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Finding Voice From a Distance: Learning Voice in Writing Through Online Learning

Amy Marie Ade Peach

University of Missouri-St. Louis, apeach@fontbonne.edu

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Amy M.A. Peach
M.Ed., Social Studies Education, Georgia State University – Atlanta, 2000
B.A. English, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1997
B.A. History, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1997

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Advisory Committee

Carl Hoagland, Ph.D.
Chairperson

William Klein, Ph.D.

Joseph Polman, Ph.D.

Randall Sommers, Ph.D.

Abstract

One of the primary objectives for many instructors of first-year composition (FYC) is to encourage students to use their own voice/persona, or express themselves with authority in their writing. While there are many pedagogical methods to address this in a face to face environment, there is now need to understand how the course tools and architecture in online versions of the course can facilitate "voice" in writing.

This qualitative study observed a summer FYC (First Year Composition) course online at one institution in the Midwestern United States. At the conclusion of the course, two students and the instructors were interviewed to determine which course elements were most effective in promoting the development of voice. The instructor was then invited to attend a focus group of other FYC online instructors to discuss ways online tools were used. The researcher used a case study approach with elements of grounded theory for data analysis.

This study found that there is great potential for students to develop their voice in online FYC courses if 1) there has been clear communication of expectations between the instructor and student; 2) feedback for student writing has been given from multiple resources; 3) the time spent in class is focused on voice as opposed to grammatical aspects of writing or technical problems; 4) FYC online students have passion for the subject of their writing. Although these findings relate to the research question for this study, there were also unexpected findings that contribute to the study's conclusions. From the instructor's perspective, the reliability and usability of the technology being used for online courses was fundamentally important to encouraging voice in student writing. If too much time was spent on these issues, less time remained to explore the various nuances of writing and content that encourage development of voice.

Additionally, online students placed grades at the forefront of the conversation. This was a point of frustration for instructors.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Every college graduate remembers it. Some with fond memories and others with cold sweats. Freshman composition has been a staple in North American higher education for decades. It is a requirement of every student and can be taught many different ways by many gifted (or in some unfortunate cases, not so gifted) instructors. It has been touted as the gateway course that can give students the essential skills (writing, critical thinking, etc.) to be truly successful not only in the university, but in work and home life as well (Martin, 2010).

While the course (or series of courses depending on the program) has been a hallmark of higher education for years, there are a significant number of changes on the horizon for many colleges and universities that could significantly impact the way freshman composition (or first year composition as it is now more frequently called) is taught. The introduction of online course work drastically changed the style of interaction between instructors and students, students and their peers, and even the class with outside guests. It did not, however, impact all instructors and students in the same way. Differences in experience, attitudes, and even age continue to make the use of technology a continuous struggle.

The use of online courses coupled with the ever-increasing number of communication technologies has changed human interaction permanently (Baym, 2010). These changes do not only impact student interaction with other class members and

content. They also create new understandings of communication as it relates to the very curriculum students pursue in first year composition. With the introduction of blogs, wikis, email, social networking sites, and texting, the written language itself has undergone significant changes (Smith, 2008). Even more recently the introduction of virtual worlds, avatars, and creative combinations of all these tools into something altogether different has created a learning environment unlike any other in history. It takes a talented instructor and well-designed curriculum to make meaning from these changing technologies and guide students in their proper use for the modern world.

Although first year composition (FYC) is charged with teaching a number of important skills (critical thinking, rhetoric, and information literacy among them), a more recent push to use composition courses as a method of teaching "voice" can be seen in the curriculum goals of such courses all over the U.S. Understanding how voice is defined by English instructors, how it is taught in an online environment, and what tools and pedagogy are responsible for the result will be the objectives of this study.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study will focus on one broad question and two sub-questions:

1. How do students develop their voice through content involving cultural immersion in a first-year composition online class?

   a. How does online course architecture (including tools and structure) encourage or discourage this development?

   b. In what way does course pedagogy encourage or discourage this development?

Course content that is designed to facilitate student learning of voice through cultural immersion can provide some much-needed stability in a course required for all undergraduate students. Due to the overwhelming use of adjuncts in higher education today, consistency in content for the purpose of teaching voice can improve overall program effectiveness. Determining which content and pedagogy accomplish this goal and which do not can assist the English program of the university in which the study is taking place specifically.

DELIMITATIONS

The sample for this study will be students enrolled in an online first-year composition course in a midwestern private university in the summer 2011 term. This course has been taught online for several years in traditional 18-week terms in fall and spring as well as in both eight and twelve week terms in the summer. The course has undergone several revisions in that time, which were done in a collaborative spirit with English full-time, tenured faculty as well as various coordinators and adjunct faculty.

Throughout the semester, students learn essential skills in writing and research. These skills are acquired through a series of readings (from various texts, articles, and online sources), writing assignments (persuasive papers and research-based works), and class discussions. The course is clearly organized into weekly activities involving text lecture notes, discussions, and writing/reading assignments. The amount of work students are expected to complete in the short summer term is substantial (as is the case in many summer composition courses online).

Participants in the course range in age (although all students will be over age 18), composition experience, ethnicity, and stated major. Although this course is meant to be taken within the first year of undergraduate studies at this university, students do not always follow this guideline. As a result, some students will be freshmen while others may be much closer to the conclusion of their program.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

- Asynchronous: online learning experiences not conducted simultaneously by all participants, but completed and submitted independently. Common examples include assignment submission, discussion boards, and blogs.

- Avatar: a visual representation of a course participant in an online course (this can be created within any type of technology used in online learning).

- Blackboard: a popular learning management tool used to organize course work and interactions for online courses or to supplement such efforts in face to face or hybrid courses.

- Blog: also known as a weblog, this online journaling tool usually organizes writing entries in reverse chronological order and is intended for public viewing.

- Course architecture: the structure of an online course, which includes the available technology tools and organization of the content to facilitate learning.

- Digital age: a period in human history where information is easily and quickly transmitted resulting in changes for the economy and education

- Discussion Board: An asynchronous tool used to prompt online discussion. A question or series of questions is posed and students may respond to the original question or to one another's remarks.

- Engaging: the level to which discussions gain student attention and encourage open dialogue.

- Face to face classroom: a class that physically meets in a university building and may use a learning management system.

- First year composition (FYC): an English composition course intended for first year students as an introduction to college-level writing and research skills (although specific course objectives may vary somewhat)

- K-12: educational experiences from kindergarten through grade 12. Although not directly related to the study, comparisons in pedagogical background occasionally occur.

- Learning management system (LMS): a software system designed to organize course work and administrative tasks related to educational or training purposes, which includes synchronous and asynchronous components.

- Millennial generation: Individuals typically born in the 1980s and 1990s. These individuals comprise much of the current traditional college student population.

- Online course: a course in which all components are delivered and received through computer-mediated communication (rather than face to face) and from a distance.

- Pedagogy: the art and science of employing specific instructional strategies to further learner development and engagement with the content.

- Synchronous: online learning experiences conducted simultaneously. Common examples include class meetings via chat or web conferencing software.

- Virtual Reality: a computer simulated environment designed to mimic live interactions among users. Often used in education to provide synchronous learning opportunities.

- Voice: an author's persona as it is shown through the literature he/she produces (this is a common definition, but part of the subject of this dissertation is examining the various definitions and accepting that of the instructor)

- Web 2.0: a series of web applications designed to enhance information-sharing and collaboration on the World Wide Web.

- Web conferencing: an online synchronous communication medium in which users may share files, chat through type or voice, and discuss ideas.

- Wimba: a web conferencing tool available through a software license. This tool allows for synchronous, collaborative work in the online environment.

- Wiki: an online collaborative space for users to generate documents simultaneously.

Most definitions here, such as wikis and synchronous, are fairly standard across several reference materials (e.g.,). Others (such as voice and web conferencing) have been customized to reflect the study's focus or their use in the online classroom in particular.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The significance of learning outcomes in first year composition courses cannot be understated. Writing well is considered a critical skill not only for later coursework, but also for the world of work. This study examines the tools and pedagogy involved in developing student voice in their writing. Its results could contribute significantly to one university's program in particular and many others in a broader sense. There is meaning to this work not only in its practical application of the results, but also in light of the extensive changes occurring in higher education in the digital age. Just a decade ago, online courses were considered very new. There was significant skepticism on the part of education professionals as to whether or not these modified distance learning courses could truly be engaging for students and transfer the content in the same way as face to face courses could. Although some of that doubt still exists, online learning (or elearning as it is sometimes called) has grown to be more accepted as a legitimate learning experience than ever before. For students, it has become an extremely popular choice among the numerous options for higher education. The demand for online courses has increased each year and universities have capitalized on this interest.

With rapid growth, however, come unexpected complications. In a course such as first-year composition, there is a need (even among smaller institutions) to create some continuity in the content. Students in most universities expect roughly the same content and assignments with one professor as they do with another (although some modifications are expected). In face to face classrooms, many professors of first-year composition decide on content together, draft similar versions of the syllabus, and follow it throughout the term. The actual delivery varies from course to course, however, in this environment. Much the same can be expected in online courses. However, with the recording capabilities of learning management software, it is easier for instructors to collaborate on future changes to the curriculum based on what they can see in one another's classes.

This particular study seeks to identify students' development of voice in writing by examining the course architecture, technology tools, and pedagogy used within an online FYC course. Findings provide a description of components that contributed to this end a well as those that were not particularly valuable.

The study also reveals interesting findings about the pedagogy used by first-year composition instructors online. One noteworthy trend in higher education in recent decades is the increasing number of adjuncts hired to teach courses of all levels, but particularly introductory courses such as this. Although there are many reasons for this trend, it is one that will likely not be reversed in the near future. Most focus group participants were adjunct instructors. Finding proper support for instructors who may not be particularly connected to the university and rely on content provided further

illustrates the need for a curriculum that facilitates the goals of the first-year composition course and a university's English program overall.

Another important purpose is to provide valuable information for the study participants. The course under investigation is taught at a small university that is considering expanding its online writing course options. Guidance on which tools and teaching strategies helped students learn voice would make such choices simpler for administrators. In contrast, some of the focus group participants are employed by a rather large mid-size public university with a significant number of commuters. First-year composition is required of all majors and there have been a number of online offerings of it in the past few years. The course itself has undergone several revisions as the developers have learned more and more about the differences between the application of course objectives online as opposed to a face to face environment. The university is also in a region where there is significant competition for college students. One of the criticisms of universities like this in general is a lack of connection to such a large student base. If ways can be found to develop student voice in an online first-year composition course, the result may very well be students who feel more personally connected to the instructor and the university program which helped them find that voice. Many studies and publications have demonstrated the ability for people to personally connect using digital media (Baym, 2010). If tools are used to this end, it may contribute to the effort to help students find "voice".

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH LITERATURE

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Anyone involved in educational technology in colleges and universities is well aware of the significant changes underway. In countless conferences and meetings around the world, there is a level of excitement about the possibilities and an underlying sense of dread when considering the unknown. It would be impossible to predict how college classrooms will be transformed in the years ahead. However, it is possible to help guide the conversation and prepare oneself for the future by outlining the most significant of proposed modifications. Although there are numerous shifts in the landscape not outlined here, those which seem to have a direct impact on first-year composition courses, undergraduate online learning, or public institutions are addressed.

While there are a few, very small, signs that the economy is improving in the U.S., many forecasters predict it will take years to recover from the collapse in 2008. Every sector of the economy has been affected, but some have more ground to make up in the recovery than others. Higher education at public institutions is one such area. Budgets have been cut to a minimum, causing changes in hiring trends and benefit dispersion. This concern when added with fears over competition from other institutions, completion and retention rates, and the recent shift in faculty hiring practices, can create a frightening picture for traditional academics and college administrators.

Of these issues, the concern over competition is foremost in the minds of many administrators in colleges within the same region where this study takes place. The

options for potential students seeking a college degree are no longer limited to the four-year liberal arts institution. The market is now saturated with two year institutions, trade schools, and online campuses, which do not even need to be headquartered in a particular city or region to be competitive. It would seem that there are enough rival institutions like these to keep retention administrators busy for quite a while. Unfortunately, there are even more recent developments to add complications to strategic plans for years to come.

One of the things that is most surprising is the increasing differentiation we find in the secondary institutions. For example, Hamburger U, McDonald's long established training program, currently offers college credit to its students in the United States through an accredited business management program. What started as internal training has now expanded to a degree granting institution (Staley & Trinkle, 2011). Although programs like these are still few and far between, the trend may prove to be beneficial for students seeking an alternative or more personalized method of learning business strategy. If business students today were asked whether or not they would find a business program coordinated and executed by McDonald's beneficial, one might receive a mixed response. But what if Google were offering the same opportunity? Might students interested in computer science rethink their original plans? This type of differentiation might also extend to degree granting programs in cultural institutions such as museums or zoos. All of these changes must be considered by the traditional four year degree granting institution.

Completion and retention rates are another area of significant concern. Many improvements in the access to higher education have been established over the past

several decades, college completion rates continue to be a cause of frustration. There's a well-known link between education and the workplace. In fact, the preparation for college level work is not all that dissimilar to that needed for many jobs: essential mathematical skills in reading skill (Oblinger, 2010). One significant challenge for colleges and universities is improving the passage rates within developmental or gatekeeper courses, such as First-Year composition. A student's inability to pass first year composition can not only impact the college's ability to retain that student, but also the students' ability to succeed in later courses where writing is required.

Another factor affecting completion and retention is the student's schedule. Many educational policies in the past were written with the traditional-aged student in mind (18 to 25 years of age). However, more than 60% of students enrolled are now over the age and are working full time while pursuing their educational goals (Staley & Trinkle, 2011). The student body within the first year composition course online is extremely diverse in many respects, but this is particularly true with regard to age. Identifying the needs of this particular group, is fundamental not only in learning how to teach "voice", but also in identifying the best course tools to encourage engagement with the content.

With the number of non-traditional students climbing, the demand for more flexible scheduling options has reached an all-time high. It is estimated that up to 75% of low income students who attend college must also work at least 20 hours a week and possibly care for families in addition to attending classes (Oblinger, 2010). Online learning options, like the one focused upon for this study, can greatly assist these students by providing differentiated learning opportunities and asynchronous work, which can be done during a time when the student can truly focus.

Another well documented trend has direct impact on the course observed for this study. Due to ever increasing economic pressure, higher education institutions have turned more to adjunct faculty than tenure track and full-time instructors to deliver content. The last three decades have seen the number of adjunct faculty increase 210% while tenure-track faculty hiring increased only 7% (Parker, 2010). The reasons again can be traced to budget concerns. In many cases the cost of hiring adjuncts can be as low as 1/3 what it would cost to hire a full-time, tenure-track faculty member.

There continues to be significant debate over the effectiveness of adjunct teaching with higher educational institutions. Although a number of studies represent both sides of this argument, universities continue to make use of this cost-effective appointment strategy. Critics of overuse of adjuncts have argued that they are less effective than full-time, tenure-track faculty as they typically have less formal education and weaker ties to the university as a whole. Those who advocate for their use insist that adjunct instructors often specialize in teaching, work in the private sector (and thus acquire up to date knowledge and specialized fields), and can focus on teaching allowing full time faculty more time for research (Bettinger, 2010). In fact, one study indicated that adjuncts were as effective as or more effective than their full-time counterparts in fields more directly tied to a specific profession. It also seemed to show positive effects on student learning with academic subjects that were taught by younger adjuncts versus more veteran instructors (Bettinger, 2010).

Although the debate over whether or not adjunct instructors can provide the same high quality educational experience as their full-time counterparts, the trend will likely not be reversed over time. In fact, IT departments consider themselves well positioned to

ensure a consistent experience for all students regardless of the status of their instructor as part–time or full-time (Staley & Trinkle, 2011). It is armed with this knowledge that we can best examine the tools, pedagogy, and architecture of this particular online first-year composition course, which is taught by an adjunct faculty member.

FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION ONLINE

First year composition (FYC) has been a standard part of the general education curriculum for many decades at various universities in the U.S. The course is considered a gateway for all students. The belief is that until students learn to carefully articulate their ideas in written form, they will not be as successful as they could be in the rest of their coursework or in the world of work. Although it has undergone significant changes in that time, most FYC's focus on the same set of guiding objectives: critical thinking skills, rhetoric, information literacy, voice, and grammar. In many cases, the writing process itself is also a focus.

There seems to be little argument about the value of teaching critical thinking skills, rhetoric, information literacy and voice among English professors. There is a good deal of debate, however, over how prominent the role of grammar should be. Simultaneously, there is also discussion about the idea of generic writing assignments designed to span the various disciplines. The contradictions and controversies, which seem to pervade the existing literature, are part of what makes the course such a compelling subject for this study.

Over the years freshman composition (or first year composition as it has been more recently called) has had a number of objectives. Typically, students consider

freshman composition an introductory course in writing and basic research. However, in more recent years this definition has expanded to include many skills. A significant number of instructors in higher education prefer to focus on critical thinking, writing strategies, and research methods. Many students begin freshman composition with the understanding that their skills in these areas will be advanced. Although this does occur with most students, one of the most basic skills, grammar, is often left unaddressed. Matthew Teorey (2003), an English instructor, found himself repeating the familiar mantra: "they should have learned this stuff in high school". Although there is general agreement among English faculty that grammar skills should have been acquired prior to this point in a student's academic career, the fact remains that many students lack the necessary expertise.

Teorey began each semester with the same assumptions many English faculty hold: that his students either already knew how to use grammar correctly or that they would use the handbook they were given. He found neither of these to be true. His solution to remedy the situation was to incorporate grammar lessons into the curriculum throughout the semester. He was able to find success with many lessons on single grammatical problems rather than on sweeping concepts. He also incorporated games and contests to encourage active learning of grammar. Because of his success, he has also warned English instructors to not only refer students to the handbook, but to use it actively during consultations with them. "Once English instructors recognize and compensate for the limitations of the handbook as a self-teaching tool, students will begin to feel more comfortable addressing grammatical problems and find more success in solving them" (Teorey, 2003, p. 20).

Instructors often seem to simultaneously recognize the need for standard English to function well in today's society, and resent its rules, which they see as oppressive and patronizing. Teorey (2003) recognized this conflict and "So the message many instructors send out to their students is one that misinforms and confuses by simultaneously encouraging respect for the dominant discourse and devaluing its rules as oppressive constructs or as minor proofreading chores that occur outside of class" (p. 3). Teorey's situation is not at all unusual. It is a frustration shared by many who teach this particular course.

Another issue of controversy first-year composition courses must face is that over the role of the generic research paper, which is also assigned in the course for this study. Although commonly accepted as a standard assignment in FYC, some faculty have begun to reconsider its role in the course. The question is primarily centered on whether or not a course of this type should take a "literacy as composition" approach or encourage more discipline-specific writing. Some argue that assignments which encourage the discipline-specific approach, such as the generic research paper, have little to no value when the skills are applied to the other disciplines. In fact, many seem resentful at being asked to perform this task, which they see is the responsibility of the other academic areas. They further argue that rather than holding responsibility for teaching academic writing, it is the composition teacher's duty to encourage students to develop their own authentic voice, which, they argue, is not accomplished through writing across the disciplines. Opponents to this argument point out that a choice need not be made between emphasizing a writer's own voice and emphasizing academic discourse. In fact, this is done quite often. It is also noted that if it is generally felt assignments such as the generic

research paper have no transfer value, then this provides an opportunity for improvement of the assignment itself (Sutton, 1997).

These two points of debate within the larger conversation of FYC also stem from a more personal argument about the role of society and its expectations of students after they leave the university. Many English faculty have emphasized the power relationships in society as they are displayed through grammar and discipline-writing. The argument that standard English represents an oppressive system has been levied against those who wish to teach basic grammatical skills or encourage discipline-specific writing. While an overwhelming majority of those who teach English agree that the language favors those in society who have more power, most also recognize the need for formal language instruction and assignments that reach across multiple disciplines. Keeping students ignorant of the language structure and the various disciplines may encourage them to reject certain ideas about a patriarchal society, but it also prevents them from engaging in the dialogue and, thus, influencing those who continue to subscribe to the power structure (Sutton, 1997).

As the debate over issues like discipline-writing and grammar rage on, there are other, less controversial, observations taking place with regard to FYC. Although online courses do continue to generate some disagreement, they are becoming increasingly accepted as a legitimate method for delivering content for FYC and many other English courses.

Whether a first year composition course is online or taken in a face to face environment, many technologies can be used to facilitate learning. In her examination of

the role of error in learning writing, Smith (2008) found the use of blogs particularly

helpful. Her decision to incorporate blogs into her FYC course stemmed from some

widely held beliefs about students and their knowledge of and comfort level with

technologies. Although their methods of communication very significantly, students

today tend to write more (although less formally) than students in the past. They arrive

on campus with the unique ability to multitask and shift their attention quickly. This is in

stark contrast to the way most composition courses have been designed (Smith, 2008).

Despite their competency with technology and their experience with writing, they still

come to the first year composition course the way most of us did: apprehensive and

unsure about our abilities. To encourage the students to take risks despite these concerns,

Smith employed the use of blogs (a technology with which most were already familiar) as

a more informal pre-writing activity, which would eventually lead to more formal written

assignments. As the semester progressed, students learned to use the blogs to gradually

improve their skills and find their voice as writers (Smith, 2008).

The students of this course found improvement in their skills as writers through

the use of these blogs, but Smith is also quick to point out that it is not the technology

that is directly responsible for such success. Other instructors did not have the same level

of success and this can sometimes be attributed to other factors including instructor

guidance and student engagement. For the engaged class, however, technologies like

blogs can have unexpected effects on the writing process. Utilizing web 2.0 technologies

in general has a different impact on student writing that more traditional first year

composition courses where papers are submitted to the instructor, graded, and returned.

Due to the collaborative nature of these tools, composition courses can teach students a

great deal about voice and audience. The blogs used in Smith's course encouraged the use of comments by other students. The feedback received on each blog helped students gradually transform their writing.

A number of technologies beyond blogs may assist this first-year composition course to achieve its stated objectives. Tools such as discussion boards and wikis encourage the same kind of collaboration. The ease with which instructors may type or even use speech recognition technologies allows for more time for thoughtful feedback in a digital environment than a student may receive with a piece of paper and hand-written notes in the margin. The resources that can be made readily available within learning management software may also assist students in ways that could be different from a traditional classroom. Many of these tools have already been explored and employed by many online FYC instructors to teach grammar, information literacy, and rhetoric. In fact, these technology tools have been easily applied to all FYC objectives but one: the teaching of "voice".

VOICE

To understand the use of tools in the teaching of voice, it is important to first clarify what we mean by voice and its purpose in writing. From the earliest years of written language, there has been considerable debate over the purpose of writing. Was it to inform? Perhaps only to express? Those who believe more the latter than the former are the strongest supporters of using and teaching voice in writing courses such as first-

year composition. This movement appears to have taken over much of the curriculum of FYP in many higher education institutions in the U.S.

In an effort to inform incoming freshman of this very important course, many large institutions (Colorado State, University of South Florida, etc.) with well-organized first-year composition courses clearly outline their objectives on the university website. Among these objectives, the goal of writers finding appropriate voice stands out as a significant end. The task of finding voice can be difficult for students in any circumstance, but it is made even more so when many academics can't even agree on one clear definition.

Although countless definitions of voice can be found in the literature, three over-arching classifications seem to encompass most of them. First, voice can be discussed in very specific terms. When an author composes a text, both a fictionalized audience created by that text as well as the human audience reading the text are considered. In other cases, voice can be used to talk about the specific knowledge of the author and that writer's ability to reveal certain aspects of a culture or event based upon that knowledge. Finally, voice can be used to describe the writer who discovers an authentic self throughout the writing process and reveals that self in the final text (Yancey, 1994).

Even these three definitions, however, do not encompass all of the different views of voice. The notion of voice as it pertains to writing and composition, does seem to stem from the most common definition of a voice: our physical voice, which is very distinct to each individual. Taking this concept further, it can be said that individuals who are seeking their "voice" in their writing are as individual in their expressions as they are in their physical voice (Yancey, 1994). Some argue that voice does not

necessarily have to be so personal, but must be passionate (Gillespie, 1994). The sheer number of definitions and explanations of voice used by instructors leads some to believe that it is, in fact, the instructor, who determines voice within the classroom. Although instructors attempt to enable students to release their voice within their writing, the instructor essentially decides when voice is present and tells the student when it is effective (Gillespie, 1994). A definition of what "voice" entails for the instructor of the course under study will need to be clarified before other sources are consulted on the various characteristics of voice within text.

Although most agree that voice in writing is important for students to learn, whether or not it should be explicitly taught is not so clear. Since the 1960s, there has been a strong push to teach voice in the college classroom. This movement sparked debate over the purpose of writing in our society and arguments over the oppressive use of language mentioned in the previous section. This history has been noted in the works of a prominent author on voice, Peter Elbow. He notes that in recent years, the dialogue among investors of college English programs (instructors, faculty, program coordinators, and the like) began to shift in the mid-1990s to other topics such as digital media, public writing, and service learning (Elbow, 2007). Although the conversation in academic journals has shifted away from voice, the concept has never really left the classroom. Elbow argues that its presence is felt in politics, in the media, and even in the classroom where students feel more empowered than ever to assert their own voice in their writing and even their actions in the classroom. The effect of the internet is especially compelling when making the case for the inherent desire for voice in writing. There are now more writers than ever before thanks to the numerous collaborative and interactive

technologies available online. Whereas students were once confined to a classroom and told to write for their instructors, they are now writing for a vast audience of selected family and friends (as we see in facebook) or for complete strangers (as is the case for modern bloggers). The desire to inform others of who we really are is demonstrated in these many technologies (Elbow, 2007).

Where one is positioned in this debate seems to relate in some part to one's definition of voice as well. Some believe that authentic voice expresses our very nature and that this voice has to be carefully developed. One instructor reflected a commonly held view of voice when he argued that the emergence of voice has a somewhat magical quality. To teach the concept of voice to students, he takes one student's work, which exemplifies this, and asks questions about what they were doing or thinking when this work emerged. This approach motivates students because it takes on the notion that the "magic" is already within them and they just need to find a way to free it (Gillespie, 1994).

This is not always a popular or common approach for FYC instructors, however. Other instructors who choose to explicitly teach "voice" in the course, may employ a strategy like one used by Woodworth (1994), of Hollins College, who not only believes in the importance of teaching "voice" explicitly, but also outlines the specific plan in various English and composition courses to do just that. She explains that her series of activities can be applied to any course in which writing plays an important role.

Her approach to teaching voice begins with a brief autobiographical paragraph, which students use to introduce themselves to the class. This assignment is revisited

throughout the term as students learn more about voice and other grammatical concepts, which vary depending on the focus of the course. Course work then follows an interesting pattern. The autobiography is immediately followed by a specific exercise in voice where students are expected to write three letters about the same topic to three very different audiences. This allows students to clearly see how they must take on different personae depending on their audience. Because the topic was quite personal, students have become fully engaged in the activity. Capitalizing on that interest, Woodworth then moves to a lecture on the classical rhetorical triangle (now with a more receptive and enthusiastic audience since they've had some personal experience with voice differentiation in the previous exercise). A discussion then follows on the validity of voice. Students are asked to debate the notion that voice is hypocritical. Woodworth follows this pattern of personally engaging assignments followed by lectures on classic content, followed by controversial discussions to assist students in finding their voice as she defines it for her class (Woodworth, 1994).

It is not only class structure that sets Woodworth's methods apart from many others who teach voice. As an instructor, she also completes several of the assignments herself to not only identify potential problems with the assignments and better understand the level of difficulty, but also to share what she learned herself with the students, thus forming a stronger bond. In their evaluations, students felt they better understood what made some writing styles better than others as a result of the activities as well as their connection to the instructor (Woodworth, 1994).

She concludes by explaining the value of teaching voice with three positive results. First, students learn that within each self lay a variety of selves with valid points

of view and the right to express those views. Second, learning voice frees them from the limiting effect of believing that there is only one true voice within them. Third, students begin to enjoy the act of writing itself, treating each draft as an act in a play. They become more interested in learning about the various techniques and styles of well-known authors and are able to apply that knowledge not only to their academic papers, but their professional writings as well (Woodworth, 1994).

Although these are very compelling strategies, Woodworth taught in a face to face environment more than fifteen years ago. Can and should these techniques be adapted differently in an online composition environment? There are many involved in online education at the post-secondary level. While there is much disagreement on various issues of pedagogy and appropriate technology use, there is a general understanding that the future of online learning lies in its ability to be fluid and adaptable to student needs. The teaching (and possibly even the definition) of voice will likely transform as these changes are underway.

More recent authors in online composition have evolved the definitions of voice even further in light of the virtual environment. In most classrooms, there is an instructional voice (one in which discourse is presented as a static truth, which is believed by everyone in the field) and a conversational voice (which is a type of pedagogical questioning with a hope for openness in dialogue, but in truth is usually controlled by the instructor). A third, compositional voice, is proposed as a useful tool in online courses in particular. This voice is characterized by its ability to be spoken after a period of deliberation (Stroupe, 2003). By giving students time to carefully consider a question or issue, a more meaningful reflection of the complexities of the topic might emerge. It is

this period of reflection that separates this voice from the conversational voice. This type of composition, which can be done in any discipline, may "help students and teachers avoid the less-common-sensical but no-less-automatic answers often presented by disciplines, especially in introductory courses and texts," (Stroupe, 2003, p. 260).

Understanding the different types of voice and how they may be most meaningfully used in first-year composition is largely the objective of this work. As this review demonstrates, there are countless methods for teaching "voice" and even more arguments for or against the practice in general. Discerning the ways in which authenticity is seen in a virtual world will clarify the data as it is collected and analyzed.

ONLINE ENGLISH FACULTY AND TECHNOLOGY

There has been much discussion over the past several decades on the rapidly changing environment in higher education as it relates to faculty and technology use. Teaching styles and institutional structure have changed little since the founding day of the earliest American colleges and universities several hundred years ago. For many instructors, a sense that things have changed at a mind-numbing pace only in the past few decades exists for good reason.

While technology has always been used by innovative faculty, its effect on profound system-wide change has been extremely limited. The once isolated impact of technology on individual classes has transformed into institution-wide reform in the past few decades. Hartman of the University of Central Florida has recognized three epochs that have caused such change in higher education: the online public-access catalog

epoch, the personal computer, Internet, and web epoch, and the enterprise systems epoch. (Hartman, 2008)

By gradually utilizing technology at the institutional level, colleges and universities began encouraging student and faculty use of technologies to complete essential functions. Students gradually began looking online for their program descriptions and registering for courses. Using personal computers and internet to research and produce work encouraged further reliance on technology. The development of learning management systems provided students 24/7 access to course materials and a place they might use to collaborate on essential ideas and even submit their work. All of this has materialized in only the last 30 years.

Not only has the technology caused significant changes, but the demands of a new generation of learners have had an impact on colleges and universities as well. There has been an essential shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning at all educational levels (Worley, 2010). Although generational comparisons cannot be used to stereotype students, they can provide some insight into their habits and tendencies. Much has been made of the millennial generation in particular, which is commonly seen as those born between 1980 and 2000. Compared to other generations, this group of learners is generally technologically advanced, well-informed, impatient, and sheltered (Worley, 2010). This interesting combination of characteristics provides a unique set of challenges for faculty.

Although advanced technical skill can be seen at any age, it is more commonly seen in the millennial generation than in others. This is not a great surprise considering that most traditional-aged college students today grew up playing video games and

learning basic skills on carefully researched and marketed electronic educational toys (Worley, 2010). As a result, they have acquired more knowledge at an earlier age than most.

This has created a generation of well-informed and independent learners. With easy access to vast amounts of information, some argue millennials have the potential to be the best informed generation to date (Junginger, 2008).

Not all characteristics of this generation are helpful to students, however. With the easy access to information also comes a higher level of impatience. They ask for more immediate and detailed feedback in their assignments and are far less likely to read through a textbook (Worley, 2010). This presents significant obstacles to the instructor who relies heavily on lectures and texts to deliver instruction.

Traditional-aged college students today also tend to be more sheltered than others. Concerns about crime in their childhood earned their guardians the nickname "helicopter parents". So involved are some of these parents that many colleges and universities have taken to focusing their recruiting efforts on the parents and guardians of potential students (Gloeckler, 2008).

A wide variety of strategies can be employed to address the needs of these learners including providing diversity in assignment choices, facilitating student input when creating learning opportunities, and providing clear expectations and timely feedback on assessed work. Many of these strategies were discussed by instructor participants in the study, but others were not. Of course, teaching one generation of traditional-aged students is not the only challenge. Non-traditional students are returning to college in large numbers. These students have learning needs that are quite different

from their younger counterparts. This mix of students brings a host of different attitudes and experiences (Worley, 2010).

Given these incredible changes, it should be a surprise to no one that many faculty are struggling with the adjustment. The challenge to not only acquire more technical knowledge, but also to adjust one's teaching strategies to this new environment cannot be underestimated. It is a challenge that the participants in this study also faced.

Of course, there is significant variance in skill, ability, and motivation among faculty regarding their technology use. In her rather large qualitative study of three populous and respected institutions, Zellweger Moser (2007) identified five different levels of technology adoption. Innovators are considered venturesome and uninfluenced by their institutional environment when adopting technology. As a result of their attitudes, their students tend to be open to new things and they are continuously motivated to improve their skills. Early adopters are respected by their peers and have a positive attitude toward technology, but find inappropriate support and unreliable technology frustrating (Zellweger Moser, 2007).

Those in the early majority are motivated extrinsically to learn technology and rely heavily on the experiences of their peers as a determining factor for their adoption. Late majority users are highly skeptical and only adopt technology as a consequence of peer pressure or economic necessity. Laggards are considered traditional and do not adopt technology at all (Zellweger Moser, 2007).

Many studies have been conducted and have different ideas as to why faculty might fall into any one of these categories (Finley, 2003; Jacobsen, 1998; Surrendra, 2001). Most of the findings seem to support Surrendra's (2001) view that access,

training, and community support were crucial factors in technology adoption. Another, more recent study found that the use of self-directed informational sources, collegial interaction, and the use of data analysis tools were significant predictors of the technology adoption level (Sahin & Thompson, 2007).

Of course, faculty are not necessarily stuck in the categories named by Moser. The Learning/Adoption Trajectory Model (Sherry, Tavalin, & Gibson, 2000) identified a series of stages instructors tend to follow in their technology adoption. These stages progress through information-gathering (Teacher as Learner), experimentation (Teacher as Adopter), identification of relationships between technology and curriculum (Teacher as Co-Learner), awareness of immediate learning outcomes (Teacher as Reaffirmer/Rejecter), and use of action research techniques to improve practice (Teacher as Leader).

A review of faculty technology adoption became a necessary addition to the literature review after it became apparent that frustration with usability and reliability was prevalent among the participants in phase two of this study. Although not directly related to the research question, the time participants spent struggling with technology impacted their time to focus on other areas of their work as composition instructors, including developing student voice in writing. Their sentiments have been reflected in other aspects of the literature.

Zellweger Moser's study found that for some faculty in the early adopters or early majority categories, a lack of reliable technology led to their abandonment of its use. In fact, one faculty member in his study noted that, because he had not yet achieved tenure, he was reluctant to use learning management systems that had been proven to be

unreliable at his institution. The fear of negative student evaluations and their impact on

the tenure process greatly affected the use of technology (Zellweger Moser, 2007). When

study results were shared with participants, Mary agreed with this concern. In a follow

up discussion, she did not particularly express concern for tenure, but did agree that the

weight of student evaluations played a role in her decision to adopt new teaching

strategies or technologies.

ONLINE COURSE COMMUNICATION AND PRESENCE

Another important theme that surfaced during the second phase of the study

identified the importance of clear online course communication and instructor presence.

While the use of various online tools is important to encourage student development of

voice, the role of the instructor is tantamount to the success of this endeavor. Ensuring

clear communication between all class participants reduces confusion on course

requirements and allows students to concentrate on their higher level writing skills rather

than details such as font size and margins, which are considered trivial by the instructors.

One of the difficulties this study would later find with regard to digital

communication for instructors is the debate between using full text to express course

content and requirements and symbols. Just a few years into the development of the

internet, the use of symbols to convey emotions (often best understood through facial

expressions) was introduced (Baym, 2010). Emoticons, as these symbols are now

known, are used in even the simplest of text interactions. For instance, several years ago,

few would have realized that a colon, dash, and closed parentheses could indicate a smile:

☺ This symbol is now so commonly accepted that most word processing software

identifies the various markings and creates the more clear smile image shown in the previous sentence. As this study's results demonstrate, this presents a dilemma for composition instructors online. The desire to express oneself fully is strong in writing teachers. Online writing teachers must also adapt to their environment, which may require an adjustment in communication techniques. Unfortunately, there is little research in this area thus far.

One aspect of online communication that has been well researched, however, centers on the importance of online presence in student learning. A number of recent studies have indicated that instructor and student presence online is highly correlated to learning outcomes (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Russo & Benson, 2005; Sher, 2009)

Most everyone has attended a class in which the instructor has had a strong presence. The impact of the instructor's persona and attitude has shown to be significant in the face to face environment over the years. Recently, studies have shifted the focus to the online environment. Student interaction with the instructor and with other students has been shown to be a critical component of learning (Russo & Benson, 2005).

While each of the studies has variations in its participants and methods, there is general consensus that a strong sense of community online equals higher student satisfaction with the course and better learning outcomes. In one of the earlier studies of social presence online and its relationship to perceived learning and satisfaction, Richardson & Swan (2003) examined the notion of teacher immediacy. This work drew from previous communication studies and identified teacher immediacy as the psychological distance a communicator puts between themselves and the person with

whom they are communicating (Richardson & Swan, 2003). This notion of distance is particularly interesting in light of this study's focus on voice in the online environment.

A strong instructor presence online is significant for a number of reasons. In the online classroom, students who do not feel connected to the material, the instructor, or each other either disengage physically by dropping the course, fail to complete the work, or do the minimum required and never fully engage in the learning process (Russo & Benson, 2005). Given that retention rates are slightly lower in online courses than in face to face, this is a cause for concern.

Another reason instructors are encouraged to create a stronger presence in their online courses relates to their students' sense of connectedness to the broader university community. Online students have reported a sense of disconnectedness to their academic community. Oftentimes the instructor is the only representative with which an online student regularly corresponds. Any efforts instructors make to bridge this gap were appreciated by the students in one study (Sher, 2009).

How students and instructors assess the degree of social presence, of course, varies. It can be argued that this is largely dependent on the medium itself. While some mediums lend themselves very well to such interactions, others do not. Even among those that do, however, usability affects the ability of students to engage in this way (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Among those tools that are easily accessible by students, ones with a visual component are seen as more desirable. Because of the physical separation of course participants, any technology that helps to bridge that gap provides more opportunity for social presence (Sher, 2009).

Another question surrounding the idea of online social presence is the value of the presence of the instructor versus other students. Both the Russo & Benson (2005) and the Sher (2009) studies found a statistically significant correlation between perceived student learning/satisfaction and strong instructor and fellow student presence in online courses. Results of the Sher (2009) study found the presence of the instructor more valuable. Russo and Benson found the value of interactions with classmates to be more beneficial.

Regardless of which truly is more beneficial, there are a number of opportunities in online learning environments to facilitate collaboration for both interactions. These studies found, as we also see in later results for this study, that a number of areas seemingly unrelated to online presence can impact presence nonetheless.

Although clearly the online course environment can provide a connection for students to the academic community, the age of the program and the experience level of its coordinators can impact the success of the course. Richardson & Swan (2003), for instance, found that while newer online programs were plagued with complaints about technical complications, the program in their study was well established leaving students and faculty to concentrate on the content and their interactions with each other. Similarly, Sher included important technology-related aspects in the implications section of that study. Most notably, it was argued that the CMS (Course Management System) needed to be more user-friendly to allow for a stronger comfort level for both students and faculty (2009).

Which user-friendly online tools are best used to facilitate student learning of voice is to be explored in the next section.

ONLINE TOOLS FOR LEARNING VOICE

Although there are a significant number of online tools available to support writing efforts in general, there has been little investigation into their potential use for learning voice. Based upon the focus group's discussions, there are a number that could influence students' acquisition of voice. In a review of the literature, however, the connection is not made entirely clear through research.

A number of innovative tools might be used in creative ways to either support voice directly or provide support for basic writing skill, which indirectly impacts voice through its efforts to save instructors time. Some of the more recent and readily available tools include collaborative reading and writing tools, video and audio conferencing tools, and screen capture recording (Nielsen 2010).

Instructors in this study discussed the importance of visual elements and this was also reflected in some of the earlier literature. A number of tools incorporate the use of avatars either within the LMS directly or with outside tools. Second Life is one of the more popular tools used for this purpose. Although there was a good deal of skepticism about its use in education, at its height in 2007, Second Life had been used in more than 150 universities in thirteen countries (Foster, 2007). Despite the current debate about whether or not Second Life in particular is working for classes as expected, there seems to be no shortage of interest in virtual worlds in general. A number of institutions have recently been experimenting with their own virtual reality software (Young, 2010).

Writing instructors have used Second Life for online writing labs as well as classroom settings. Ball State University, for example, offers a composition course entirely in Second Life. Students are expected to participate in various activities and

write about how their experiences in a virtual environment compare to their everyday experiences (Foster, 2007).

Collaborative online tools vary significantly in their features and cost. Most LMS provide blogs, wikis, or discussion boards to serve this purpose. While their features can assist students in reaching any number of educational objectives, their ability to assist writers in particular with certain tasks is substantial. It has been argued that they are not particularly useful in teaching writing accuracy or basic mechanics. Their strength, rather, lies in encouraging students to become confident writers through practice and feedback (Warshauser & Meei-Ling, 2011). Some research has been conducted on these tools, but blogs in particular have received attention as they relate to students developing confidence as writers.

Although they've been used in many courses at various educational levels, their use in first-year composition courses in particular was well articulated by Tryon (2006), an instructor who documented his use of them as a tool to encourage student development of voice and confidence. He began requiring blog writing and reading in his course based upon his belief that students would take their writing more seriously if they were writing for a public audience rather than just a professor (Tryon, 2006).

Students in his course were expected to read a series of blogs as well as write their own to be available to the general public. Although pseudonyms were encouraged, some students initially felt uncomfortable with the possibility that others might comment on their work. Tryon argued that this possibility pressed them to think through their arguments before submitting work, which was not always the case with independently submitted assignments (Tryon, 2006).

An unexpected benefit of this approach was the reaction of the bloggers his students read and responded to. Students were given a list of writing characteristics to identify in blogs and this got the attention of the authors. The bloggers began interacting with the students in the comments section essentially creating a guest speaker for the course. For Tryon (2006), this sparked one of the most enjoyable conversations he's had with his students about the relationship between writing and audience.

The concept of audience is discussed at length by the focus group in phase two as it relates to voice. It appears as though blogs may be a tool well suited to the development of voice. This coupled with visual representations and collaborative tools may provide an environment well suited to learning voice.

ONLINE RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

One of the primary concerns with using such technology for social science research has been access for participants. Although the statistics available on internet usage and access vary somewhat among respected sources, the most recent 2012 PEW internet survey noted that 80% of all Americans adults used the internet in that year (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012). Those figures can be broken down even further by ethnicity, age, and education level. Because of the continuing gap in either access or usage among these categories, sampling is still a challenge to the internet survey researcher.

Despite this, there are significant strides being made in access and usage. The same 2007 survey indicated that internet access at 64% is up from only 22% a decade earlier (Edwards, 2009). These figures are expected to increase over the next several

years, which may help alleviate concerns about access to surveys for researchers who hope to use these tools.

With regard to online education in particular, one of the most commonly addressed concerns with online learning has been equal access. The digital divide, as it is called, has been a cause of concern for many who wish to advocate the internet as capable of providing the same knowledge to all. Eliminating the notion of the "haves" and "have-nots" has been very appealing. However, the reality of access has prevented this. While some lack the equipment needed to take advantage of online information, others simply don't know where to look for the knowledge they seek. To expand on this idea, it is also important to note that the skill and motivation of the teachers is fundamental to access as is a school climate supportive to technology education.

Although some of the more recent literature cites other concerns with online learning, such as lack of non-verbal expressions, (Bloor, 2002) recent developments in technology have lessened if not eliminated those concerns. Many access issues have also been addressed in recent years as public libraries and local schools have opened their computer labs for public use. The participants in this study may be from disadvantaged areas, but their schools have already found the necessary supports for them to take online courses with the program under study.

While many different techniques will be employed for this study, it is most likely different from others in its use of online research techniques. All data is gathered electronically throughout the course of this study. Because the subjects are online students, some of the concerns with access are eliminated. They are quite accustomed to

working and interacting in this environment by the end of the term when they participate in online interviews.

Commentary with regard to the various research techniques and their rationale are provided in the following chapter. However, a separate review of the literature for online research techniques was found to be necessary before developing the tools used. The primary concern with using online research techniques did not lie so much with use of email, synchronous classes, or asynchronous discussions, but rather with the use of online synchronous voice-based individual interviews. There are also legal and ethical considerations that drive the research.

Internet-based interviewing can take many different forms and the current literature has hardly been able to keep pace with developing technology. Clearly, traditional face to face interviews have advantages in terms of non-verbal cues. However, when travel cost and convenience for subjects eliminate a strong participant from engaging in the interview, the online interview can often be an acceptable substitute (O'Connor, 2008). Toward the beginning of online social science research, interviews were primarily done either asynchronously via email or synchronously, but were limited to texted chat. Although the asynchronous nature of some interviews can provide fewer complications in terms of time constraints (O'Connor, 2008), today's synchronous formats offer voice capabilities so more can be said in a shorter period of time (much in the same way a face to face interview might).

The advantages to online interviews are numerous in many cases, but they are not without ethical concerns. The most prevalent relates to security of the audio and transcript in virtual transmission. Although one may use conferencing software that is

secure and password protected, these are not always guaranteed. It is therefore important that these risks (although unlikely) are clarified in the informed consent (Gaiser, 2008).

Despite the securities offered in the environment of this particular study, certain legal and ethical considerations must be taken into consideration when conducting social science research online. Most often, the cases that have such problems did not assess the legal risks of the research topic, choice of subjects or methodology (Charlesworth, 2008). Clearly mapping out the study's topic and strategy and checking on legal issues with all schools involved as early as possible is the key to avoiding concerns at a later time. It is also recommended that online researchers maintain a journal or field notes and analyze them frequently throughout the data collection phase. This will identify unanticipated ethical concerns that arise as the project is carried out (Charlesworth, 2008).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

REVIEW OF RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this study will focus on one broad question and two sub-questions:

1. How do students develop their voice through content in a first-year

    composition online class?

    a. How does online course architecture (including tools and

        structure) encourage or discourage this development?

    b. In what way does course pedagogy encourage or discourage this

        development?

The broad research question has been answered through an examination of assignments that demonstrate a student's development of voice. This list of applicable course components was generated by the instructor based upon her experience and expertise in this area. Analysis of these works formed a profile of the students as individual learners of "voice" and were combined with the results of their semi-structured interviews at the end of the term.

For the first sub-question, students will be asked about the effectiveness (in their opinion) of the various tools available and structure of the course with regard to their development of voice. The instructor's view of course architecture effectiveness will also be examined in combination with general views of FYC course structure and online

learning discovered in the focus group. The focus group in phase two will also provide insight into this question through their comments on course tools.

Course pedagogy, as it applies to the instructor's interactions with students as they learn the content, will be investigated through the interviews of students and the instructor as well as the focus group. The researcher's journal, which is used as field notes while the course is in session, may also inform this particular question.

Course content that is designed to facilitate student learning of voice through cultural immersion can provide some much-needed stability in a course required for all undergraduate students. Due to the overwhelming use of adjuncts in higher education today, consistency in content for the purpose of teaching voice can improve overall program effectiveness. Determining which online tools and teaching strategies accomplish this goal and which does not can assist the English program of the University in which the study is taking place specifically.

PARTICIPANTS/HUMAN SUBJECT CONCERNS

As was addressed in Chapter 1, the purposeful sample for this study includes students enrolled in a summer first-year online composition course. The students range significantly in age, stated major, and writing ability. After an email was sent to potential students, two responded and were interviewed.

Successful online students are generally viewed as highly organized individuals who are self-motivated and have a strong sense of time management (Dabbaugh, 2007). The students participating were responsive and diligent in their work for this course and fit the description of the successful online student. Their level of experience online

varied. The instructor had not taught an online course prior to the term reviewed for this study. There were no significant concerns for subjects with regard to their physical safety or comfort level. Student identity has been carefully disguised in writing the findings of the study. The interview was not tied to the course grade and any items that were graded and analyzed (such as discussion boards, wikis, and other assignments) were done as a regular part of the course.

The instructor conducted the course as she had intended without interference from the researcher. The researcher did not participate in class activities, but rather observed the natural progress of the course.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

As in all qualitative research, the researcher herself was be the primary instrument. A research journal was maintained throughout the semester and was used in analysis. The data resulting from the online sample originated from a semi-structured interview with the instructor, student-generated components (course assignments and activities which display development of voice as well as a semi-structured interview), and one focus group with FYC online instructors at various universities.

There are a number of reasons for using these different tools. The assessment of online students requires different tools than might be used in assessing face to face classrooms. Consequently, only online assessment tools will be used for student components including threaded discussions, wikis, internet-based interviews and essays given through the online platform's testing system. The interview with the instructor and focus group with FYC instructors and developers was done in a face to face environment.

The combination of these tools in both environments provided enough detail to paint an accurate picture of an online FYC course as it relates to development of voice.

PROCEDURE

To develop grounded theory through a case study method, the research question must first be addressed. Research design must carefully consider data collection strategies, analytic methods, and whether or not single or multiple cases should be studied. An initial review of the literature is also necessary. This design is consulted when data collection begins. Comparisons between the data and the literature gradually evolve into initial analysis. Data must then be organized, coded, and placed into conceptual frameworks. This is followed by a period of very careful reflection. The researchers ponder the meaning of the findings, consider alternative explanations, and compare the findings with literature. Finally, the theory that has been gradually emerging throughout this process is clarified and offers an explanation for the original research question (Berg, 2007).

Given these general guidelines for grounded theory through case study, the study began with a semi-structured interview with the instructor. This interview was conducted face to face largely because I had already met and casually discussed the course with the instructor. A certain sense of ease had developed in this relationship through that meeting as well as casual emails and phone calls. Although technology problems are not uncommon in online interviews, every precaution must be taken to avoid them. Given this history and the nature of the relationship to the researcher, a face to face interview was the best choice.

Shortly after the interview, the text was coded and analyzed. Results informed the list of class assignments and activities analyzed for students who chose to participate in the study. Students were informed of the study via course announcement and email. Any students interested in participating contacted the researcher via email. If more than six students had expressed interest, then a stratified random sample balancing sex would have been selected based upon their responses to an early "ice-breaker" assignment in which students are asked to identify themselves as writers and online students. Students who met minimum criteria in this assignment (answered all questions, provided detail enough to thoroughly answer each question) were to be placed in a pool and six would be randomly selected from that group. However, only two volunteered for the study, so this process was unnecessary. Throughout the duration of the course, any assignments or correspondence within the learning management system (LMS) were analyzed through a list of activities that included discussion boards, wikis, and assignments that were pertinent to voice. This list was generated by the instructor during the initial interview.

As potential theories began to emerge, the results of data analysis was compared against the evolving literature review. Students who have been selected for interviews were given copies of their responses to the various assignments and activities selected for analysis within the study. They had a few days before the scheduled interview to review these documents and answer questions in light of what they've read. The interview was held in an online web conferencing format at the end of the term. Those results were analyzed and used to inform any revisions to questions asked of the FYC instructors focus group. This group received an invitation to participate in September and met after the summer term had ended at a time that was most convenient for the group. The focus

group was conducted face to face and was videotaped. Results were analyzed and included in the final theory development.

The original focus group questions were modified slightly from their original version due to the emerging theories from the first phase case study. The first question was intended to help members of the group get to know one another a bit better. After a few emails were exchanged between the group to arrange times and meal preferences, this became less important. This decision turned out to be the right one as everyone arrived a few minutes early and the group instantly took to one another and carried on casual conversations on their own.

Asking participants to define voice was still fundamentally important as it significantly impacts the outcome of any efforts to teach it to students. It was extended in the focus group to include whether or not they even felt it was important. The original assumption was that this was something important to teach, but it was not entirely clear that it would be important to each instructor. This, too, would be the correct choice. Although the instructor in phase one did discuss it at length, she did not spend as much time on it in the focus group when other instructors assigned different levels of significance to teaching voice in first year composition.

Upon deeper reflection, it seemed that asking participants about which things they felt were most important to teach in FYC did not place enough significance on the online component of this study. The instructor in phase one tended to move back and forth between her online and face to face experiences. To avoid this, the question was modified to ask what instructors personally liked or disliked about teaching FYC online. This was a successful change in one respect and unsuccessful in another. The focus was,

for the most part, kept on the online environment (although comparisons between face to face and online were inevitable). However, this section of the focus group moved rather quickly into an environment of complaining about everything from usability of learning management systems to student emails. Even so, this diversion proved to be important in understanding faculty adoption of the available technologies.

Finally, the focus was moved away from the more generic "books and activities" question to more specific online tools. They were asked not only about the tools they use, but also the tools they don't use and their reasons for avoiding those tools. The responses revealed a significant array of motivations, skills, and talents at the heart of instructor choices in online tools.

Two additional questions were asked in light of what was found in phase one. It became apparent that communication between instructor and student played a role in the teaching and learning of voice. This focus group was asked if they believed their online students saw them differently as a person than they did when the course was taught face to face. Although comparisons between the two environments was generally avoided for this study, phase one revealed that the communication and resulting relationships were vastly different. Given that participants were not able to avoid the comparison even when it was not directly asked, this did not appear to cause any problems in addressing the research question.

The second question resulted from the gradual realization that an instructor's experience and/or training in the online environment greatly affected his/her ability to teach voice (among many other FYC objectives). Participants were asked to reflect on

changes they've made to their courses or to their communication strategies with students if they've taught three semesters or more.

PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT

Because the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative studies, it is important to clarify my background and experiences in this area. I hold two bachelor's degrees in English and History and one master's degree in broad-field social studies education. I have worked as a K-12 social studies teacher in public, private, and online institutions. My higher education experience is in pre-service teaching and educational technology where I have taught courses in the graduate and undergraduate level in both online and face to face environments.

This background heavily influenced my interest in this study. Upon my initial literature review, I recalled my own experiences in freshman composition. Although I enjoyed writing a great deal, I do remember some of the assignments as tedious and cumbersome. As a student, I did not have the option of taking courses online, so this fueled my curiosity about how students learned about writing in this sort of environment. As a graduate of a very large English program at a state university, I was often not particularly connected to the faculty. This memory prompted my interest in using online tools to connect to students as they search for their writing voice. Of the degrees I hold, I consider my bachelor's degree in English to be most valuable. It has supported every professional effort I've made since graduation and it is my hope to contribute to the program's evolution so that other students may similarly benefit from a thorough understanding of the written language and the power it holds in our society.

My experience in online education also greatly influences the study. I have taught online in many different levels and in different subjects. Although face to face environments have important qualities, I have found some distinct advantages to teaching and learning online including the ability to connect on a more personal level with students and allowing a student more time to consider the content and his/her response to it. As Stroupe (2003) pointed out, there is value in distance from an educational perspective when students must carefully ponder their understanding of and relationship to the content.

I also currently hold a position as instructional technologist at a university. In this position, I have had the privilege of researching the various tools that can be employed both online and in a face to face classroom in more depth than was possible while I was teaching. Knowing what is possible and comparing this to what is actually done may prove useful in the study results.

This can also be treacherous when conducting the study. As a teacher, I am quite accustomed to being heavily involved in a course. This study required me to simply observe. It was a new role and I had to be aware of this throughout the study when the urge struck to participate in or modify the course. I also had to reserve judgments about the course components or pedagogy throughout the study.

In reflecting on the research journal I maintained, I found judgment of the course components or pedagogy to be a non-issue. There were a great number of adjustments that could have been made to the course architecture and pedagogy not only of the course I studied directly, but also potentially to the courses taught by focus group members. It

gradually became obvious that my experiences and philosophy of teaching were vastly different from those I was recording during data collection.

As member checking would show, my experiences in my master's degree program in education as well as professional development in the K-12 environment established a teaching philosophy that prepared me for higher education in a different way than that experienced by study participants. Participant responses about their own backgrounds in teaching and technology preparation put the results of the study into context and helped inform recommendations for future directions of this research.

INCENTIVES

A number of incentives for study participants were available. Students who were selected to participate in the study received a $20 gift card to a local department store as compensation for the approximately 30-minute interview. The instructor received a $40 gift card for a local department or grocery store of her choosing. This instructor has demonstrated enthusiasm for the study and her time and effort with this project is highly valued. Focus group participants had lunch served during the session. Incentives for the instructor, students, and focus group participants were funded privately by the researcher.

DESIGN/DATA ANALYSIS/TRUSTWORTHINESS

A number of this study's characteristics lend themselves well to a qualitative methodology. The goal of this investigation is to better understand the ways in which content, course architecture, technology tools, and pedagogy influence a student's

development of voice in writing. Given the tools mentioned previously, the design is flexible and evolving. The researcher is the primary instrument and interviews, field notes, and observations are all used in the data collection. Given these many qualities, a qualitative design is the best choice (Merriam, 1998). Among the different design types, it would seem that a case study design would be most appropriate.

Although case studies can have many definitions, generally they serve to "systematically investigate an event or a set of related events with the specific aim of describing and explaining the phenomenon," (Berg, 2007, p. 283). The strongest case studies gather enough information about the setting, individuals, or group of people to allow the researcher to understand how the subject functions (Berg, 2007). Because case studies generally engage in theory-building as opposed to theory testing it is an ideal choice for the structure of this study.

The data was analyzed using the most reliable methods cited by leading qualitative researchers. All interviews were categorized and analyzed in major categories and sub-categories. Field notes were generated based upon course architecture and participating student responses to discussion boards and their assignments significant to voice. The discussion boards were organized into two different dimensions. First, all responses from the boards being analyzed from each individual participant were grouped together in chronological order and used in the categories created from instructor and student interviews. They were also then organized by discussion topic or thread and reviewed for the interaction among participants. This will place the comments made by each individual into a particular context so they might be better understood. The course essays were also reviewed in light of the comments made by the instructor, which were

available in the grade center.   The online interviews and focus group were recorded and transcribed

Trustworthiness of data is always a serious concern for qualitative researchers. Some of the ways to enhance internal validity of these types of studies include triangulation (multiple methods, researchers, or sources of data), member checking, long-term observation, peer review, participatory research, and clear identification of researcher bias (Merriam, 1998). This study will utilize a number of these methods including triangulation, member checking, and identification of researcher bias.

Triangulation will be achieved through multiple methods of data collection. The discussion boards, , interviews, focus groups, were transcribed and categorized. Field notes will be generated from course architecture observations, student essay submissions, and the response to those submissions from the instructor. The researcher journal will also be used to complete the case study. A clear audit trail will be also maintained.

After all data has been analyzed, member checking will also be conducted with the online student participants, the instructor, and the focus group. This may help clarify any issues of concern to the researcher.

LIMITATIONS TO GENERALIZATION

As with all qualitative research, there are concerns about limitations to generalization. Although naturalistic generalization can be achieved to a certain degree, scientific validation is more difficult. Regardless, using multiple methods and participant checking of the findings are ways to lend some credibility to qualitative research (Gaiser, 2008). It is generally believed that in order for findings to be considered applicable, it

must be possible to apply findings to other times and contexts from which the study was originally conducted. Although there is some argument about the extent to which this is possible, or even desirable, finding a variety of participants and employing triangulation do demonstrate transferability of one's findings (Gaiser, 2008).

Although this study employed triangulation to establish a level of trustworthiness to the data and researcher bias was clearly identified, the member checking was not as successful. One student and one instructor responded to two requests for additional questions and an analysis of the study's significant conclusions. Although the findings from those informal conversations were very useful, it would have been more helpful to hear the perspectives of other participants.

It is also important to note that while the four instructors who participated seem to represent the various perspectives of FYC online teachers quite well, the student view was quite limited given that there were only two participants. Further research on the student perspective would help clarify the theories put forth in this study as they relate to students.

Although case studies are generally not concerned with generalizability, this study might inform other first-year composition courses about various aspects of what students learn of voice and authenticity in such an environment. FYC has been taught extensively, in many different environments, and for a considerable amount of time. Courses that fit this description often naturally conform to one another as institutions learn collaboratively which practices have worked well and which have failed. It is not unreasonable to expect a number of the findings from this case to apply to several online FYC courses in other institutions.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Some results of this qualitative study were not entirely unexpected and others were quite a shock. As the instructor and student interviews were first analyzed it became obvious that the results showed some distinct traits that were either not present or were seen in a very different light by participants in the focus group. This experience is not entirely unusual in qualitative studies. To best display the data, however, it did require some modification of the original research plan. The data was eventually organized into two distinct phases. Phase one served more as a case study of the FYC online course conducted in summer 2011. This phase involved an interview with the instructor and two students. It also required an analysis of the course structure and tools identified by the instructor as helpful in teaching voice. The students' participation in those tools was also reviewed and analyzed.

Phase two investigated the findings of the focus group in great detail. Although the categories remained largely the same, there were some distinct differences, which warranted a separate examination from phase one.

After the first interview was transcribed, an initial series of categories was created based upon those findings. Over fifty items were generated from this first interview. Many appeared to overlap, but were not combined into more formal categories until the student interviews were examined. The second list of sixteen categories and sub-categories reflected the most recurring themes from these data sets. After data was organized into these categories, they were further reduced to nine categories centering on

the two major themes of the research question as it relates to voice: course architecture and pedagogy. This final set of nine categories also included data from the research journal and course components identified by the instructor as relevant to the teaching of voice.

After that analysis was complete, the categories were applied to data taken directly from the course and the research journal. What follows is an analysis of the data grouped by those categories. Each category is examined with supporting evidence from the interviews, focus groups, course data, and, to a lesser extent, the researcher journal.

PHASE ONE

Case study of FYC online

REVIEW OF COURSE ENVIRONMENT

Throughout the last few decades when online learning was transformed from a static distance learning tool to a dynamic, interactive learning opportunity, there have been a number of theories as to what constitutes a "good" online course. Of course, this varies significantly by subject, instructor, institution, and even tools available in the learning management system in use. The course under study here contained a number of characteristics we know to be present in strong online courses. It also lacked some elements that take it from good to "great".

This first-year composition course online was a first attempt by the instructor involved in the study. For reporting purposes, we will refer to this instructor as "Mary". The basic course outline had been developed by past instructors, but reflected Mary's

chosen topic for her course: food culture. In this particular institution, each FYC course centered on a theme selected by the instructor. This theme was not disclosed in the course guide, but rather revealed once students began the course. The technology available at this institution did not allow for students to preview the course or the syllabus before they were allowed access to the materials, which was no earlier than two weeks prior to the course start date depending on when the instructor was ready for components to be viewed in the learning management system. This made the "food culture" theme a surprise and (as later data show) not always a pleasant one for students.

When first logging into the course, the very clear and clean organization is immediately present. Course information relevant to the entire semester is located in one folder, content organized by weekly activities is in another, and a separate link to all discussion forums is present and readily available to students at any point. The content area exemplified what we know of good course design. Each week was created using learning modules which allow for a table of contents to be visible just to the left of the folders. They also contained tables, which clearly organized class topics and assignments.

Course Content

Week One

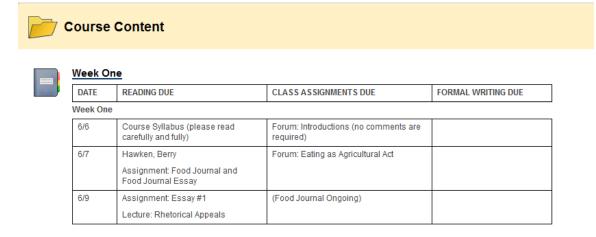| DATE	READING DUE	CLASS ASSIGNMENTS DUE	FORMAL WRITING DUE
	Week One		
6/6	Course Syllabus (please read carefully and fully)	Forum: Introductions (no comments are required)	
6/7	Hawken, Berry Assignment: Food Journal and Food Journal Essay	Forum: Eating as Agricultural Act	
6/9	Assignment: Essay #1 Lecture: Rhetorical Appeals	(Food Journal Ongoing)	

Figure 1 *Course Folder Organization*

Formal writing assignments (worth 60% of the course overall grade) were given a separate column and were clearly visible. Once each week's module was entered individually, however, the course activities were less clear.

Present were anywhere from six to ten links to various assignments, forums, and readings. Although they were all clearly labeled, not all contained a description. An explanation of each activity and assignment was clearly provided in the syllabus. However, it is common practice for details to be provided at the point of access within online course designs. Depending on the students' experiences with online learning, this could be a distraction.

The formal essay assignments were identified by the instructor as significant to student development of voice, so those were also closely examined. The first two were 15% of the student's total grade and the third was 30%. All three were explained in text form through a word document that was one single-spaced page long. Although everything students needed to know to complete the assignment was available in the document, the format stood out in an online environment. The introductory paragraph was indented slightly to indicate that it contained the crucial information (page length and a description of essentially what should be included). However, no text within this page was bolded, bulleted, or otherwise distinguished so that students could discern crucial information from examples or elaboration (see appendix D). It is important to note that this is not atypical of assignment directions in English courses. However, as was later discovered in the data, the expectation students have of assignment information in an online course is somewhat different than what may be seen in a face to face environment.

Both the course organization and assignment description tie to one of the most important aspects to be examined in online course effectiveness: communication. One of the tools used quite effectively in the course facilitated communication between student and instructor, student and student, and even student and content: the discussion board. Each of the forums explored different aspects of food culture and/or the writing process. Although there are many different approaches to online discussion, it is generally believed that fruitful conversations come from instructors involved in discussions (but not controlling of them) and questions or topics that display the individual thought process of the participants. For this course, the first two questions asked participants about their personal experiences with food. Later questions explored their thoughts on the readings and essays. It was used as a collaborative tool in certain places as well by asking students to post their introductions for essay assignments and asking peers for feedback.

The discussions, for the most part, lacked controversy, but did provide some personal insights that seemed to be reflective of the development of voice for students. This lack of controversy could be due to the nature of the questions or the fact that it was a summer course when considerable detail is sometimes absent due to time constraints. It might also be attributed to what was observed of instructor/student interactions within the forum. The instructor was clearly present in all of the boards with regular posting. Between the detailed remarks in the grade center, regular course announcements (twenty-five in all), and over one-hundred posts to the discussion forums, her influence was regularly felt. What was noticeable was the nature of those posts.

Food can be a remarkably interesting topic, but can also be the cause of great anxiety for those with a difficult history of eating and food culture. It was particularly interesting that the first two forums asked students to discuss their personal experiences with food. Many seemed comfortable in sharing, but some kept their remarks brief. Mary regularly responded to these posts with positive remarks or insightful questions. Nowhere in those one-hundred posts do we have a sense of what Mary eats. What does she think about these issues? Outside of class she is very open about her interests and even her home life. This "Mary" was not clearly present within the discussion boards. This observation led to an extension of the research into the notion of an instructor's online presence and how that might impact student learning.

The two students observed for this study were regular participants in the course with regular discussion board posts and timely submission of assignments. Their responses to the first two, more personal, questions reveal something of their backgrounds and general natures. Later discussion questions centered more on the readings do ask for students' views on the topics presented by the author, but do not explicitly ask students to consider their own lives and experiences in their responses. Such a question may encourage more interaction with the subject, which is identified later with the focus group as significant to the development of voice.

REVIEW OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Although the original research plan allowed for up to six students to participate in the study, only two volunteered. A number of factors could have caused this. It has been expressed by instructors in higher education in many different divisions that summer

courses are generally more time-intensive and stressful. This assessment was later

endorsed by the focus group. Attempting to work sixteen weeks' worth of content into

eight or even twelve is a daunting task for most and seems to result in one of two

approaches. The first is to keep every bit of content used in the sixteen week course in

the summer version. This usually results in a very stressful situation for both the

instructor and students. As a result, the second approach, reducing the course workload,

is often adopted by the instructor in subsequent courses. Guilt over cheating these

students out of valuable content often accompanies this method, however. As the later

focus group would find, students taking composition in the summer find the time frame

somewhat difficult and this could be a cause for the low number of participants.

The two students (one with previous experience in online course work and one

who was entirely new to the experience) who did volunteer could be described as

involved, active class members. A review of their discussion board posts revealed two

students who seemed to be interested in course content and in their peers' activities and

interests. It came as a surprise, then, when both expressed some confusion over course

objectives and their learning of the course material. These two students will be referred

to as Alicia and Janice.

The instructor, whom we will call Mary, had been teaching in this small

Midwestern university for approximately a year at the time of the study. Prior to this

time she worked as an adjunct instructor in English in other institutions. She began her

career in publishing, but pursued teaching after some soul-searching about her

professional direction:

I knew I wanted to work with writing and that was how I started out. But after a few years, just kind of wondered if the corporate life was for *me* and if that was where I really wanted to be for the long haul…

She then pursued her M.F.A in fiction writing and began teaching as part of her graduate program. To prepare her for teaching, the university required just one course in pedagogy. Although some would consider this inadequate to prepare one for the field of teaching, the program did encourage collaboration among the graduate students who were teaching, which may have led to a better understanding of teaching techniques:

> …and we had a lot of people around who were resources for us and many other grad students who could talk about their experience. Uh, and we'd have weekly meetings…so all the current comp instructors would meet each week and we did some grade norming where we read sample papers…that kind of thing.

Observation of the students' teaching was also part of the program. In addition to more formal training in teaching and technology, Mary has attended professional development opportunities, which have enhanced her skills. A local technology conference provided exposure to some of the online tools and techniques she would later use to provide meaningful feedback to her students in this course as well as in others.

Mary's love of teaching was apparent in every encounter we had. She regularly mentioned how much she enjoyed working with students and emphasized her desire to improve her teaching strategies and technology use. She takes particular pride in her work as a gateway instructor in teaching introductory composition courses.

> Uh…and I do think it is…it's sort of a, a privilege and a great responsibility to meet them at that moment in their career because I *think* their college writing skills are going to be very important to them as they move through *whatever* discipline

While she had clear passion for the work, Mary also recognized her own shortcomings as well as general frustrations. For her own part, she recognizes the challenges of teaching a gateway course like first year composition: "and I can't say that I…I'm the best at getting the students when they're first exposed to college comp." She also appears to struggle with objective assessment. In face to face environments, she finds it easier to rely on visual cues in assessing comprehension. In online environments, this possibility is removed and there's a general sense of unease as to whether or not students are "getting it". Mary expresses this sense when discussing her posting of typed lectures in FYC online:

> So I've been posting that in the form of just a written page or two…getting across those ideas and I don't know how effective that is…what they're doing with that. It *seems* like they're *aware* of those things when they go to write their essays, so I think they are reading and taking it seriously, but I don't have the same sense online whether that's happening or not.

This sense of unease is also shared by the instructors in the focus group in phase two. In addition, there were general frustrations with the online environment. She found engaging students in a meaningful way sometimes difficult.

A survey of composition courses across major universities would find regular use of group work, particularly as it relates to the writing process. This can be fairly simply organized in a face to face environment, although not always maintained as easily. While there are tools available to facilitate group work in most learning management systems, they can sometimes be cumbersome to use or require training and maintenance on the instructor's part. As studies have revealed, if technology is not simple to use, it will only be used by early adopters (Zellweger Moser, 2007).

Discussion boards are also a commonly used tool to enhance student engagement. As stated previously, their success depends on initial organization and facilitating techniques. In this area, Mary was less certain that the boards in FYC online were having the impact on student learning she had hoped for:

> But it hasn't totally worked to facilitate that discussion because some of them don't post by noon and then it's 4:00 and people have already logged on to comment or I don't know, I don't know when they're logging on to comment…just the timing of the whole situation is kind of challenging and I wonder if I need to leave more like 48 hours and have readings due further ahead of when we're gonna be done with that reading or something like *that* to facilitate more of that discussion.

This observation was particularly interesting in light of generally acceptable guidelines for facilitating discussions online. Timing has been noted to be significant in facilitating meaningful discussions (Higher Ed. Program). Most trainings in online discussion technique remind instructors to time students' first posts earlier during the week they are due and the response to others later in the week. Had such a guideline been followed here, Mary may have found the experience more rewarding. Also, whether or not such training is available to instructors in Mary's position has an impact on experiences such as this.

Throughout this process, Mary has established a strong teaching philosophy that seems to pervade her teaching in both face to face and online courses, which centers on the idea of a teacher as collaborator rather than a gate through which students must pass to achieve knowledge.

This philosophy is manifested in less direct ways than one might expect. While some might differentiate their instruction to suit this aim, Mary displayed it more through her commentary with students on their role in the writing world. She regularly uses

words like "expert" to describe her students when they research and write on a particular topic and reminds them that they are joining a vast conversation that has gone on for quite some time and will move ahead with their own ideas incorporated. There are also seemingly unrelated actions she takes as an instructor that encourage students to share in the responsibility for their own learning. Although it is a common practice among composition instructors, Mary has chosen not to be too detailed in her comments on paper drafts as it may inhibit student development of ideas, which is something she also advocates.

> … I saw that students didn't really respond to margin notes and I could physically correct something and it wouldn't be corrected in the draft I got back….So, I stopped doing as much of that and I see a pattern of error, I'll tell them about it and I'll correct it and track changes in one paragraph or something like that… So, I'll copy and paste some sentences that either illustrate what I want them to do or illustrate a problem that I'm having…*But* they're not overwhelmed with a bunch of chicken scratch on their page.

By relinquishing this control over specific grammar and style issues early on, students are given the opportunity to focus more on their ideas. In this particular course, however, it appears as though such actions went largely unnoticed or were misinterpreted by students as evidenced in the expectations and clarity analysis later in this chapter.

Although she does not appear particularly concerned about editing every error so early, Mary is not lax in her enforcement of certain course standards. She believes ignoring deadlines, for instance, would actually inhibit students' sense of voice. Part of her philosophy centers on student development of their own ideas in a very individualistic way, but without clear deadlines, she argues, the development of those ideas will not come in time for the end of the semester. She expresses particular concern about draft deadlines:

That's a really important stage, I think, because I give them such detailed commentary. So, if the draft doesn't come in, then they're really in trouble and it seems, it can seem like such a big *task* to a lot of students to write an essay that it maybe happens more than it would, uh, not just because they didn't have time to finish, but because there was some kind of barrier to, to finishing…emotional or whatever...confidence-wise.

She also holds important philosophies about writing as a craft, which influences her teaching. Mary believes two important things about writing: that it is a fundamental skill required to function in today's world and the most valued lessons to writing lie in its process, not the end result.

One would be hard pressed to find English faculty who do not believe that writing is of fundamental importance. The argument, as demonstrated in the literature review, stems more from whether one should write for oneself or to benefit the world using certain accepted writing standards. While Mary states a number of times that she wants students to find their own way in writing, she also recognizes the importance of writing well and the impact that will have on her students once they enter the workforce:

I think a lot of them don't know why….why do we need to be here and,uh, so I also emphasize that, uh, being able to meet the…meet the requirements of writing in the work place or in other academic pursuits is part of how you show respect or that discipline work place, so even if you're not really interested in the writing, you need the skills so that you can show that you *are* interested in keeping your job or, uh, communicating with your *colleagues*…things like that.

As seen here, part of her teaching philosophy includes educating students far beyond the time they leave her class. Her sense of responsibility to the world to produce strong writers is present in a number of categories produced for this study.

In addition to the importance of writing as a skill, she also emphasizes throughout the course and in her interviews that she sees writing as a process. When certain steps are followed, she argues, writing can become compelling.

Uh, so that's probably the second thing that I emphasize is this process, the idea that *even* the best writers' first draft is gonna be bad. Uh, because it's your first *thought* to….it's probably your second or third thought, but, …it's an early thought…uh, and that writing is really about thinking again and it probably comes back to the idea of content.

Inherent in her communication with students is a sense that failure is not only an option early on in this process, but it is encouraged. It is through this process that students learn the various nuances of writing well. Course architecture also assists in this effort. First drafts are assessed, but not graded. Students are also encouraged to review their ideas before submitting them for a grade. These are important steps, although a number of other tools and strategies might be used to further this effort.

Mary does not only communicate these ideas about writing to her students. She also finds immense joy in re-discovering the writing process herself through the class activities: "Well, I think as a writer, it's helped me kind of go back to the root of what writing's about…why we do it, why it's important."

Mary's experiences and attitudes regarding pedagogy directly impact the experience her students have in FYC online. The next series of results focus more on the content of FYC courses in general and in the online environment specifically.

FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

In a review of the literature, there were a number of concerns over the suggested focus of FYC courses on college campuses today. Arguments ensued over the type of writing students should learn, the role of grammar, the relevance of a research paper assignment, and even the various tools that should be used to teach any one of these. A number of those concerns surfaced in the phase one findings as well.

First, challenges to teaching first year composition were in no way absent from this summer online course. Mary shared a number of concerns expressed in the literature. She consistently finds lack of depth in the writing as many others do:

> I have a sense that students come in thinking they need to…well, on the one hand students that want to be lazy and bull-shit their papers. They think if there are paragraphs on the page and they have words that that's what we're looking for or if they use *big* words that somehow they're going to be able to smooth over or manufacture an essay.

The general belief Mary held in this regard was that much of this focus on how a paper *looks* as opposed to what it *says* is encouraged (or at the very least not discouraged) in high school:

> So, I guess that comes again back to…to about what you have to say and, and saying it *well*….not about these kind of topical aspects of your writing and I don't know, I get the impression that in high school, maybe more of their grade is based on that, than *I* would like.

She expressed a good deal of frustration with the focus she sees in her first year composition students on specific details such as page numbers or formatting concerns. This was partly responsible for her reluctance to provide a model or sample paper for students.

Another common concern among instructors of FYC centers on the sometimes wide-ranging writing abilities among the class participants. Because FYC is considered a gateway course (and is a requirement in most institutions) some strong writers will happily participate and dramatically improve through the semester while others will languish. Mary found working with these different abilities challenging in many respects.

> …we have a varied student body, so…especially in comp one, I had students who felt pretty comfortable with the typical five paragraph essay and students who

were able to read and comprehend pretty much on the first time through and then I had students who really, really were *not* comfortable and who had a *lot* of trouble getting something out even a two or three page essay

While these are common problems for many first-year composition instructors, at least one surfaced in Mary's case that, while is likely experienced by many, isn't as clearly articulated by other instructors. Mary feels a strong sense of duty not only to her students, but to the rest of the university community as well as those in the field of work to produce strong writers capable of clear communication in almost any context:

I *also* think the comp or comp2 instructors are in a position to really… help the other instructors at the university because if we set our students up with a good foundation, then those instructors are free to teach their subject matter and worry less about students' writing skills.…*and* then complaints from when I tell people in the corporate world that I teach writing complaints from them about what employees can and can't *do* so it feels like, uh, a real service to all of those people by giving them a good foundation.

Although challenges are clearly present in Mary's situation, she also identified a number of opportunities presented in a class like FYC. Her sense of duty to create strong writers is balanced by her desire to involve students as equals in an overall writing community. This sense of knowledge building was prevalent less in over-reaching statements and more in her choice of words to describe students' involvement and in the program's choice of reading materials:

…our whole comp program here uses this book called "They say, I say" and "they say, I say" presents academic essay writing as joining a conversation.…that might mean just writing a few paragraphs that *explore* something that came up as you were writing.

Notions of "joining a conversation" and "explore" were prevalent in her responses. The program's choice of readings highlights a central belief Mary holds about writing and the writing process as it relates to the teaching of FYC: that a strong

understanding of content, and one's feelings toward that content, is central to the writing

process.

> when really the basis of good writing is…is having a thought. It doesn't need to be a *brilliant* thought, it doesn't need to be a thought that I had *thought* of, it doesn't need to be any particular thought, but if there's no content, there's no essay.

The final characteristic defining Mary's views on the teaching of FYC is the

importance of scaffolding the knowledge in careful steps so that students may understand

the most fundamental aspects of writing first and build upon that knowledge throughout

the term:

> we're all building very much, at least the way I approach it, each essay we're adding some new content or adding new, new concepts about writing, but that doesn't mean the concepts for the first essay are no longer applicable. I want those first concepts to be *added* to the second concepts….*added* to the third concepts and that seems tough for them as well. No to…alright, we're *done* with essay one and the things we learned about essay one now…we're moving onto essay two. No, no, it's all, all building on each other.

This notion of content building onto itself is present in the architecture of the

course although, as we will see with online tool choices, the structure may not be entirely

clear to students when materials are presented entirely in text format. A series of typed

lectures references earlier concepts consistently to help students understand the entire

process. Although references are made to earlier works and connections are attempted,

the discussion of such connections is typically brief and not entirely explicit. For

example, when preparing to write the third paper for their course, students are reminded

of the skills learned in the first two essays and how that knowledge can be applied to the

final paper. Below is the introductory paragraph of the typed lecture on the research

paper:

The introductions you've written for your first two essays have, I hope, prepared you for this assignment. In your personal essays, you worked on placing your own experience in a broader context for your reader, and on presenting a strong thesis with a sense of controversy and significance. In your rhetorical analyses, you did both of these things again (establish context and thesis), and in addition, your provided summaries of other writers' work, and analyzed their methods of argument (provided textual evidence). That covers everything you need to do for this essay, as well.

While there is mention of the importance of a thesis and in understanding a broad context, it is not followed by examples or any activities or course links tying students to those earlier class activities. In addition, this introductory paragraph is the only reference to past work in the lecture, which itself contains an additional four paragraphs of information. It is important to note, however, that every lecture document begins with a reference to past activities or work. Some of these descriptions and connections are longer than a paragraph and some are quite brief. Regardless, the connection exists in every document even if other tools are not utilized to bring students back to the activity or lesson being referenced.

ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Many of the benefits and challenges to working as an instructor of FYC exist regardless of its status as a face to face course or an online course. However, there are many unique benefits and challenges to online learning with regard to teaching the writing process. In this particular category, both the instructor and student had quite a bit to say about the characteristics of online learning.

For Janice, a student study participant, the organization helped her understand her activities and objectives for her first online course. The FYC structure made quite an impression on her as she conveyed no desire for improvement in this area when asked if

she thought anything could be structured differently to facilitate her learning: "Um, I would say no because I…I think for online it's about as, you know, as efficient or as good as it *can* be."

Although many students appreciate the quick and easy access to content and course tools, the vast majority want instant and easy access to one most crucial area of the course: the grade book. Janice pointed out its importance in understanding her own progress:

> I did like the, uh, the *grading* part that we go out there and see what our score was after a discussion board or journal entry or you know, a rough draft, or you know, see where we're…how we're doin' in the class too.

She also remarked that she would be taking online courses in the future.

Both students were also keenly aware of the traits that make for a successful online student and considered these carefully while working in the course. Being disciplined and motivated were seen as keys to success in any online course, particularly to Alicia, another student study participant, who has taken online courses prior to FYC:

> I'm, an overall, um a strong…I think I'm a strong online learner. I've learned how to discipline myself. Um, which you have to be for your online classes.

Many students are not aware enough of their strengths and weaknesses as students to recognize what courses are appropriate for them in an online environment and which are best taken face to face. Possibly due to her previous experiences in online work, Alicia also had insight to share into self-awareness when it came to selecting course work online.

> Um, I usually don't have, you know, too many problems with the online classes, but I also, you know, decide what I'm gonna take. I know what I can take online and what I can't. Like a statistics class is not for me online.

Although Janice had not taken online courses previously, she shared Alicia's sentiment of the value of self-motivation: "…but you definitely have to be self driven and self motivated."

One of the primary reasons many students enroll in online courses is the convenience of not attending a physical classroom. Perhaps because of Janice's status as a new online student, she also pointed out the value of that in her own remarks: "I would..uh, the experiences are that you get to work at your own time when it's convenient for *you*." She was also quick to point out something else that sometimes comes as a surprise to students who are new to online course work: the heavy workload:

> There was a lot of *work* in this class. Um, talking Monday through Sunday. Well usually took off Friday, but probably 3 hours a night of homework. But the nice thing was that I didn't have to go to a class or drive anywhere. Uh, but there was a lot of work to it.

Although complaints of a heavy workload are shared by both new and veteran online students, it is more common in new online students. It is possible that Janice may not have elaborated on this (in much the way that Alicia chose not to even mention it) had she been through the experience at least once and understood how to manage the course load. Another aspect of online learning Janice noticed (and liked) was the ability to provide different learning opportunities:

> as you doing it online, uh there's you know, different learning ways and I kind of like the blackboard…being able to go out there and see the the discussion board and the journals and, uh, you know submitting work through there. So, I do like it.

Although there were various assignment types, there was little evidence of significant differentiation in terms of individual assignment choice. As is evidenced by Alicia later in this chapter, more experienced online students are aware of the possibilities

presented by online courses that allow for this type of learning and notice when it is

absent in another course.

In a member checking conversation with the instructor, Mary, it became apparent

that this was also on her mind. She mentioned her habit of pursuing other tools and

opportunities to use them in her classroom since the study's conclusion. She expressed

interest in applying some of the requests Alicia mentioned like video lectures.

As seen in the literature review, a number of studies have remarked on the

communication habits between instructors and students in the online environment. As a

new online instructor, Mary found herself somewhat surprised at the response of her

students when she returned her remarks on writing in electronic form:

> I think they feel that they're getting attention….I feel like they're taking my
> comments more seriously, they're reading them more carefully, they're referring
> to them more often. Sometimes asking better questions, so I wonder if that's
> actually a positive about the online format as well that...it feels like we have a one
> on one correspondence going on about their drafts…that might help them take
> authority or see that I'm treating them as a, an intellect that deserves my time and
> commentary.

Some of Mary's beliefs on this issue stemmed from a workshop she attended the

year prior on electronic feedback for writing assignments. The presenter argued that

commentary received electronically was more substantive for students and was generally

well received, which initially surprised Mary. As seen in the previous section, Mary

modified the way her feedback was given to students and has seen a change in attitude.

She continued by speculating on why students seemed to respond so well to the

comments she would add to their papers individually but also in the "comments" section

of their grade report in their online course environment:

uh, written notes seemed impersonal to them on their paper, which is totally counter-intuitive because you held their paper and written on it with your hand, but summary about what they think of as personal whether it's just they're used to technology for personal communication or…I don't know, they felt it was more personal to receive an email comment or something.

Although this type of change is possible in an online course, its success largely depends on the participants. One benefit to working online that is less dependent on the will of the participants is the ease with which information can be disseminated and retrieved. Ease of access to information within the course environment itself still depends on the organization of the course content, which is usually dictated by the instructor or a course developer. For this particular FYC course, the content and tools needed to complete the work were extremely well organized. This organization made it possible for students to easily find and respond to content.

Neither the instructor nor the students commented much on course organization as it relates to ease of access. They did, however, comment on the availability of outside resources in general. Mary remarked several times on the instant access to outside resources made possible with the development of the internet:

> Um, and that may be one of the great things about being in school *now* is that you don't only have your textbook or the books that were assigned to you…it's very easy to go after additional information or to, to seek answers to your own questions and that would *definitely* be something I'd emphasize in developing voice

She continued to speculate as to why her online students appear to be more engaged and reflective in the content of the course online than in a face to face environment.

> Is it the fact that they don't have the pressure of being in the classroom and they actually get to focus more…think harder, look for examples online? That's another thing I'm curious about too. I know, if *I'm* at the computer and I'm trying to write something and have a question, I can *google* that question. I can pursue

that knowledge on my own and I wonder if they're doing a little bit of that….which would be very nice.

In her comments is the inherent assumption that because the option of pursuing knowledge on one's own is available that it is being used in that way by students. This was particularly interesting when compared to students' comments on the availability of such resources. Today, a number of faculty from respected institutions around the world provide lectures online. Alicia touched on the desire to see such resources in her course.

I think, um, maybe, uh, videos brought in from other…even other, you know, sources or lectures from, you know, um, another professor, um, you know just kind of going through and explaining a little bit.

In a member checking conversation, Mary agreed that it appears an inherent divide in understanding of whose responsibility it was to provide these resources exists. She was under the assumption that because these items were available to anyone any time that students like Alicia would simply pursue the knowledge on their own. Alicia assumed that everything she would need to be successful in the course would be provided within the course environment itself.

PHILOSOPHY AND DEFINITIONS OF VOICE

Before exploring the various aspects of development of voice within this particular course environment, it is important to clarify what we mean by "voice". As we discovered in the review of the literature, there are a number of different definitions for and philosophies of the use of voice. Understanding the instructor's view on this matter is key to understanding how course architecture and pedagogy (both heavily influenced by the instructor herself) affect student learning of voice.

Mary's definition of voice reflected the general sense from the literature that it involves a number of characteristics. At its simplest, though, she describes a piece of writing with a strong voice as one where the reader could easily picture the writer: "Voice is, is where we have a sense of a real person speaking." She uses a number of words when explaining how she teaches voice and describes it to her students including diction, tone, style, compelling, and authority.

The first word she chose to use in describing voice was "diction". She discussed the kinds of words chosen and identified their role as emotional, logical, etc. in this respect. Her choice of the word tone was fairly consistent throughout her various descriptions and, to her thinking, was closely connected to diction. Style, she argues, is more about correctness and seeing one's audience in terms of the level of formality. Style, although related to voice, seems less directly linked for Mary.

The last two words she chooses to describe a sense of voice, compelling and authority, are related to a consistent theme in her thinking about voice: its relationship to content. For a piece of writing to be compelling, Mary believes, the reader must be compelled not necessarily to agree with the author, but at the very least to be engaged by what he or she has read:

> People say a piece of writing has a voice if it compels us. Uh, there are a lot of ways you can describe a voice, but it's ultimately about being compelled by what we've read. Maybe compelled to discuss. Not necessarily compelled to agreement with the writer, but some kind of feeling… compelled.

Although she explains that in class she uses the word compelling quite a bit, her interviews seem to indicate that she prefers to use the word "authority" when discussing voice. She argues that, for a piece of writing to really have voice, the author must have

authority over the content in order to be effective. She is careful to clarify that having

authority does not mean having all the answers. Rather, it is important that the author is

highly informed about the topic.

> Uh, actually *having* an idea, being *informed* about your idea, filling in your own knowledge so that you *can* present yourself as an authority. Uh, and that sometimes means admitting that you *don't* know or that there are counter arguments. It's not that I want a writer to…to say "I'm right" and there's no other consideration, but I want the writer to *own* that counter argument and *own* that discussion of the flaws in his or her own thinking and, uh, that means feeling like you really do know what you're talking about.

This insight was especially significant when we consider the students' views of

whether or not they learned voice or felt that they had command over their content or

topic. When asked this question, Alicia felt she did not master a strong voice in her

writing during the semester precisely because she did not feel informed about the course

topic.

> Um, because it was topics that I wasn't real familiar with or comfortable with. Um, and I think I have more passion when it's somethin that I enjoy or I feel confident that I at least know the subject matter (questioning tone). Uh, and I…you know, I just… it was just a little bit, I think I lost my confidence a little bit in this class.

Confidence is a phrase Alicia used often in her interview. It is important to

remember that FYC courses at this particular institution, be they online or face to face,

are topic-based. Each instructor selects a topic of his or her choosing and the topic is not

revealed in the course schedule. Students are unaware of topics until they arrive on the

first day of class. Although food culture is certainly relatable to everyone, clearly not

everyone necessarily enjoys researching it or writing about it. Alicia confirmed this by

declaring skepticism in the decision to choose a single topic for each composition course.

Mary, too, recognized the importance of authors being invested in their topics as a way of developing voice:

> By the end of the term it's really…I'm looking for students to write *about* something and that that's where they're gonna be generating a sense of voice even in their research paper and it's, again, about engaging with what they're reading and if they don't ultimately care about what they read and they don't *have* an opinion, then they're not gonna have that sense of being compelling and that's another…maybe that's another word I should use with voice.

It is also important to note that in both interviews with students, they needed clarification as to what voice was. This seems to coincide with Mary's remarks that the word "voice" is rarely used in class. Once Mary's definition was used to clarify, students spoke freely about their opinions on their own development of voice.

One interesting, and somewhat unexpected, finding in this category related to a sense of whether or not it was even important to learn voice. Although it wasn't discussed at length, Mary did, without being asked, offer her sentiments on the importance of voice in writing through her description of collective voices in writing. Her argument was that it is important for students to have a sense of voice if they are to be clearly heard and understood amongst the many voices that already exist in the world.

> …we're adding our own voices to the *many* voices that are already out there on the subject. Uh, and then it's up to us as readers to decide whose voices we think are more compelling…but there's no reason why a student, all of us were students at some point, and and it's a part of this process that we want voices from, uh, freshman comp… *and* voices from faculty members, *and* voices from people outside of academia all commenting on that same, uh, topic of cultural interest essentially.

As she addressed earlier, there are numerous resources available online for just about anything. That sense of being overwhelmed with information makes the study of teaching voice even more significant.

When study participants were asked various questions about voice and the tools, some answers given directly tied to the questions. Occasionally, though, both found their way to discussing voice in terms of the level of detail and opinion in a piece that has a strong sense of voice. Strong detail was identified by Mary as a significant sign that a particular piece of writing displayed voice. She discussed the importance of detail even after identifying the various synonyms discussed earlier. Detail, she argued, is where a true sense of voice comes from and where a reader can have a better sense of the author's position.

> I emphasize that this is vague or general vs. specific or *detailed* and, uh, a vaguer general statement usually lacks a sense of voice because anyone could be saying it without really knowing what it means, can't really follow it through.

Word choice, she argues, says something significant about the author's beliefs or position on a particular topic. It may also say something about his or her past experiences with the subject matter.

> Yes, I think that's what voice is and ultimately it's about being deliberate as well…it's that the person has made choices along the way and….has approached each sentence from the purpose of that writing assignment with a consistency and that adds up again to a sense of voice.

Although the role of detail was clearly significant to Mary, students tended to think of voice more in terms of personal beliefs. Each student interviewed needed clarification on what they were to consider the definition of voice as they initially believed it to be their opinion. While Mary confirms through her own definitions that the author's opinion is clearly part of his or her voice, she was quick to explain that her definition of opinion and that of the students was usually quite different:

…so I think students often think opinion is just "well, I feel like"and blah blah blah and it's not that kind of an opinion. It's an opinion based on this analysis of, of *strategy*, why is, uh, the use of emotional diction effective in this argument, something like that.

Many students taking composition for the first time are uncertain as to the role their own opinion plays in their writing. By the time they arrive as freshmen they have had at least twelve years of writing experience likely from at least that many different instructors. Some will take to the environment with a good deal of confidence. Others will be very unsure and rely heavily on the instructor's guidance. Part of what Mary attempts to stress in her learning environment is the importance of the sense of expertise she mentioned earlier. Taking ownership of one's content is fundamental to understanding how voice works in writing. An important opportunity to learn this skill comes in the third essay assignment: the research paper.

There is much debate amongst first-year composition instructors on the value of this assignment. Mary finds great value in the skills learned through this work, but also recognizes that it may in a somewhat indirect way impede students' acquisition of voice.

They're writing about something they've probably not been exposed to before and the readings are often by obvious scholars or people with a lot of authority on their subject. So, how's the student going to take on the confidence and step into the role of someone who's on equal footing with these other writers because he or she has become an expert by reading those…those eight pieces.

Mary doesn't have a clear answer for her students in this respect. It is clear that she believes the students have the capability to maintain this "equal footing", but whether or not they really are accomplishing this goal is not entirely clear. At least one student, Janice, did believe that she was learning the importance of being clear in her writing through this course:

I feel that, um, I did um, uh learn more about, um, how to write more clearly in specifically… getting that thesis down and being more direct in what you're trying to say.

The kind of detailed feedback Mary typically provides would go a long way, but there may be other tools or techniques to better assist her less confident students.

Although developing voice for her students is important to Mary, she also seems to indicate that it is one of the later steps in the writing process. Wrestling with ideas and sorting through one's own feelings on a matter needs to be done first before an opinion based on facts can be articulated and detail and word choice can be applied to show that voice.

They've already wrestled with their ideas and now I'm in a position to more specifically pin-point …where those ideas *have* been developed, where they *are* taking authority, where I *do* come away feeling compelled by a paragraph and where there are problems.

As later results will show, there are a number of strategies and tools that can be used to not only help students learn to use voice, but also to help Mary identify whether or not her objectives in this respect have been achieved. With respect to detail and opinion in particular, Mary looks to the types of questions they ask as a guide.

Well, it's probably again specificity. Uh, when students are asking me vague questions…questions about how *long* something should be. Uh, questions about whether uh….did…do I have a thesis? Something like that. Then I know that they haven't taken ownership of that material…. but questions …"in my thesis, do you think I made it clear that blah" or "in my fourth body paragraph, I'm not sure that I've explained blank". Then I know that they're working on detail, on specificity, that they have a firm handle on what it is they're up to.

She is then better able to assess the drafts and final work they submit in light of those questions.

EXPECTATIONS AND CLARITY

A common complaint in online courses centers on course expectations and clarity, particularly for students or instructors who are new to the experience. Although a significant number of tools are available to assist, whether or not they are used (or used effectively) remains an open question. Of the many barriers that could exist to learning voice, few are as detrimental as confusion over expectations in writing.

Expectations are usually communicated to students in two ways: through detailed assignment descriptions and in feedback once an assignment has been submitted. Although a number of assignment types were examined for this study, understanding expectations of written work would have us focus more on the three essay assignments for the course.

Each assignment was given a detailed one-page single-spaced description of the assignment. This description included a broad overview of the assignment followed by several paragraphs of definitions (such as a thesis and topic sentence) and a few vague examples. Upon reading each sheet, the researcher had a clear idea of what was expected. For less experienced writers it may or may not have been entirely clear.

One strategy employed by other courses in higher education (and even among English faculty in particular) is the use of model assignments to more specifically guide students to expectations. Although this teaching technique can be highly effective in clarifying expectations for students, Mary was hesitant to provide that level of direction as she prefers to guide her students rather than dictate standards.

> we're starting off with nothing, so there are no test questions, there's nothing that we're filling into and I actively don't give model essays because I don't want students to think that writing is about making something that looks like something they've read before or done *before*.

Yet this is precisely what the student study participants would have liked. Repeatedly they requested more specific guidance.

The second form of communication, feedback, was also very detailed. Each student, upon submitting a first draft, received general commentary in the grade center section of the course as well as margin notes in the paper itself. Depending on the confidence level of the student, this kind of detailed feedback might be helpful or disheartening. Mary recognized the difficulty in negotiating this kind of feedback in ways that are most meaningful for each individual student.

> I think they see writing as this kind of amorphous blob of a task so if they're already nervous about it, it can be hard to, to give them the confidence to move *forward* without being *too* nice and I don't wanna say "your writing is *awesome*", but I do want to say "there's a great idea here that you need to keep working on" and, and try to generate that confidence and interest in actually trying to get that idea…out.

Despite the detail in both the assignment description and the feedback, the students in the study did not feel as though they had a clear grasp on what the instructor expected from their work. Alicia in particular remarked a number of times on her confusion with regard to the assignment expectations.

> For myself, what I would have liked was maybe, um, more specific explanations on, um the assignments. Just to make them a little clearer on what we were supposed to be *doing*, I guess.

Alicia's confusion could be caused by any number of factors: her skill level, a time commitment to the course, a misunderstanding of the written directions, or even simply the length of the directions themselves. Although the assignment description was quite thorough at over 600 words, its format is not known to be particularly useful in the online environment. Visually, a great deal of text in paragraph form is not what most users are accustomed to when looking for information online. Breaking up the directions

using visual elements such as tables, graphs, or even simple bullet points might have allowed students like Alicia to more clearly understand expectations. Essay #3 did provide directions partly in bullet form to describe the source requirements for the research paper indicating an importance to adhere to those guidelines.

It is also important to note that all information for the course was in written form. Other visual or multimedia elements more commonly seen online may have made a difference in comprehension of assignment objectives. Focus group participants in phase two would later elaborate on the notion of expectations in online courses and how they influence the acquisition of information.

Even if students had difficulty understanding the directions or were not entirely clear as to the meaning or significance of their personal feedback, an important question remains: why didn't they simply ask? A study of online communication habits is beyond the scope of this study, but because it is always relevant to student success, it is important to at least point out that this could have been a factor in student misunderstanding. Neither Janice nor Alicia commented on their interactions with Mary, but they did discuss their strategies for handling misunderstandings related to assignments. Janice felt reaching out to other students was the best strategy:

> Sometimes it didn't come through, uh, *clearly* enough and I, I know a couple people in the class, we would literally pick up the phone and talk to each other and say, "have you looked at the assignment or have you looked at what she wants us to do now?"…You know and then we'd together do it or you'd wait a little while and see what people post on the discussion board or email her and ask her for the… more clarification.

Although it might have been more efficient for the students to ask the instructor directly, Alicia points out at least one reason why that didn't happen for this particular course:

> …if you email the instructor every five minutes that, you know, I'm still not understanding this or..um, you know. I don't know. I guess I don't feel comfortable doin' that with the instructor and emailing them constantly cause I feel like I'm getting to be a pain in the..ya know.

Although most instructors would find Alicia's concerns about encroachment on their time ridiculous, it is a fairly common concern among online students. In a later conversation, Mary was asked about a seemingly unrelated topic: reasons why faculty do not seek out assistance with technology more often. Mary's response was nearly identical to Alicia's. She, too, felt her questions were a burden to those with the answers and felt no need to "bother" the staff if she could find the answers on her own.

Both of the problems just mentioned stem from students' needs for clearly outlined expectations. Analysis of the students' commentary in the discussion board and the interviews show a number of references to a strong desire to understand exactly what the instructor is looking for. Not only do students want to know about assignment objectives that have a significant impact on their grade, but they also want to know how the instructor would like them to respond to discussions and even what they should be interpreting from their readings as Alicia expressed:

> I'm trying to find the voice of the articles that we were comparing…trying, you know, to go through, those. I think that woulda, that woulda helped a little bit knowing what she was trying to get us to pull out of the information.

Part of the cause of the issues with both clearly outlined expectations and clear communication, from Mary's point of view, stems from the type of writing education experienced by first year composition students prior to their college admission. Mary

argues that this continuous focus on less significant details as opposed to the far-reaching ideas she's really looking for are a product of their high school writing experiences and the rigid standards of college-level courses they take in other disciplines.

> Uh, and then I think also they're used to being more content-laden classes. They're used to understanding what the content of the course is. I have these 65 terms. I have, uh, these twelve concepts about x. I have these four chapters worth of material and if I know all these *bold words*, I'm gonna be able to do well on the test. And they come into comp and, well, there are some terms that we're learning…that's really not the point and, uh, I occasionally give a quiz, but rarely am I gonna give them a quiz about what a thesis is. I want them to *do* what a thesis is.

Mary found the continuous questions over what she saw as largely insignificant detail in writing frustrating and usually indicative of students who have not yet been able to grasp the concept of voice in their writing:

> So, I try to say, well yeah, you need to follow MLA format or whatever we're working in, but that's not..the goal of writing is not making it look a certain way….it's not having your paragraph be a certain length, it's not even having your word length or your page length be a certain way.

Although Mary's frustration with this over-emphasis on less significant issues in writing like font size and formatting are not uncommon among writing instructors (the sentiment was later shared by the focus group), it is important to note that although other formatting elements were listed at the very bottom of the essay assignment descriptions(including font type, size, margins, etc.) the page requirement was the very first piece of information listed within the text of the description and were indented indicating a level of importance.

The balance between providing clear expectations of student work and allowing students freedom to find their own way in the world of writing is a very difficult task for all English faculty, but is particularly difficult for those teaching first-year composition.

Whether in the online environment or face to face one of the most common critiques students have of the experience, and one that directly impacts their understanding of voice, is that instructors want too much of their own voice in their students' writing. The students in this course were no exception to this common complaint.

Alicia did not feel as though she learned much about how to incorporate voice largely because she did not understand the content as well as she would have liked, but also because by the end of her drafts and remarks, she did not feel it was as much her work as it was the instructor's. When asked if she felt she learned strategies for incorporating her voice in her course, she responded: " I…I didn't feel like I did because I felt like I was writing to please the teacher rather than writing for *myself*...."

Janice echoed this sentiment not so much by emphasizing the notion of pleasing the teacher, but more being led into what to write:

> Um, let's see yeah yeah that's what I'd say is that voice is, we'd try to talk one way and, you know, I it's not to use I and stuff like that, but you would re-direct us into a different, you know, direction…she'd kind of *lead* us with what she wanted us to say.

The fundamental difference between the student and instructor view on this issue seems to be the focus on *what* is being corrected. Are instructors leading students into changing their fundamental ideas or simply adjusting their elements of writing to make the message more clear or compelling?

Because this is largely a judgment call, it is a question very difficult to answer for this particular case. A few indications may help us understand why instructors and students do not view this situation in the same light. To use one example that was typical of the responses received by both students, we will use Janine's review of Essay #2 to examine the issue. Mary used track changes to provide detailed feedback for Janine's

work. Ten comments were made along with a few deleted items. In examining word count only, this commentary accounted for 20% of the total words on the page. Another noticeable aspect of the paper was the amount of text underlined in reference to the comments.

In the word document itself, the comments can be attached to a single word or paragraphs of information. Any words that are highlighted as relevant to the comment serve as a digital "red pen underline" of sorts. When reviewing this paper, a full 50% of the paper was highlighted indicating the need for significant changes.

Although this may be extremely helpful guidance for some, others may see it as specific (and sometimes unwanted) direction. Of course, the number of words used in this guidance is less significant than what was actually said. The overwhelming majority of comments addressed areas in need of improvement. Any positive comments about the work were immediately followed with detailed explanations of how the work could be improved. "This is the right idea….but" was a common phrase used in several assignments. Other comments provided very specific ways students might change their work. This may be the type of commentary to which Janice referred when she felt the work she submitted was not entirely her own.

Alicia extended this notion to other faculty when she argued that some instructors do not allow students enough freedom to express their own ideas if they conflict with those of the faculty.

> I just, you know, if you're a strong believer in, in one thing, sometimes I feel like, um, instructors are tryin to push their ideas of things onto their students. I don't know. I just like to, you know, maybe…I know it has to be structured so everybody's kind of doin the same thing, but, um, maybe just a little bit more freedom in that.

Although students may have different reasons for these impressions of faculty

guidance, one theme surfaced from this sub-category that may be key in understanding

students' feelings about their feedback from instructors. A student's grade in a writing

class is usually one of the primary considerations throughout the semester. Although the

focus group would later de-emphasize the importance of grades, students took a very

different view. With regard to instructor guidance and learning voice in particular, Janice

mentioned her grade twice when discussing whether or not she felt she learned to write

with her own voice.

> and then she'd kind of give me an *idea* what she wanted me to say, but because I
> didn't, I guess I didn't *change* it into *her* tone, uh, that was probably my lowest
> score was on that exam, or that essay…I'm sorry, that essay. You know,
> that…you know like if we didn't change it to *her* way, you know, I guess it's a bit
> of a grade…

At the time of the interview, Alicia did not mention her grade when considering

her own development of voice. However, several months after the interview, she read the

major findings of this study and did discuss scores and grades at length. In fact, she had

since discovered another English instructor at her institution who had replaced the

traditional notion of grades and scores throughout the term with checks and +/- indicators

to communicate mastery of content to the students. Although she felt she was getting off

topic from this study, she was very interested in seeing such a system for her own

courses.

As many instructors do, Mary also struggled with the balance between guiding

and dictating in assignments other than major writing assignments. One of the online

tools she employed in the course, discussion boards, has the potential for rich classroom

conversation on interesting topics. Although she expressed no particular concern with

the topics and how they guided students to such a discussion, she did seem unsure about how much involvement she should have in the discussion and how much should be left to the students. Although there are general guidelines to assist instructors like Mary in this area, she had not, at the time of the course under study, received any formal training in online teaching technique. The role training in technology plays in instructor facilitation in the learning of voice was not discovered in phase one, but became a central topic of conversation in phase two.

TOOLS AND STRATEGIES RELATED TO VOICE

Among the array of tools available in online courses, some can be specifically applied to develop a student's voice in writing. This course in particular followed a general trend with new online courses. The course was developed prior to the instructor's agreement to teach it. Mary made some minor adjustments, but largely left the structure intact. As a result, few of the tools that might have been better suited to facilitate voice were left untouched. This is not uncommon among new online teachers, courses developed by other instructors, or online courses taught in the summer due to time constraints. This particular course provided a solid foundation for Mary's future exploration of tools, which she applied to her other courses the following term.

Some of the tools that were suggested were not unexpected. Discussion boards and essay assignments can be tailored to suit these aims. While journals were used, they were not implied as particularly helpful in this case.

Although part of the objective of this study is to examine tools, a fundamental finding here is that the tool is only as effective as its users. The pedagogical strategies

employed in the tool's use were even more important to the development of voice. Assignment descriptions and feedback, as we saw regarding expectations and clarity, were significant sources of information for students seeking to more fully develop their own voice. The readings selected by the instructor were also noteworthy as they were specifically chosen for their strong sense of voice to serve as examples to students and to be discussed within the discussion board. The final strategy centered on the use of additional resources. What constituted an additional resource, however, was in dispute between instructor and students.

Mary first identified the two most important tools she found in her online course that were most clearly related to voice: the essay assignments and discussion boards. Although essay assignments are not exclusive to the online environment, Mary's use of feedback tools with regard to the assignments is. In her online course, students are to submit their work to an assignment link. Most simply submit the document for analysis, but there is also an option for them to type commentary about their submission, which can be used to ask further questions about their work.

Discussion boards are also designed to facilitate student's in-depth understanding of various topics explored by the course. Mary used them primarily to encourage reflection on the course readings:

> And, uh, I have really come up with those assignments as a way to get at voice, those are mainly to get them to do the reading, and not just do it, but to think a little bit about it.

She saw value in this activity not only as a way for students to articulate what they thought, but also to see other students' reactions to the readings. She felt this was

particularly helpful for students who were not as clear about voice or other objectives of

the readings:

> But I think it shows the other students who maybe *don't* have as good a handle,
> they then *see* that writer's voice coming through in something that they've just
> read and responded to at the same…in the same immediate time frame. So, that's
> been good.

Alicia and Janine also saw the discussion boards as helpful in both articulating

their own ideas and in expanding their own understanding of course materials through

collaboration with their classmates. Janice particularly enjoyed seeing what others

concluded from the readings and how that compared with her own assessment:

> …I *did* like reading the discussion boards because sometimes, you know, you're
> writing one idea, but you can read what your other classmates, or other people
> who are taking the course along with you, what they're writing…comment on
> each other kinda … *learn* from each other and then also see how *other* people, uh,
> what they pulled out of the material we were to *read* and how they wrote.

One of the tools that both instructors and students did not feel was particularly

useful in the development of voice was course journals. The journal tool is designed as a

one to one communication method between instructors and students largely for personal

reflection. This course used it more as a submission for required work. Three of the

journal entries were related to aspects of their research paper. One was a works cited

submission, another dealt with topics proposals. Several others were assignments related

to the readings. The food journal was the only item using the journal tool as it was

intended, which may account for why no one really thought of it as a reflective tool that

may improve student use of voice.

Even more important than tools available to facilitate the development of voice is

the pedagogy of the particular instructor. Mary encouraged student development of voice

through the assignment descriptions and feedback in their essays and the selection of class readings.

As mentioned earlier, each essay assignment description was a full page in length and provided direction into what students could expect to be assessed on at the time of submission. Mary was quick to point out that, although she felt all three essay assignments developed voice in their own way, some did this more directly (and possibly more effectively) than others. Essay #1 was a personal reflection. This, she felt, was the assignment most directly linked to voice:

> So, all of the "evidence" for this paper is supposed to come from their personal experience, or almost all of it should. And I ask them to do an interview as well, so, I think it might be easiest for students to see how they are developing their own voice when they're writing about themselves.

She also argued that voice can also be learned through essay #2, which addresses rhetorical strategy and in the third writing assignment, the research paper. Her directions are explicit in her expectations for their examination of voice. In closely examining the writings of others and considering how those voices fit into a larger conversation, she hopes they can understand how other writers are using voice.

> So they're presenting what they know they wanna say about these two articles or these three articles, so they're getting these summaries that….that show that….are more interest…that have *interest* to them. They're not just "here are the main points the author made"..uh, they have opinion couched in that…or *voice* couched in that.

Not only does she want students to identify voice in the readings, but she also wants them to consider voice in their own summaries by "summarizing with a slant" as she puts it.

A more indirect way Mary encourages voice in student writing is by the selection of course readings. She has deliberately chosen writers who have clear, strong voices to serve as examples and uses the discussion boards to encourage student opinions on how effective those voices are:

> And I think the readings themselves *encourage* voice because these are writers that I feel have strong voices, so that another way that I try showing them examples of writing that isn't over the top.

The assignment descriptions and feedback could be easily identified by the researcher simply by examining the course components and interactions. Similarly, a quick scan of the readings reveal exactly what Mary had described: strong, clear voices to serve as examples of voice. A third strategy was not evident anywhere in the course, but both instructor and student identified it as important in learning voice. The use of outside resources that are readily available is one of the significant advantages to learning online. Mary identified the importance of outside resources as a way to develop voice: "And also would also be a way to develop voice, I think, feeling like you have other resources available to you."

Alicia in particular believed in the value of outside opinions or sources of information when it came to developing a sense of voice:

> I think, um, maybe, uh, videos brought in from other…even other, you know, sources or lectures from, you know, um, another professor, um, you know just kind of going through and explaining a little bit. Um, like what you're, like what you're trying to write.

In a later conversation with Mary, she agreed that having additional resources are very beneficial to student development of voice. The fundamental difference between her perspective and Alicia's is where the responsibility for researching those other sources lies. Alicia was under the impression that anything she needed to be truly

successful in the course would already be there. Mary knew that this information was readily available with one google search and assumed the students would be inclined to search for it on their own. As seen earlier, students in this course were more inclined to go to each other for assistance rather than searching for these independent sources.

PHASE TWO

Originally this study intended to review the case of the FYC summer online course and couple the findings with a focus group of FYC online instructors. The belief was that the group would see the use of voice in a somewhat similar fashion as the original instructor. This proved rather quickly to be an error. The direction the focus group took in its discussion of voice and online learning was quite different from the tone of the original instructor interview even though the instructor was part of the group. Reviewing their remarks in light of the original categories would have left out significant findings. As a result, the categories were slightly modified for phase two and a general qualitative approach was used as opposed to case study as in phase one.

Original categories that remained intact include the online environment, strategies and tools related to voice and philosophy and definitions of voice. Other categories were still touched on, but were either absorbed into the three that were common to both phases or into new categories that emerged as a result of data analysis. New categories that emerged included technology-driven obstacles, the online writing teacher, online teaching strategies, and online course communication.

As with the first phase, the categories were divided to inform the two sub-questions of the research study. Online environment, strategies and tools related to voice,

and technology-driven obstacles all inform the effectiveness of online course architecture in teaching voice. Philosophy and definitions of voice, the online writing teacher, online teaching strategies, and online course communication all examine the effects of pedagogy on voice. Although instructors in the group attempted to focus on their online courses, the comparisons between this environment and face to face were unavoidable.

REVIEW OF PHASE TWO STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Participants in the focus group included the original instructor in phase one and three other FYC online instructors. Although all participants live in the same region, their levels of experience in both education in general and online learning in particular varied greatly. All have taught in both online and face to face environments and all teach a variety of composition courses outside of FYC. While most teach students who reside in the region, occasionally those courses contain students who do not live nearby. One participant taught students online at the national and international level for a private online university.

The varied experiences of the participants greatly enhanced the group's conversation. Although there were a number of points on which the group agreed, there was also divergence on key points. The four participants, for purposes of anonymity have been named Mary, Kate, Jake, and Jenna.

ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

From the perspective of the group of instructors, the online environment has many of the strengths and weaknesses observed by phase one participants. Time was a

consistent theme for both groups and is reflected to varying degrees in many of the

categories. Organization also held worth for both groups in terms of success in the

course. There were, however, significant differences.

As the group came together, they all agreed that student expectations online are

different from those they observed in their face to face courses. It was also noted that

there are key differences in their feedback and turnaround time for assignments in online

courses. Organization and tool use was discussed and related to the idea of composition

courses as knowledge-building as opposed to knowledge-disseminating. Finally, there

was much conversation on the level of fragmentation observed not only in course

materials and tools, but in the students themselves. Each of these areas provided a clear

assessment of the environment from the viewpoint of these instructors.

One of the most important points that was discussed a number of times

throughout the conversation was the notion of student expectations in online courses.

The common misconception that such courses are easier and take less time appears to

greatly inhibit these instructors in their attempts to convey the commitment required as

noted by Kate:

> Students have an expectation….but online means *easier*, it means less time, it
> means less really expected of them, and they can just get to it when they *want* to,
> they can wait 'till the last *minute*, and they're done. I don't care what level course
> I'm teaching online, this goes from freshman to senior level courses. They're,
> majority of students have this opinion of an online course where in *reality*, if you
> are taking an online course, you have to spend *more* time, uh, because all the
> conversation is lost. So you have to *read* all that or *watch* all that in a
> presentation.

Time is not the only misunderstanding many students encounter when taking

online courses. As many online instructors do, the participants here expressed interest in

creating a similar learning community environment online as they do in their face to face

courses. Kate continued by articulating the frustration felt by the group at the assumption

by many online students that their course work would be easy and direct with little

knowledge-building or collaboration.

> …in the classroom they can, I let my students work *in* the classroom on their
> papers and work *with* a partner and they can consult and they can share their
> bibliographies. And I go around and I *talk* to them. I try to create the same
> community *online* and again I get resistance saying "I don't want to do all these
> drafts", "I just want to turn in my final paper". Um, or they don't want to work
> with each other….they just want to work with me directly as if it's a one on one
> type of situation.

The group did recognize that this may be a problem particular to their courses and

not to all online courses in all disciplines. Mary observed that conversation-based

classes, in her view, have more difficulty in the online environment than those which

simply disseminate the information.

> I think this is particular to teaching not just writing, but conversation-based
> classes…. we mostly are drumming up that information or that content *together*
> and it's really been hard to figure out how to do that.

The group agreed with her assessment so much, in fact, that they expressed

frustration with peer review or group work in general. While some participants found it

difficult (but begrudgingly conducted these collaborative opportunities regardless) Kate

gave up on it altogether.

> And I cannot do feedback as they want it for 23 people, for first draft, second
> draft, and then the final for *every* paper and, um, I get around that in a classroom
> because I'm there working with more than one student at a time, uh, partners,
> people are more likely to show up to traditional classroom than an online
> classroom and so the partner thing just falls apart...I will not do a group project in
> my online class *ever* again.

Although there was a good amount of frustration with the environment in this

respect, there was also recognition that some tools might be used to facilitate

collaborative work. The possibility of creating synchronous learning situations online seemed to give some hope of creating a learning community. At the same time, this was tempered by the understanding that online students have not come to expect such opportunities online and, thus, may be resistant to it as observed by Kate:

> And I would *love* to…and I've gotten resistance on this…have a venue and *wimba* could be it, I'm sure there are other technologies…where you have 45 minutes of people all on at the same time and designated a time *talking* to each other. And they seem to be resistant because it's not flexible…that's not what they wanted

Although frustrations with student expectations, available tools, and collaborative efforts persist, the instructors also recognized that there were ways around some of these issues. By working the system for their own objectives, they were able to reduce their own anxiety level as well as that of their students. One way to reduce the stress of online students, they found, was to lighten the course load. All participants recognized this as an insight that was crucial to survival in teaching FYC online although it was a realization that usually came to them after a few semesters of teaching.

In addition to reducing the number of assignments and readings, the instructors noted that regarding their online environments in particular, reducing the number of tools used helped students understand their objectives more clearly. Kate commented on her experiments in simplicity for FYC:

> But I don't, um, they're, they're, they have a lighter load and I'm finding that it's going much more smoothly. So I think some of the problem *I* might have with discussion and tying things together is I'm throwing too much for the environment at them. You know, click on this and we're gonna do the discussion board and click on this and watch this presentation and then click on this and do this exercise. I don't know…maybe it's too scattered sometimes?

Jenna concurred and also contemplated the reason she believed many instructors online use too many tools for an already work-heavy course:

> …and I wanted to do everything because I thought everything was important and I would give them powerpoints, and I because I have them go on blackboard and I have a file for every week and I like use the resources and the powerpoints and the websites and the youtube videos you can watch that'll all help you get the concept. But, you know, I figured out that after a while that they were, they were struggling. I like to see them rise to the occasion. I want them to feel like, "oh, I'm living in the dark, I need to wake up. I'm going to meet the challenge". And…and, but then I figured out to a *certain* degree that I'm overwhelming *some* of them, so I need to pull back.

In both remarks by participants, the speed of their responses increased greatly indicating a hurried and frazzled existence for students when engaging in these many activities. They all agreed that more isn't always better, sometimes it's just more. By easing the requirements, instructors noted a shift in the general mood of the course. At the same time, there appeared to be a persistent concern that online students are not receiving the same quality of education as face to face students. The solution, according to the group, is not attempting to replicate the exact conditions online as one sees in face to face. Recognizing that the two environments are distinct and must be treated as such to achieve success was significant.

Student demand for quick responses from instructors was another concern for the online environment and articulated well by Kate:

> …but my online students, they want a turnaround that…it's like, well, you know, if I checked my email and then you email an hour later, I'm probably not going to check it again…that particular account…for like 20 hours or so. Uh, and so that…that I find difficult. I feel they're very demanding.

Although all participants agreed that the pressure to provide feedback quickly increased in the online environment, there was also recognition that the feedback they

provided was sincerely appreciated by the students and taken into account in draft

revisions as noted by Mary:

> I find…I respond to the students' writing in the same forms that I do now in my
> live classes. I respond using track changes…uh, but I feel like the online students
> take those comments more *seriously*. They attend to them….that's like the *goal*
> for them in the class and so I see really good *revisions* coming out of those
> classes. Uh, it's almost like there's a lot that they ignore, but the things they *do*
> focus on, they really focus on."

An important area of disagreement among participants was the degree to which

they saw online students as more fragmented and less willing to collaborate than face to

face students. Kate expressed the assumption that the setting itself was to blame for

students not connecting to one another, as she would have liked.

> … because of the medium, I think, they're obviously more disconnected. They're
> not sitting around a table together. And then, um, they have less in common and
> they might not be as willing to connect with each other because they assume that
> they don't have anything in common….and in a traditional classroom, they get
> over that a lot faster.

Jake, on the other hand, maintained that it was simply the way in which students

connected to each other online that was different. He argued that there were

opportunities online for collaboration among class members who were quite different

from one another by relaying one recent case he observed:

> …I have a mother uh who, who…her husband passed away, um, you know, a
> couple of years ago so she's, she's like I need to go to school, I have two boys to
> take care of. She's taking online, she's….I think she's going to school completely
> online. Um, and um, this is at Rockledge. And so uh, I just paired her up with a
> 19-year old, fresh out of high school, to do some peer review and they're
> collaborating in ways I don't think would happen in any other venue

Despite just a few differences in perspective, the group members agreed that the

online environment was quite distinct from their face to face teaching opportunities. The

tools and strategies used in this environment to teach voice may not be those used to teach other aspects of FYC.

STRATEGIES AND TOOLS RELATED TO VOICE

Although a number of tools are available in online environments to facilitate student learning, not all are ideally suited for each and every educational objective. The tools and online strategies used to help students learn voice are often either altogether different from those used in other endeavors or are, at the very least, used in different ways.

The tools identified by the group have very different functions within the online course, but they all contain one common characteristic: a visual component. VoiceThread, Avatar-driven tools like Second Life and Xtranormal, and web conferencing tools such as Wimba, were all identified as tools that may facilitate the development of voice in student writing.

One of the most commonly used tools in learning management systems is the discussion board. The ability for students to interact with one another and develop ideas collaboratively is greatly enhanced by the tool's various features. Interestingly, the group did not discuss this tool much in their responses to focus group questions. Kate discussed her experiences with students' resistance to the large amount of writing that was required for traditional threaded discussion formats. As a result, she began using VoiceThread, which is a discussion tool that allows students to verbally respond or provide a webcam response, rather than write, and allows conversation to center on multimedia as well as simple questions.

While she felt this particular tool would address student concerns about the overload of writing, she found an unexpected response.

> Everybody's typing the answer in and if they would *call* it in, I've *seen* this, it creates more of a conversation. You can comment on each other's comments on the same thing you just viewed. But instead they're just typing as if they're talking just to me about the topic….it's supposed to be conversational, but they're turning it into what they're *used* to with discussion boards and, um, wikis.

Although the tool has the capability for rich discussion, it was not used in the expected manner in this case and thus was limited. The same can be seen for avatar and animation-based tools also suggested by the group such as Second Life and Xtranormal.

Second Life, a virtual world community used for many purposes outside of education, has been successfully used in courses at every level and in every part of the world. Avatars, visual representations of participants, can be used to communicate with others virtually and in unique environments. This tool was recognized by all participants as valuable, but Jake gave a description of its use specifically for teaching voice.

> …there's a professor in Texas who, uh, had students create avatars that were of their favorite writer. So you would see a Langston Hughes walkin' around or you'd see a Shakespeare walkin' around and they would have to give a speech in the rhetoric or the vernacular of that writer. So, it's kind of stepping, in terms of voice, it might be stepping out of their own voice but it gets them, it gets them looking at the perspective of somebody else's writing and kind of role playing that a little bit. So, it isn't teaching them a third voice maybe, I don't know that much about it, but it might be teaching them about voice in terms of that. I thought that was a pretty interesting, uh, study that I saw."

Jake discussed this tool not in terms of a student learning his or her own voice, but in learning the concept of voice in general. This strategy was discussed by other participants as well and is addressed in later sections of this chapter as it relates to philosophy and definitions of voice.

Although Second Life in particular is seen as a highly effective tool, it can also be time-consuming and complicated for many instructors to learn. None of the participants in this group had used Second Life citing this reason. A somewhat similar tool that is simpler and has been used by at least one member of the group is Xtranormal.

While Second Life is unique in that it provides an opportunity for students to meet synchronously through avatars, an asynchronous option that may encourage development of voice is Xtranormal. This tool allows the user to create animated movies. The user selects a setting, characters, voice tones, camera angles, and other aspects of movie-making. The student is then able to write a script and see the story acted out. Jake saw this as an opportunity for students to understand voice. "… there's lots of different default characters that you could get and you could kind of write…you could *adapt* a rhetoric, uh, if you will, of like a, a street thug."

This resonated with Kate who connected the use of a tool like Xtranormal with a skit activity she used in her face to face courses: "I'll use a skit to teach voice sometimes and have these…so that you can see the miscommunication that happens when you are not knowledgeable of voice, of your audience and of the speaker and you could do that with xtranormal."

A third tool that could be directly used to teach voice was web conferencing software like Wimba. Web conferencing tools allow course participants to meet synchronously online and share presentations, files, or other media, converse either verbally or through a chat feature, and even work in small groups. Only one participant mentioned using Wimba, the tool sanctioned by her institution.

what I *try* to do in Wimba where they…I create a presentation and I'm talking and I make a comment at the same time with online conferencing basically and we could go through pieces and *discuss* what's happening, what's happening in this piece of writing here. And I can markup areas of the writing and people could be commenting and they could even comment to each other.

Although she could see the benefits to its use in teaching voice by discussing the readings, she was frustrated by the technical difficulties it presented. Having visual elements in the tools was a common trait in the tools mentioned, but so too was the belief that if the usability or reliability were in question, it was not worth the time to learn.

Although these tools appear to have the capacity to teach voice directly, at least one tool mentioned did this indirectly as a result of simple instructor frustration. One dilemma a number of instructors discussed with regard to FYC in general is the low level of writing skill seen in some students. Each instructor found only so much time scheduled to devote to each class they teach. With every minute they spent correcting basic grammar, they lost one to teaching about voice.

Jenna used a software called write point to avoid at least some of these issues. Write point is an automatic paper submission service that returns work to students with basic grammar corrections.

…they can submit their paper and it comes back with just basic comments about conventions and style that they need to pay attention to in their paper or that they need to revise...basic revision comments. And sometimes they'll get a few that aren't really correct because it's automated. But they…it makes a difference because then by the time *I* get the paper I can focus on other things and it gives them a chance to practice on the basics.

The group was very interested in hearing about any technology that reduced their time grading aspects of writing they felt should have been covered in their high school courses.

Although these tools can all be used to facilitate voice, Jenna submitted a very important idea that the group all agreed upon. The tool is essentially useless without a strong instructor behind it. This translated to two important concepts for this group: strong content and meaningful interaction.

In phase one, the instructor discussed the importance of content in learning voice and this idea was reinforced by the focus group participants. Kate, in answering a question about tools she used, admitted her strategy was not exactly a tool, but selecting content that was relatable to students allowed voice to be learned more easily. She used the theme of comedy, which she has used in the past, to illustrate her point.

> I'd have to say this is not a *technology* tool, but I teach it as comedic rhetoric and we examine theories and systems of comedy. And we read philosophers, we read Ben Franklin, we read Jonathan Swift, we read Jon Stewart, we read….I mean it's such a range, but since it's *funny* and so *entertaining*, it keeps them *engaged*.

The group did address the importance of being entertaining as a way to promote student engagement online and this participant felt it was much easier to do that with this particular theme. Although comedy could certainly be taught face to face, the easy access to materials used to support course objectives made the online environment an ideal home for such a topic.

> and it's pretty easy online with comedy because you can pull clips and it's easy for *them* to find…so I think the assignment, so find a clip that is an example of, uh, you know, ambiguity. If I have an example of political satire, well they can find tons of 'em and they want to watch all of 'em so they all wanna talk about it.

In addition to engaging content, providing feedback and meaningful interaction were seen as important in developing voice. In fact, Jenna did not even discuss online tools as they relate to voice. "I can't say that any of the tools I have really help me teach voice other than interacting with my students and giving them feedback." As seen earlier, feedback is remarkably meaningful for online students. In later sections of this

chapter, interactions between instructor and student are seen as important in student development of voice.

Although there are many more tools available online that can facilitate the teaching of voice, very few were mentioned by instructors. There are likely a few reasons for this. A series of comments throughout the session may indicate that this may be due, at least in part, to a lack of understanding about the tools. Several times, participants indicated a desire to learn more about the tools they were already using as well as those they had not yet tried. Two participants expressed interest in SecondLife and three wanted to know more about xtranormal.

While interest in specific tools was high, there was also interest in learning new online teaching strategies, particularly as they related to collaboration, an area of frustration for the group.

> But I would like to know how….ways of organizing students to...because I think collaborative work online is important because it keeps them *engaged* in some way if it's done…if it goes well.

Based upon the focus group data and follow-up conversations, most faculty expressed interest in technology, but had varied experiences on how and when it was offered in training. Most had some teaching and technology training at the beginning of their work in either English education programs or as part of a Teaching Assistant contract (although it is unclear who provided the training and how it was done).

It later became apparent that the continuing education of these FYC online instructors was sometimes organized and scheduled. At other times, it was up to the instructor to seek out the help needed. Kate explained her experiences with both in a follow-up conversation after the study's conclusion:

During my time as a TA this was formally offered. As an adjunct, I have to seek out peers that are interested in collaboration. I have always had a positive experience with my colleagues. I have always received the feedback I requested. And I've always provided feedback to my colleagues. I think there is a positive feeling of camaraderie among the instructors and students in the English Department at (school name) I also feel great inter-department collaboration for online learning and use of technology in teaching.

Although all participants expressed interest in learning new techniques and strategies as they relate to technology (perhaps in the organized or ad-hoc ways described by Kate), there was also a surprising amount of frustration at the reliability and usability of technology. These problems were sometimes seen as insurmountable obstacles for the instructors in their attempts to teach voice online.

TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN OBSTACLES

Of the categories created to adapt to the finding of the focus group, technology-driven obstacles was one of the least expected. While instructors did seem enthusiastic at times about their online teaching and learning experience, there was an equal amount of frustration with its limitations.

Instructor comments ranged from issues relating to their own experience and level of expertise to concerns about time investments in learning new tools and strategies. As seen with previous themes, there were also a number of strategies and tools that may have clarified these issues, but due to a lack of technical training, the instructors were unaware.

Despite the differences among participants in experience teaching online or face to face, all agreed that understanding technology would be important to their futures as teachers. Although instructors in particular disciplines, say computer science or engineering, almost always recognize the need, it is not as common in Arts and Sciences areas such as English. Participants in phase two not only understood the value of

technical expertise to their field, but also were also informed of some of the general

literature on technology use. Jake shared some of his views, which were formed by one

author in the field of technology and society.

> you know, there's a, there was a really good book that came out a little while ago
> by this guy named Douglas Rushkoff who's a technology theorist guy. He, he
> wrote this short little book called program or be programmed. And it says that if
> you can't manipulate the technology to do what you want it to do, you are merely
> just being controlled by the technology itself. So Blackboard is the, the
> quintessential …you can't, you can't...you can do a *little* bit to manipulate it. To
> do what you want to do.

Other group members agreed that a certain level of programming skill would be

helpful in customizing the tools to their particular purposes. Kate recognized that a basic

understanding in HTML would help her, but as later discussions would show, there is

little time in the average English instructor's day for such training.

While their own skill level was addressed in a number of ways, they also

recognized that the skill level of students can greatly inhibit the acquisition of voice in

writing for online coursework. The concern that students would spend too much of their

time focused on the technology and not on their coursework was significant enough for

Jake to admit that looking for the simplest tool, which students could handle themselves

was ideal.

> I mean, anything that I can do, um, through a means that the students would find
> *easier* to manipulate themselves…I would choose to do it. So, I would *love* to use
> voice thread, but I can't do it yet."

At the time of the focus group, voicethread was a fairly new tool for those study

participants who had access to it. Because student training in new technology tools was

not required for this institution, Jake was reluctant to start students on a new technology

until it was more heavily used in other courses.

Usability of the technology became a key point of agreement among participants as well. In fact, one participant had a professional background in website usability and shared her impressions of the learning management system used by her institution: "But I *do* think that Blackboard is poor usability and I used to be a usability analyst and still do it in a tech class that I teach in…"

This experience gave her a unique vantage point. Although the other participants weren't as experienced in usability issues as this instructor, they all have used other technologies enough to compare their LMS to the other tools they use. A persistent request for the LMS (in this case, Blackboard) to streamline its features so it was more manageable surfaced regularly throughout the session: "I find Blackboard very frustrating. It's so compartmentalized and just too much jumping around…"

In addition to general remarks, specific tools were also targeted including discussion boards, calendars, and even email. Of the three mentioned, discussion boards were the most heavily criticized from an instructor perspective. The complaints about discussion boards were similar to those seen of the system overall. Instructors found it difficult to move from the discussion area where they would comment on student remarks to the grading area.

> "But I think it was the way that I would have to go in and find it and read it and try to associate it with a name and who said that and go now enter it as a grade and now respond to it and who responded to this…I found it *cumbersome* from a grading point of view and just a time sucker…a time sucker"

Similar comments were made by other participants. Not only was it time-consuming to grade discussions this way, but it was also frustrating when trying to connect students with their particular contributions.

I have the same problem with the discussion boards and that reading it as a participant is a different view than reading it as instructor grading…so I'm always going back and *forth* and trying to participate and go back and "wait, whose posts were those?" and that also, that commenting…or grading comments is even *harder* because you can only see comments divorced from their original threads.

It is important to note that instructors identified discussion boards here as a hindrance not in students learning voice, but rather in their ability to find time to devote to students while they are developing that voice. Helping students learn to write with authority, they felt, couldn't be done if they were spending too much time simply grading the discussion boards.

In addition to the discussion board, calendar and email functions caused difficulties for instructors when conducting day to day course activities. Although the calendar feature in learning management systems can be particularly useful in keeping students organized in their work and activities, their functionality is limited when it can't connect to other similar tools they use for personal or work activities as noted by Mary:

Uh, in BlackBoard the calendar isn't linked to other things so I would have to go make the calendar apart from making the calendar that I've already *made* and putting due dates on things. It doesn't link you over to those *places*…exactly. So the way the whole blackboard system is *fractured* I see that the individual tools are useful in and of themselves, but because they aren't well *integrated*, it makes me want to use as few of them as possible.

Kate agreed with this assessment not just in using calendars, but with email features as well.

I find that with our email system we have as well. Um, I can't create hierarchies in our folders the way that I want to and manage my email. I actually have this truly urgent, big important, don't forget it, like this meeting and I email it to my personal account where I can manage it better.

It would seem as though concerns about calendar features and email would not be related to teaching voice. In fact, several times throughout the conversation participants

recognized they were getting off track. However, as participants began to move through the conversation from complaining about the features to providing reasons for their frustration, it became evident that time became a significant theme as it related to technology. Although they seemed almost apologetic about their technology tangent, Mary spoke to a sentiment with which the rest wholeheartedly agreed.

> …and this *is* relevant to teaching voice because you're spending your time teaching them where to look for the such and such instructions, you're not spending your time teaching voice.

Gradually participants came to the conclusion that there was a limited amount of time they intended to use to teach each course. Time wasted on functionality or unforeseen issues with reliability did not appear to be seen as added time the instructor should submit but was taken from instructional time. All seemed very hard pressed to find additional time in their schedules to deal with such issues.

Another unexpected use of time as it relates to technology use was the investment required to learn the technology in the first place. Although participants recognized that taking time to learn new technology was beneficial in the long run, it still seemed to cause dismay. Depending on the complexity of the tool and its perceived usefulness for the course, some tools which might be beneficial for teaching voice were simply ignored. The prospect of creating a new set of assignments more tailored to the online environment was also daunting for instructors. Mary articulated this widely-held concern.

> …the reason I don't use the tools I don't use is because of the up-front time that I need to put in to create more uh, not to create the tool, but to create the artifact, thing that I need to employ this tool. Uh and it's just…I'm already creating all the materials for the *live* class so the idea of having to create…not just to tweak them but to create all new materials or a whole new approach has been intimidating.

As seen with the Strategies and Tools category, it is also important to recognize instructor role in making technology useful for students in learning voice. While much of the focus was on the tools themselves, instructors also recognized their own behavior in online environments as a contributing factor. Mary recognized that she seems to have a more relaxed attitude in her face to face course where they spend time simply discussing articles they've read. In her online course she feels compelled to get at the main points of the article rather than opening discussion.

> We need to start driving at my points about the article or what they should *learn* from the article and I feel like online I'm really always driving at what you should learn from this rather than trying to *open* discussion. So I bet I can lead also to that sense that things are closed down.

Learning to open discussion to students and create a collaborative atmosphere is a high-level skill for online instructors and is often not something that is covered in technical training sessions. Group members agreed with her that the atmosphere in general was more driven to objectives than casual conversation.

Also, as seen with the previous category, there is a lack of technical understanding for some instructors. For instance, a common complaint among the group members was the apparent inability to see the screen from the student's view. Although this is not tied to voice, once again, instructors are serving as liasons for technical concerns with their students rather than addressing concerns about voice. Being unable to see the same view as their students greatly inhibits their ability to assist and move forward with the content.

This could be a very common concern were it not for the fact that this functionality does, in fact, reside within the Blackboard system most participants were

using. In a post-focus group conversation, participants were surprised to learn this was, in fact, available either for them to create themselves or upon request to their institution's IT department. A more clear line of communication between IT and faculty would have clarified this point for instructors.

While online course architecture has a number of tools available to assist faculty in teaching students voice, the results of both phases indicate that the role of the instructor is even more significant. Tools can make this job easier and less time consuming for faculty, thus allowing them the time to work more closely with students on their understanding of voice and presence in writing. Ultimately, however, it appears to be the abilities and talents of the instructor that are necessary for this valuable lesson.

Categories in phase two that examine the pedagogical aspects of learning voice online were also slightly modified from those used in phase one. The instructors began with their impressions of the definition of voice, which was similar to the instructor in phase one in some respects, but also clarified some differences in teaching philosophy among the group members.

PHILOSOPHY AND DEFINITIONS OF VOICE

Much in the way the instructor in phase one had, this group discussed voice in many different respects. Words like tone and authority were often used as synonyms. Other topics that surfaced from the instructors included the obstacles to students learning voice and the importance of a clear strategy in teaching voice.

Although the first instructor identified a number of different words that might be used to describe voice, this group kept their list a bit shorter. Tone was agreed upon by

most of the group as was authority. Jake elaborated upon earlier findings by arguing that, while teaching the concept of voice directly was not something he normally did, discussing the concept of audience was certainly part of the rhetoric of FYC.

> It has a lot to do with audience. So if you teach your students to write for a certain audience, the "voice", whatever that means, (*light laughter from group)* might change to fit the, the needs of what that audience needs to comprehend in the text or the writing.

In much the way Mary expressed in phase one, Jenna discussed her efforts to focus her students on word choice as a way to develop voice. Certain words carry certain meanings and a student's choice of those words displays a persona in writing, she explained. Understanding the role of word choice is a crucial step in finding voice, she argued: "Um, and I think that's…that helps them because once they start discovering word choice, then they start thinking more deeply about what they're writing about."

The general sense from the group initially was that the definition of voice was rather unclear and could be changed not only depending on the instructor's point of view, but also on the course one was teaching.

> I find that it's like one of those terms that people have their own feel of and as a *fiction* writer, I think it would mean something very different to me than it does when I'm in the classroom teaching business writing or advanced writing or freshman comp.

While this example compared FYC and fiction writing in terms of voice, another instructor emphasized the same point with a very different example: technical writing. This course, according to the instructor, taught voice in writing more explicitly than one might see in a fiction course or even FYC. He even noticed changes in voice within course assignments themselves.

…I just taught *technical* writing over the summer… and audience becomes like the *theme* of the course. You know, shifting your language to fit the, the, the needs of the audience. And I think I saw a lot of changes, perhaps, in what could be perceived as voice, um, from assignment to assignment.

While he did believe that voice can change based upon his assignments or the course, he also believed it could change depending on the desires of students. He felt that defining voice was something personal to each student and that it was a student's responsibility to define it and determine what it meant for his or her own writing.

I think voice is a tricky term. Seems that it could mean lots of different things to lots of different people. Uh, so I often ask them what they *think* it means. And they usually tell me it has something to do with something…..the way something *sounds*. Uh, I think, which usually leads to a conversation about personal writing style and it kind of snowballs from there. So, me personally, I wouldn't say I *focus* on voice, uh, it's something that I feel happens organically, individually. Because voice to me has something to do with individuals' uh, personal approach to using language.

His use of the word "organic" made quite an impression on other group members. It was used by two others later in the conversation to describe their desire to hear a student's voice coming through their writing in a more personal way than is seen in some academic writing. Helping students understand ways to access this voice and why it is important was one of several obstacles instructors also identified in the conversation.

Kate identified a common hindrance not presented by the course architecture or materials, but the students themselves. That voice is something that evolves as a result of considering one's audience is a relatively new concept to some FYC students.

the rhetorical triangle comes up always in every class, to not just think about *you*. We have a tendency to, all my students have a tendency to think "it's *my* paper" and so the voice is right, right here (*motions with both hands a few inches over her mouth…indicating the voice hasn't left further than one's personal space*)

The ability to grasp the concept of writing for one's audience is one challenge for FYC students to overcome in finding their voice. Regarding the FYC course in particular, instructors also identified redundancy in writing as a significant obstacle. All participants agreed that redundancy tends to be a common concern at this introductory level.

A students' confidence level was another concern for these instructors. In phase one, the instructor was hesitant in providing clear models of strong essays due to her desire for students to find their own way as writers. In phase two, the group elaborated upon this concern. Not only did they share her desire for students to be more independent, but they also explained that FYC students did not express enough confidence in their writing to see models as anything but explicit rules to be obeyed: "…they are trying to imitate academic writing and that's where they use all the big, pretty words and, but they're not saying anything." (Kate)

Jenna agreed. She appreciated the value of models, but also found them quite limiting when it came to writers at this stage in their development. Her solution was to encourage students to find active voice. If they are able to accomplish this, she argues, the over-dependence on advanced (and sometimes inappropriate) vocabulary is diminished.

> …if I start with active voice…because they look at the models, they get caught up in, in using *passive* voice and using language they think they're supposed to use when they see the model passages and, um, and if I can just get them to use active voice, then that means they have to stop for a moment and speak directly. And speaking directly means getting to the point and not dancing *around* it or fishing through things they don't really understand…figuring out what they *do* know and then doing the research they need to do to understand that better and know what's relevant.

Jenna was relatively quiet as the other instructors sorted through their own philosophies of voice. When she spoke of her own beliefs, she articulated this focus on active voice as one of three important areas on which her students should concentrate if they wish to find their own voice.

She employed a three-part strategy for her students. A focus on the purpose of their writing, audience, and active voice, she argued, kept the objectives clear for herself and her students. She also strongly argued the need for continuous cycle of practice on the student's part and feedback on her own. In other categories of the findings, she demonstrated how her use of online tools made her more accessible for feedback and provided more opportunities for practice.

Although participants discussed their thoughts on voice at length, they seemed conflicted between the need to develop this in students and the desire to "cover the basics" which did not include voice. While the group agreed that teaching voice was important, it could not clearly be done if too much time were spent on basic grammar and technology problems.

THE ONLINE WRITING TEACHER

One important aspect of understanding the value of online pedagogy as it relates to voice is a clear take on the challenges and strengths inherent in the online writing teacher. Online instruction requires a different set of skills when compared to face to face teaching. While all participants in phase two understood this, their remarks seem to imply a general sense of push and pull between the strategies they've found to be successful in the classroom and those that work online.

All instructors in phase two have had experience in both environments. They all felt at least somewhat competent in technology use and in their abilities as online teachers. However, they also felt uncertain at times about important issues in online learning. When are certain technologies called for and when should they be avoided? When should strict guidelines for assignments be provided and when should students be left to fend for themselves? Does not seeing students mean the class is disconnected? These important questions weighed heavily on the minds of participants and ultimately, there didn't seem to be a clear answer.

One of the more important questions for instructors in this group was when to leverage technology. Jake put it well when he argued for careful consideration before using technology in any course: "you have to have a *reason* to use tech(nology)…you have to have a reason to swing the hammer, you can't swing the hammer just to swing the hammer."

Kate agreed, but also explained why instructors sometimes swing the hammer regardless of need:

> So then I think as teachers, it's hard to give all this technology…and you wanna keep embracing it, you know, the *new* technology. And it's like, okay, wait, what's really just more and what's important?

Another important question centered on the amount of guidance instructors should provide students. Although all agreed that guidance was important, a fine line between guidance and dictating was recognized. As mentioned in the online environment of phase two, there is a more direct and efficient mood in many online classrooms including FYC. Creating a community of writers focused on finding their own voice and style, therefore,

can be difficult. Mary articulated well her struggle with such a mentality when responding to other instructors' views on the topic.

> What I'm learning from what you've got to say is that students online are looking even more than students in the classroom for *exactly* what I need to do to pass. And that is totally against the way I go about teaching writing.

Kate also felt frustrated by the environment when students asked detailed questions about specific aspects of an assignment that, to instructors, were largely irrelevant. To avoid the constant questions, however, she decided to provide more detail on some assignments and post requirements such as paragraph numbers and other details that, as she sees it, have little to do with quality writing. Even so, her desire to see these students move from a grade-centered ideology to what she believed college was truly about (learning) was pervasive in her remarks.

> …you know, college isn't about *points* or grades or credits. It's about an education. It's about the learning *process*. And that's why I, I don't like giving those really detailed rubrics, but if I do *not*, then I don't get what I want out of them.

Jake understood the value of providing such details, but simply didn't feel it was appropriate to his particular style of teaching writing: "Uh, and in *my* classes, uh, um, I want them to give their on their own in a way (*laughing*) in their...in their own way, you know?"

Part of the reason why this notion of letting students find their own way may stem from their status as writing instructors. Mary made an important connection between her ideas about restrictions on writing and those in a classroom setting.

> Well, I don't…I don't think of writing as filling in the blanks and so to give them a fill in the blank way of succeeding at the assignment I see as…I still try and give, okay, so I'll say it needs to be substantive, it needs to include *this*, it needs to DO *this*.

Although other instructors did not articulate as much, it is possible that the more open approach to writing may be part of what informs their pedagogy. One instructor, however, did not share the frustrations of the others in regard to assessment and guidelines.

Jenna provided students with rubrics, point values, and clear directions for assignments. Discussion boards, for instance, exemplified a strategy that was causing some aggravation for the other instructors. Most appeared unsure about how to manage motivating conversations and elicit inspired reactions from students. Jenna did not appear to struggle with such a dilemma.

> I usually don't have problems with the discussions but that's because they *understand* it's like half of their grade. And, and they understand what the requirements are…. I have like a list of what's *substantive* and, and they have to meet those requirements in every post..the content has to be substantive, it has to be a certain length and they have to respond in a certain way and they have to end with a question that furthers the discussion, but…and if they don't do that, it doesn't count.

This was initially met with skepticism by a few of the instructors as too restrictive on students. Even so, Kate felt as though she did provide guidance to a degree, but wasn't getting the desired result.

> I did that before with discussion threads, but ….Like the four students who were really willing to participate and they're always prepared and there'd be the ones who…yeah, what he said…you know, they're not really adding more. They're reading it perhaps, but they're not really adding to the conversation or they're just re-wording the same point.

Others agreed that this was a common problem in discussion boards. Jenna clarified that it was a learning process and that they were often told that their lack of description would earn them no points. She emphasized her role as a facilitator in this respect and argued for the effectiveness of practice. She was also careful to point out that

this kind of remediation was only necessary for a few students and was not representative

of the norm for the class.

> And the ones that are struggling, now they just wanna say "I agree" and repeat
> what somebody else said, I, I go in there and I have discussions with them and I
> tell them "you're not gonna get your points for this"….And, and, I just sort of
> give them ideas to think about and *eventually*, they catch on and they start
> bringing…and then when they do, I have to go back in and reinforce it, but that's
> just for the ones that are struggling.

Throughout the group conversation, she touched on this theme of continuous

communication and contact with online students as part of the learning process. At times

she seems to describe her role more as a coach than an instructor. Practice and repetition

is an important part of her strategy as an online writing instructor.

This was not the only point of disagreement among the instructors regarding the

experiences of the online writing teacher. The importance, or lack thereof, of photos or

other visual representation of the instructor and class members was also discussed.

Although a detailed review is beyond the scope of this study, it was nonetheless an

important subject to the focus group participants.

Kate and Mary really seemed to struggle with the fact that they were not able to

see their students face to face. They both agreed that not only was something lost for

students if they could not see the instructor, but instructors also were not getting feedback

from students through their body language.

> In a classroom, I can say "does everyone understand?" No one will say anything,
> but I see the faces that are the "I don't understand" faces and I can address that
> and I found that *online*, I, I try to gauge…is it me or is it them?

Kate explained her position by describing the interactions of this face to face

focus group itself as more beneficial than if it were held remotely.

I think there's something to the human experience that…if we had all gotten on the phone to…. have this same conversation it would *not* be going this well because I don't know what anybody *looks* like. I...why that's important, I don't know, but I think it's on a very *basic* level in your brain.

This sentiment resonated with Mary who argued that this "basic" level had

something to do with audience. Kate heartily agreed.

Yeah, here's my audience. I don't think we would have the facial cues to be reading off to either keep responding or *shift* the conversation and I think that's part of what was missing…

The inability to see their students (or for students to see them) caused her to

believe that the inherent message of a lecture could be lost.

And then I have to give the, the lecture, which is easier to do face to face than through an online course because through an online course, I feel like tone…voice is often misconstrued

These remarks were particularly interesting in light of these same instructors' use

of those words (voice, tone, audience) in describing student voice in writing, which is

entirely devoid of the visual representation they so strongly desire in the classroom.

Regardless, not all instructors agreed that the face to face environment alone offered such

opportunities to "read" students and assist their development as writers. Jenna saw

unique value in the online environment in this respect:

I think for me in the regular classroom, the transitions between mood and tempo are more fluid for sure. Uh, but online I have this marvelous opportunity when I interact with my students and answer their questions …. And craft it in a way that I'm eliciting a response from them that is going to be similar in structure and nature and they're going to pick up on that and suddenly the response is in getting…you can see improvements in their *writing* and just that whole conversation back and forth. Because it's written like writing letters back and forth to someone even except that it's more immediate…they pick up on it right away and, and just so much more *productive*.

This did not resonate with Kate who advocated for the value of visual representation. She argued that the visual feedback she was receiving from students in a classroom was valuable. This sentiment was repeated a number of times and the tone of her language became a bit more forceful.

> And if you think that verbal and audio…you know the audio and the facial and who's showing up and who isn't and how they're sitting and what's goin on with the tears in the eyes…I mean, if you think that all that information your brain is takin' in isn't more feedback, you're kiddin' yourself."

She gradually came to the conclusion that she would be able to assess student progress in an online environment, but that it took quite a bit more time.

> It *really* is and I feel like I can turn around a *lot* quicker when I see something like, this isn't going the way I want it to go, they're not picking this up…this person's struggling. I'm not sure what's going on, but they're struggling, I can tell. Where in an online I feel like it takes me a *lot longer* to get a hold of somebody and what's going on with them.

Jenna acknowledged the assessment, but disagreed for two reasons based on her own experiences. First, she found students more personally inhibited in the classroom and thus less likely to discuss their issues with her. She also recognized the effect of time on such interactions in a face to face setting.

> And in a regular classroom, I don't have that opportunity because I'm dealing with a room of, you know, 20 students and I'm trying to get everything I need to get into that 45 minute period or hour and a half or whatever it is they gave me.

Both Kate and Jenna continued to debate on this point. Kate began arguing that the natures of Jenna's students were the most likely reason for her ability to connect with them. Jenna countered that her student demographics were no different than those seen by the other participants. Jake and Mary did not comment.

ONLINE TEACHING STRATEGIES

How these characteristics of online teachers translate into specific teaching strategies is the subject of this section. Participants did identify a few strategies that would be particularly helpful in the online environment, but also described difficulties they had in translating their efforts in a face to face classroom into specific and functional strategies online. A desire was expressed not only in combining the two experiences as much as possible, but also for more guidance in online teaching pedagogy.

One of the aspects of online learning that makes it distinct from the face to face environment is the potential for visual entertainment. While films, games, and other visual elements can be used in the classroom, many instructors find it much easier to facilitate such activities online. Instructors in this group recognized the playful nature of the use of such tools.

> Yeah, we do, and second life, I and that's why I mention it in the classroom, I haven't used that yet and I think for some students that would definitely…just because they want to *play* with it…they'd be more interested in doing it.

Participants agreed that the entertainment value of tools such as second life and xtranormal, which were explored in an earlier section of this phase, was significant for online students and contributed to a more relaxed atmosphere. Such a learning environment, they argued, may reduce the need for the "professionalism" they identified as so persistent online (discussed in the next section). Kate also recognized the value of avatars not just from the student perspective, but from her own as well:

> And, uh, because sometimes I need to refresh or if I just came out of another classroom, that's where my head still is. And they all have their little avatars that they have chosen like a monopoly game piece or they can personalize it. And I know, okay, that's Alison and that's Jenn and that's so-and-so, and he commented

here. And I can see all of those comments and who he's responding to that it's much more visual.

Kate consistently expressed concern about the lack of visual elements in the online classroom, so the use of tools like voicethread were particularly helpful for her to feel connected to her students. While she expressed concern for the ways students were using the tool, she did see value in the strategy of employing visual effects.

In addition to the more entertaining elements readily available online, instructors in this group also recognized the value of facilitating student learning rather than dictating it through a series of rigid assignments and time-consuming activities. This may have been of particular interest to this group considering they had all taught summer sessions of FYC online in the past and found the compressed schedule quite stressful. Jake articulated the sentiment through his explanation of the requirements of his own students.

> I try to consolidate them into, into less assignments, you know. So while the standards are the same or the expectations are even a bit *higher* as far as what I'm expecting out of that particular assignment, it's not uh, it's not *five* papers, it's three. You know, so…or four papers or whatever it is.

Other participants agreed that at times it was necessary to reduce the amount of work in an online course given the other time constraints that have been mentioned previously. Jenna discussed her gradual release of control to her students in terms of encouraging them to take ownership of their work.

> well, I used to…in the beginning, I was so precise and so trying too hard. And now I figured out how to let them take over and take ownership, like you were saying, of the process and I get more out of it when I, when I just periodically *facilitate,* which is what I was supposed to be doing all along, rather than just trying to manage it so…it's better when they do it themselves. They get more out of it and then I can just throw in things for them to think about when they take off on their own.

This led Kate to consider the importance of trusting that the students had received the information they needed and that they would draw from the resources as required to become better writers. Her sentiment, particularly her repetitive use of the word "trust" strongly resonated with the rest of the group.

> I would pack the course too tightly. And some things really did just turn into busy work for them and I, I don't like that at all…it's not what I had *intended*. Um, so to relax and *trust* them that they can get what they need out of this. Just because I'm not standin' there in front of 'em they, they can get this. They can understand it and if I make myself *available* to them that they will ask. And in doing that, in lightening their load so they can see what they need to see and trusting that they will go from this step to this step, um… without, I guess I won't have to hold their hand too much. That really improved things. And I would say I finally did just learn that lesson from the previous semester to this semester and I can see such a difference.

Kate touched on a point that may provide insight into why more instructors do not follow a philosophy of reducing workload. She had taught for a number of years and had only recently decided to reduce the amount of work. A similar comment was made by Jenna, who also had years of experience in both environments.

Regardless of experience level in either environment, a concern expressed by many in the group was the translation of strategies that worked well in a traditional classroom into the online environment. A number of discussions throughout the session connected pedagogical skills, which participants felt worked well to various aspects of the online environment. At times the task seemed quite daunting. Mary, for instance, truly enjoyed the collaboration opportunities in her classroom, but felt intimidated at attempting such a venture online.

> …one of the things I *love* doing most in the classroom with writing is looking at a piece of student writing and editing it as a group because they are *comfortable* with that writing…the level of writing. They think they *can* improve it…they

start to feed off of each other. We actually *make* changes they read it…it sounds *better* and I have not even *attempted* to try to recreate something like that

Others in the group agreed that such an endeavor was daunting and some seemed to argue that in some circumstances it should not even be attempted. Earlier, Kate argued completely against group work online based on her past experiences in mediating disputes among students. However, she also recognized her own struggle between which activities were appropriate for each environment.

> And some of that, I'm like "I could use this on my online. I'm gonna make a copy of this and give it to them too." And sometimes things I'm doing online, I'm like "oh my god, why didn't I even *think* to put this in my traditional classroom?

As the session moved forward, she evolved her philosophy of online teaching to reflect a more blended environment as ideal. While she enjoyed working in both, she acknowledged that each had specific strengths and weaknesses which made working in only one the less desirable situation.

> But it's also given me a break from both mediums. I don't feel like I'm just *always* in front of a computer wondering what people are thinking. And I'm not *always* having to be so on. You're *on* in a different way when you're standing in front of a classroom.

Another strategy that appeared to have significant value for all participants was the use of a third party when students sought evaluations of their writing. Earlier, online tools such as an online writing lab and write point were discussed. Jake elaborated on the value of additional points of view with regard to students' development of their voice in writing.

> …or of the writing *center* of this place, this person who's *not* your professor but who and who's not going to like judge you in *that* way or what they perceive as being judged in that way…and um, themselves who, this kind of, they might consider themselves unknowledgeable about writing, um, and that writing center negotiates that space so maybe by, by making them *attend* the writing center, it

just develops good habits that, you know, a third, fourth, fifth pair of eyes on your paper…writing's collaborative, it's not in isolation. So, it's cool. That's really cool. I wish I could work it online.

Interestingly, Jake is the participant who identified an online writing lab and was interested in the use of write point as a tool that might be used for such a purpose. He made these remarks only shortly after expressing a desire to make a writing center possible for his own courses. A few participants seemed to exhibit the same behavior. They would occasionally express a desire for something only to realize after collaborating with colleagues that the resources were already available. Throughout the conversation, complaints of areas lacking in online learning weaved between viable solutions.

This indicated to the researcher that there may be significant value in not only training for faculty, but also simple, casual collaborative opportunities. Jake echoed this sense of isolation, which others shared throughout their conversation: "…um, I'm the only teacher I know, and I don't know *how* to do it…this differently."

For the most part, a desire to simply come together and share ideas was expressed. However, one area of particular concern seemed to arise several times. Group work was considered a valuable instructional strategy in FYC, but specific strategies to employ it in the online environment caused quite a bit of consternation.

I've had, I've had, I've had it go well and I've had it go not so well, so and um….I would *love* to know some strategies on how to organize students and to do collaborative work, uh, in ways that will be meaningful for them.

Another area of concern for the instructors is online course communication, which is conducted very differently than in the face to face environment.

ONLINE COURSE COMMUNICATIONS

As a result of the continuous comparison between the online and face to face environments, a new question seemed appropriate for this group of FYC online instructors: did they feel their online students saw them differently than their face to face students did? This prompted a brief, but rich response from some of the participants. Jake was most vocal as he conceded that he had thought hard about the question and what it might mean for his teaching of voice.

> …the first thing I thought was "no, no, no…I try to represent myself the same in both" because I don't want to be fake or something…. but then I started thinking…um, I think I'm more professional online than in the classroom….and I was thinking about this, uh, going, just briefly back to teaching voice….like I try to make it fun I make it *inviting*, but there's a certain voice to the way my course is setup that, um it just translates differently and I think it's because I'm trying to set expectations. And I'm trying to, um I'm trying to set the tone for how a course is gonna go.

The others recognized his interest in keeping things professional online if only to be sure that everyone was on track and knew what was expected. This seemed to coincide with their beliefs about an online course being more about expectations than relaxed expressiveness. Earlier, Mary indicated her presence may be contributing to that sense of expectations and Jake seems to justify that view here as well.

Although professionalism was a word used often to describe the instructors' online presence, a number of participants recognized their own use of multiple voices depending on the purpose of the particular activity. The desire to establish authority in the online courses was strong, but the longing to have fun was also significant. Although instructors felt this balance was important, some felt it could be a burden as well.

> …here's my authoritative voice, "these are the guidelines and the rules you *must* follow. This is what you *must* do". Here's my "this is interesting and we're

gonna have fun. Here's my now being silly, okay back to the work" I mean you just can't write that many voices.

Mary agreed and added that at times she felt she had to have twenty-three voices prepared at any given time. Jake did not feel that it was a particular burden to attempt to present some of the sides of his personality through various online activities, but he did feel that the environment could be restrictive and take some of the spontaneity out of the class.

> …I would never in my notes and, uh, in a video for an online class use the word "shit". But in a face to *face* class, I I might just be like, you know, if if we're all kinda jokin' around I might throw it out there. You know, cause, cause the mood of the…the context of that particular class session, it's okay.

Understanding their own role in the online environment was just one challenge with regard to online communication techniques. The instructors explained that part of the challenge of teaching writing online in particular was that they were not only correcting the writing students were doing in their assignments, but also in their other course communications. As online work is still largely written, communication that would normally be verbal in a face to face environment was most likely written through emails, discussion boards, blogs, and other tools. Instructors found themselves struggling with this shift. Kate noticed the difficulty she sometimes had with the email correspondence she received from students who were asking questions about grades or assignment criteria in particular.

> I have to step back a moment and not get offended at the way that they just worded that email…aaannd, try to think, "okay, how can I teach them that that's not a a good way of approaching a professor or *anyone* via email" This is a learning moment. Uh, also not, not escalate the situation if they're already very upset with something.

While she found that difficult to handle at times, she also recognized the value in such a learning opportunity. Students were corrected on such offensive correspondence and this opportunity is far less likely in a face to face environment.

Jenna had less concern with offensive emails and more with coaching her students on the questions they should be asking in such an environment to advance their skills. Her argument was that her students online did not understand right away what it means to submit a specific question. The others quickly and enthusiastically agreed: "how many times can I say "uh, if you have specific questions, please let me *know*. Let me know your specific questions". And they don't…"

Kate agreed and wonders why students often overlook instructions, announcements, and emails asking them for *specific* questions. She then debated her use of text communication vs. symbols to deliver this message.

> …I know that it's not just what I'm trying to project 'cause sometimes I wanna, you know, just use a little smiley face to let them know that this was….this was happy. Uh, but then I think "really? And I teach writing? You're supposed to get this tone across with your *woooords*

Although it is beyond the scope of this study, a review of the use of symbols online to express emotions or to emphasize points may assist instructors like Kate in determining if and when such symbols should be used to communicate online.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

Teaching students to use voice in writing has been a high priority for many English faculty in the U.S. There has been much debate over a consistent definition of voice and even when it should be taught. First year composition, considered a gateway course in college, may be the only opportunity for English faculty to affect the writing abilities of students of other majors. As such, the desire to encourage student voice at this crucial juncture is significant for some. But *how* can it be taught?

This case study sought to examine the ways in which students learn to develop voice in their writing through an online first-year composition course. The study focused on one broad research question and two sub-questions:

1. How do students develop their voice through content involving cultural immersion in a first-year composition online class?

   a.   How does online course architecture (including tools and structure) encourage or discourage this development?

   b.   In what way does course pedagogy encourage or discourage this development?

To find answers to these questions, a case study approach was used to carefully examine three areas: student perspective, instructor perspective, and course structure. Student perspective was investigated through online interviews and analysis of their

activities within their FYC online course. Instructor perspective was reviewed in the same way. Careful field notes on course architecture provided insight into the third area.

In addition, a focus group of FYC online instructors provided a different perspective. The case study investigated only one FYC online course with an instructor with limited experience in such an environment. Other courses and pedagogies were examined through the focus group to better understand the practices of others and how they might be applied to future courses. Interviews and the focus group conversation were transcribed and categorized per commonly accepted practices of qualitative data analysis (Merriam, 1998). The researcher used a case study approach in phase one with an additional generic qualitative approach in phase two.

MAJOR FINDINGS

It would appear as though a FYC online course has great potential to promote student use of voice in writing, but has a number of obstacles to overcome before realizing such potential. As focus group participants have pointed out, online courses have a reputation for being simple and relatively easy. Unfortunately, this is not the reality for the vast majority. The obstacles to learning voice in particular can range from technology issues to simple time management concerns. I found that online course architecture and pedagogy can be effectively used to facilitate voice if certain, important conditions are met.

Developing Voice through content in online First-year composition

As the results show, there is great potential for students to develop their voice in online FYC courses. However, as the data indicate a number of conditions should be present for this to occur:

- Clear communication of expectations between instructor and student

- Feedback from multiple sources

- Time in class focused on voice

- Passion for the content

The faculty in this study confirmed that strong communication between themselves and their students can solve a wide array of problems in the classroom. What constitutes strong communication can vary significantly from case to case, however, and in this particular case study the concern seemed to be over assignment expectations.

Student participants were quite frustrated at not receiving clear directions on what was expected of their essay assignments in particular. Although the guidelines were one page long and over 600 words each, the students still felt disappointment when they received their drafts with a considerable number of comments and recommended changes. Mary expressed concern that her students were asking for too much guidance up front and was quite reluctant to provide a model or rubric with such strict guidelines.

The notion of clear expectations was also addressed by the instructors in the focus group. Although most participants agreed with Mary that writing was an expressive activity and that students should find their own way, Jenna disagreed. She provided very strict guidelines for discussion board responses as well as all writing activities. She seemed to have no concern over students finding their own way and argued that if she did not provide guidelines she would not see the kind of quality in the work she expected.

Although not all students may like this approach, it seems to be what the student participants here would have wanted. The directions Mary distributed were lengthy and detailed, but applied to all papers in general. Students like Alicia and Janice received comments particular to their papers and choice of wording. It is possible that first-year composition students are rather unsure of themselves and have received such strict guidance from their high school English teachers and other courses in college that they prefer to be told specifically what to write. This was the dilemma identified by all instructors in the study.

On the other hand, both Alicia and Janice expressed resentment for feeling as though they needed to express more of their instructor's view than their own after receiving their draft comments. Interestingly, there was little commentary from the students regarding their feelings about their progress. Although Blackboard allows students to submit comments with each submission, very few did so. Mary indicated that some of her clarification of expectations came through emails, but there was little discussion of phone calls and no web conferencing was used. The writing process can be complex for many students and it is possible that the use of more synchronous communication may have clarified some of the issues for students. An audio or video explanation was also suggested by Alicia as another way of describing expectations for students.

Alicia expressed interest not only in multiple presentations of Mary's specific expectations, but she also conveyed a desire to learn the content from multiple sources. She had taken online courses in the past that had used different tools and displayed some disappointment in the largely text-based format of the course. Mary, too, identified the

value of outside resources. There was, however, an essential difference of approach between student and instructor. Alicia expected these resources to be furnished in the course itself. Mary expected students to search for the materials they thought would supplement their learning on their own. It would seem that a FYC online course that either contains outside materials suitable for course aims or directs students in how they might find such resources would be most beneficial.

Instructors in the study identified another important aspect of providing multiple perspectives in FYC online. Clearly, providing directions in multiple formats and providing content from multiple sources can be beneficial for students. In addition, instructors stressed the value of receiving specific feedback from multiple sources. Focus group participants all placed high value on the writing centers at their respective institutions. Online students in particular could email their submissions, others could attend a virtual writing center, and one could even use an automated tool (write point) to review the basic grammar issues before an instructor reviewed the work for development of ideas and voice. Jake in particular remarked on how important it was for students to hear feedback from this "third place" as he called it.

Another important characteristic of FYC online courses that encourage voice appears to be time well spent. Each instructor in the focus group indicated a limit to the amount of time they could or would devote to course activities. Ideally, this time would be spent focused on student ideas and interactions to help develop their understanding of the content and the expression of that understanding in their written work. Unfortunately, this is not always the case in online FYC. Much of the time, instructors noted, was spent on technical problems or on constructing basic grammatical knowledge. Both of these

pursuits, they argued, were a waste of time in FYC and took away from the time they could have spent working with students on more advanced skills and in developing ideas. Based on the results, two important components need to be present to allow time for students to develop voice under an instructor's guidance.

First, technology must be not only reliable, but also usable. Although it was clearly annoying to faculty when their technology failed, participants spent a good deal of time debating over certain functions of their technology that did not work as expected. All recognized that technology use requires a learning curve and all were willing to learn the new tools. However, there were certain basic functionalities missing that they felt would make their jobs easier. Of the many tools discussed, discussion boards were seen as the most cumbersome to review and then grade. This was unfortunate as discussion boards were also identified as valuable to students learning voice as a forum to explore their ideas. However, it is also important to point out that the faculty were unaware of the grade forum feature within the course and were not using pedagogical practices to reduce their level of frustration (namely responding to boards as a participant and grading posts as two separate activities).

Another concern for instructor participants was the amount of time they were spending answering student questions about the technology. Kate pointed out that much of this burden falls on her as the online instructor because students do not wish to be shuffled about when they have technology concerns. The literature also indicated that online instructors not only carry most of the technology burden, but also serve as a link to the university for remote students (Sher, 2009). Although there are tools available to assist in these efforts, they were deemed either unreliable or not functional by instructors.

These additional responsibilities place an added time constraint for instructors and, consequently, leave less time to explore content and construct voice.

In addition to technical difficulties, instructors in this study also found themselves spending a good deal of time with students on basic grammar and essay construction. These are skills, they felt, that should have been learned before their arrival to college. This was a frustration shared by some authors in the literature review as well (Teorey, 2003). Although participants struggled with this (as it appears many teaching FYC do), they also recognized the value of those third-party readers Jake mentioned. If these are used effectively, there is more time for instructors to spend teaching voice.

Clear expectations, feedback from multiple sources, and time all play significant roles in student development of voice in online FYC courses. Each of these areas, however, was emphasized more heavily either by the student or the instructor participants. One important component that was agreed upon firmly by both was the importance of content. Mary explained in her very first interview (and reiterated in the focus group) her belief that voice came from an author's strong grasp of the content and a sense of expertise. She remarked that her consistent use of the word "expert" in the course encouraged students to take control of their work. That sense of authority could then be seen in a strong voice throughout their writing. The students agreed that part of their problem in attaining voice in their writing stemmed from a lack of confidence where the content was concerned.

Mary was fairly confident, as many would be, that the topic of choice for her course (food culture) would be accessible to all of her students. Surprisingly, Alicia did not feel terribly confident with this topic and explained in a follow up conversation that

she may not have chosen that particular course if she knew of the theme in advance. Although Alicia may be an isolated case in regard to her desire to know a course theme in advance of registration, her concerns demonstrate the link between confidence in one's subject and a sense of voice.

Clear expectations, feedback from multiple sources, time, and content expertise may all help students attain voice in their online FYC courses. Other qualities found in the study apply specifically to online course architecture and online pedagogy.

Developing Voice Through Online Course Architecture

How should a course be structured to encourage student voice in writing? Although the importance of a great instructor cannot be diminished, there are certain aspects of online course architecture that may also facilitate this effort. FYC online courses that contain multimedia, opportunities for synchronous interaction and outside resources are in a good position to encourage voice.

As previously noted, students must feel engaged with their material in order to develop confidence, and thus voice. As the results show, online courses possess very different qualities when compared to face to face environments. Focus group participants noticed that their students had come to expect an entertainment value of some kind when enrolling in their online courses. Although the course observed did teach writing, there was an over-abundance of text-based content and a noticeable lack of multimedia. This did not escape Alicia's attention.

Possibly because she had taken online courses with such elements before, she preferred a video lecture to the text notes she received when learning certain concepts. She also remarked that possibly listening to or seeing the lectures of other professors may help her better understand her work. The literature also supports using multimedia

elements for online FYC courses as well as synchronous opportunities for students to explore content in more depth and in a more personal way than can be done through asynchronous activities (Nielsen, 2010).

The Blackboard system used in this case study contains some opportunities for synchronous chat, but it was quite limited when compared to the tools available to the other focus group participants in different institutions. Mary informed me that some instructors in her institution use this chat feature to hold virtual office hours, but that she had not attempted to use it at the time of the summer course.

Web conferencing tools allow for synchronous interaction between participants. Most versions offer opportunities to present multimedia, chat (either through text or voice), and even break into groups. These activities could (if used properly) encourage better understanding of the material and give students an opportunity to receive feedback from multiple sources. Kate's institution used Wimba for this effort. Although she could see some value in it, she stopped using it fairly early due to technical problems. Again, reliability and accessibility to the technology affected instructors' efforts to use tools that might encourage voice.

As stated in the previous section, both instructors and students identified the value of outside resources in understanding the content and, thus, developing voice. The use of web conferencing as well as multimedia within the course environment both address this concern but were clearly underutilized or completely abandoned by participants.

Another important aspect of FYC online course architecture that facilitates voice involves the use of activities designed to help students develop ideas and voice that are either not graded or worth little when compared to the final grade. Although not

explicitly stated in the interview, students expressed an underlying anxiety about the response of the instructor when submitting essay assignments in particular.

In this particular course, essay drafts were not graded, but were identified as submitted or not submitted in the grade center. Only in the third essay were students encouraged to share their introductions with their peers through a discussion board. Other tools available in the LMS might have facilitated student sharing of work and peer review such as group sharing tools and blogs. These have been identified as significant to learning voice in the literature review (Tryon, 2006; Warshauser & Meei-Ling, 2011).

Blogs in particular have been used effectively to encourage the open exchange of ideas and feedback so desired by the students in this study. Most LMS offer a blog tool within the system, but other FYC courses have used public blogs to encourage feedback from those beyond their own institution (Tyron, 2006).

Another valuable strategy identified by instructors was the use of group work and peer review in the writing process. Although they all used this in their face to face courses, many were reluctant to use much group work online. Kate, in particular, was adamant about not using it in her online courses. She expressed a great deal of frustration with the process and flatly refused to consider applying it again.

Jake agreed that it could be difficult to coordinate at times, but contested that there was value in online group work. The fact that participants did not see each other, he argued, allowed for interesting pairs of students and exciting learning experiences. Blackboard was the LMS used by both Kate and Jake and the most recent version they've been using has had some technical difficulties with the group tools. This may be one cause for the frustration. Other participants encouraged collaboration through less

complicated tools like discussion boards. Although this allowed students to review one another's ideas in a vague sense, it did not provide the kind of depth of commentary so valuable in group or peer review processes. Again, providing synchronous opportunities or even using some of the more dynamic tools may allow for greater interaction between students in the writing process.

A strong sense of community online is extremely important to student comfort level and thus development of voice. This can most effectively be done through collaboration opportunities "Facilitating interaction is time-consuming and often demanding. It is easy to argue that interaction is not required for some subjects, some contexts, or some students." (Russo & Benson 2005). Most of the instructors expressed frustration with the notion of group work online. Clearly it is not an easy task. The instructors did, however, identify the value of group work. The instructor, in turn, needs to be supported in this endeavor by the employing institution through training opportunities or resources. Of course, providing for this can be difficult if an instructor's time is consumed by technical difficulties or reviewing basic components of composition that should have been reviewed prior to the course start.

These tools and resources can greatly benefit online FYC students in their pursuit to use voice in writing. However, there is also an important obstacle that must be identified and eliminated during the development of such a course. Clear course organization plays a role in an online course. As mentioned earlier, if time is spent on technology usability, there is little time left for voice. Usability is normally not easily controlled by the instructor. Course organization, on the other hand, is. Focus group members mentioned a number of times that loading students with too much work or

having them "click" in too many locations to find information was cumbersome and not conducive to good work.

Instructors regularly targeted the LMS as the culprit for such activity. Although their courses were not seen by the researcher, it is possible that better organizational strategies might assist in this effort. It is also important to note that the instructor view of course materials and that of the student are remarkably different. This may lead some instructors to believe that the course content is more disorganized than it actually is. Of course, the system in question, Blackboard, has been criticized for lack of usability in the past, so the criticism of these instructors is not entirely unwarranted.

FYC online courses that possess these elements (media-rich content, synchronous activities, opportunities to explore writing without significant grade consequences, and those that are highly organized) can create an environment poised for teaching voice. Ultimately, however, it is the pedagogy of the instructor that most heavily influences student writing with a strong voice.

Developing Voice Through Online Pedagogy

In both the instructor interview and the focus group, participants were asked to identify which tools they felt were most beneficial to students learning voice. Of all the respondents, Jenna was most direct. She argued that none of them were directly tied to voice in her view. Rather her interactions with the students, through formal assignment feedback and informal discussion of course content, were most responsible for her students learning voice in their writing.

As seen previously, there are several aspects of online course architecture that can be used to assist instructors in this effort. However, instructors must know how to use

these tools well in order for them to be effective. As the results demonstrated, three

particular strategies may be employed to benefit students searching for their voice.

Maintaining a balance between the wishes of the instructors and students, appropriate use

of technology, careful consideration of workload, and using all course communication as

a learning opportunity can all assist this effort.

It became clear by the final focus group that instructors and students were not

seeing this situation in the same way. Both students expressed frustration with not truly

understanding assignment expectations. Their grade for the course was also a persistent

concern. Both Mary, their instructor, and the other instructors in the focus group

expressed frustration with students so concerned over specific criteria and grades.

Repeatedly participants stressed the importance of the learning process over specific

criteria and grades. The stark difference in perspectives caused considerable

miscommunication and possibly missed opportunities to learn voice.

Balance, it seems, between these perspectives is required to maintain an

environment conducive to learning voice. Instructors who learn to balance the focus on

the learning process with a student's concern over grades may find they gain the trust and

respect of students who then feel more confident to take risks and grow in their writing

skills. Similarly, instructors who provide opportunities for exploration yet recognize a

student's need for guidelines may find their students developing their voice sooner in the

semester than anticipated.

One pedagogical approach that may be particularly useful in this respect is inquiry

learning. Although definitions of inquiry learning vary significantly, this process

essentially requires the learner to lead much of the learning leaving the instructor as more

of a guide. Students formulate ideas about the content based upon their past experiences, review new materials to supplement those experiences, and gradually construct new knowledge (Kuhn, Black, Keselman & Kaplan, 2000). This is all done with the consistent guidance of the instructor. For a FYC online course, it may be possible to construct an inquiry-based assignment with various benchmarks to be reviewed by the instructor. If students are given more choice in their pursuits, this may improve their content knowledge and lead to a sense of control over their learning.

Balance is not the only skill to be applied for FYC online to be successful in teaching voice. Although all instructors appeared excited about the use of technology in their classrooms, they also recognized the time constraint of learning new technologies and the importance of leveraging the technology so that it may be most effective in their course. As Jake so clearly put it, you have to have a reason to swing the hammer. Knowing which technologies are applicable and which are best left alone is an important skill for instructors of courses with an already dense workload. For some instructors, this can be learned through training either from their employing institution or from past graduate school experience. For others, it must come from experience. Unfortunately for many graduate students who hope to become professors, there is little emphasis on teaching as an important skill and even less on technology. Mary, for instance, was enrolled in only one pedagogy course in her graduate experience and never took formal courses in teaching technology. She has, however, taken advantage of some conference opportunities and informal trainings. Even so, when a formal course in online teaching was offered at her institution, she declined. A pressing schedule prevented her from accepting the training.

Other participants in the focus group also remarked on their delight in having an opportunity to collaborate with other FYC online instructors, but also identified the difficulty in coordinating such a meeting with busy schedules. This was a particular concern for participants who taught for more than one institution. Despite the difficulty, it would seem that such meetings would be extremely beneficial for instructors who are still learning what technology is applicable to their field and what can be ignored.

In addition to determining which technology is best used, understanding the workload of the course and how to best manage it would be a valuable benefit to such collaborative meetings. Instructors who have taught FYC online for a number of semesters discussed their gradual reduction of workload for their students. They eventually came to understand that a heavy number of assignments was not required for students to understand the material. The reduction of some of the assigned activities, they noted, left more room in the course schedule to discuss concepts such as voice.

A final way for instructors to encourage voice through pedagogy lies in those unforeseen "teachable moments" possible in online coursework. Kate voiced this concern with students who had difficulty communicating through email. She expressed frustration with students who did not appear to understand how their language could be seen as offensive to an instructor, but also pointed out that correcting students in their word choice was an important teaching moment. Although voice can clearly be taught through a number of assignments such as essays and discussion boards, written communication is still the norm in most online courses. Communication mediums such as email can be used to encourage students to think deeply about their goals and intended

audience. If instructors take advantage of such opportunities, students can learn to apply these concepts to their more formal work in the class.

Results of this particular study show that there are a number of tools and strategies that might be employed in FYC online to help students find their voice in writing. Some of the suggestions arose from interviews and the focus group, but a number came from the literature or the researcher's journal and were unknown to the participants. When it comes to technology use, quite often instructors don't know what they don't know. In follow up conversations and informal chats after the focus group, several were surprised to learn that some of the functionality they thought was missing from the system was actually available. They simply didn't know to look for it. This was one of several surprises that came as a result of this inquiry.

UNEXPECTED FINDINGS

In qualitative research, results often veer into unexpected areas. This study was no exception. From the instructor perspective, I was surprised at the number of concerns with technology and the high level of frustration with its adoption. Although I was aware there would be some differences between myself and the participants in terms of technology use and pedagogy, I was not entirely prepared for how stark those differences would be. In comparing notes from the research journal and the transcriptions, there was a level of frustration with the technology I simply could not relate to. Given my own background in technology, I understood how to work around those problems. It became obvious that the instructors in this study were not privy to those solutions, nor did they feel they should have to know them based on their remarks of usability.

They were also unaware of some of the more common "tricks of the trade" that might reduce their frustration. For example, there were a number of concerns over the cumbersome nature of the discussion board. I was confused by their frustration, though, as my own approach had always been to review the boards as a participant and then grade the posts in a different mindset. When grading, a "grade forum" feature can be enabled making this process quite simple. There appeared to be either a pedagogical or technical disconnect between my own experiences with the LMS and those of the participants.

What was important, I noted in the journal, was that these were skills I had acquired through years of training and experience. Upon my first review, I was surprised at their level of frustration, but after further reflection, I recalled my own days in early online work. Many of the same annoyances were present for me as well.

What is significant about this finding is that the technology can be such a cause of frustration for instructors that it has the potential to severely impair their ability or willingness to focus on voice with their students. It is important to note, however, that the focus on reliability and usability by the instructors revealed a lack of understanding about common pedagogical practices to work around technology problems. Providing technical information in the course introduction, maintaining flexibility with deadlines, and using tracking features in blackboard to identify student difficulties can all give much needed relief to instructors.

From the student perspective, the biggest surprise came in their apparent confusion over expectations. In reviewing the criteria for the assignments, it seems Mary had included almost everything students needed to get started on the assignment. What students apparently had come to expect, however, is that following the guidelines as

clearly as they knew how would result in very few remarks, if any. They didn't see criteria as a starting point, but rather what they needed to have by the end of the process. Getting students to understand how writing courses assess learning differently would be key to moving the focus to the writing process.

This stems from two significant concerns for the FYC online students in this study: a lack of control and a concern over grades. Instructors who are hoping students will find their own way are not aware of the severity of these concerns for students. The apparent mysterious nature of the process by which they are assessed causes stress to students who then focus on what they believe the instructor really wants as opposed to their own development of voice in writing.

Although both concerns with technology and misunderstanding about expectations were unanticipated, they are two of the most significant findings to understanding voice in FYC online. They also may inform some of the key implications for action. Before addressing conclusions, however, it is also important to note that there are important limits to the generalization of the findings.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

As the study results indicate, students have the potential to develop their voice in writing in online FYC courses if the following conditions exist: clear communication of expectations between instructor and student, feedback from multiple sources, time in class focused on voice, and passion for the content.

Course architecture specifically can facilitate voice if the course contains multimedia, opportunities for synchronous interaction and outside resources.

Additionally, providing opportunities for students to explore their writing with little consequences to their grade may also create an environment more conducive to learning voice. Certain pedagogical practices can also encourage the use of voice. Instructors who maintaining a balance between their objectives and those of the student, leverage their technology in appropriate ways, give careful consideration to the workload, and use course communication as a learning opportunity can all assist this effort. Given these conclusions, two important adjustments may improve the ability of FYC online to teach voice.

First, instructors' frustrations with technology must be addressed. Participants' concerns stem from two important issues: reliability and usability. Reliability of instructional technology is imperative to the ability of instructors to focus on the writing process and development of voice with their students. Although this is largely out of their hands, clear channels of communication between instructors and information technology departments can improve any serious impediments. Usability issues may originate with the technology itself, but might also be managed through various technological trainings for faculty. For instance, focus group participants frustrated with an apparent inability to see the student view were unaware that this functionality did actually exist within their LMS. Universities that work to bridge the gap between faculty understanding of technology and IT may find this to be a less significant concern.

Focus group participants were also delighted to have an opportunity to discuss issues of teaching and technology with their colleagues. It became apparent that this opportunity does not present itself often, particularly if instructors are adjuncts. Institutions that either require pedagogical and technology related trainings or at least

provide opportunities for colleagues to visit and share best practices may find diminished frustration in FYC online faculty.

In addition to providing professional development opportunities, specific tools that were not discussed in either the literature review or among participants may help balance student desire for clarity with instructor desire for students to find their own way in the writing process. One pedagogical strategy that has been used involves student participation in the grading process. The form this strategy takes varies significantly from one course to the next, but may include asking student input on assignment guidelines or encouraging multiple drafts of work with detailed comments from students. Additionally, Calibrated Peer Review (http://cpr.molsci.ucla.edu/) is used by some institutions as a way of encouraging detailed peer review. Students submit writing assignments and are required to review peer work before obtaining the assessment of their own work.

An important tool is available in the LMS used by all participants for this effort and was entirely overlooked by participants: the interactive rubric. In the current version of Blackboard, rubrics may be created and attached to any assignment, discussion board, blog, etc. that can be tied to the grade center. This allows the instructor to clearly identify important criteria in a writing assignment and assess the work according to those criteria. The tool is very simple and can be used across any course using the current Blackboard system. Although it is only currently editable by the instructor, future versions may allow for student input of rubric criteria. Allowing an initial student submission with their own assessment of their work might better inform instructors on where students are

in their writing process. It also clarifies for students how the criteria compare to the work they are submitting.

Such a strategy would likely give students more a sense of control over their learning and ease anxieties related to their grade. On the surface, this would seem to be too rigid for some instructor participants who criticized strict guidelines for writing. However, it is important to note that rubrics are highly flexible and simply reflect the values each instructor holds in writing regardless of whether or not they explicitly communicate those values. Such evaluation can communicate specific, commonly-accepted criteria and simultaneously include areas for those "intangibles" so often used to identify strong writing. They can also reflect the aspects of the writing process most valued by each individual instructor. Review of these criteria by both parties provides the specificity in grading that today's online students so desperately crave while simultaneously focusing on the writing process.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although much has been written about online learning, online communication, FYC courses, and faculty adoption of technology, there is still much to know about voice as it relates to online writing courses. Upon reviewing the results, a few questions persisted. What if technology *is* reliable and usable? Ok, we know what the instructors think. What about the students? If writing assessment becomes a collaborative effort between instructors and students, will it impact student voice in a positive way?

Clearly, participants felt that if technology is not reliable and usable, there would simply be no time to discuss more nuanced aspects of writing like voice. But what if the

technology were reliable and usable? Would this necessarily translate into a shift in the instructor's role from "IT liason" to "voice coach"? More research would have to be done with instructors who feel they do have reliable technology and support for students' basic writing skills to make conclusions relating to such a question.

Another question raised that appears to still be unanswered is the student perspective. Two student interpretations does not a solid theory make. Much of the research on voice relies heavily on instructor perspectives. Although some of the literature does incorporate student responses to assignments or field notes of researcher observations, very little involves surveys or interviews asking students about their views on the subject. This case study showed a distinct difference between instructor and student perspectives. To better understand this split, more research would have to inquire into the student experience.

Finally, if writing assessment becomes more collaborative through student and instructor co-created and assessed rubrics as suggested, will this necessarily translate to stronger voice for students? Research has shown certain benefits to such strategies including increased student confidence and clearer communication of expectations between instructor and student. However, there is no clear tie to its impact on student voice. Follow-up studies may provide more insight into this question.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions-Student

1. What did you learn about yourself as a student, writer, or online learner in this course?

2. How would you describe your voice in writing?

3. Do you feel the course helped you find that "voice" in writing?

4. If so, what course components helped you most and in what ways? If not, what do you think should have been done differently?

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions-Instructor

1. How did you come to teach composition?

2. What do you see as the most important things to teach students in first-year composition?

3. What do you think are the most significant benefits and challenges to teaching first-year composition?

4. What is "voice" in writing to you?

5. What things do you look for in student work or correspondence that tells you whether or not they are learning voice?

    a.   Please review the list of assignments for this course. Which ones do you feel would tell you something about the development of voice?

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions-Focus Group

1. Please share some of your background and explain how you came to teach composition.

2. What do you think are the most important things to teach students in FYC?

3. How would you define "voice" in writing?

4. Of the books and activities selected for all FYC courses, which do you think are the most valuable in teaching voice?

5. Do you think there are other things that could be done to better teach voice?

Interview Questions-modified

1. How would you define "voice" in writing and how important do you think it is to teach compared to other course objectives?

2. What have you personally liked or disliked about teaching FYC (first-year composition) online?

3. Whether you use them or not, which tools are available in your online environment that could be useful in teaching students "voice" in writing?

4. If there are tools or methods mentioned by others that you don't use, is there a particular reason you don't use them?

5.   Do you think your online students see you differently as a person or instructor than your face to face students do? If so, why do you think that is and do you think it affects the way they learn voice?

6.   For those of you who have taught 3 or more online courses, how do you think you've changed in terms of your approach to the content and your interaction with students?

7.   Any other topics or questions related to online composition and learning voice you'd like to discuss that weren't covered here?

APPENDIX D

Essay #1 – Personal Essay (15%)
In 4-5 pages, you will discuss your own history and/or identity as an eater. Which "food cultures" have played a part in your shopping and eating habits? How conscious are you of your decisions about food? What thought processes influence them? This essay should include a central theme and thesis, vivid description, rhetorical appeals, and use of field research (an interview with a parent or relative, for example).

For this essay, you will develop a central idea or thesis using illustrations from your own experience and preexisting knowledge, as well as from an interview or other field research. Your thesis should be neither too broad nor too narrow. An overly broad thesis is generally a fairly obvious or non-controversial statement. An overly narrow one generally doesn't serve to illustrate a larger point, or lacks relevance to your potential readers. A strong thesis tends to include both an assertion and a reason for or explanation of that assertion, something that could take the basic form: I believe _____ because of _____. This is an oversimplification, but suggests the two components you should seek to include. There is more on what makes a good thesis in the *Writing at Fontbonne* booklet (on Blackboard), the *Pocket Style Manual,* and *They Say, I Say.*

Your introduction should provide your reader with context for your discussion ("they say"), and present your thesis ("I say"). This may take one paragraph, or may take more. Your body paragraphs, then, should walk your reader through a thought process that aims to illustrate your central idea, and should convince him or her that it's valid and compelling by providing detailed supporting points.

Your support, as this is a personal essay, may include anecdotes from your life or the lives of friends or family members. It may include information you've learned from teachers, parents, friends, books, films, etc. It may include theoretical or hypothetical examples that you can imagine, or that fit with what you know of the world (for example, you might narrate "a typical fast food experience"). If you choose to use invented anecdotes, they must be detailed enough to ring true to your reader's own experience. Your essay *must* include material based on your field research.

All of your evidence should be presented in your voice and from your point of view. At the same time, be sure your supporting points approach your topic from different angles, employing more than one type of appeal. In one example, you might tell a personal story that appeals to your reader's emotions, asking him or her to sympathize or relate to you. In another, you might appeal to your reader's intellect or sense of logic by describing a chain of events that has a necessary result (2+2=4), or connecting facts to reveal a larger picture. Finally, you might include a quotation from a person of authority, or draw on a lesson you learned from someone you admire, or discuss the point of view of a respected public leader. These various components may come in the form of individual points or stories, or you may want to tell one extended story that takes three or four paragraphs and allows you to do all of these things along the way.

Finally, your conclusion not only should recap key points from the body of your essay, but also should reinforce the significance of your discussion to your reader and the public at large. Your conclusion should answer the question: "Why should we care about what you've just told us?"

The essay should be typed, double-spaced, and stapled, with 12-point font, 1 inch margins, a descriptive title, and numbered pages. Include your name, our class title, and my name on the first page.