classroom developed by Robert DeVillar and Christian Faltis (1994), the authors concluded that their effort was successful on two counts: it succeeded in integrating two diverse groups and in facilitating communication between them. It failed, however, in creating a cooperative learning situation, and the authors suggested that they would both create small student groups for discussion instead of using whole-class discussion and assign a shorter reading selection for discussion and a group-generated project to give the students

a more meaningful goal in their discussion. The authors also suggested other changes that they would make, but they emphasized the possibility for Internet-based classes to help facilitate diversity in the classroom.

Elaine Whitaker and Elaine Hill (1998) described another experiment linking geographically separated students. The students included in this study were students in advanced placement high school English and university students in first-year composition. Whitaker and Hill paired the students to compare the cultures of high school and college with the underlying objectives of discovering whether or not email communication could help students develop personal voice in their writing, explore different cultures, and question prevalent stereotypes. The authors suggested asking students to write about culture in email, talk in class about the stereotypes and hierarchies evident in the written messages, and then reflect individually about what they have discovered in order to encourage achievement of these objectives.

Also following in the trend of discussing how online teaching and learning affects issues of difference, Gian Pagnucci and Nicholas Mauriello (1999) wrote about “the nature of gender in cyberspace” by discussing a case study asking students to post papers online to facilitate peer response. The authors explored how choice of pseudonyms reflected students’ perceptions of gendered power relations, how readers responded to particular identities, and how gender choice affected classroom conflict. They found that students often equated power with male identities and also found that other students seemed to respond to those constructions of power, verifying that gender identities remain significant online, despite the lack of physical cues described by Buckley (1997).

4. Conclusions: Where are the gaps?

First of all, it is important to address the limitations of this research before drawing conclusions. In constructing a review, I have selected articles that reflect my definitions of distance education and writing instruction. Research on distance education in writing instruction draws on research from several disciplines including educational technology and composition studies. This review places research on distance education and writing instruction within the realm of inquiry in computers and writing, but it would also be feasible to place this research within the field of educational technology. It is not my intention to limit inquiry on distance education in writing instruction to computers and writing, however, or to imply that research on distance education and writing instruction only draws on these fields. Part of the challenge of constructing a review is determining the relationships between multiple paths of inquiry and the choices made by a researcher in determining those paths influence the construction of the review.

In addition, my division between theory and practice is somewhat problematic (Schuster, 1991) although it is helpful for providing an overview of the research. More specifically, the articles in the theory section stem directly from the authors’ experience with instructional practice, and the research in the practice section consistently theorizes the implications of distance technology in practice. For example, Mason et al. (1994) described the limitations of distance-learning technology due to a lack of face-to-face communication, which points

to theories of reducing transactional distance between students in distance-education research (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Although I have used the categories of theory and practice to describe the research in *Computers and Composition*, I do not imply that theory and practice are in any way divided in these articles. Informed research seeks to integrate issues of both theory and practice.

In light of these limitations, much research remains to be done on the use of distance-learning technology for writing instruction. We need more empirical research, both quantitative and qualitative, examining the nature of writing courses taught with distance-learning technology, drawing on the model of Harris and Wambeam (1996), and also possibly including other research methodologies as described by Patricia Sullivan and James Porter (1997). Research analyzing distance education in different contexts or comparing and contrasting methodologies employed in teaching writing with distance-learning technology would help us to develop a more complex understanding of the possibilities and implications of teaching writing online.

In addition, there is a need for research drawing on distance-education theories and descriptions from other disciplines. Research in writing instruction would benefit from drawing on the rich theoretical foundation already being constructed in other disciplines. Research that draws on the educational technology theories described by Michael Moore and Greg Kearsley (1996), for example, would enrich inquiry in the context of writing instruction. Finally, reviews of research exploring how writing instruction is discussed in distance education research outside *Computers and Composition* would enrich our understanding of what research has been done and what remains to be accomplished.

Note

1. I have chosen to use the terms *distance learning* and *distance education* interchangeably in this article.

Susan K. Miller is a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric, Composition, and Linguistics at Arizona State University where her research focuses on computers and writing, distance education, and second-language writing. She also teaches writing and ESL at Mesa Community College. Her work has appeared in *Composition Studies* (with Maureen Daly Goggin) and in *Language Alive in the Classroom*, a collection edited by Rebecca Wheeler.

References

- Anson, Chris M. (1999). Distant voices: Teaching writing in a culture of technology. *College English*, 61, 261–280.
- Barton, Ellen L. (1994). Interpreting the discourses of technology. In Cynthia L. Selfe & Susan Hilligoss (Eds.), *Literacy and computers: The complications of teaching and learning with technology* (pp. 56–75). New York: MLA.

- Bennett, Michael, & Walsh, Kathleen. (1997). Desperately seeking diversity: Going online to achieve a racially balanced classroom. *Computers and Composition*, 14, 217–227.
- Buckley, Joanne. (1997). The invisible audience and the *disembodied* voice: Online teaching and the loss of body image. *Computers and Composition*, 14, 179–187.
- DeVillar, Robert A., & Faltis, Christian J. (1994). Reconciling diversity and quality schooling: Paradigmatic elements of a socioacademic framework. In Robert A. DeVillar, Christian J. Faltis, & James P. Cummins (Eds.), *Cultural diversity in schools: from rhetoric to practice* (pp. 1–22). Albany: SUNY Press.
- Fey, Marion H., & Sisson, Michael J. (1996). Approaching the information superhighway: Internet collaboration among future writing teachers. *Computers and Composition*, 13, 37–47.
- Harris, Leslie D., & Wambeam, Cynthia A. (1996). The Internet-based composition classroom: A study in pedagogy. *Computers and Composition*, 13, 353–371.
- Lang, Susan. (1998). Who owns the course? Online composition courses in an era of changing intellectual property policies. *Computers and Composition*, 15, 215–228.
- Mason, Lisa D., Duin, Ann H., & Lammers, Elizabeth. (1994). Linking learners: Structuring a mentoring via telecommunications course. *Computers and Composition*, 11, 123–135.
- Moore, Michael G. & Kearsley, Greg. (1996). *Distance education: A systems view*. Albany: Wadsworth.
- Pagnucci, Gian S., & Mauriello, Nicholas. (1999). The masquerade: Gender, identity, and writing for the Web. *Computers and Composition*, 16, 141–151.
- Quigley, Dan. (1994). The evolution of an online syllabus. *Computers and Composition*, 11, 165–172.
- Royar, Robert. (1994). New horizons, clouded vistas. *Computers and Composition*, 11, 93–105.
- Schuster, Charles I. (1991). Theory and practice. In Erika Lindemann & Gary Tate (Eds.), *An introduction to composition studies* (pp. 33–48). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Selfe, Cynthia L. (1999). Technology and literacy: A story about the perils of not paying attention. *College Composition and Communication*, 50, 411–436.
- Stacey, David, Goodman, Sharon, & Stubbs, Teresa D. (1996). The new distance learning: Students, teachers, and texts in cross-cultural electronic communication. *Computers and Composition*, 13, 293–302.
- Sullivan, Patricia, & Porter, James E. (1997). *Opening spaces: Writing technologies and critical research practices*. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.
- Whitaker, Elaine E., & Hill, Elaine N. (1998). Virtual voices in “Letters across cultures”: Listening for race, class, and gender. *Computers and Composition*, 15, 331–346.
- Yagelski, Robert P., & Powley, Sarah. (1996). Virtual connections and real boundaries: Teaching writing and preparing writing teachers on the Internet. *Computers and Composition*, 13, 25–36.