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doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/1059567>

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FEMINIST ONLINE WRITING COURSES: COLLABORATION, COMMUNITY ACTION,
AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

by

LETIZIA GUGLIELMO

Under the Direction of Lynée Lewis Gaillet

ABSTRACT

As fully online course offerings continue to grow at colleges and universities around the country, we are faced with the challenge of preserving what we value in first-year writing while making the affordances of online environments work for our students. This dissertation explores how the online writing instructor, guided by feminist pedagogy and civic rhetoric, can begin to shift the center of power within the course, allowing students to become co-teachers and promoting the social construction of knowledge central to first-year writing. Facilitated by computer-mediated communication technologies, this approach relies on online activities that invite ongoing contributions from students, promote interactivity within the course, and facilitate a collaborative learning environment that can foster student success in online distance learning. Having studied the effects of these feminist moves on two sections of online first-year research and writing courses, I examine in this text their impact on the development of community,

students' impressions of their place within the community, and the decentering of the virtual learning space. Specifically, I explore how students can write to shape and to change our online community and how students tie their work within the course to their development as writers and critical thinkers. Ultimately, in combining the goals of feminist pedagogy, first-year writing, and civic rhetoric in our design and delivery of online writing courses, we can begin to fulfill our vision for significant learning experiences for our students that will be as good as or better than their experiences in the traditional classroom.

INDEX WORDS: Online learning, Online writing courses, First-year writing, Feminist pedagogy, Community, Composition pedagogy, Collaboration, Civic rhetoric, Civic participation

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LETIZIA GUGLIELMO

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University

2009

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Letizia Guglielmo
2009

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AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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May 2009

For my grandmothers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my faculty colleagues at Kennesaw State University for their ongoing support and encouragement throughout my doctoral studies and through the completion of this project, specifically Dr. Laura Dabundo who believed I would pursue the Ph.D. even before I knew I was ready. Thank you to the many professors at Georgia State University who guided me through the program and, in particular, to Dr. Beth Burmester and Dr. Baotong Gu for their insights both as classroom teachers and doctoral committee members. To Dr. Lynée Lewis Gaillet—my committee chair, mentor, and friend—your guidance, support, and willingness to collaborate has been essential to my success in this program and throughout this project; I eagerly look ahead to our future work together. Finally, I wish to thank my family for their years of unwavering encouragement, for their steadfast belief in the power of education, and for their quiet patience—I share this with each of you.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In a 1999 *College English* article, Chris Anson wondered how distance education and “rapidly developing technologies” would impact what we know to be fundamental to successful writing pedagogy (“Distant” 48). “The teaching of writing,” he explains, “unlike some other disciplines, is founded on the assumption that students learn well by reading and writing with each other, responding to each other’s drafts, negotiating revisions, discussing ideas, sharing perspectives, and finding some level of trust as collaborators in their mutual development” (54). Furthermore, Anson argues, distance education complicates the teacher-role and may perpetuate the belief that anyone can teach first-year writing (“Distant” 58, 60). Articulating the concerns of many compositionists, he leaves readers with these questions: “*How do new communication technologies change the relationships between teachers and students? [. . .] How might the concept of classroom community change with the advent of new technologies? [. . .] What are the consequences of increasing the distance between students and teachers?[. . .] Will the benefits of drawing in isolated clients outweigh the disadvantages of electronically ‘isolating’ even those who are nearby?*” (61-62)

Perhaps it is not surprising that many of these questions still are in need of answers and substantive research, yet despite the concerns, over the last decade, online education has become “[. . .] the fastest growing form of distance education in the United States” (Woods and Keeler 263). According to I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, authors of *Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning*, “Nearly twenty percent of all U.S. higher education students were taking at least one online course in the fall of 2006” (1), and “[a] large majority (69 percent) of academic leaders believe that student demand for online learning is still growing” (2). While

some administrators were initially attracted to the potential financial savings and in some cases the financial gain that would come with commercializing these courses, Allen and Seaman's research suggests that "[o]nline [learning] is not seen as a way to lower costs," and that "reduced or contained costs are along the least-cited objectives for online education" (2). When it comes to *teaching* these courses, however, many educators, as Anson notes, are most concerned by instructor workload—both in preparation and delivery—issues of access, training, and technology support; a compromising of pedagogical goals; and the potential loss of intellectual property rights (Allen and Seaman; McGinn; Noble "Part One"; Noble, "Part Two"; Oliver; Peterson; Blakelock and Smith "Distance"; Samuels; Singh and Pan; S. Taylor; Woods and Keeler). Compositionists in particular are alarmed that "[t]he fundamental goals of distance-learning classes appear to be driven by corporate visions rather than by academic standards" (Peterson 360-61; see also Brady 133). More troubling in this discussion is that "[r]esearch to examine teaching and learning in computer-mediated environments has barely kept pace with the growing demand for such courses, and faculty pressured to try online instruction modes typically learn as they go," an approach that undoubtedly impacts student learning (Sujo de Montes, et al. 251). Furthermore, Gregory Farrington and Stephen Bronack echo other scholars' calls claiming, "It's time for creative and careful research to ensure that we're making the most of education in the digital age" (par. 3). Although initial findings in online teaching research are important, "they don't provide the kind of understanding needed to make truly informed decisions about the value of online education" (Farrington and Bronack par. 8).

If we come back to the questions posed by Anson, focusing specifically on students who may enroll in online courses, we are left wondering if these students will feel isolated, disconnected, and reluctant to ask for help from an instructor they cannot see, finally deciding to

drop the course mid-semester, or if they will have a course experience that offers them similar or better opportunities than they would receive in a traditional classroom setting. What is certain with respect to online distance education is that most colleges and universities are offering these courses to meet the demands and needs of students (Cooper, “Anatomy” par. 1). Understandably, some students may enroll in online courses by default when other sections are closed or simply because the course is required for their major or as a general education requirement, yet in my own experiences teaching online courses for nearly five years, most students at my institution choose online learning because of convenience. Balancing fulltime work, family, and other commitments, students are attracted to courses that allow them flexibility and untraditional schedules. Because course activities and information “can be stored and accessed by students asynchronously,” Zane Berge notes, the convenience of and “consistency” in course materials for the courses may outweigh how “labor intensive” they may become, both for the student and often for the instructor (23-24). Although Allen and Seaman’s study of institutions already engaged in online learning suggests that “[. . .] academic leaders of every institutional size and type cited ‘Students need more discipline to succeed in online courses’ as the most important barrier to the widespread adoption of online learning,” I am wondering if we truly have explored the ways in which teaching and course design impact student success in online learning (21).

As we work to meet the needs of online learners, research continues to illustrate the great potential in online courses across disciplines to increase access to higher education, to encourage students to become self-motivated learners, to speak to more than one learning style by providing multimodal education, and to shift the focus of the traditional classroom to one that is student-centered (Allen and Seaman; Canada; Cooper, “Anatomy”; Knowlton). Linda Cooper explains, “If the course is well designed and carefully implemented, online instruction can provide an

effective educational environment and can be an enjoyable experience for both students and instructor—particularly if the students are motivated and self-disciplined and the instructor maintains continuous interaction with them” (“Anatomy” par. 28), yet how do we determine what constitutes a “well-designed” course when most of us teaching online courses completed coursework in a traditional classroom setting? How can we ensure that our students are, in fact, “motivated and self-disciplined”?

Finding My Way

Initially, my own journey into online teaching was one of necessity and curiosity. I had been teaching first-year writing and world literature courses at Kennesaw State University (KSU) full-time since 2001 and began doctoral work at Georgia State University (GSU) during the 2004 summer semester. Since my schedule generally included teaching Monday through Thursday or during some semesters Monday through Friday—the result of a 5-5 teaching load with additional teaching in the summer—I had to find a way to work typical T/Th courses at GSU into my teaching schedule, and while I was aware that a few of my colleagues were offering online sections of their courses, I was not aware of any procedure for being selected to teach online courses at the time. Realizing that unassigned online sections were included on our course schedule for the Fall 2004 semester, I asked our Associate Chair to swap one of my face-to-face sections for a fully online second-semester first-year writing course, a course in which I already relied heavily on our Course Management System (CMS) and other online resources in the traditional classroom. Because I was already interested in Computers and Writing as I began my doctoral work, I took advantage of the summer semester to begin reading current scholarship on online learning and to develop my course well in advance of the fall semester. Although I spent much of my time during the summer months preparing for everything that I thought could go

wrong with the course and carefully crafting detailed course introductions, policy statements, assignment guidelines, and weekly schedules, what became most challenging for me while I taught the course—and what I did not anticipate—was the lack of substantial participation from students and the number of students that simply dropped the course or *disappeared* into cyberspace over the course of the semester. It was obvious to me even before beginning the course that the online environment would be different from what I was used to in teaching face-to-face (f2f), but I was puzzled by how difficult it became to transfer activities that had worked so well in the classroom to the virtual learning environment.

Over the next ten semesters, I continued reading studies on online teaching, research in computers and writing, and scholarship in feminist pedagogy and rhetoric as well as writing program administration related to other projects that I was pursuing. I was frustrated by the small body of research on online first-year writing courses given that these were the courses that I was teaching most often and because it was in our General Education program that we were beginning to increase our online course offerings at KSU. According to Allen and Seaman's report, "[. . .] more than 86 percent of those studying online are undergraduates" (7). Furthermore, as scholarship in composition studies and writing program administration reveals, first-year writing courses are taught most often by contingent faculty, the least supported and compensated group among university faculty. Although I was fortunate to be in a tenure-track position even before I completed my doctoral work, many of my colleagues teaching first-year writing were not and would not be supported, as I had been, to attend conferences and to pursue professional development if they were interested in teaching first-year writing online. Without this essential research in online teaching and learning, how can we ensure that we are making the most of online learning for first-year students? This research project grew out of those concerns.

Background, Design, and Methods

Drawing from scholarship both in rhetoric and composition and online learning across disciplines, during the Spring 2008 semester, I began a study to investigate the effects of feminism and civic participation on student success in online writing courses at KSU. Since I had struggled to understand why my online students seemed less engaged with the course assignments and activities than students had been in the f2f classroom, my larger goal as I began this study was to determine how a shift in traditional instructor and student roles could impact the online learning environment and promote increased student engagement and success. Although my more immediate focus for the study was my own first-year writing courses, my larger purpose was to envision a shift in roles that could be applied to online courses throughout the English department and across disciplines, one that might help first-time online instructors to approach online learning with student success in mind.

Currently “[. . .] the third-largest university in the University System of Georgia” (KSU, “About” par. 1), KSU offers a number of undergraduate and graduate programs to both traditional and returning students “in the northern suburbs of Atlanta and extending into northwest Georgia” (KSU, “Mission” par. 4). Although the university was originally founded as a junior college in 1963 and “opened its doors to 1,000 students in 1967” traditionally serving commuter students (KSU, “About” par. 9), significant growth and increases in enrollment as well as the addition and expansion of on-campus housing nearly every year since 2001 have significantly changed the face of KSU. According to the *Kennesaw State University Strategic Plan 2007-2012*, “Kennesaw State University is among the best learning-centered comprehensive universities in the country and is expanding its programs of distinction to meet state and national needs” (KSU, *Kennesaw* 3). Among its many characteristics, the institution

offers and values “technology to advance educational purposes, including instructional technology, student support services, and distance education” (KSU, “Mission” par. 2) and plans to “increase the proportion of courses and programs that are offered off-site and online” within the next five years (KSU, *Kennesaw* 10).

Although the university has been involved in online distance education on a small-scale for the last few years, a quality assurance initiative in August 2007 required that “[. . .] ALL undergraduate online classes scheduled for the fall 2008 semester and beyond must be vetted through an internal peer review of course structure and organization as part of the KSU Online Course Quality Initiative” (KSU, “KSU Online” par. 1). As a means to this end, the university selected the rubric developed by the Quality Matters™ (QM) organization to guide this review, noting that “[b]eginning Fall ’08, all undergraduate online classes will be assessed a supplemental tuition rate of \$100 per credit hour and faculty who are certified to teach online will receive an additional stipend of \$50 per student (for a 3 credit hour course) at the end of the term.” The two requirements associated with the stipend include passing the QM peer review and completing faculty training “that focuses on the pedagogy of online teaching” (KSU, “KSU Online” par. 2). Finally, in conjunction with both the “Strategic Plan” and the QM initiative, the KSU Web Learners Program began during the Spring 2008 semester, defining *Web Learners* as “students who enroll exclusively in online courses” and offering these students priority registration for online courses (KSU, “New KSU Web” par. 2, 3). Surprisingly, however, this program is not well-publicized on the KSU website, and users may access information regarding the *Web Learners* program only after finding a link to the registrar site.

Having completed the required training and having passed the QM review, I planned to study my first-year research and writing courses (English 1102) because I had taught the course

both in the classroom and online in previous semesters, and, as a General Education writing requirement, it was the course for which the greatest number of online sections were offered by my department and likely would continue to be offered in future semesters (the first-semester writing requirement, English 1101 was not offered online at the time). Although the QM review is focused on the “structure and organization” of the course and since online learning was still relatively new on our campus, we had not yet had the opportunity to understand—within the writing program as a whole—what was working well within our design of online writing courses and to what extent we were meeting the goals set out for first-year writing, goals that represent what most in the field of Rhetoric and Composition would cite as common outcomes for freshman writing courses (see Appendix F).

I also was aware, as the research suggests, that much of what we know about online learning comes from studies of graduate courses and of students in upper-division undergraduate courses whose learning experiences and expectations often differ greatly from those of first-year students, especially those of first-year writing students (for example, see Alsgaard; Blair and Hoy; Gruber; Hewitt; Mauriello and Pagnucci; Swan; Woods; Woods and Ebersole; Woods and Keeler; Yagelski and Grabill; Zembylas and Vrasidas). Furthermore, few of these studies actually seek the feedback of the students enrolled in online courses, so I wanted to involve my students in the research and allow them to provide insights that would undoubtedly help to shape and to improve the courses in the future. I also believed that while my role as both researcher and teacher for the course would be challenging—perhaps influencing my perception of course success—I firmly believe that in any given semester, we are investigating the ways in which our course designs can be improved based upon the experiences and responses of our students, whether or not we conduct formal studies. Because I also would be the instructor for the course

acting as course designer, writing coach, female techie (Tulley and Blair 61-62), and community member, my understanding of student success, frustration, and learning likely would be much more insightful. One of the earliest concerns regarding online education centered on the possibility that courses would be commercialized—created by content specialists and then sold to be *delivered* by anyone with access to a computer. For my research, I believed that *I*, the course instructor, was best suited both to design and to teach the course *and* to observe the ways in which my students used language to build community and to develop skills in communication. Since the course did not meet f2f and because online learning often requires a significant portion of the course to be created in advance, I was more comfortable asking students to co-teach and to make suggestions for course revisions if I knew that I could immediately implement at least some of those suggestions during the semester. Studying my own courses also allowed for continuity between the two sections since the course design and activities were identical. Finally, I felt confident that my feminist research methods—that I would play a part in the community that was the subject of my research, a participant-observer, in other words—were a natural extension of the feminist teaching that would drive the course design and the students' work within the course.

During the Spring 2008 semester, thirty-eight students chose to participate in this study, previously approved by our Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix B). Participants responded to my beginning of the semester call to be involved in shaping future sections of the course and to allow me to draw from their work in and contributions to the course as well as to seek their feedback on three surveys throughout the semester (see Appendix C, Appendix D, Appendix E) as well as post-semester email interviews. The surveys were conducted and results compiled through SurveyMonkey and the remaining information gathered for this study comes

from my transcripts of discussion board postings, my observations of and interactions with students, and my post-semester email interviews with students. Because I did not have frequent contact with the majority of the students throughout the semester (some chose to meet with me for writing conferences in my office), I felt that it was important to maintain that visual and oral anonymity for the interview to avoid adding an unfamiliar layer of contact that might influence students' abilities to reflect candidly on their experiences.

Of the thirty-eight student participants, seventy-six percent (76%) completed the first online survey conducted at the beginning of the semester. More than three-fourths of the participants (75.9%) described their gender as female, fairly typical of the student population at Kennesaw State University, and nearly the same percentage (72.4%) indicated that they were between the ages of 18 and 24. Fifty-five percent (55%) of the respondents were freshmen, with an additional 34.5 percent describing their standing as sophomore. Although the course is a first-year writing requirement in the General Education program, the remaining 10.3 percent were juniors or seniors, likely transfer students who had not yet satisfied the requirements or students who simply had put off taking the course. Eighty-six percent (86%) of the respondents had previously completed English courses at Kennesaw State, suggesting that students were fairly familiar with the goals and outcomes of our first-year writing program and our General Education sequence.

Nearly the same number of study participants completed the MidSurvey (71%), so I was curious to compare responses and to examine the ways in which the course design and activities had impacted students since the beginning of the semester. Again, the pool of respondents was made up mostly of females (81.5%) and most respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24 (74.1%). Close to the same number of respondents classified themselves as freshmen (51.9%),

with an additional 37 percent sophomores. By the end of the semester, fewer study participants completed the final survey (50%), which likely can be attributed to students' workload both in my course as they put the finishing touches on peer response and the final research project, as well as their work in other courses and their preparation for final exams. The final survey also may have seemed another time-consuming step since students also had been asked to complete online course evaluations administered by the department. Similar to the previous two surveys, the pool of respondents was made up mostly of females (84.2%) and most were between the ages of 18 and 24 (73.7%). Again, close to the same number of respondents classified themselves as freshmen (52.6%), with an additional 36.8 percent sophomores.

In the chapters that follow, I will examine student feedback on these surveys as well as discussion board activities over the course of the semester in both sections of the course. Chapter 2 offers an overview of current research in online learning, as well as scholarship in computers and writing related to synchronous communication technologies and teaching with computers. I offer in chapter 2 an explanation of my use of the terms *computer-supported classroom* and *online course* and introduce the feminist angle that drives this research. Before I move into the detailed discussion of the course design and study findings, chapter 3 provides an overview of the ways in which feminist pedagogy and writing program administration inform the use of computers in the writing classroom, this specific course design, and the shifting of student and instructor roles that I illustrate in the chapters that follow. In chapter 4, I focus specifically on the instructor role in the online first-year writing course and the findings of this study related to feminist rhetoric and collaborative learning. To follow, in chapter 5, I focus on the student role in the online first-year writing course and the findings of this study related to community engagement and decentered teaching. Finally, in chapter 6, I bring together the identifiable

successes of this course design as well as the limits of the study and consider what possibilities for future research in online learning these findings reveal.

CHAPTER 2

The Potential for Online Writing Courses

Although the envisioned benefits of online learning in higher education discussed in chapter one are significant, for online writing courses in particular, there exists great potential to highlight the social nature of the composing process since much of the communication in an online course is written, and, according to Leslie Blair, “[. . .] the medium [. . .] lends itself most readily to student writers.” Online courses, then, certainly could help students to improve writing skills since we know that students actually become better writers by writing, and as Mark Canada explains, “[. . .] synthesizing their ideas in writing presents them with a far greater challenge than oral discussion” (38). What is discussed perhaps less often in research on computers in writing is the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on writing itself and on students’ development as writers. According to the research of Harris and Wambeam, “[. . .] combining synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication did help [their] students improve as writers” (370) and although Schriener and Rice did not necessarily investigate the impact on the quality of student writing for their study, online discussions resulted in “an average of 50 pages of double-spaced” writing per student over the course of the semester (473). If we continue to agree that students become better writers by writing, then the potential impact of online discussions for f2f writing classrooms is difficult to overlook. When we move these courses to exclusively online or virtual environments with the discussion board as the primary site for course interaction and activity, we can envision how this additional opportunity to write surpasses even what is possible with CMC in the traditional classroom. As a whole, both proponents and critics of online education cite the need for additional and substantive research in

this area to support or to discredit many of the “rules of thumb” (Woods; *see also* Sujo de Montes, Oran, and Willis; Farrington and Bronack; Hewett).

Research in Online Writing Courses

As one of the few studies of its kind in computers and writing, Susan Kay Miller’s review of research on distance education in the journal *Computers and Composition* offers readers a snapshot of online writing courses. In addition to a general consensus “calling for critical examination of new technologies for writing instruction, specifically the possibilities and limitations of using distance-learning technology” (423), research in the field, she explains, has focused on the benefit of closing geographic boundaries among students, the possibilities of improving discussion, collaboration, and the shifting authority to students while accepting an increased workload, an emphasis on discourse communities and the development of individual voice, the possibility for Internet-based classes to help facilitate diversity in the classroom, the potential benefits of a loss of body image, and the ways in which gender is still significant online. Miller, too, calls for increased research on distance writing courses and claims, “Research in writing instruction would benefit from drawing on the rich theoretical foundations already being constructed in other disciplines” (429).

Furthermore, Peterson believes that writing teachers should enter the current discussion on distance learning “because the primary interface of a distance learning course is the written word,” and first-year writing is the most “universally required” course (359-60). She reminds writing instructors—as did Cynthia Selfe—to pay attention lest decisions regarding technology be made without our input, and explains, “Online teaching also reminds us that technology alone cannot cause change; it is the teacher’s use of technology and the designer’s construction of the technology that shapes its impact” (362; *see also* DePew, et al. 54). In the area of student

learning, Peterson notes that while opportunities to cater to different learning styles could improve learning, she also offers cautions against the possibility of alienating non-traditional students who lack skills in technology. More surprising we might find is that no one really has asked students what they think about taking these courses (366). She concludes with this call to action:

Instead of simply dismissing online courses because they do not look like the classes we are used to, we need to discuss the most effective and ethically responsible ways to incorporate these technologies. If we can get beyond the binaries of the debate, then our conversations about distance learning can help us critically examine our assumptions about teaching and research—a useful project indeed. (367)

Despite concerns regarding online learning, Jane Blakelock and Tracy E. Smith have discovered that these courses are taught by tenure-track faculty suggesting “that those who teach online do so despite sketchy recompense because doing so agrees with firmly held notions of the purposes and possibilities of higher education, and for a smaller but undeniable segment, because DL [distance learning] is the available part-time or general teaching opportunity” (“Distance” 145). Although their study findings suggest that roughly 50% of participants received compensation in the form of course reassignments or stipends (as I do at KSU) for teaching online, “[. . .] the lessening of incentives for new practitioners is a serious impediment to the growth of online programs and courses” (“Distance” 145-46) as well as to continued substantive research. Despite the lack of support, however, compositionists will be encouraged to discover that respondents reported freedom in designing their courses, working against the fear “[. . .] that teachers of

composition, especially adjuncts, would be forced to teach ‘canned’ courses designed and marketed [. . .] with no regard for sound pedagogical practices” (“Distance” 155).

Similar to what Peterson’s research reveals, most surprising in Blakelock and Smith’s findings is the lack of available demographic information on the students enrolling in online courses; in other words, “we have no idea whom we are teaching,” and “[w]e are left, then, with some disturbing questions. How can we really serve the needs of online students if we do not truly know who they are?” (“Distance” 156). Just as surprising is the lack of data investigating the “impact of online courses on the teaching of writing” (“Distance” 156). In their “Letter from the Guest Editors,” Blakelock and Smith comment on “[. . .] the shift in the interests of DL [distance learning] teachers from the basic principles of how to teach online to research regarding effective online pedagogies and methodologies” and identify “[. . .] several areas [. . .] greatly in need of exploration [. . .] through empirical research: assessment of online composition courses, student demographics of online courses, further comparison of pedagogies and methodologies [. . .]” (1, 3). Responding to these calls for research, I will describe within the following chapters how the findings of my semester study, grounded by research in computers and composition as well feminist pedagogy and rhetoric and driven by a desire to understand the impact of online learning on first-year students, illustrate how online distance education can offer first-year writing students learning experiences that are as good as or better than those in the traditional classroom.

Defining Online Writing Courses

In the field of computers and composition specifically, research generally focuses on the use of computers within the traditional, face-to-face (f2f) classroom, whether students meet in a lab during each class session or periodically throughout the semester. Because exclusively online

writing courses, those taught at a distance, are not widespread in English departments, references to the *online classroom*, *computer lab*, *computer-supported classroom*, *distance education*, *online delivery of coursework*, *electronic writing class*, and *computer-based learning*, may suggest learning situations that range from a traditional classroom equipped with computers in which students use Word Processing programs only, to a hybrid course by which students alternate face-to-face meetings in the classroom and asynchronous meetings online, to exclusively online courses that call for online submission of assignments and email contact among members of the course and the instructor. “The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), for example, “defines *distance education* and *distance learning* [in this way]: ‘In distance education (or distance learning) the teacher and the student are separated geographically so that face-to-face communication is absent; communication is accomplished instead by one or more technological media, most often electronic (interactive television, satellite television, computers and the like)’” (qtd. in Hawisher and Selfe, “Teaching” 131). In a study of women online instructors, Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe, “[. . .] “define *distance education* and *distance learning* a bit more narrowly: as that instruction which is accompanied by online interactions—that is, accomplished over the Internet—and at a distance—that is, not including only those students on our campuses” (“Teaching” 131). Beth Hewett, on the other hand, uses *online writing instruction* (OWI) as an “[. . .] umbrella term that includes all educational uses of computer or Internet technologies for teaching or coaching writing.” Finally, Vrasidas and McIsaac explain, “Online courses are those courses that are completely online or have several scheduled online meetings. There might be some face-to-face meetings but the majority of instruction takes place online” (105).

For the purposes of this study, my use of the term *computer-supported classroom* will suggest a course that is held in a classroom (face-to-face) at least one half of the time and includes computers with Web access for all students. Although students may submit assignments online and may participate in online asynchronous discussions, the primary meeting space for these courses will be a classroom in a building on the school's campus, the kind of classroom in which a growing number of first-year writing courses take place. On the other hand, my use of the terms *online courses* and *virtual classroom* will refer exclusively to courses taught at a distance, in which students complete and submit assignments, receive course materials, and communicate with peers and with the instructor through the Internet. Although many of these virtual courses may require one or two meetings during the course of a semester, the primary meeting space for these courses is a virtual room or space established through a course website or Course Management System (CMS). Appropriately, coupled with the difficulty in naming these courses exists the challenge to discover a course design that will be most effective for students both in meeting the fundamental goals at the heart of writing pedagogy and offering students the kind of flexibility essential to the virtual classroom.

Drawing from Computers and Writing

To examine the potential benefits of online writing courses, I draw first from what we know about computers in the writing classroom. Lisa Gerrard argues, "One of the things we praise about computers is that, far from being impersonal, they socialize writing" ("Computers" 25). "This tendency to invite collaboration," she continues "was one of the things we liked about computers in their early years in our classrooms, even though we started out largely concerned with individual writers, focusing on how the computer changed or supported their writing process" ("Computers" 25). Gerrard's comments are significant to a discussion of online writing

courses because similar concerns (see Anson's questions included in the Introduction) continue to breed skepticism toward distance learning in many English departments (see also Allen and Seaman 18).

According to research conducted by Mike Palmquist et al. comparing teaching in traditional (no technology) and computer-supported classrooms, teachers "[. . .] expected students to take more responsibility for their learning in the computer classrooms. They described their role in the computer classrooms as facilitator rather than leader and typically asked their students to work in small groups or to write during class rather than to engage in large-group discussions or listen to lectures" (252). As we consider exclusively online writing courses, we might not be surprised to discover that these goals for facilitation and self-motivated learning are likely to carry over as goals for virtual learning. Most surprising for Palmquist et al.'s study participants as well as those who approach online teaching for the first time is that "[a]lthough their goals as teachers remained the same regardless of classroom setting, they discovered that techniques which worked successfully in one classroom did not work as well—or even at all—in the other" (256). With these findings in mind, instructors must be prepared, therefore, to approach online distance education as a relatively new teaching experience. Although students within the traditional classroom did have more out-of-class interaction with the instructor, "[. . .] significantly more discussions of student writing occurred among classmates and between students and teachers in the computer classroom," according to Palmquist et al. (258-59). Furthermore, since "[the authors] did not find any differences in student writing performance between the two settings," we can imagine here how the additional practice in writing as a primary form of communication in the exclusively online course may

significantly contribute to students' comfort with writing in general and with college-level writing assignments (266).

The challenges of teaching writing with technology are not unique to the online writing classroom and are explored by Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe in "The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class." Examining the effects of computers in face-to-face (f2f) composition courses (computer-supported classrooms, in other words) the authors argue, "the use of technology can exacerbate problems characteristic of American classrooms and [we] must continue to seek ways of using technology that equitably support all students in writing classes" (129). "In many English composition classes," the authors claim, "computer use simply reinforces those traditional notions of education that permeate our culture at its most basic level: teachers talk, students listen; teachers' contributions are privileged; students respond in predictable, teacher-pleasing ways" ("Rhetoric" 129). For the online, or virtual writing classroom, the possibility that students simply will become consumers of information—users rather than participants and contributors—is a concern that must be addressed if we are to provide significant learning experiences for our first-year writing students.

Hawisher and Selfe call us to be realistic in our discussions of computers in writing, reiterating that "it is not enough for teachers to talk about computer use in uncritical terms," especially if "[t]he use of computers in these classes [. . .] come[s] between the teachers and the students, pre-empting valuable exchanges among members of the class, teachers and students alike" ("Rhetoric" 135, 132). Although "[c]ollaborative activities increase along with a greater sense of community in computer-supported classes," the authors explain that "constructing such spaces so that they can provide room for positive activities—for learning, for the resistant discourse characteristic of students thinking across the grain of convention, for marginalized

students' voices—requires a sophisticated understanding of power [. . .]” (“Rhetoric” 132, 137). While the focus of Hawisher’s and Selfe’s piece falls primarily on teaching writing in the computer-supported classroom and not specifically on exclusively online writing courses, the authors offer a number of cautions that become essential for instructors in the virtual classroom, primarily the potential for the computer to become a tool through which students receive and produce static content as the result of an isolated experience that fails to meet or to foster the goals of the writing process. Heeding their advice and considering current research in online distance learning, I argue that the online writing instructor can reinvent the first-year writing classroom while maintaining a focus on the social aspect of writing through feminism and civic action.

What Research in Online Learning Tells Us

Appropriately, most research and findings in online education point to the importance of the course design and course activities in providing a successful and valuable experience for students. While many attempt to “replicate” the classroom (Berge 23), others have found that online teaching involves a complete re-invention of that classroom, that the course must become “student-centered” (Knowlton) and that “online students must shift their focus in a fundamental way—from viewing the teacher as a source to viewing themselves as seekers” (Canada 35). Generally, consensus exists with respect to making the most effective use of the available technologies beyond simply readapting information into web pages (Berge; Oliver; Singh and Pan; Stiff-Williams), yet how might we encourage students to become “seekers” as Canada suggests, working to construct knowledge?

Beyond the more obvious differences in the dissemination of information that occur when a course takes place in a virtual space, the absence of visual cues, the lack of immediate feedback

and requests for clarification, and the difficulty associated with reading lengthy sections of text on the screen mark the virtual classroom as one that varies considerably from even the computer-supported classroom in which students and instructors meet face-to-face. In designing online courses, instructors must make decisions that consider: 1. How static material will be; 2. How dense the content will be; 3. What level of interaction is sufficient; and 4. Whether instruction will take place in real-time or not, leading students, ideally, to interact both with instructors and with one another about course content (Berge 25). Drawing from her experience as a WPA considering the role of distance education in her writing program, Laura Brady explains that online writing courses should include “diversified [. . .] content and technologies [. . .] to appeal to differences in student learning styles” ; “meaningful feedback” ; community development; “technological support” ; and a “Web-based discourse community” (143). Echoing the call of other scholars investigating the implication of online courses, Berge argues, “I believe that a goal of distance teaching is to create an environment that both fosters trust among learners and the professor and seeks to promote a cooperative and collaborative environment that allows students to learn from course materials, the professor, and each other” using a variety of technologies and communication resources (25, 28).

Although we may argue that what Berge describes is ideal in the f2f classroom as well, one significant difference for students learning in exclusively online environments is that “learners [assume] much of the responsibility for themselves in terms of what is learned and how it is learned” (Oliver par. 22-23). According to Dave Knowlton, “An online course must align itself with student-centered approaches to be educationally effective,” suggesting that student-centered classrooms allow students to make meaning that is more “personally relevant” (6). In online learning environments, Knowlton explains, the teacher is not the “giver of knowledge”

but rather “a coach, counselor, and mentor,” and, in using collaboration and dialogue, he explains, an online instructor may effectively enact this role (7-8), one, I argue, that sounds much like the role of a first-year writing instructor coaching students through the writing process. Since a student-centered approach may be new for students and difficult to adjust to, collaboration may facilitate this shift in the learning process (Knowlton 12). If teachers are instead to act as coaches and facilitators in online courses, “[framing] the course and [supplementing] student interactions by providing resources and opportunities” (Knowlton 7, 11), then our specific aims should be in working to create a community where students find resources in the course content and through their interactions with their peers and with us in order to make meaning (Berge 25).

Although Canada compares the online student to “the pianist in a private practice room [. . .] [noting that] the motivation to prepare [. . .] must come from within,” I would argue that the potential for socially constructed knowledge central to first-year writing may be lost with this approach and this focus on the individual student (36). While Canada also comments on the loss of human connection in online courses and suggests that working for this connection may improve retention and success in the course (39), I argue that the human connection and social construction of knowledge is central to first-year writing and cannot be sacrificed if we are to offer our students learning opportunities online that are as good as, if not better than, those in the traditional classroom.

One of the most important realities of online education is that students miss out on the human contact that normally takes place in the traditional classroom or, perhaps, even in the computer-supported classroom. Lacking visual cues and immediate feedback from their audience, continued communication and interaction among those enrolled in the course becomes

challenging yet essential for student success (Cooper, “Online”; Farrington and Bronack; Kazmer; Knowlton; Singh and Pan; Woods and Ebersole; Woods and Keeler). Those who speak from experience teaching these courses argue that feeling connected to the professor and peers helps students to learn more and “helps [the instructor] from feeling like [he/she is] teaching to a computer screen” (Kazmer 6). Most instructors working to maintain ongoing and open communication will agree that essential features in online courses include email, synchronous chat, threaded discussions, and additional opportunities for meaningful interaction intended to enhance and to facilitate course activities. Creating intentional and significant interactions among students through collaborative activity and group work becomes essential to connect students to the course and “to provide students with a real-world opportunity to examine and participate in a professional discourse community” (Knowlton; *see also* Caverly and MacDonald; Kazmer; Woods and Ebersole). In a study of online writing courses, however, Kristine Blair and Cheryl Hoy call on instructors to “[. . .] continue to rethink traditional design and delivery modes for writing instruction that presume those collaborative, community models will transfer so seamlessly from the face-to-face to the distance classroom” (46). If, as Blair and Hoy explain, “[. . .] the [course] successes and limitations [are] due less to the technology than to the varying motivation levels and academic priorities of students enrolled in the course” (36), how can we encourage students to participate in collaborative activities and to remain contributing members of online discourse communities in first-year writing courses taught at a distance?

From my earliest experiences teaching online writing courses, I have discovered that motivating students to use the discussion board can be challenging, whether to create new knowledge or simply to engage in more casual exchanges with peers enrolled in the course. Similar to Craig Stroupe, while I “imagined that the discussion board would enable students to

apply course concepts, share experiences, and build learning communities,” some students find it to be busy work (255-56). In approaching online teaching, my goals have been “to create socially interactive web-based versions of [. . .] courses,” courses that are both writing-intensive yet also driven by discussion (Stroupe 256), yet what I was not expecting initially was, perhaps, the lecture-discussion gap that Stroupe describes. Students may expect the instructor to lecture or *feed* them the information rather than working to arrive at meaning through discussion, the kind of social construction of knowledge that we value in the first-year writing classroom. For many students, it is this lecture model through which they believe they are “getting their money’s worth” (Stroupe 258).

What is most important for online writing instructors to consider is “[. . .] that online courses represent the potential realization and institutionalization of the kind of writing-intensive learning long-promoted by writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines initiatives” (Stroupe 261). The great danger for these courses, however, lies in asking students “to discuss” and assuming that community will develop (Stroupe 261), as I did when I offered my first course online. Essentially, in doing so, we are trying to apply conventions of traditional, f2f courses and conversation to online environments where that seamless transfer is generally impossible (Stroupe 266). Instead, Stroupe explains, online writing instructors should create assignments “to help create a community based not just on conversational interaction, but also on a sense of mediated presence achieved aesthetically and compositionally” (269). In addition, then, to the “instructional voice” and the “conversational voice” within the online course, what is missing, Stroupe claims, is the “compositional voice,” one through which “students play an active role in creating, or composing, not just their own texts, but the experience of the class, its sources of authority and presence, and its online community” (258). In other words, given the

lack of visual cues and human interaction, the online writing course must be guided by deliberate attempts to construct community in order to create a foundation from which students can grow as writers and thinkers.

Spontaneous Community

The great challenge of teaching online, I have discovered, especially in a first-year writing course, stems from the dangerous contradiction in expecting students not only to be self-motivated self-learners, “seeking” knowledge and acting, in Canada’s words, “like the pianist in a private practice room” (36), yet also to become invested members of a community, working collectively for the benefit of the group. This strategic combination of individual accountability and group collaboration seems to work well in the traditional classroom, yet the fundamental difference in the *classroom* is the prior existence of community. If we consider the traditional classroom for a moment, and the way in which, as Kate Kiefer explains, “[. . .] the first impression a teacher creates in a classroom does set expectations and often determines the boundaries for classroom behavior and interactions” (125), it is easy to imagine how this lack of physical presence may be jarring for both students and instructors in exclusively online learning environments. She continues, “Over several class meetings, each group of students and the teacher develop a unique classroom dynamic that typically shapes the work—and perceived success—of each class” (125). Drawing upon her teaching experience, Kiefer explains the challenges she faced “[. . .] in building a cohesive class dynamic” as an online instructor (125-26) and notes that this lack of face-to-face contact complicates the development of classroom identity and community and may “[. . .] explain why students in virtual classrooms are often less successful than their physical classroom counterparts in negotiating the eddies of virtual interactions” (131, 125).

In traditional courses, the majority of class activities center around the room. Students may engage in casual conversation while they wait for the instructor, they may greet one another as they enter, they may turn to their peers and ask them for a pen, consult them about course assignments, or even reflect on weekend activities, and all of this interaction may take place without the instructor's involvement or even the instructor's presence. On the other hand, the instructor may walk to the room with a student, comment, for example, on a connection between the current writing project and a related television program that she viewed when that student walks into the room, or, as David James suggests, tell a joke or even make light of a personal situation. Generally, these occurrences are unplanned and often prompted by visual cues, cues that occur in and around the room. While group activities may work to strengthen the spontaneous community that has developed in the classroom, students still work from a level of established connectedness. In online courses, therefore, we must attempt to facilitate the spontaneous community and identity construction that develops in traditional classroom settings.

Because of the very nature of online education and the need to offer asynchronous access, requiring that the majority of course activities take place in a virtual room in real time seems to contradict the purpose of these courses and our attempts to meet students' needs in offering them. We must focus instead not on the simultaneous presence of the students in the classroom but rather the atmosphere and opportunity for personal connections and investment in course activities that the *room*—the course design and activities—creates. Before we expect students to create meaning through interactions with their peers or to engage in collaborative work that will determine their course grades, we first must offer opportunities for identity construction and community-building separate from subject-specific assignments. Although creating and facilitating additional activities may present the instructor with more work, the potential threat of

renegotiating and rethinking the course design throughout the semester when students fail to participate in collaborative assignments creates more work still and more significant disruptions for everyone involved in the course.

Feminist Approaches to Online Writing Courses

Addressing specifically the role of technology in community action, W. Michele Simmons and Jeffrey T. Grabill investigate “how people can write to change communities,” and how computers, the Internet, and a lack of specialized knowledge can hinder successful change. They further “[. . .] assert that any attempt to understand writing for community action and change [. . .] must [consider] that if citizens cannot access, assemble, and analyze the information they find, they will not be able to produce the necessary knowledge to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives and communities” (427). A similar challenge, I would argue, faces students who enroll in online courses, specifically online writing courses in which first-year students are asked to use writing as a primary form of communication and often must navigate complex computer-mediated resources to access course information and to complete assignments. Although Simmons and Grabill conclude with a call for pedagogical change in first-year writing courses whose goal is to prepare students to be productive citizens in the larger community, in the online writing course, that need for civic participation becomes much more immediate—essentially, the virtual space of the online course becomes the site for civic participation. As I have discussed, it is the *development of community* that often determines the success of online courses. If we draw from Simmons’s and Grabill’s assertion that “people can write to change communities,” presumably communities of which they are a part, we can envision how this rhetorical act in the online writing course can allow for both the defining and

shaping of as well as continued participation in the community of the online first-year writing course.

At the heart of Simmons and Grabill's argument, however, is the more immediate concern that despite a citizen's desire to contribute to change, the interface complicates and even prohibits that process (432). Research in online teaching and learning reveals that this difficulty exists for online students as well, often resulting in frustration, disconnection, and even withdrawal from the course. In the University System of Georgia alone according to one study, withdrawal rates among students in exclusively online General Education courses are as high as thirty percent (Morris, Wu, and Finnegan 24). In order to realize the possibilities for online writing courses, some of which include the: potential for student-centered learning, co-learning and co-teaching by students and the instructor, co-construction of knowledge among participants, and increased access and convenience, instructors and students must enact a civic rhetoric to ensure student success; students must become active participants in course activities, must be responsible for identifying and solving problems, and must draw from a common understanding of course objectives and course goals.

Certainly, we may argue that no matter how determined our efforts, often we, the instructors, have little control over the technology itself—the size and reliability of a server, the frequency of maintenance on a course management system like WebCT/Blackboard, or simply our students' abilities to send, receive, and even open documents, and we must expect and be prepared to make slight adjustments as necessary. Despite these challenges, however, what I find has a greater potential to impact student success and to move students toward the civic discourse that I am describing is the online instructor's teaching philosophy and willingness to foster a student-centered learning environment regardless of the time and effort. Quite simply, if students

cannot easily navigate a course site or a linking of course information, their ability to contribute in meaningful ways, as well as their opportunities for success, are very seriously compromised. Yet in addition to providing careful access to information, in the same ways that we would in a traditional face-to-face course—explanation and repetition of key concepts, clear learning objectives or outcomes that are tied to daily and long-term activities, a description of grading and evaluation criteria—how we structure these course activities, interact with students, and invite them to become active members of the course also determine our ability to meet our goals for first-year writing and, ultimately, for online learning.

As a means to this end, I further claim that it is through feminist rhetoric and pedagogy—both in the course design and delivery—that instructors of online writing courses can facilitate the kind of civic participation among students that leads to community building. I draw here from a number of sources and scholars, including Cynthia Selfe’s claim that “[s]uch classrooms would value personal and group discovery through open discussions, collaboration, and process-based writing and reading activities” and are “broadly inclusive and embracing, non-hierarchical, student-centered communities” (121, 122); Mary Hocks who explains that “[f]eminine perspectives can offer alternate, more holistic ways of knowing, including collaborative social processes for constructing facts and new relationships to objects of study” (108); Lisa Gerrard who defines feminist pedagogy as one “that connects personal experience with political knowledge, reduces hierarchical relationships in the classroom, promotes collaboration, validates women’s experiences, and offers a forum for women’s voices” (“Feminist” 377-78), and a more comprehensive discussion of feminist pedagogy and rhetoric that I will share in chapters 3 and 4. And although I do not focus on women’s experiences exclusively in this study, believing that this approach has the potential to benefit all students enrolled in the course, carefully constructed

course activities can invite continued participation from female students and help to address what Hawisher and Selfe among others, describe as inequitable opportunities that may create the deliberate exclusion of women from technologically-mediated activities (“Teaching” 129).

Before moving into a detailed discussion of the findings of this study, I will offer in Chapter 3 a definition and description of the feminist framework under which I am working and the kinds of course activities that may blend this framework with the goals of online first-year writing.

CHAPTER 3

Feminism, Computers, and Composition Studies

Defining Feminism

Before examining how a feminist approach would foster civic participation in online writing courses and lead to student success, I want to offer a clear explanation of my use of the terms *feminism and feminist classrooms*. I draw here from a number of scholars who, in many cases, also draw from one another in crafting and reshaping their own definitions of feminism. Primarily, my definitions and examples of feminisms are culled from rhetoric and composition studies specifically, and as some already have done, I will apply those definitions to computer-supported and fully online learning environments.

First, a historical context provided by Susan Jarratt in her introduction to the collection, *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*, in which she explains, “In the United States, feminism emerged from black and white women’s experiences of writing and speaking on behalf of abolition in the mid-nineteenth century [. . .] a few decades before composition was created in response to the movement of middle-class men into the elite domain of the universities” (2). Both within and outside of classrooms, “Feminist theories,” according to Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, “offer alternative stances for working in and against the male-dominated canon of rhetoric, for questioning assumptions about the relationships between readers and writers, for demonstrating ways of rereading rhetoric, and for expanding received definitions of discursive authority and effective communication” (219). For online courses in particular, “relationships between readers and writers” become particularly important not only when first-year writing students are asked to consider the needs and responses of their readers as

they study principles of rhetoric, but also because both students and instructors occupy these roles at various points throughout the semester as they communicate with each other online.

Most often, characterizations of feminism, specifically of feminist classrooms, place great value on personal or lived experience and shared authority (Ritchie and Ronald 237). As I noted in my brief introduction to feminism in chapter 2, feminist pedagogy, “[. . .] connects personal experience with political knowledge, reduces hierarchical relationships in the classroom, promotes collaboration, validates women’s experiences, and offers a forum for women’s voices” while “[. . .] guid[ing] students to reflect on their lives and to connect personal experience with ideology and social issues” (Gerrard, “Feminist” 185, 190). Within the writing classroom in particular, “according to Eileen Schell, ‘feminist pedagogy [. . .] encourages individual voice and personal growth,’” (qtd. in Tulley and Blair 57). Furthermore, “feminine perspectives can offer alternate, more holistic ways of knowing, including collaborative social processes for constructing facts and new relationships to objects of study” (Hocks 108), and according to Cynthia Selfe, feminist classrooms consist of “broadly inclusive and embracing, nonhierarchical, student-centered communities” and “[. . .] value personal and group discovery through open discussion, collaboration, and process-based writing and reading activities (“Technology” 121, 122). This focus on personal experience “[. . .] gives lived individuality significance in the public sphere,” and while not necessarily “legislat[ing] homogeneity in the classroom” (Desmet 169), I argue, may create common ground among students in the absence of visual cues and proximity in the virtual writing course.

According to Jarratt, “Composition and feminism, then, currently share to some degree an institutional site, an educational mission, and a conflicted relation to both” (Jarratt 2). She argues, because compositionists must continue to unravel the assumption that composition is not

the *real* work of English departments, “[. . .] that writing is more than a remedial skill and composition classes more than institutional gatekeeping, teachers of writing [. . .] challenge assumptions about knowledge acquisition throughout the academy” (3). Jarratt offers this explanation of academic feminism: “Both feminist inquiry and post-current-traditional composition studies, in other words, seek to transform styles of thinking, teaching, and learning rather than to reproduce stultifying traditions. They share a suspicion of authoritarian pedagogy, emphasizing instead collaborative or interactive learning and teaching” (3). She further asserts, “And we imagine how feminism and composition may speak to each other in many still unacknowledged ways” (4); one, which I advocate here, is the impact of feminism on the exclusively online first-year writing course.

Feminism in Composition Studies

In attempting to decenter the classroom, a term that is also commonly associated with virtual teaching and learning across disciplines, “feminist teachers seek to equalize power among students and, as much as possible, between the instructor and students” (Gerrard, “Feminist” 191). Yet one also must consider issues of authority and the extent to which a teacher’s position as evaluator complicates these goals. Shirley Logan Wilson argues, “Concern for helping students to develop voice and authority in the writing classroom should not lead teachers to abdicate their positions as writing experts. But there is a great difference between a teacher who is an authority in the subject matter and one who squelches ideas” (55). This struggle to navigate authority is particularly significant to the online writing course in which students and instructors never meet face-to-face (f2f) and cannot rely on verbal and visual cues that may temper feedback on writing assignments. Although, as Christy Desmet explains, “[. . .] feminist pedagogy has traditionally rejected the characterization of a teacher as a judge [. . .] [f]eminist jurisprudence [. . .]

.] can provide composition pedagogy with a useful perspective on the metaphorical equation between courtroom and classroom” (155). To elaborate, Desmet claims, “[. . .] feminist jurisprudence can provide the foundation for a utopian vision of classroom praxis that reimagines relations among teacher and students without denying real discrepancies of power” (156), a reinvention that I believe is essential to the online writing classroom as well. Within first-year writing courses in particular, courses in which students are just beginning to adjust both to the work of the academy as well as to the idea of socially constructed knowledge, providing students with constructive, often evaluative, feedback as well as guiding their development as writers is among an instructor’s primary responsibilities; however, feminist instructors also can reinforce the social construction of knowledge, as I will discuss in the following chapters, as clear evidence of shared authority within the course.

Beyond instructor-student interactions, relationships among students within feminist classrooms are generally characterized as collaborations or cooperatives, and it becomes the instructor’s responsibility to model and to foster this collaboration. Gail Stygall’s concern, however, is that “[. . .] in both the composition and feminist versions of collaboration, when the instructor withdraws, hierarchy and inequality may reappear” (Stygall 253). Without “a feminist-critical authority in the writing classroom,” Stygall explains, we may not achieve our goals for full participation from all students if “[. . .] collaboration acts to displace teacher authority” to another student (253, 254). Although she claims that “[. . .] women fare better in collaborative talk when the feminist teacher explicitly teaches and models new forms of talk” (254), I would argue that in using online communication technologies, this modeling is likely to benefit all students. Although the teacher may not occupy the predictable position at the front of the room in decentered classrooms, “[. . .] some student must move into that vacated supervisory

position” (Stygall 261). When these courses take place online, for example, the potential for one student to occupy a position of power—however unconsciously—becomes a very real possibility when much of the course interactions occur through collaborative discussion board postings.

Beyond issues of authority and carefully supported collaboration, feminist teachers sometimes find their goals at odds with the conventions of argument and traditional academic discourse. Citing Patricia Bizzell, Desmet notes the challenges that students face as they approach the college writing classroom because “the media represent ideas as self-evident and public debate as a series of stated positions, a shouting match rather than a reasoned dialogue” (cited in Desmet 155). For instructors of online first-year writing courses, these experiences certainly may complicate the exchange of ideas and construction of knowledge when students are required to interact through computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies exclusively, sites for social exchange and potential debate. Alternately, “Catherine Lamb, for instance, recommends mediation and negotiation as feminist species of debate that allow power to be shared in a benign way” (cited in Desmet 158), a sharing of power that may foster community building and trust among students. According to Ritchie and Ronald, however, while some “[. . .] might find argument aggressive and agonistic,” historically, women worked successfully against social injustices and inequality through effective argument, a history that informs modern conceptions of feminism (232). “[. . .] [T]o see argument as male and narrative as female,” they explain, “[. . .] or to locate patriarchal discursive authority in the rational mind and feminist authority in subjective experience—not only may be inaccurate but also may limit women’s rhetorical options and ignore the rhetorical power of much of women’s writing throughout history” (Ritchie and Ronald 234-35). Heeding Ritchie’s and Ronald’s advice, then, it becomes important for online writing instructors not to dismiss argument, especially if, as in

my case, argument is the focus of first-year writing courses, but instead to *model* effective communication and online interactions for students, a kind of modeling of effective communication that is then likely to transfer to students' more formal writing assignments.

For Donna LeCourt and LuAnn Barnes, “teaching academic discourse seems to require that students construct masculine textual selves in response to academic contexts” (57). “Particularly within academic discourse,” they claim, “the voice constructed in writing is associated with a position of authority that claims its perspective as all-encompassing. Such a voice, however, reinvokes the logic of phallogentrism by claiming its perspective as the *only* way of seeing the world” (58). This critique is echoed by Laura L. Sullivan in noting “[o]ne of the critiques feminists have launched against traditional conceptions of knowledge is the privileging of reason—typically associated with masculinity, over the realm of emotion—typically characterized as feminine” (Sullivan 41). With what alternatives, then, are feminist teachers left? According to LeCourt and Barnes, it is “experimental writing” that will allow “a place for marginalized voices, an interrogation of power relations, an awareness of the gendered nature of academic discourse, and, most importantly, an insight into self and its relation to others” (69-70). One example of this experimental writing offered by Sullivan is *hypertext* because “unlike traditional academic writing, hypertext allows us to leave contradictions unresolved, and to leave questions unanswered” (Sullivan 48), the kind of writing, perhaps, that may offer women an advantage within the classroom (Gerrard, “Feminist”195). Moving writing courses online, I argue, is one more way to allow for such experimental writing and communication among students. Rooted by a feminist approach, the online writing instructor can create a site of experimentation through asynchronous discussion board postings, allowing students to grow as writers and critical thinkers without the strict evaluation criteria that students may associate with

formal writing assignments. Instead, through computer-mediated communication, online instructors may invite all students to brainstorm ideas, to offer responses, and to consider the ways in which their ideas impact members of an audience, reinforcing that no one person holds the ultimate position of authority or the right answer within the exchange; the larger goal of this experimental communication becomes collaborative critical thinking.

Feminist Administration Online

According to Lisa Gerrard, “Feminist research would do for computers and composition what Elizabeth Flynn [. . .] says a feminist critique of composition studies should do for composition generally” (“Feminist” 185), and while much of the scholarship on the following pages illustrates the impact of feminism on the use of computers within the traditional f2f classroom, my goal is to examine the potential impact of these strategies within the fully online first-year writing course. One cause for concern in composition studies argues Cynthia Selfe is an “atheoretical approach to computer use” which prevents significant understanding of the role of computers for our students’ learning and writing processes (119). In 1990, she framed group work in the computer-supported classroom within feminist rhetoric, arguing that computers maintain and magnify the status quo and that “an alternate version of computer use may help us understand how to extend privilege to communication over isolation, collaboration over competition, and change over tradition” (C. Selfe 120), the kind of alternate vision that I believe may be possible when exclusively online writing courses are guided by feminist pedagogy and rhetoric. “In considering the uses of computer technology,” C. Selfe argues, “feminist theory allows us to look critically at the context of what we now know, of how we currently use and see computers, in order to rethink the relationship between techno/power and literacy and then reconstruct the role computers could play in our literacy efforts” (121).

As many scholars have echoed, C. Selfe claims that computers can bring others into the discussion and may begin to address marginalized groups because these interactions not only result in increased participation but also in the improved communication and sharing of ideas and the elimination of “cues” which become significant in face-to-face interaction (122-25). Moreover, she argues, “[t]he use of computer networks in a writing classroom situation, for instance, often seems to shift focus from the teachers to the students, prompting more discussion that is student-centered” (C. Selfe 125). Carol Klimick Cyganowski reinforces this claim, and suggests that “[c]ollaboration in using computers and in writing can create a student-centered, cooperative community” that immediately disrupts the hierarchy of teacher at the front and moves students into smaller groups (68, 70), the kind of decentering characteristic of feminist classrooms. In the exclusively online writing course, however, without the visual cue of the instructor actually removing herself from the front or center of the classroom, I argue that this shift in power is facilitated by an instructor’s deliberate feminist action in the design and delivery of the course.

The term, *delivery*, used often to describe online distance education is precisely what becomes problematic for writing courses and draws up images of Freire’s “banking concept”—that instead “[. . .] of a dialogue in which hierarchical divisions are broken down so that teachers become teacher-learners, and learners become learner-teachers,” students are simply vessels into which we deposit information (qtd. in Anson, “Distant” 55). In its most basic form, this image suggests a kind of correspondence course of the 19th century (DePew, et al. 50). What is it that we are *delivering*, exactly, when we teach virtual first-year writing courses if they truly are based upon the social construction of knowledge? At the same time, however, it must be said that teaching online does require an element of administration—the careful planning of course

assignments and activities in a way that will respond to the needs of online students' non-traditional schedules, the design of online course pages whether within a course website or course management system, the moderating of asynchronous discussions and synchronous chats, as well as the response to questions both technical and writing-related. If the larger goal in online teaching, as much of the research suggests in chapter 2, is to create learning communities and to increase participation online, models of writing program administration (WPA) guided by feminist theory can serve an instructor well in fostering civic participation and student success online.

As many scholars have noted, Composition studies has been “feminized” and labeled a feminized field because of both the number of women teaching first-year composition as well as the inequitable conditions of their employment most often as part-time contingent labor (Schell, “Costs,” “Part-time”; Micciche). Typically, part-time teachers of writing are given little say in decisions that affect the writing program and those decisions that impact their status within the department or the evaluation of their work. To manage all of these workers as well as to negotiate the problematic nature of both the teaching of writing and of writing program administration, Ed White, often cited, suggests that a WPA should embrace the power she is given and “use it or lose it” (112). Similarly, I would argue, an online distance instructor, responsible for both the design and delivery of the course as well as the coaching of students as they develop skills in writing, may find it more manageable and less time consuming simply to *deliver* all course assignments and information and to encourage students to become self-learners like “the pianist in a private practice room” (Canada 36).

As Fontaine and Hunter have noted, this hierarchical, top-down model exists in various forms within rhetoric and composition as a whole (7-8) and is often cited as ideal administration,

and ideal, perhaps for technology systems that are still described as male-dominated (see Hawisher and Sullivan), yet many compositionists, including Barbara Cambridge and Ben McClelland, call for a redefining of this administrative structure, suggesting one that more closely resembles a partnership and allows for the sharing of power (156). Although Composition Studies' "feminization" typically is described as problematic for and by those involved with writing programs, I argue here that feminist approaches to administration—a revision similar to what Susan Miller describes as the "positive new moves in composition" that come from feminization (520)—may offer online writing instructors, in the same way that they would WPAs, opportunities to create more significant learning for online students while promoting agency and facilitating the co-construction of knowledge among all who are a part of the course community. Aware of this feminization in Composition, Hildy Miller asks, "In what ways does a delivery system informed by feminist ideology clash with the masculinist administration structures in which it is embedded?" (78-79). She suggests, instead of the wrangling of power advocated by White, that "[t]o lead, then, is not to dominate but rather to facilitate, to share power, and to enable both self and others to contribute" (82). "As rhetoricians," she explains, "we understand the extent to which language shapes reality" (87). A more useful structure of administration according to Miller is what she terms a "teaching collaborative" informed by a "web of support" (87). In the online writing course, a feminist approach would create opportunities for a similar teaching collaborative and web of support that draws from and relies upon the contributions of both students and the instructor.

The problem with a "centered" WPA—or in this case, first-year writing instructor—Marcia Dickson and Jeanne Gunner explain, is that authority or control is perceived to belong to one person only (Dickson 144, 140; Gunner 253), especially true for first-year students taking

writing courses exclusively online. Working within collaborative structures that diffuse control while promoting growth, Dickson claims, “The feminist administration I envision allows for the blurring of the lines of authority and control [. . .] [and] creates a collaborative program that considers human stories, issues, and abilities” (148). Within the online course, these “human stories” become particularly significant for students with non-traditional schedules and responsibilities and, perhaps, with experience learning and communicating in online environments. Like Dickson, Gunner advocates a collaborative structure that promotes shared authority (253) and notes that “[a]lthough not directly connected to collaborative pedagogical theory, collaborative administration does share in its theoretical foundation some of the values and goals of decentered teaching and learning” (254). The most significant characteristic of this administrative structure is its “unstable” definition, a “fluid approach” appropriate for the inevitable and ongoing changes that writing programs face (Gunner 254) and, I would argue, for the less traditional teaching and learning environments that we face in a virtual course. In this administrative structure, Gunner replaces traditional with “flattened” hierarchies, characterized by “community, shared responsibility, and open exchange of information, ideas, and criticism” among the group as a whole regardless of status (254, 255). Within the online first-year writing course, this structure would invite contributions as well as ongoing feedback from both the students and instructor over the course of the semester.

A similar structure—the *teaching circle*—allows members “both [to] share from and benefit from distributed expertise” as they become “agents of change” (Yancey “The Teaching” 134; 136). Although Kathleen Blake Yancey notes a link between these structures and better teaching, reminding WPAs that they “have enormous opportunities [. . .] to accept the invitation to work with faculty and graduate students to enhance teaching” (133, 136), for the online

writing course, this *enhancement* would exist in the increased opportunities for student participation and success. Recognizing the need for this interaction across ranks in creating successful writing programs, Kelley-Riley et al. argue that “the WPA [must be willing] to remove herself from an agenda for the outcome [. . .] and can only initiate and facilitate the process” (131). They explain that societal changes in technology and communication must be mirrored within the university through a networked administrative structure: “Today—and tomorrow—information must flow more quickly and freely among individuals. This free flow can only occur in a system with a high level of interaction among individuals and groups” (132). It certainly is worth noting here that this networked structure is well-suited—essential, even—for the exclusively online writing course in which the free flow of information among students and instructors may significantly impact students’ abilities to achieve success within the course.

Beyond the benefits of this decentered administrative structure, Gunner also acknowledges the “[. . .] tensions and conflicts that accompany collaborative leadership efforts,” and while noting that “no structure can ‘automatically’ transform program administration into a completely sane and equitable process,” she reminds readers of the importance of considering local conditions when implementing administrative changes (260). For the online writing course, Gunner’s cautions are particularly significant in light of the complicated realities of evaluation and experience; although an instructor may aim for a decentered structure within the classroom, she still is ultimately responsible for evaluating student work and for guiding each student’s development as a writer. On the other hand, Goodburn and Leverenz, note that despite the challenges that often accompany a feminist restructuring, “the enacting of feminist principles [. . .] [is] ultimately [a] rewarding process” (277, 290). As each of these descriptions of feminist collaborative administration illustrates, the decentered, fluid structures when applied to the

online writing course, ultimately may promote collective decision-making that accounts for the interests of all students, value the contributions and lived experiences of all members of the community, and allow for a collective voice of knowledge construction.

As is generally the case, students in a f2f first-year writing course come to the classroom with much less experience in academic writing than the instructor, and although the writing community of this classroom will likely collaborate to foster the growth of each student, often it is the individual interaction between student and teacher—novice and coach—that contributes to the student’s success and to the larger goal of the course. Within the online writing course, however, although the level of writing experience of the instructor and students is likely to remain the same, it is not always the case when considering experience communicating in online environments and navigating computer-mediated systems; often it is the students who are the experts or *digital natives*. If a significant goal of the online writing course, or of any online learning situation, is increased and equal participation among students, valuing the *experience* that they bring to the classroom is essential. Within a writing program, the larger goal of a writing committee, for example, part of a program in which a WPA may enact feminist principles, is not ultimately the growth of the individual but the growth of the program that will then lead to the development of writers within individual classrooms. Within the online writing course, it is the development and the strength of a similar (online) community that allows for individual writers to grow. In this way, the feminist administration that I describe here is characterized less often by the “ethic of care” (focused on individual growth), about which Schell writes (“Costs”; see also Blair and Hoy), and more often by the fluid, nonhierarchical structure that has the potential to be uniquely collaborative and decentered while offering students a real stake in their own learning.

Like Gunner, Goodburn and Leverenz explain that despite attempts to work within feminist structures and to fight the bureaucrat within, power struggles among stakeholders are often inevitable (277). They continue, “The challenge of feminist writing program administration, then, is not just to change administrative structures but also to foreground the inevitable resistance and conflict that result and to make critical reflection about that resistance and conflict as much a part of the program as a new syllabus or new teacher training workshops” (Goodburn and Leverenz 289). When applying these concepts to online learning, instructors should be forthcoming with students regarding the extent to which they (the students) will be involved in shaping the course and the ways in which community action is an integral part of their work. Students also should be invited to reflect on this civic action and to offer feedback throughout the course (see Tulley and Blair). This self-reflection also prompts students to remain involved in their learning and reinforces the decentered structure.

Fostering Feminist Online Interaction

In the area of Computers and Writing, beyond the ways in which simply introducing computers transformed the writing process and the feel of the traditional classroom, computer-mediated communication (CMC), according to Kathleen Blake Yancey, fosters a much more significant change. She argues, “[. . .] these digital forums offer teachers new ways to connect students, new ways for students to communicate with each other and the world at large, and, not least, new genres in which to learn” (“The Pleasures” 106). If we return to the goals of feminist pedagogy in light of Yancey’s claims, I argue that organizing a virtual first-year writing course with feminist goals in mind and with the discussion board at its center allows an instructor to invite students to become invested members of a community, an action that may lead to increased student success.

Writing as a Social Process

Most teachers of first-year writing would agree that at the heart of writing pedagogy is a desire to help students to develop as writers (Harris and Wambeam 353). “If thinking is a ‘dialogic process,’” Harris and Wambeam explain, “[. . .] [b]eing able to understand others’ perspectives is central to developing thinking and writing strategies” and to the social construction of knowledge (Harris and Wambeam 354, see also Schriner and Rice 472). If “[s]tudents learn critical thinking skills and persuasive strategies through active, involved discussion with their peers, which can then inspire fuller treatments of the issues in subsequent essay assignments” (Harris and Wambeam 355), it seems CMC technologies certainly can foster the goals of the first-year writing classroom.

Harris and Wambeam suggest that the goals of first-year writing extend beyond the development of writing and thinking skills: “If one of the purposes of education is to help students become not only more complex thinkers and writers, but also more tolerant, accepting people, computer mediated exchanges can be used to foster that humanistic goal” (370). This ability “to learn through discourse” explain Marilyn Cooper and Cynthia Selfe illustrates for students that communication is not a solitary process and allows students to grow as writers and thinkers “by learning to take on new perspectives, to understand and express new ideas” (858, 860). Similarly, Mary J. Flores explains,

Because writing is a social activity—one that establishes a relationship between the writer, the writing, and the reader—we need to establish writing communities in our composition courses. The networking capabilities of computers give us many opportunities to foster such communities, by increasing participation and collaboration and recognizing diversity among our students. (108)

This idea becomes particularly significant for the online writing course where the loss of the “social activity” of writing often is tied closely to the absence of face-to-face contact among students and between students and the instructor.

Benefits of CMC

Drawing from a study conducted at Purdue University, to investigate the use of discussion boards in undergraduate f2f classes, Robert Yagelski and Jeffrey Grabill note that while “synchronous [real-time] discussions can significantly alter class meetings [. . .] asynchronous discussions often serve as an ‘external’ supplement to conventional in-class lecture and discussion” (Yagelski and Grabill 15), the kind of discussions, that “[. . .] encourag[e] dialogic learning strategies” and reinforce writing as a social process (Harris and Wambeam 354). Furthermore, Cooper and Selfe “[. . .] argue that these computer conferences are powerful non-traditional learning forums” and help to foster a student-centered learning environment (849, 857-58). This liberating shift in the classroom may result in “increased student participation, and collaboration” as well as the presence of many voices (Gruber 62; Lenard 77).

Within these forums, according to research conducted by Schriener and Rice, online discussion forums allowed students to contribute to the course in non-traditional ways, offering feedback to the instructor and taking a more active role in driving course activities (477). Although the authors did not explicitly state that they aimed for a feminist, collaborative pedagogy within the course, certainly, it seems that the decentered model that they invited was facilitated by the use of CMC. Moving classroom discussions to online forums also offers every student the opportunity to contribute, “especially those who might not take part in oral discussions” or those who would like more time to consider their responses (Alexander 210; Lenard 78). In addition to increased participation, online discussions may allow instructors and

students to confront issues of diversity and sexuality in open and non-threatening ways (Alexander). A significant realization for students who participate in CMC is that their contributions also invite response whether they initially intend for them to or not. Reflecting on students' participation in their study, Harris and Wambeam explain, "Once sent to the e-mail list, the messages were instantly shared (and instantly public), providing the writer with an immediate sense of audience (an awareness that influences the writing process)" (364) and one that moves students from internal dialogue toward publicly-generated knowledge. In fostering collaboration among participants, online discussions also can become occasions "in which everyone investigates problems and ideas of common concern" (Cooper and Selfe 848), a collaboration that is fostered by the decentered nature of the computer-supported classroom (Schriner and Rice 477), and one which also encourages civic action and the goals of feminist rhetoric (see Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford; Simmons and Grabill).

Most promising for online writing environments, writes, Cynthia L. Selfe, are the potential changes in classroom discussion that "can offer marginalized groups a forum in which to discover their own voice, to reinterpret and reconstruct their experience, and to make meaning that reflects their own cultural and intellectual contributions," (127). She is discouraged, however, noting, "unfortunately, although these scenarios are already possible, in a technological sense they are not happening. Connection although central to a feminist vision of education, is not a characteristic we can use to accurately describe most educational computing systems we now have available to us as teachers" (131). Extending this conversation regarding feminism and online discussions, Mary Flores argues, "In the composition class, the computer conference is one method by which we can bring the authority of the student's personal experience into the

curriculum, integrating personal experience with received knowledge” (106). In the past, Flores continues,

computers have been used largely as a means to disseminate information more efficiently and to increase our control over students’ writing processes and products. [. . .] This argument suggests that computers might best be used to expand and increase the ease with which we control our students, not to expand and increase their ease in the classroom, or sense of control over their own educations. (109)

While, working to enact a feminist pedagogy, “[t]he issue for the composition teacher, then, is to use computers to facilitate an interactive, diverse, and collaborative writing community in which every student has a voice and can engage in dialogue with each and every other member of that community” (Flores 109). By potentially increasing participation among women and allowing for the sharing of experience not generally valued in academic writing, “the computer conference [discussion board posting] has the power to enfranchise everyone in the class” (Flores 110-11, 113-14) and to promote the goals of feminist pedagogy. Guided both by C. Selfe’s cautions as well as Flores’s vision of the feminist online discussions, instructors of online writing courses may begin to foster connections among students that lead to student success.

Exploring precisely “[. . .] how women activists might transform e-spaces into sites for productive feminist change” and “[. . .] can transform writing classes, subverting dominant power structures and traditional classroom roles,” Gail Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan agree with Flores, claiming, “[e]lectronic networks, neither egalitarian utopias nor sites devoid of power and influence for women, offer women a way into the male-dominated computer culture” (173-74). Yet, like C. Selfe, the authors offer cautions against these ideals, explaining that most appealing

for writing instructors are the possibilities for an “egalitarian space” within the classroom accomplished by a decentering of authority: “Because of the attractiveness of the egalitarian narrative and the persuasiveness of the research that supports it, feminists have needed powerful stories of gender deception, violence and harassment to counter prevailing notions about the utopian possibilities of e-spaces” (175). Furthermore, according to Gruber, “[i]n addition to fears of flaming, critics contend that computers do not necessarily facilitate equal participation; instead, hierarchical structures, gender prejudices, and racial stereotypes remain intact” (61). She continues, “[i]t would be premature to characterize the technology as ‘liberatory’ and ‘egalitarian’ if we are not prepared to use CMC in connection with a teaching approach conducive to diversity and change” (Gruber 74). When using online discussion in a course setting, then, is it possible to foster a more egalitarian e-space that begins to meet feminist pedagogical goals?

Studying thirty-two academic women and “the complex negotiations women must engage in to establish presence in a particular e-space,” Hawisher and Sullivan share with readers the ways in which these spaces might be constructed as ideal for their participants (176-177). From “a supportive community” to “sites of scholarly discussion about composition studies” and “efficient forums for the exchange of professional information” to “fun and escape from [. . .] overworked lives,” the women in this particular study shared their varied desires for online exchange, including, most importantly “for all participants to be acknowledged rather than to be dismissed” (178, 181). This need for recognition is particularly significant for the online first-year writing student who is still working to develop an academic identity, an online identity, and an identity among a group of people with whom he or she is not familiar. One key idea that emerges from this study when considering the online first-year writing course is that “[t]he strain

of maintaining their participation in e-space while conducting all their professional duties and keeping personal commitments sometimes overwhelmed [the participants]. When it did, an interesting fusion of public and private took place” (188). For the online writing student, one who is generally working to balance coursework with outside responsibilities including work and family, this “fusion” is precisely the kind of blending of personal and private that may foster the creation of identity and community at a distance. The authors leave readers to question, “What constitutes feminist action in e-space,” (193) and within the online first-year writing course, it is precisely this opportunity for students to take ownership, essentially creating a space of their own within the course community.

Beyond the development of identity, one vital feminist action in online environments, according to Mary Hocks, is the feminist intervention described by Nedra Reynolds within composition studies and cultural studies in particular. Writing about the importance of agency, Nedra Reynolds argues, “Feminists need a concept of agency in order to work and hope for social change; writers need a concept of agency in order to write a page, make a claim, or extend an idea” (58). “Agency,” she continues, “is not simply about finding one’s own voice but also about intervening in discourses of the everyday and cultivating rhetorical tactics that make interruption and resistance an important part of any conversation” (59). Reynolds asks, “How can women and other marginalized speakers and writers interrupt the very discourses and practices that exclude or diminish them? How can a theory of interruption help feminist rhetors analyze the workings of discursive exclusion?” (71). One method, she suggests, is to “[. . .] model interruption for students, both as a tactic of resistance and as overlapping support for a speaker” (71). Within the online writing course this approach can be particularly useful in promoting the continuation and development of discussion threads, drawing students into

discussions, and foregrounding issues of diversity and dissent. Although Reynolds claims that “[i]nterruption is most effective in the spaces where physical presence heightens the effect—at conferences, in classrooms, around tables” (71), allowing the discussion board to function within the online writing course as the primary site for identity formation and knowledge making is one step toward making this change. Applying this process to online environments, Mary Hocks explains, “the disruptive intervention” as a “communicative [act has] the primary aim of shifting and bringing attention to power relations” within online discussion forums (112). Within the virtual writing classroom facilitated by discussion boards, Hocks’s intervention allows the feminist instructor attempting to decenter the learning environment to respond to cautions raised by Stygall regarding control and power struggles and to maintain a “feminist-critical authority” (253-54, 261).

Hocks also examines “the troubled relationship between computer technology and gender because of how technologies both reflect and play a role in historical sexism and cultural politics,” and argues that “[b]y [. . .] enacting feminist interventions in online environments, we ensure a more humane, diverse, and gender-balanced human presence for all forms of technology and new media” (107-09). She continues, “Electronic forums allow like-minded people with similar interests to congregate and collaborate, with the luxury of ignoring topics or people that don’t interest them” (112). Within the online course that relies on communication and interaction through the discussion board, it becomes much easier, as Bill Anderson’s research demonstrates, for students to skip over postings that address challenging or difficult topics or simply to ignore the posts of some students when compared to traditional f2f discussions (114). According to Anderson, “The question at issue is whether or not the use of asynchronous online interaction between student and lecturer provides space for students to shape their own learning, or whether

the textual commentary that lecturers provide, with or without request, extends their control” (119). Rather than an act of control, an online instructor’s highlighting of these issues or redirecting of the discussion can help to ensure that these posts are not deliberately overlooked. Examining feminist interruptions in practice in two online discussions, Hocks “[. . .] demonstrates that, without interventions and confrontations in public forums, feminist concerns are typically not at the surface” (113, 116). Beyond serving as feminist action, this kind of intervention within the online writing course really becomes an opportunity for critical thinking and for students’ growth as writers since they are afforded the added time to reflect upon their responses and to consider the larger impact of their words on an audience.

Creating a Feminist Online Course

Echoing the claims of Cyganowski, C. Selfe, and Flores, Christine Tulley and Kristine Blair explain, “[. . .] an electronic environment can give voice to the disenfranchised, but technology in and of itself is not necessarily empowering” (57) “Thus,” they ask, “where does feminist pedagogy intersect with electronic writing environments, and what does this intersection mean for teachers of online writing attempting to design a course situated in feminist or gender-fair pedagogies?” (57). Applying feminist pedagogy to the computer-supported, f2f classroom, the authors argue, “[. . .] an underlying feminist framework can be broadened to revalue the experience of *all* students in the computer-aided writing classroom,” not only that of female students (57), and I expand that claim to suggest that this framework will be successful within the exclusively online writing course as well. To support their claims, “[the authors] offer specific instructional initiatives that can allow students to develop technology-based literacies in a supportive and nonthreatening environment” (56-57). Regarding literacy they argue, “In the context of the writing classroom, this may manifest itself in online assignments that blend the

personal and academic—and the visual, verbal, and aural—in order to enhance opportunities for establishing situated yet fluid knowledges and identities” (58). Furthermore, Tulley and Blair urge instructors “[to stress] that maintaining decorum and demonstrating mutual respect are the social and academic responsibilities of the entire class, not only those of the teacher,” and suggest that “[. . .] teachers can assign roles and responsibilities to students to ensure equal accountability and leadership between genders and to enable collaborative knowledge-making” (60). This blending of the personal and public, sharing of authority, and acknowledgment of the students’ responsibility in the learning process is the kind of feminist action that becomes essential in fostering student success in the exclusively online writing course. If participants see themselves as valued stakeholders who can make a difference in the learning process, they may be more likely to remain committed to a community at a distance regardless of the lack of traditional cues.

Although feminist action need not be limited by gender, for the female writing instructor the authors suggest that she be the female techie in the class and learn with the students rather than asking for help from the outside. This modeling of behavior, Tulley and Blair, argue is useful for female students enrolled in the course (61-62), yet I would argue that within exclusively online learning environments, modeling this behavior encourages all students to take greater ownership of their learning and fosters confidence in solving problems and in sharing that knowledge with the other members of the community. “Allowing students to become the experts and to teach both the instructor and fellow students,” they argue, “disrupts the expected balance of power in the computer classroom and enables the disenfranchised, thus realizing the feminist pedagogical tenet of giving voice to those who have no voice” (62). Within the online writing course then, this move offers students an opportunity to co-teach and to develop agency and

identity within a faceless classroom. Cautioning first-year writing teachers, Tulley and Blair conclude, “Within the context of the first-year writing classroom, it is important for teachers to remember that an ‘add computer and stir’ model of technological integration will not guarantee safer, more egalitarian online spaces for our students” (63). However, “Basing a computer-mediated writing classroom on feminist pedagogy invites female students in particular to actively claim espace as a safe haven” (63). With similar goals in mind, Hawisher and Selfe argue, “It behooves us, then, to craft a feminist pedagogy that acknowledges and endorses women’s virtual contributions while, at the same time, valuing men’s participating in these contexts as well, admittedly not an easy task” (“Teaching” 135).

Together, under a pedagogical structure committed to collaboration and the valuing of multiple voices and perspectives, teachers and students can work together to improve the online learning experience and to foster growth as writers and critical thinkers. In chapters 4 and 5 I illustrate the impact of this feminist approach on the online first-year writing course examining the roles of both the instructor and students.

CHAPTER 4

Feminist Moves and the Online Instructor

When planning to teach courses online, as I discussed in chapter 2, many instructors mistakenly attempt to “replicate” the traditional classroom (Berge 23) when online teaching actually requires a reinvention of the learning space and a new approach. If effective online teaching and learning takes place in “[. . .] an environment that both fosters trust among learners and the professor and seeks to promote a cooperative and collaborative environment that allows students to learn from course materials, the professor, and each other” (Berge 25), it is easy to see how the collaborative, decentered foundations of feminist pedagogy effectively align with these goals. Furthermore, as I discussed previously, fostering this collaboration is essential if we are to create a “dynamic” and interactive environment that moves beyond the common image of “an isolated student at a computer simply completing and submitting assignments” (L. Blair). Reminded here of Hawisher and Selfe’s caution that “the use of technology,” whether online or in a classroom, “can exacerbate problems characteristic of American classrooms,” that “[i]n many English composition classes,” the authors claim, “computer use simply reinforces those traditional notions of education that permeate our culture at its most basic level: teachers talk, students listen; teachers’ contributions are privileged; students respond in predictable, teacher-pleasing ways” (“Rhetoric” 129), I will illustrate in this chapter that working within the definitions of feminism explained in chapter 3, the online writing instructor whose interactions with students are guided specifically by feminist moves can begin to shift the center of power within the course to create more collaborative learning environments for students that promote the goals of first-year writing pedagogy and value the presence of many voices.

Feminist Rhetoric

Offering a justification for brining together the fields of feminist studies and rhetoric, Lisa Ede, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford comment on “traditional western discourse—conventions that sharply dichotomize the public and the private, that devalue personal experience in favor of ‘objective’ facts, ‘rational’ logic, and established authorities” at the expense of personal experience and subjective truth (423). For the online writing student, lacking the spontaneous community that typically exists in the traditional classroom, an ability to draw upon personal experience in online exchanges can provide students a way to enter discussions, lends students credibility, and offers students the opportunity to reveal—essentially, to create for their peers—an identity within the virtual course. Using the work of Mary Daly and Audre Lorde as examples, Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford note within the nature of language its ability to interweave multiple voices (425). With respect to Lorde in particular, the authors identify a feminist rhetoric’s ability to “[fuse] the public and the private, the personal and the political, [. . .] to [. . .] make connections that unsettle the traditional borders between speaker and listener” (426). Because all communication and interaction in online writing courses typically is facilitated by the computer, and more specifically the Internet, students’ traditional understandings of author and audience, of “speaker and listener,” or, perhaps, of instructor and student, may interfere with or determine their level of participation in course activities. In other words, students may assume that the instructor’s voice should be privileged or should be *heard* most often within the online course. Reinforcing the presence and validity of many voices, the online writing instructor can begin to decenter her own voice by highlighting the contributions of others and facilitating the construction of social knowledge through asynchronous communication activities.

With respect to rhetoric and composition pedagogy, Pamela J. Annas explains that although we have been taught to teach objective argumentative writing, “our observation of students lets us know how necessary it is for them to discover their own voices in an expression, assertion, and grounding of their own identity in their own experience” (61). “People write well” she argues, “with passion and color—when they write out of their experience and when that experience is seen as valuable so that they have the confidence to write it” (62). Particularly in the online course, “Students’ lives will ‘intrude’ into their classroom performance, their attendance, their attention, and their writing. They need to ground their writing in their lives rather than to surmount their lives before they write” (Annas 62). In a collective call to action, Annas explains, “Those of us who are, as composition teachers, in the powerful position of judging our students’ writing need to extend our definitions of what good and effective writing is and to transfer that sense of possibility to students alienated from the connections between language and experience” (71). For the online writing student, this reconsideration of “good writing” within online exchanges, writing that values experience and the student’s immediate context, may offer students the confidence to share and to explore their ideas while fostering student success.

Furthermore, “The womanization of rhetoric,” according to Sally Miller Gearhart, is necessary due in part to “[her] belief that any intent to persuade is an act of violence” (53). She argues, “Until the last few decades speech or rhetoric has been a discipline concerned almost exclusively with persuasion in both private and public discourse: it has spent whole eras examining and analyzing its eloquence, learning how to incite the passions, move the will” (53). More useful to communication, Gearhart explains, is “a nonpersuasive notion of communication” that can be a deliberate “creation or co-creation of an atmosphere in which

people or things, if and only if they have the internal basis for change, may change themselves [. . .] may choose to hear or choose to learn” (57, 56). In the online writing classroom, asynchronous discussions framed to invite equal contributions from all members of the course become the mode through which students can begin to create knowledge and to share power. Within an environment in which students must be *co*-creators of knowledge in order to remain committed to the course—a part of a community at a distance—this kind of feminist rhetoric certainly may result in what Gearhart terms “a mutual generation of energy for purposes of growth” (57) while allowing contributions from all of the voices within the course.

Beyond written and oral discourse, Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford reflect specifically upon “electronic writing, a new means of delivering text and graphics that offers another productive space within which rhetoric and feminism may work” (436). Considering the growth of online communication technologies, the authors claim, “[. . .] rhetoricians and feminists together must continue to examine the power relations of its rhetorical situation: Who gets to speak/write? Who gets to listen? Who gets to rewrite? How many of us will have access to the electronic media and to all their concomitant delivery systems?” (436). Working to highlight the collaborative aspects of the writing and communication processes while creating the kind of cooperative environments cited by much of the literature in distance education as ideal for online learning, instructors of online writing courses can use the questions posed by Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford to guide their course design and their interactions with students. Since much of the communication in online courses will take place asynchronously, a discussion board becomes essential to achieving these goals as well as the likely site for feminist rhetoric—a non-evaluative invitation for the blending of many voices and perspectives in generating knowledge.

Feminism and Collaboration

Valuing personal experience and validating many voices, feminist rhetoric also is driven by collaboration, precisely the kind of interaction advocated by scholars in online learning. As I noted in chapter 3, Cyganowski, in writing about the computer-supported classroom, argues, “Collaboration in using computers and in writing can create a student-centered, cooperative community” that immediately disrupts the hierarchy of teacher at the front and moves students into smaller groups (68, 70). Collaboration, then, is also one way “[. . .] to offer as interactive an online course as is currently available” (Farrington and Bronack par. 20). Similarly, Dave Knowlton argues, “An online course must align itself with student-centered approaches to be educationally effective,” allowing students to make meaning that is “more personally relevant” (6). Presumably, these personally relevant connections would allow students to draw upon personal experience and to blend the public with the private. Redefining the instructor’s role and restructuring the hierarchy of the traditional classroom, cooperative activities—online discussions—then become essential to connect students to one another and to the instructor and to allow students to support one another’s learning. A feminist rhetoric, valuing the presence and blending of multiple voices and perspectives, seems particularly appropriate for reaching the goals that Farrington and Bronack and Knowlton set for effective online learning (see also Tulley and Blair).

Advocating the kind of collaboration that can be applied to the online writing course, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede cite a new rhetoric, one that is “a dialogic or polyphonal model of communication” (256). They describe this collaboration, a method that is “predominantly feminine,” as “loosely structured, and the roles enacted within it are fluid; one ‘person’ may occupy multiple and shifting roles as the project progresses. In this mode the process of

articulating and working together to achieve goals is as important as the goals themselves” (Lunsford and Ede 258, 257). Although collaboration is not always valued within English studies, explain Lunsford and Ede, dialogic collaboration “allows a contextualized, multivocal text to appear” (261) and works against “the ways in which our society locates power, authority, authenticity, and property in an autonomous, masculine self” (257). Within the online writing course, power may be assumed to rest in the hands of the instructor or in the hands of those who are most *present* or vocal, yet it becomes the instructor’s responsibility to share that power and to highlight multiple voices. Continuing this discussion of collaboration, Lunsford focuses also on the work of Gloria Anzaldua and her idea of *Compustura*, that “[writing] is stitched together from ‘what’s out there,’ [. . .] what you can take and use” (190). The meaning of *compustura*, or seamstress, illustrates Anzaldua’s notion that she writes in “the company of the reader,” that the audience becomes a collaborator in the writing process (cited in Lunsford 191). For the online asynchronous discussion, the notion of *compustura*, the blending of many voices and ideas—a kind of layering that Sullivan and LeCourt and Barnes associate with hypertext—is essential for first-year students who are asked to make meaning from “what’s out there.”

Echoing many of C. Selfe’s and Flores’s comments on access and participation related to computers in the writing classroom, Melissa Alsgaard applies them specifically to the exclusively online learning environment. She, too, notes that women speak (participate) more often in online discussions, whether a component of the traditional or of the online course, and attributes that difference to the added time that students have to consider responses (23). “The virtual space,” Alsgaard explains, “seems to offer a comfort zone enabling [women] to flourish and often speak more assertively than in a live section of the same course” (24). Although Alsgaard’s conclusions seem promising, Sujo de Montes, Oran, and Willis remind us, “Equitable

spaces for learning and empowerment in online classes require dedicated and committed online educators willing to analyze their own biases and assumptions, first when they build online courses and then when they interact with online students” (269). Beyond fostering interaction among students, then, instructors in online courses also must be conscious of the ways in which their contributions and interactions with students indicate a distribution of power and facilitate students’ continued participation and presence.

Although centering course activities around the discussion board in virtual writing courses allows for interaction among students and the instructor and may foster the social construction of knowledge, when these activities are framed by a feminist approach, the possibilities for increased participation among students as well as a commitment to the course community are compounded. Drawing from their research, Yagelski and Grabill explain, “[. . .] simply putting students online does not necessarily increase their rates of participation in course-related discussions, significantly change the nature of that participation, or provide a more egalitarian and less leader-centered space for student voices” and that using discussion boards within writing courses will not, in and of themselves “[. . .] alter the students’ sense of their roles as undergraduate students” (Yagelski and Grabill 35, 36). Within a feminist framework and with the goals of civic rhetoric in mind, however, instructors of online writing courses may invite students to actively shape the course, to consciously solve problems, and to make meaning through discourse. In addition to “[. . .] providing students *and* instructors with responsibility for the course’s outcome,” a feminist online writing course embraces difference, and “[. . .] [students’] ideas become a means for exploring issues important to a liberating classroom” (my emphasis, Gruber 76). By allowing “[. . .] students [. . .] to put their virtual chairs in a virtual circle in an online classroom and discuss their writing” (Blair and Hoy 38), discussion board

postings “[. . .] may provide [. . .] spaces [. . .] in which both teachers and students can learn to listen to multiple voices, and thus, in Carol Gilligan’s words, learn the importance of ‘different truths.’” (cited in Cooper and Selfe 858).

The Instructor in the Feminist Online Writing Course

In studying the effects of these feminist moves on two sections of online first-year research and writing courses, I intended to examine specifically the ways in which my role as the instructor—my framing of online discussions as well as my responses to student posts—would invite ongoing contributions from students, would promote interactivity within the course, and would facilitate a collaborative learning environment that is believed to foster student success in online distance learning. Beyond individual writing assignments for which students would be responsible over the course of the semester—a short narrative of a research process (see Appendix G), a response essay and evaluation of current research on their individual semester topics, a research proposal and annotated bibliography, and a final (print or digital) research project (see Appendix H)—much of the students’ work within the course would consist of online discussion posts and peer response. Since we were not scheduled to meet as a group f2f or to interact synchronously at any point during the semester, the discussion board on our course management system (WebCT Vista) became our primary space for interaction. Aware of both the benefits of computer-mediated communication (CMC), discussed in the previous chapters, as well as the potential challenges, I was sure that careful planning for online discussions was essential to their success and to their significance for students. In order to foster this success, online instructors can begin by clarifying participant roles, offering students multiple opportunities for participation, and “responding thoughtfully and thoroughly to all student work to model the kinds of behavior students can follow” (Kiefer 136). In this course, online

discussions were scheduled during nearly every week, with the exception of weeks during which students were completing peer response of longer writing projects via email, and typically, students were expected to post an initial message in response to the prompt by Wednesday evening and to respond to the posting of at least one other person by the end of the week (Sunday evening). Since I had been teaching this particular course online for eight semesters, I found that the Wednesday and Sunday deadlines, suggested by former students, allowed them time to complete course readings and to work through and respond to at least some of the postings of their peers.

Drawing from the experiences of Dewitt and Dickson, I believed that in addition to the research guide for the course that common readings would help to foster collaboration through discussion since students would spend much of the semester working with their individual research topics and, in many cases, individual readings. I selected Chris Anson's *75 Readings Across the Curriculum* primarily because of the range of topics covered by the essays and specifically because of the chapter titled *Brave New World* that includes five readings on online identity and community that would allow us to discuss (during the second week of the semester) some of the challenges and benefits of learning and communicating online and examine closely the role of technology in our lives; in keeping with the goals of feminist rhetoric, I felt that this early opportunity to draw upon personal experience was essential to inviting multiple voices into the conversation and to building community within the course since students likely would draw out similarities and make connections with their peers. Furthermore, since the students would read a great deal of text on the screen each week, I felt that including actual print texts for the course might offer a bit of variety and, perhaps, a welcome move away from the computer screen. About half of the semester's scheduled online discussions involved analysis of and

response to course readings while the other half allowed students to share their current research findings or questions and to seek feedback from other members of the course community. As is customary for an online course and for discussion board activities, the first two discussion prompts for the semester (both during week one) invited students to introduce themselves by posting a short biography and to construct collaboratively the discussion board etiquette document and guidelines, activities that I will discuss in detail in chapter four (see D. Selfe; Tulley and Blair).

In addition to careful planning for computer-mediated communication (CMC), Yagelski and Grabill's study reveals that the extent to which instructors *manage* these discussions also determines their success (Yagelski and Grabill 28-29). Certainly there exists the danger that instructors may dominate or potentially cripple fruitful discussions, leading students to censor themselves (Gruber 73; Hawisher and Selfe, "Rhetoric" 136-37). And while in Gruber's case, "the instructor's 'absence' provided an opportunity for a discussion free from statements by perceived authorities," an instructor's complete withdrawal from a discussion can be difficult when course activities still require leadership (Gruber 69, 73), particularly true of first-year writing courses in which students are still learning to engage in social discourse and to consider the needs of their audiences. Similarly Lenard describes, "[Her] pedagogical stance [. . .] was to participate very little in the class e-mail list so that [she] could avoid shutting down a potential discussion by weighing in with [her] own opinion, which too many students would see as the 'right' answer" (Lenard 87; Anderson 119), yet Yagelski and Grabill note, "[. . .] the nature of the instructor's online presence and her or his way of framing the CMC component of the course seem to [be] key factors in influencing how students underst[and] their online participation" (Yagelski and Grabill 34). Within the exclusively online or virtual writing course, instructor

involvement in online discussions can “[give] an impression of ‘high involvement’ and ‘interaction’” and may foster the continued development of the discussion (Woods and Ebersole 113-14; Anderson 118). When considering the feminist pedagogy discussed in chapter 3 and Stygall’s cautions, an online instructor’s careful and deliberate participation can help to ensure equity and student success.

With these cautions and suggestions in mind, during each week, I responded to every student’s initial discussion board posting on Thursday (after initial postings were due), highlighting key ideas and posing questions that would prompt students to think more critically about the reading, their writing, or their research and to draw from their experience, allowing for a blending of the personal and public. Although students would receive course credit for their discussion board postings based upon both the etiquette guidelines and grading criteria that the group had collaboratively generated, my responses to discussion board postings were never evaluative in order to avoid shutting down or monopolizing the discussion or giving students the impression that I favored those whose opinions aligned with mine. Instead, I typically thanked students for posting and for sharing their unique perspectives and then moved on to elicit additional analysis or response from them and/or to draw connections among students’ posts if the students themselves had not yet done so.

For example, during the second week of the course, our readings centered on online learning, identity, and interaction, and my larger goal was to call students to think critically about their decision to enroll in an online course and their interactions as members of this online community. Students were asked to read five short essays and to post responses to two of them over the course of the week—the initial post to one reading by Wednesday evening and a response to a peer’s post under a separate reading by Sunday. Although I created five separate

threads (one for each reading) with a quotation from the text and a question to open the discussion, I encouraged students to introduce other issues and examples from the individual essays in their responses. One student posted this initial message:

I identified most with the article which [sic] talked about online personas and behaviors. To me this relates extremely [well] to my life. I have been an online gamer since the age of 12 and along with many of my "real life" friends, I have also kept friends for over 5 years from the games that I used to play. During these years, whenever I talk about my online friends to my parents they think I am crazy because like in this article, they believe that everyone is fake on the internet and simply displaying a personality at their will. I simply ignored her [sic] and eventually about a year ago me and my "real life" friends made a trip to South Carolina to meet our online friends. They ended up being the exact same as they were online and it was one of the best experiences of my life. When the author starts talking about a guy who has a different online personality than he does in reality, I witness this daily. [. . .] Because of the people lying about their identity online is the reason we have a problem today with Internet stalkers child molesters. Be yourself, whether it be sitting next to a stranger in class or chatting with your aunt on AIM [AOL Instant Messenger].

Again, my larger goal in creating a decentered learning environment guided by feminist rhetoric was to validate the presence of many voices, so I made a point to respond to each students' initial post during this discussion and to follow up with additional questions that would allow students to continue to reflect on the topics at hand and to draw from their experiences:

I suppose it's human nature, [student's name omitted], that there will always be those who use technology for good and those who do not. Since you chose to meet your online friends in person, would you agree that something is always missing online? That we crave that f2f interaction at some point?
The danger of child predators [. . .] is one of the most dangerous and unfortunate turns in online communication. In other cases, however, do you think that the ability to "be someone else," say someone who is more confident or comfortable sharing an opinion can be a benefit of online communication and/or online learning?

With my questions to draw from, the student followed up with this response:

I would say there was a craving before we met, just to see what the people on the "other side" are like in person. The way they walk, what they wear, eat, etc might not sound important but it often tells you a lot more about the person than just hearing their voice and seeing their pictures online.... Now all of my gaming

friends (mostly from Georgia but I from South Carolina and I from Virginia) get together twice a year...

As far as being someone else online, I'd have to say that there is not benefit in pretending to be someone else. Yes you can be more confident and say things you wouldn't online, but to keep that core personality of yours is essential. I believe online communicating should be as close to real as it can...

example: I would not be saying these things in class, because they are in depth and not a lot of people share my opinion but this online class gives me that opportunity. Overall though I would say from seeing me and talking [to] me face to face you would see the same personality you read in these posts.

This subsequent post allowed the student not only to continue considering issues that he/she had introduced in the previous post but also to consider the response of a member of the audience.

Rather than a solitary reflection—what the student alludes to, perhaps, in the example provided at the end of the post—this exchange on the discussion board (two additional peers responded to the student's initial post as well) reaffirmed for the student that the construction of knowledge in this case is social and that these online interactions do impact an audience.

I also used these opportunities to redirect discussions—modeling a kind of feminist intervention described by Nedra Reynolds and Mary Hocks (see description in chapter 3)—if students had moved away from the topic, if it seemed that one student's comment could be or had been misinterpreted as offensive to other students, or if students' posts were glossing over or largely ignoring important issues, especially issues of race, gender, religion, and equality; in general, this kind of post was rare. For example, during a discussion of Anna Quindlen's essay "Evan's Two Moms," later in the semester, one student posted this message in response to a peer's post which opened with, "Personally, I do not support gays [sic] rights but I also don't state my objection." Showing her support for her peer, the student posted this message:

[student name omitted] I am like you I don't really support gay rights but I don't go around voicing my opinions about it. [. . .] I did read this article and I agreed with some of what the author said, especially the part you quoted about the 25 years ago it was wrong for marrying a different race. Now that is not uncommon. Do I think they will legalize gay marriage across the US? I'm still not sure about

that. There are so many people that believe that God created man and woman for a reason. I don't think gay marriage is right but it is not my place to judge someone and make them unhappy because I don't believe the same way.

In an attempt again to validate multiple voices and perspectives within the course yet also to call this student's attention to the potentially offensive claims within her post, I followed up with this message:

The reason that you are referring to [student name] is procreation, correct? I have to wonder, however what happens in the case of a couple (one male one female) who is unable to conceive; should they be prevented from marrying since they do not fit the traditional definition of marriage?

And the same student responded in this way:

I don't think they should be prevented from being married, but unfortunately I am not a big fan of same sex marriage. I don't have anything but opinion to back that up. I don't really agree with same sex relationships but have the attitude their [sic] not bothering me so whatever. Yet at the same time, I really don't agree with the same sex marriage.

Because this discussion took place during week eight—at midsemester—and because this student had posted consistently to the discussion board, often expressing opinions contrary to those of peers, I felt fairly certain that my response would not shut-down the student nor would it prevent him/her from continuing to post to subsequent discussions. Beyond my initial response postings each week, although I did read all of the remaining posts, typically I allowed students to continue the discussions with their responses to one another and their follow up posts and stepped back from the exchanges. My larger goal here was to highlight the students' voices on the discussion board, to call students to think critically, and to allow them to support each other in the construction of knowledge.

In approaching the discussion board in this way, my goals for the study were three-fold: promoting interactivity, fostering collaboration, and promoting student success. First, I wanted to create a first-year writing course online that maintained the social aspects of the writing process

for students that they would likely have experienced in the f2f classroom and one that allowed for the kind of interactivity that online distance learning research suggests fosters student success. Questions on the three study surveys called students to consider both the ideal first-year writing course as well as to comment on the level of interactivity between instructor and students and among students over the course of the semester to gauge the success of this approach.

Second, I intended for discussion board activities—both initial postings and responses—to allow for collaboration in the construction of knowledge that did not necessarily hinge on my input and invited all students to contribute in a way that would allow them to remain engaged with the course and with course assignments. I chose not to define the word collaboration deliberately to allow the action of the course to speak for itself and to invite students to draw from these experiences in defining and reflecting on collaboration in the three course surveys. Finally, I believed that this collaborative approach and my discussion board posts guided by the feminist rhetoric described in the opening of this chapter, would lead students to feel that their ideas were valued by me and by their peers and as a result of the interactivity within the course, would lead to increased student success and retention.

Analysis

At the beginning of the semester and in an attempt to gauge students' expectations for the course, I asked study participants to reflect on their impressions of the ideal online first-year writing course, considering the level of interaction, the assignments, etc. Some respondents suggested that the courses would be similar to those held in the traditional classroom, explaining, *"Similar to how a teacher teaches face-to-face courses she only talks to the students online, still showing example essays, and having the students in groups to think of ideas for essays."* Highest on the list of priorities for survey participants were opportunities to communicate and to interact

with peers and with the instructor as well as detailed explanations that aligned with current research in online learning:

- *“[H]igh interaction with students & prof. mostly the same [as a face-to-face course] except online so little more difficult for everyone to be on the same pg. more detail & explanation [sic].”*
- *“Students are able to talk easily with one another even if they are shy. Getting in touch with the teacher is even easier then [sic] if in the classroom.”*
- *“The instructor should introduce themselves [sic], and make the students feel comfortable. Being able to [post] about different subjects is nice. Assignments should be clear on instruction and the instructor should be able to answer emails with questions. Chat rooms would be beneficial for the students and instructor to talk about subjects and assignments.”*
- *“Lots of interaction, students constantly replying to each other and giving feedback with continuous encouragement.”*

In keeping with the collaborative focus of feminist pedagogy, I was equally interested in students’ definitions of and levels of comfort with *Collaborative Learning* since the approach would be critical to the course. Two students explained that they did not understand or were not familiar with the term, and some of the respondents associated the term with the specific environment in which a course takes place:

- *“I think Collaborative Learning is when you learn in a group and you have class, like a traditional class. I am comfortable with this learning style because I have been learning this way for most of my life.”*

- *“Traditional class room setting [. . .] it is good to see other students and interact with them. I am comfortable in that setting.”*

Just over half of the respondents (58%), however, associated *Collaborative Learning* with some level of interaction and cooperative learning with peers:

- *“[W]orking together to learn is a good thing and sometimes we can learn from students as well as instructors.”*
- *“Collaborative learning is learning together and helping teach as a group rather than by one individual. Since I have never had an issue talking to my peers I feel quite comfortable in the idea of collaborative learning.”*
- *“Collaborative learning means to me is when you have to be able to understand [sic] and cooperate in a different style of communications with others. Im [sic] comfortable with collaborative learning. Being able to communicate and collaborat [sic] with others is not difficult.”*
- *“Collaborative learning is everyone working together towards the same goal. I am comfortable with this style since we learn something every day.”*
- *“This style of teaching works well for me. Working together helps me learn things that I would not have normally learned. I am extremely comfortable with this style.”*

Furthermore, students also expressed some concern, likely based on past collaborative experiences, within the classroom and also guided, perhaps, by their choice to take an online course in which they would presumably learn on their own:

- *“Students interact with each other in helping each other to learn. Not too comfortable because I hate to disagree with other peoples [sic] opinions.”*

- *“Collaborative learning to me, suggests that small groups of students are working together on a common goal instead of individually. This is nice every now and then, but I wouldn't want to be in groups daily for it's hard to get your point across in some groups with stubborn members; I would rather work on my own.”*
- *“Learning together. I am fine with this learning style as long as everyone is learning and not just taking the grade from others.”*
- *“To me, Collaborative Learning means to learn as a group. To confide on [sic] your peers and learn together. I am not so comfortable with this. I like to learn by myself. I have my own ways of studying and learning and feel as if I cannot learn as well with others in a group.”*

After the first eight weeks, since nearly the same number of study participants completed the MidSurvey (71%), I was able to compare responses and to examine the ways in which the course design and activities had impacted students as they reflected on the term *Collaborative Learning*. At this point, I asked: *What does Collaborative Learning mean to you and how comfortable are you with this style of learning as a result of this course?* All but one respondent offered a response to this question, and although not all of the students (19 of 27 respondents) commented on their level of comfort with collaborative learning, nearly all who did offered a positive assessment of this kind of learning (89.5%). Two students in particular made reference to peer response:

- *“In relation to this course, I do not think it is effective. Some people do not give any help when it comes to peer editing. I am not sure if it is because they do not want to take the time to actually edit the paper or if they really have no idea and no input. I*

realize that this is a general education class, but so far I have not been pleased with peer editing.”

- *“Somewhat comfortable; Peers can help assess some aspects of writing, but not all. They do not necessarily know what the teacher is looking for.”*

And two additional students explained that they preferred working independently to learning collaboratively, similar to the responses expressed at the beginning of the semester:

- *“Collaborative Learning means that you learn with your peers and as a group, [sic] I am pretty comfortable with thi [sic] style of learning, but prefer to be independent.”*
- *“I don't feel like I'm learning Collaboratively, [sic] I feel like I'm learning Independently and that's more important to me.”*

Compared to the results of the first survey, sixty-nine percent (69%) now associated *Collaborative Learning* with some level of interaction and cooperative learning with peers, an increase of eleven percent (11%) from the first survey. Most significant in student responses to this question, however, were the number of respondents who made specific reference to the aspects of the course design that fostered collaboration and community building, the foundations for the feminist pedagogy that I was attempting to enact:

- *“Collaborative learning to me involves students building on each other's ideas and coming together to help each other learn. I am comfortable with this technique.”*
- *“Collaborative learning means you learn from others around you. This implies that the people that surround you teach you what they know and you share the information that you know.”*

- *“Collaborative learning has really been helpful in this course for me because every question is posted, so if i have a question and someone else has already asked it, I can read the teachers [sic] and other peers [sic] response.”*
- *“Collaborative learning means that the students learn together instead of the usual teacher-student learning. The Teacher only directs the students in the direction to learn. I find collaborative learning to be personally easier to learn.”*
- *“It's awesome because we are all sharing ideas with eachoter [sic] in a small community to help build our skills and grow as writers.”*
- *“[W]orking together to meet a goal.”*
- *“It means to help others and receive help. It is very nice to receive feedback from other students and get valuable help. Very comfortable with it!”*

At the end of the semester, again I asked students to reflect on the term *Collaborative Learning* in order to compare their responses to those offered both at the beginning of the course and at midsemester: *What does Collaborative Learning mean to you now and how comfortable are you with this style of learning as a result of this course?* All survey participants provided a response to this question, and although not all of the students (16 of 19 respondents) commented on their level of comfort with collaborative learning, of those who did, sixty-nine percent (69%) did offer a positive response. This percentage decreased from midsemester, and again, I would associate this decrease with both the smaller sample of study participants who responded to the survey and the work that students completed with their individual research topics during the second half of the semester, making sustained collaboration less obvious to students perhaps. Although none of the respondents made specific reference to peer response as they had in the MidSurvey—potentially a result of the changes that I had made to the peer response process after

receiving student feedback—one student did explain, *“I’m not completely comfortable with [collaborative learning] in this course because much of the advice/information that the students provide [is] too general and often passive.”* Furthermore, one respondent commented specifically on the implications of collaboration in General Education courses: *“I guess that would depend on the group of peers. For a general education class that is required I am not very comfortable with it.”*

For the most part, however, students’ definitions illustrated an understanding of the term that aligned with my intentions in creating an online course that would build community and create knowledge through the collaboration of many voices. When compared to responses at the beginning of the semester, 78.9 percent of respondents now associated *Collaborative Learning* with some level of interaction and cooperative learning with peers, more than a twenty percent (20%) increase since the first survey:

- *“Collaborative learning means sharing ideas and information, that way everyone has a certain air of knowledge about the subject. I think this style of learning is very good.”*
- *“Collaborative learning means a group of people come together to learn from one another. All learners leave [sic] from each other.”*
- *“Collaborative Learning means to me that we learn as a group and contribute to each others [sic] thoughts. I am comfortable with this as well.”*
- *“Collaborative Learning to me means that everybody in the class participates in teaching each other. Student interaction allows for positive growth on all sides. I’m very comfortable with this technique.”*

- “Students are able to work together to provide feedback and help each other out with understanding assignments and getting the job done. I am also very comfortable with this idea.”
- “Collaborative learning involves the teacher and students combining their ideas [. . .]. I was really comfortable with this, I felt like my teacher really took our opinions into consideration and used them for our own benefit.”

Beyond issues of collaboration and given both the presumed impact of sustained interaction on student success in the literature on online distance learning and participants’ own descriptions of the ideal online first-year writing course discussed earlier in this chapter, I also asked study participants to describe on the first study survey the level of student-instructor and student-student interaction in their most recent writing course. Since a significant majority of participants—over 93 percent—had completed a traditional face-to-face English course most recently, I saw this part of the surveys as an opportunity to investigate whether an online first-year writing course could be as good as or better than one in a face-to-face setting. When asked specifically about interaction and interactivity within the course at midsemester, all of the students described the level of student-instructor interaction as at least *Somewhat Interactive*, with an overwhelming majority (81.5%) who felt that the course was *Highly Interactive*, an increase of 16 percent when compared to students’ most recent English course described as having the same level of student-instructor interaction. Similarly, all of the students described the level of student-student interaction as at least *Somewhat Interactive*, with nearly three-fourths (70.4%) selecting *Highly Interactive*, again, an increase of 18.7 percent when compared to students’ most recent English course described as having the same level of student-student interaction. Furthermore, the majority of students—81.4 and 70.3 percent, respectively—agreed

at least *Somewhat* with the statements: *I feel that my ideas and contributions are valued by my instructor*; *I feel that my ideas and contributions are valued by my peers*. Also worth noting, those selecting *Strongly Agree* in response to the same statements constituted 44.4 percent and 25.9 percent, respectively, of those students

At the end of the semester, all of the respondents described the level of student-instructor interaction as at least *Somewhat Interactive*, with 57.9 percent selecting *Highly Interactive*, and all described the level of student-student interaction as at least *Somewhat Interactive*, again, with 57.9 percent selecting *Highly Interactive*. While the percentage of respondents selecting *Highly Interactive* had decreased in both areas since the MidSurvey, a decrease of between 23.5 and 12.5 percent, I associate this decrease with at least two factors. First, a significantly fewer number of students responded to the EndSurvey when compared to the number of respondents at midterm, providing perhaps an unbalanced impression that did not represent the majority opinion among study participants. Second, course readings and discussion board postings became somewhat less collaborative during the last few weeks of the semester since students were working with different topics and on their individual research projects. The majority of students, however—84.2 and 73.7 percent, respectively—agreed at least *Somewhat* with the statements: *I feel that my ideas and contributions are valued by my instructor*. *I feel that my ideas and contributions are valued by my peers*, a slight increase from the previous survey suggesting that the decrease in interactivity did not affect students' impressions of their place within or value to the course community. More significant, however, those who *Strongly Agreed* with the statements made up 57.9 percent and 47.4 percent of the respondents, respectively, by the end of the semester, increases of 13.5 percent and 21.5 percent since midsemester.

Finally, given the generally positive feedback from students noted above and the consistent level of participation over the course of the semester, I expected a correlation to retention and student success given the impact of this feminist approach. Within the University System of Georgia, researchers report a thirty percent (30%) withdrawal rate within exclusively online General Education courses (Morris, Wu, & Finnegan 24). Over the eight semesters during which I had been teaching the course, withdrawal rates within my sections of online English 1102 ranged from 8.7 to 29 percent, with an average of 16.8 percent. During the Spring 2008 semester when this study was conducted, withdrawal rates among study participants decreased to an average of just over eleven percent between the two sections, remarkably with no withdrawals in one section. This is a significant decrease when compared to the University System and KSU English department averages of about thirty percent (30%).

In the next chapter, drawing from the assertion that the benefit of blending rhetoric and feminism becomes evident as “[. . .] both fields share a long-standing concern for public values and the public good, for creating spaces within which human subjectivities, at least potentially, can be realized, celebrated, and expanded,” (Ede, Glenn, and Lunsford 439), I will explore how an online instructor’s grounding of the course in feminist pedagogy can invite civic action among students, a kind of concern for the public good that allows students to contribute in significant ways to their development as writers and thinkers and to the development of the course community.

CHAPTER 5

Civic Rhetoric and Student Participation¹

Although my discussions up to this point have focused primarily on the instructor role in the online first-year writing course, when the course is grounded in feminism and collaboration, the students' active involvement and civic action becomes essential to individual student success and to the success of the course as a whole. Since many students may choose online learning, as discussed in previous chapters, as a result of their non-traditional schedules and need for flexibility, they may approach online learning environments with the expectation of individual and self-paced learning. For first-year students, writing courses often create opportunities not only to grow as writers and thinkers but also to expand notions of literacy and to examine the role of multimodality in communication; in each case, this growth is grounded in collaboration during the writing process and in the social construction of knowledge.

Since computers first were introduced to the first-year writing classroom, compositionists have written widely about the early and ongoing impact of these technologies on the traditional classroom: a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning (C. Selfe; Tulley and Blair), changes in interaction and collaboration (Hawisher and Selfe, "Rhetoric"; Cyganowski; Flores), an increase in focus on writing (Palmquist, et al.), yet when these courses take place in exclusively online or virtual learning environments, learning spaces that are often very new to students who are used to visual cues and proximity, the social activity that we count on in first-year writing may altogether disappear. If it is, as I have argued thus far, the development of community that determines the success of many of the other elements within the course, how might we draw from Simmons and Grabill's assertion that "people can write to change [and to

¹ An earlier version of this chapter appears in the Spring 2009 issue of *Computers and Composition Online*.

shape] communities,” as we design and develop online courses? How might we foster opportunities for civic participation in our online first-year writing courses?

Discussion Board

In addition to the convenience for students that comes with asynchronous communication as I have discussed, compositionists, teaching both face-to-face and online writing courses, frequently note the benefits of discussion board postings including the extra time allowed for reflection, the increased contribution by female students and by those who typically may not speak up in a f2f environment, and the added practice writing and considering the needs and reactions of a real audience (Alexander; L. Blair; C. Selfe; Yancey). Although the burden for response and evaluation of these discussions may fall primarily on the instructor, one strategy for fostering community and the co-creation of knowledge in an online writing course is to require students to respond to one another’s posts as well as to the initial prompt. While this exchange mirrors in some ways the discourse of the face-to-face classroom, the online environment allows all students to contribute, provides a written record of the discussion, and invites students to participate in an ongoing exchange over the course of the semester. As a result, these discussions also become sites for collaboration and student-centered learning, again, foundations of both first-year writing and feminist pedagogies, and respond to a need described by Simmons and Grabill for coordinated efforts among citizens (441). As I discussed in chapter 4, although online writing instructors may withdraw from discussions in an attempt to promote a student-centered environment, their careful and deliberate participation may further support feminist teaching and promote the kind of civic participation that may result in student engagement and success.

Beyond modeling responses as Kathleen Blake Yancey suggests (“The Pleasures” 113), an instructor, as I illustrated in chapter 4, may follow up on a student post with questions that

solicit clarification or invite the student to draw upon personal experience, promoting the construction of identity. This ongoing exchange and move toward critical thinking also creates opportunities for increased response and civic participation among students enrolled in the course. What has been most challenging in my own experience working with discussion boards in online courses is allowing the discussions to develop and providing students time to respond before intervening. In the f2f classroom, students almost naturally await the response of the instructor, gauging both her approval and disapproval and often making decisions about how, when, and if to respond based upon what they observe.

Marilyn Cooper and Cynthia Selfe “argue that these computer conferences are powerful non-traditional learning forums for students not simply because they allow another opportunity for collaboration and dialogue [. . .] but also because they encourage students to resist, dissent, and explore the role that controversy and intellectual divergence play in learning and thinking” (849). As instructors, we often attempt to mediate the discussion or to clarify students’ f2f responses without realizing that we may silence other students. The challenge, of course, is that time becomes a factor in classroom discussions, and we may look for an opportunity to conclude or to bring the discussion to some resolution before ending class. Online, however, time becomes an instructor’s and a student’s ally, both for considering initial responses to a prompt and for generating follow-up to peers’ comments. In their course feedback, students reveal that they appreciate and benefit from my responses to their posts, yet I also have discovered that students are willing to and very capable of continuing many of these discussions without my input or my attempts to calm the choppy waters. It is in those instances that we may allow students to grow as writers and thinkers, to enact a civic discourse, and to begin to generate knowledge while solving problems.

Course Strategies

Given the challenges of learning in computer-mediated environments, instructors of online first-year writing courses must make deliberate attempts to shift students' understanding of instructor and student roles while redefining the virtual learning space. Instructors must work to decenter this space and to invite students—citizens of the course community, in this case—to become co-teachers in the learning process. Since students are likely to approach online learning with expectations shaped by traditional learning experiences in f2f often lecture-heavy courses, this deliberate and initial shift of power not only reveals the instructor's expectations but also clarifies for students their role in this learning environment.

Although this sharing of power is an inherently feminist move, I have found that first-year students at my institution can be somewhat resistant to the term, bringing with them preconceived notions and definitions of feminism. Instead of focusing exclusively on feminist teaching and what I regard as my responsibilities, I find it important to introduce students to civic rhetoric and to their roles as citizens within this online community, reinforcing again their responsibilities and my expectations for the course. In order to facilitate civic participation in online courses, first, as is customary in online learning environments, the instructor should introduce herself at the start of the semester and invite all members of the course to do the same (Blair and Hoy 38). The discussion board can serve as a useful method of facilitating these introductions because it allows for responses from other members of the group and provides an ongoing opportunity for interaction throughout the semester or as long as the thread remains active. Introductions in my online courses have allowed students to discover other courses they may have in common, to find that other students enrolled in the course live close to them, to

identify common interests or experiences, and generally to set the stage for the community that we will attempt to foster over the course of the semester.

According to Stuart Blythe, when planning to incorporate CMC into course designs, instructors should consider both the type of communication as well as privacy, whether they will “monitor discussions, if “students [will] post anonymously or sign their names,” and how discussions will be evaluated (125-127). In studying a graduate seminar in which she was enrolled as a student, Sibylle Gruber explains “[. . .] that the so-called ‘negative effects’ of CMC can be used productively if the classroom pedagogy allows an exploration of conflict situations” (Gruber 62-63). “First,” she explains, “instructors can discuss their pedagogical approach explicitly with the students and establish common goals and objectives as well as continue discussion throughout the semester. [. . .] Otherwise, students will consider computer-assisted instruction just another form of instructor-controlled communication and look at it as an unwarranted imposition on their already overcommitted academic lives” (Gruber 75; see also Lenard).

To this end, next students should be invited to generate collaboratively the guidelines and expectations for discussion board use within the course. Addressing both etiquette, or *netiquette* as described by Dickie Selfe (26) and Tulley and Blair (60), and outlining the requirements for actual post content, these guidelines will help to set parameters yet also will invite students to make collective decisions that will impact them as members of that community, in other words, to take civic action. Ideally, this activity will constitute an online discussion during the first week of class and will allow the instructor to contribute and to respond as well. This activity can provide immediate evidence for students that their contributions are not only valued but also essential to the success of the course. Finally, I offer a discussion board strategy that promotes

the development of community, allows students to act as co-teachers, and may begin to address what Kristine Blair and Cheryl Hoy and Kate Kiefer describe as potential semester-long one-on-one teaching or tutorials with every student enrolled in an online course (Blair and Hoy 37-38; Kiefer 133): the discussion board *Questions* topic.

Although we may make every attempt to provide clear explanations and multiple methods through which students can access information in an online course, inevitably, questions will arise as they do in f2f classes as well. A significant difference given the online environment, however, is that other students do not benefit from our responses when they typically are sent via email to an individual student. Alternately, and in an attempt as Simmons and Grabill explain, “to unite citizens by showing them that others in the community [are] experiencing similar problems” (428), instructors can create a discussion board topic available all semester simply titled *Questions* and request that students *post* rather than send their questions via email. The added benefit here is that students can, and should, be invited to respond to questions as well, once again becoming co-teachers and taking responsibility for the success of the community as a whole. In those instances, the instructor simply may respond to acknowledge a student’s contribution in addressing a peer’s question and model the kind of behavior expected of members of that community (Yancey 113). While students should be reminded that more personal matters may be discussed via email or even during virtual or f2f office hours, a significant number of student questions in a given semester will be appropriate for the discussion board thread. These strategies, framed for students within a discussion of civic participation, have the potential to “unite citizens” (Simmons and Grabill 428) enrolled in the course, invite students to become co-teachers, and to allow for access to and meaningful interaction with course materials to make new knowledge.

Analysis

Over the course of the Spring 2008 semester, as I studied two online sections of my first-year research and writing courses, I implemented the strategies noted above, observing their impact on the development of community, students' impressions of their place within the community, and the decentering of the virtual learning space. Specifically, I was interested in: How students would write to shape and to change this online community, the extent to which that participation would promote a sense of having shaped the course, and how students would tie their work within the course to their development as writers and critical thinkers.

Community and Civic Action

From the beginning, I framed the course interactions under the umbrella of community within the virtual classroom and acknowledged our ability to write to shape and to change this online community. I wanted students to understand that civic rhetoric becomes important to the online course because course success depends on the participation of all who are enrolled, and writing—the central focus of the course—is essential to fostering that success. The course WebCT site included this introduction to our online community (both in print and as an audio file), deliberately titled *Writing to Change Communities*:

Before we get started, I would like to share with each of you my philosophy for this course so that we all approach the experience with common expectations and understanding. If this is your first online course, you may be apprehensive about what to expect and how the course will compare to past learning experiences, especially since we will not meet in a traditional classroom. In fact, we may never meet each other at all. For me, two important ideas lie at the foundation, and the success, of this course—community and civic rhetoric. Each of you, without giving it much thought, plays an important role (more or less important depending on the specific community) in a number of communities. You are a member of your family community, your hometown community, and even the Kennesaw State University community. During the course of this semester, you will have the unique opportunity to become a member of an entirely new community within this course. As a rule, the strength of any community rests on the shoulders of its members and their commitment to meeting goals and bringing about change. In

many cases (and this is where civic rhetoric comes into play), members of those communities write to bring about change; in other words, the writing facilitates the development of the community. Considering that we are members of a writing community—this is, after all, a writing course—and that much of our communication will take place digitally (generally in written form) we certainly are in a position to work together to shape and to bring about change within our specific online community.

Having read [the introductory information on] Taking an Online Course, you are aware that online courses offer you the unique opportunity to take greater responsibility for your own learning, yet I also am asking you to play a role as a co-teacher in this community. Over the course of the semester, I often will ask for your input and feedback in setting guidelines and expectations for course activities, responding to questions, and working together to create new knowledge and to develop as writers. We each come to this course with very different experiences and it is in combining those perspectives that we all truly can become teachers and students. Although you may feel at times that you are all alone at your computer in this course, remember that we all are working toward the same goal and that more than likely, someone else is online at the very same time working on the very same assignment. If you are that person online at 2 am and notice a peer's question, take time to respond to the post—even if you don't know the answer—reminding him or her that someone is, in fact, on the other side of the screen. Also take advantage of opportunities to use the Chat function in WebCT, taking stock of who is online and sending a message. I assure you that I will do my part to create a foundation to move us forward and will coach each of you as you develop as writers, but I firmly believe that the success of this online course—like any community—depends on the contributions and the commitment of each of its members and in this specific case, the contributions of the co-teachers.

Because a primary facet of this study involved feminist, decentered approaches to the design and delivery of the course, my goal was to enact this kind of teaching without specifically calling attention to it or specifically naming it feminist, as I did with *Collaborative Learning* (see chapter 4). Without discussing the term formally, in the first survey I asked respondents to define *Decentered Teaching* and to explain their level of comfort with this approach. Six of the respondents indicated that they were not sure or did not understand the term, and seven associated it in some way with online learning specifically:

- *“I have never heard the term before but by dissecting I would think it means a teaching institution that has no walls”*
- *“Well I think it is on-line [sic] teaching, the teacher never really interacts with the students physically. I do not have a problem with this as far as English classes go.”*
- *“To me, Decentered Teaching means that we do not interact face-to-face with our teachers but through messages and emails. So far, I'm pretty comfortable.”*
- *“Decentered teaching means another opportunity to learn what a student does not have time for at the college campus. I'm very comfortable with this style of teaching because it makes my life easier.”*

I was very happy to discover that a number of students defined *Decentered Teaching* in ways that aligned closely with my goals for the course and my working definition of the term—that each of the members of the course would play an important role in the success of the community as a whole and that my role as instructor was not privileged:

- *“I think it takes the focus off of any one person or thing, and allows an entire class to teach each other. I am very comfortable with this style.”*
- *“I see Decentered Teaching as more of a student course, where we all learn from each other, and even the teacher could learn from the students.”*
- *“Only a guess, but a teaching style where everyone not only the teacher has nearly equal input in the instruction [sic]. I personally am a little doubtful about the total effectiveness of this type of teaching, ‘too many cooks in the kitchen’ as they say.”*
- *“I think it means that the nstructor [sic] teaches, but also allows other students to ‘teach’ by allowing free interaction and communication with each other. I am very comfortable with this style.”*

- *“My most educated assumption of decentered teaching would be teaching not based solely on lectures or being taught by one specific individual. I feel slightly uneasy about this at times because I have always been in environments where the teacher is right in front of me giving the lectures and new material.”*

By midterm, only four of the respondents indicated that they did not know how to define the term, and one student offered no response. Four students still associated decentered teaching with online learning environments specifically, explaining *“There is no centered meeting and everybody can work at their own pace,”* and *“[. . .] we are learning with out the class room and at our own time.”* Additional responses included:

- *“Decentered teaching to me involves letting the entire class teach each other, rather than having one established teacher and the rest only learners. I am comfortable with this technique.”*
- *“Decentered Teaching mean [sic] that the teacher does not lecture its more so the students having and [sic] input and creating class discussions. I am somewhat more comfortable with this process.”*
- *“Decentered teaching to me means that students participate in teaching and learning as much as the instructor does. Since the beginning of the course I have become much more comfortable with this style of teaching.”*
- *"Decentered Teaching means that the student is more responsible for their learning, and I am comfortable with this style of teaching."*

At the end of the semester, since the students had now been enrolled for nearly sixteen weeks in a course designed with a decentered approach, I wondered how this design and their course activities had shaped their understanding of and level of comfort with this teaching style,

again, without my deliberate use of that term. By the end of the semester, five of the respondents indicated that they did not know how to define the term, and three students—fewer than at midsemester—still associated decentered teaching with online learning environments specifically, claiming, *“Decentered teaching means to me that you are not face to face with your instructor,”* and *“Decentered teaching is teaching beyond the classroom. I need to attend another online course in order to make a decision as to whether I am comfortable with this style otherwise I have nothing to make a comparison.”*

And yet another respondent associated decentered teaching with a complete absence of teaching by the instructor: *“The teacher doesn't actually teach. We teach ourselves.”* Overwhelmingly, however, survey responses suggested that after being enrolled in the course and participating in the activities that I had facilitated for the semester, study participants associated the term with some shift in instructor role within the course:

- *“Decentered Teaching means that the traditional teacher figure is displaced and it is up to the student to learn what he is being asked to learn. I like this style very much due to the self drive the method implies. I like the creativity it offers and the fact that it can be very efficient.”*
- *“Decentered teaching, to me, means that I am learning on my own, with a little but [sic] of guidance from my instructor. They are there to help me if I need it and to add tips. I am very comfortable with it.”*
- *“Decentered teaching takes the focus off of the teacher and lectures, and allows for a community approach to learning. I'm very comfortable with this technique.”*
- *“[. . .] students are able to learn from the instructor by the instructor providing all the resources necessary, but allowing the students to tackle things on their own with*

an easy way to contact the instructor if they need help. I am very comfortable with this style."

Responses to each of these surveys reveal that students certainly were aware of a shift in what might be termed a traditional instructor role, yet what seems to be missing is that they did not identify an equal shift in their own responsibilities from students or learners to co-teachers. Even the student who noted, *"The teacher doesn't actually teach. We teach ourselves,"* fails to indicate that he/she is also responsible for some teaching through discussion board postings or peer response.

Biographies

As their first discussion board assignment, students were asked to post a short biography before the end of the first week, introducing themselves to their peers and beginning to create and to share an identity with their peers and with me. Generally, within the f2f classroom, I am not overtly personal in this first-day introduction and share with students only the basics including my education, my time at KSU, my specialization in Rhet/Comp and Computers and Composition, and my Italian heritage. Throughout the semester, however, I reveal much more about myself in class discussions, on Monday or Tuesday morning in describing something that took place over the weekend, or simply in passing while chatting with students before or after class. These exchanges foster a kind of spontaneous community over the course of the semester within the traditional classroom and constitute one significant aspect of teaching and learning that I believe is missing online because, as one student noted in a survey response, we have fewer opportunities *"to be spontaneous."* In an attempt to reveal my identity as a member of the online community and to help students begin to make connections with me, during this semester, my biography posting included more personal details in the hope that students would follow my

model and would reveal a bit more than their names, hometowns, and majors (see Nathan 92-93). My goal here was to help students to understand that the online environment requires a more deliberate construction of identity since traditional visual cues are absent, and I included the following prompt for our first discussion:

I thought we could start with a bit of background here. Read on and then add your own NEW message under the "Week One Intros" topic with a brief bio, a bit of background on your online learning experience, and anything else you might like to share with all of us. Please feel free to respond to as many postings as you'd like. Looking forward to learning more about you!

Again, as a member of the community, I posted my biography to open the discussion, sharing with students information about where I grew up, how long I had been living in the south, where I completed my undergraduate and graduate work, and the focus of my current research. I also referred to my husband, living in downtown Atlanta, and teaching yoga at a local studio to help students to create a complete picture of their instructor. In response to my invitation to post a biography and with my own, more personal biography posting as a model, all of the students' biographies included details beyond name, hometown, and major as I had hoped. Of the thirty-eight study participants, 36.8 percent included details about their families, including mentioning husbands, siblings, and parents.

Twenty-nine percent referenced (equally) work or career goals, while another 47.4 percent mentioned past educational experiences. Since I had asked students to comment on their experiences with online learning, I was not surprised to find that 63.2 percent did so, yet I was particularly interested to discover that 7.8 percent of respondents expressed fears or concerns about online learning environments; more surprising is that all of these respondents were enrolled in the same course, suggesting perhaps that one student's admission allowed the others to feel comfortable expressing similar concerns. Just over thirteen percent of posts (13.2%)

included mention of pets, and nearly half of the students (44.7%) mentioned extracurricular activities in which they were involved. Students also mentioned personal course goals (18.4%), additional contact information (specifically for MySpace and Facebook) (18.4%), and names or nicknames (including pronunciation and spelling) (18.4%). Finally, in addition to the vulnerabilities that 23.7 percent of the study participants expressed regarding personal shortcomings, failures, weaknesses, and insecurities (expressed much more frequently in one section of the course than the other), an equal percentage attempted to make connections with the group in their initial posts; nearly sixteen percent of participants (15.8%) attempted to make connections with me by commenting on specific details included in my biography (New York, Auburn University/SEC football, Middle Tennessee State University, yoga, etc).

Because I was grounding the course in civic rhetoric with a decentered approach, I also wanted students to see me as part of the course community, and since I invited students to respond to as many biography posts as they wished, I assumed that students also would respond to my biography posting as a member of the course. I was surprised to find that I received no responses, yet upon further reflection, I wondered if this new decentered approach was atypical of what students had previously experienced in the classroom and if they believed that it was more appropriate to respond to the postings of their peers instead. Of the thirty-eight participants, nine students responded to the postings of their peers, resulting in ten posts (one student responded to the posts of two peers). Again, it is important to mention that these response posts were not required and may illustrate, instead, students' desires to reach out to their peers. Since both sections of the course included a greater number of female students, it is not surprising that response posts by female students outnumbered those of male students by 8:2, yet in one section of the course, response posts were split equally between male and female participants.

Within the posts themselves, students commented on similar majors or programs in which they were enrolled, greeted former classmates, offered assistance for work within this course and others, expressed similar concerns about another course, and offered praise for extracurricular activities in which their peers were involved. On a more personal level, participants also invited their peers to share additional information or to elaborate on some aspect of their posts, made connections with peers that were related to work or interests outside of school, noted close proximity to a peer's home, and simply agreed with a posted comment in the initial biography. Although I did not receive responses to my biography, I had planned to respond to every student's biography post in order to begin to make connections with students and also to model the kind of interaction that I was expecting for the discussion board over the course of the semester. In keeping with the feminist approaches and my goal of civic rhetoric within the course, I wanted to draw students into the community by asking them questions and allowing them to reveal their identities to peers. Furthermore, I believed that my follow up posts would not only remind students that I was, in fact, on the other side of the screen, but also would encourage them to remain engaged in course activities.

Of the thirty-eight participants, who all received responses to their biographies from me by the end of the first week of the course, 78.9 percent (76.5% in section one and 81% in section two) responded to my response posts. These follow up postings allowed students to comment on connections that I had made with them and to answer the questions that I had posed. In some cases, these follow up posts led the students to ask questions of me as well, yet the ensuing discussions were limited to the individual student and me despite their public appearance on the discussion board. Overall, this discussion board activity allowed me to reveal an identity and to invite students to do the same, it enabled us as a group to create a foundation for the course

community, it allowed me to model discussion board activity, and it prompted students to take initiative in responding to their peers and in essence to share the teaching.

Discussion Board Etiquette

During the first week of class, with Simmons and Grabill's assertion in mind, that shared information leads to community building (424), the next opportunity for civic action involved students creating collaboratively an etiquette/guidelines document to guide their use of the discussion board. Typically, as I prepare and post course materials for a new online course, I create these guidelines on my own, and I felt strongly that I, too, as a member of the course community would offer suggestions and guidance as necessary. My larger goal, however, was to allow students to take greater ownership of these guidelines and to consider more carefully the significance of the etiquette document to their learning and participation in the course. I suspected that students would be more likely to participate fully and frequently in discussion activities if they were involved in setting the expectations as co-teachers, and I made a deliberate effort to link this activity specifically to the overriding goal of civic participation and writing to change and to shape communities. With the added intention of offering students evidence of the decentered approach toward which I was working, I included this prompt on the discussion board:

This is your first co-teaching task and opportunity to begin to define our online community. Read the first message under this thread and then respond with your own ideas. Remember that there are no wrong approaches here; we simply want to create guidelines and evaluation criteria on which we can all agree. Instead of creating your own new message, simply respond to my original post or a follow-up post and be sure to read the messages that come before yours. Post by the end of Week One and be sure to come back to the discussion often to add/respond to your peers' suggestions.

As a member of the community, I also wanted to post a message to begin the thread yet did not want to stifle students with my ideas at the outset; instead, I reminded students of the

purpose of the discussion board activity and offered a few general ideas to open the thread:

Together, we are creating a list of guidelines, expectations, and rules for etiquette on the discussion board. What would you like to see included in this kind of document? Consider length and content of posts, frequency of posts, general format, etc. I, too, will offer some suggestions as the discussion progresses and will compile a final document from this discussion. Looking forward to reading your ideas.

Again, similar to the responses to their peers' biography postings, this activity was not required, yet I wanted to invite students to participate and to explain why I believed that the activity was important to their work within the course and to the overall development of community. Of the thirty-eight participants, an average of 76.9 percent of participants (82.4% in section one and 71.4% in section two) offered their feedback and suggestions. Since I had mentioned length and frequency of posts in my opening message, it is not a surprise that student posts addressed those issues most often: 68.4 percent mentioned length, specifying either a set length or preferring no set length, and fifty percent (50%) mentioned frequency of posts in a given week, noting the dangers of overposting and suggesting that at least one reply be required.

Nearly thirty-two percent (31.6%) of participants noted that posts should include meaningful content or helpful comments that move beyond, "I agree" or "I disagree," while 23.7 percent commented equally on the tone of posts, suggesting that students avoid rude comments, and a respect for all opinions. Furthermore, students suggested that their peers sign-off with their names, avoid offensive language, include the name of the peer to whom they are responding, and avoid all caps in their messages. In offering these suggestions, 18.4 percents of students made comparisons or references to past online communication experiences or past online courses. Specifically, students' posts referenced:

- *"open lines of communication"*
- *"goal of us all becoming better writers"*

- “*be[ing] open to all ideas*”
- “*[. . .] stay[ing] on topic*”
- “*[. . .] learn[ing] by trying to help others*”

Overwhelmingly, student posts addressed all of the issues that I typically include in the etiquette document and more. Most exciting was the collaborative and encouraging tone of student posts that reiterated the course focus on writing (see comment above) and encouraged both participation and civil discourse:

- “*[T]he more you post the better [writer/communicator] you will be*”
- “*Remember, it’s not only what you say, but how you say it. Let’s aim to build each other up*”
- “*From reading all the bio’s [sic] we all have completely different opinions and backgrounds and can learn a lot from each other.*”

Students’ participation and their careful reflection evident in their posts illustrated both the success and the importance of this act of civic participation early in the semester to create a foundation for the community.

Course Readings

To offer students further evidence of their role as collaborators in the course and my genuine desire for their input and contribution as co-teachers, I invited students to choose the readings for the semester. Although I had selected Anson’s *75 Readings Across the Curriculum* as the common reader for the course, I deliberately included *TBA* on our course syllabus for the weeks during which we would read, analyze, and respond to essays to ensure that students would have a voice in that process. At the beginning of Week Three, I included this prompt on the discussion board under a thread titled *Readings*:

As I noted in my Week Three announcement, take a look at the table of contents for the *75 Readings* text, and post the titles of a few essays that you might be interested in reading this semester. No deadline or grade for this discussion.

I deliberately made the activity voluntary because I wanted an accurate indication of the number of students who would *choose* to take part in this act of civic participation after having read the introductory course information reinforcing the importance of community as well as those who would note from the weekly announcement that the discussion thread was an opportunity, once again, to *co-teach*. In all, twelve students posted their suggested chapters (about half included specific titles of essays within those chapters as I had requested); four students posted from section one and eight students from section two. Although I would have expected greater participation in this activity given that over eighty percent (80%) of respondents to the PreSurvey indicated that they planned to be *At Least Somewhat Involved in Shaping the Course*, I wonder, perhaps, if selecting readings did not strike students as the most significant contribution that they might make to the course. Since subsequent student survey responses indicated that they had, in fact, been *At Least Somewhat Involved in Shaping the Course*—62.9 percent at midsemester and 73.7 percent at the end of the semester—and since none of the survey respondents voluntarily expressed dissatisfaction with the assigned readings, it may be reasonable to assume that students were satisfied with their decision to participate in selecting readings or with having left that decision up to their peers. Furthermore, survey percentages suggest that students believed that they had contributed to shaping the course in other ways.

Questions Thread

I also included on the discussion board a specific thread for questions to begin to mirror the question-answer process of the traditional classroom (all students may benefit when one student asks a question) and to invite students to act as co-teachers responding to the questions

posted by their peers. In addition to remaining active all semester, allowing students to come back to the questions/answers as often as they would like, I believed that this thread would allow me again to reinforce the idea of civic rhetoric in the online writing course. My expectations led me to guess that I would receive fewer individual emails from students and that students would begin to see the benefit of the question thread both from their continued posting of questions and responses as well as their responses on the surveys. To my disappointment, the *Questions* thread was not used widely by students, and the same small group of students both posted and responded to questions over the sixteen week semester. In the first section of the course, the thread included one hundred eleven (111) posts for the semester, of which forty-five (45) messages were posted by me as responses and thirty (30) were posted by one student (both questions and responses).

Of the total posts, thirty (30) were actual questions, the majority of which were posted during the final month of the semester, and only six students (5 female, 1 male) actually posted questions. In two instances, questions posted by students allowed other students to post related questions, either in response to the original post or to my response post, yet in nearly every case, I was responsible for responding to the questions posted to this thread. In the second section of the course, the thread included thirty-four (34) posts for the semester, of which sixteen (16) messages were posted by me as responses. In total, six (6) students participated in this thread, and all were female. Unlike the previous section, most of the question posts occurred in the month of February, with only one post each in the months of March and April. Although it may seem reasonable to conclude that students, especially those enrolled in the second section, did not have many questions, my general email folder for each section included one hundred sixty-

six (166) and two hundred forty-five (245) messages, respectively, the majority of which included specific questions from students.

On the final survey, I asked students to describe their level of participation in the discussion board *Questions* thread, yet I discovered that more than half of the respondents misinterpreted the question to reflect instead on the required weekly discussions. This misinterpretation led me to wonder if I had placed enough emphasis over the course of the semester on the co-teaching opportunity inherent to that thread. Those who did address the *Questions* thread in survey responses, however, indicated very little participation, in line with the number of posts by the same small group of students over the course of sixteen weeks:

- *“I didn't really use the Questions thread, but I can see how it may have helped others.”*
- *“It was very helpful at times. You can always get a response in just a short amount of time.”*
- *“I had some participation. I would answer questions I knew if it looked like it would be a while before the professor would answer. The difference between posting to the questions thread and emailing the professor would be if I thought the question would benefit others.”*
- *“I did not post questions, glanced at it briefly, but for the most part I did not require help.”*
- *“I think I was the main contributor in the questions thread. It was one of the quickest ways to get an answer from our instructor.”*

These responses, when combined with the *Questions* thread data clearly suggest that this aspect of civic participation within the course was not fully realized. Comparing the sheer number of

emails to which I responded to the contributions to this discussion board thread, I wonder if students simply felt more comfortable emailing me directly rather than posting questions to the public forum, if they did not remember to post questions to the discussion thread despite my reminder in the weekly announcement, and/or if students simply associated email with asking a question of the instructor in the traditional classroom. Although I did on two separate occasions ask for permission to post a student's email question and my response to the *Questions* thread since the information would be useful to other students, I did not make this duplication a habit since it was often time-consuming and/or did not immediately occur to me.

In chapter 6, I will discuss the findings of this study in more detail, offering suggestions for future and continued research on exclusively online first-year writing courses.

CHAPTER 6

Implications and Future Research

Introduction

Reviewing the findings of this semester study, it seems reasonable to conclude that online first-year writing courses not only pose new challenges for compositionists but also offer us opportunities to redefine our roles and our students' roles as members of these course communities. In conducting this study, I intended to examine specifically the ways in which my role as the instructor—my organization and introduction of course activities, my framing of online discussions, and my responses to student posts—would invite ongoing contributions from students, would promote interactivity within the course, and would facilitate a collaborative learning environment that is believed to foster student success in online distance learning. Furthermore, I hoped that allowing students both to shape and to improve the course community and, in turn, the course itself, would enable them not only to develop as writers and critical thinkers but also to recognize, as Simmons and Grabill explain, their ability to impact communities of which they are a part (440).

As I discussed in previous chapters, my goals for the study were three-fold: promoting interactivity, encouraging collaboration, and fostering student success. First, I wanted to create a first-year writing course online that maintained the social aspects of the writing process for students that they would likely have experienced in the f2f classroom and one that allowed for the kind of interactivity that online distance learning research suggests fosters student success. Second, I intended for discussion board activities—both initial postings and responses—to allow for collaboration in the construction of knowledge that did not necessarily hinge on my input and invited all students to contribute in a way that would allow them to remain engaged with the

course and with course assignments. Finally, I believed that this collaborative approach, supported by my use and modeling of feminist rhetoric would lead students to feel that their ideas were valued by me and by their peers and as a result of the interactivity within the course, would lead to increased student success and retention. By implementing the specific discussion-focused strategies discussed in chapter 5, I intended to observe their impact on the development of community, students' impressions of their place within the community, and the decentering of the virtual learning space. Again, I was interested in how students would write to shape and to change this online community, the extent to which that participation would promote a sense of having shaped the course, and how students would tie their work within the course to their development as writers and critical thinkers. I worked under the assumption that if participants could see themselves as valued stakeholders who can make a difference in the learning process, they would be more likely to remain committed to a community at a distance regardless of the lack of traditional cues.

Decentering the Course and Fostering Collaboration

At the heart of this study and course design was my desire to decenter the virtual space of the course and to allow students opportunities to co-teach. Aware that the move to an exclusively online environment with a lack of visual cues might further reinforce students' assumptions that work online simply involves calling up and consuming information prepared by the instructor, I wanted to work deliberately in designing the course to offer students evidence that they, too, would play an integral role in the success of the course and in their own success. Over the course of the semester, students' participation in the activities described in previous chapters as well as their responses to survey questions regarding *decentered* teaching suggest that they did not, in fact, view me as the center—or perhaps the traditional leader—of the course and that they did

take on greater responsibility for their own learning. What is missing, however, is the shift for the majority of students in seeing themselves not as individual learners but as co-teachers within the online course. Although student surveys did reveal students' understanding of *Decentered Learning* as teaching and learning both by and among students and the instructor within an environment of collaboration and interactivity, it is not clear that students also recognized within their roles as teachers, their responsibility to other students within the community. A number of the students noted in their survey responses that "*it is up to the student to learn what he is being asked to learn,*" essentially, that students are taking key concepts from course materials and activities and are processing them on their own rather than teaching others. From my perspective, of course, it seems likely that students did learn from one another given the way in which they were prompted by students posts to reconsider their claims, to expand their understanding of course readings based upon the content of posts to which they responded, and to approach their research with new ideas in mind after receiving feedback from peers; however, since I did not ask students to reflect on the extent to which they felt they were learning from other students or actively contributing to teaching others, I do not have a clear sense of how decentering the course impacted this aspect of teaching or co-teaching.

Equally difficult to assess is the impact that my roles as the course instructor, researcher, and member of the course community had on this decentering. Difficult to gauge, of course, is the extent to which students felt, perhaps that 1. their participation in the study was tied in some way to their success within the course despite my repeated attempts to assure them otherwise (see Appendix A) and 2. they were being scrutinized over the course of the semester since they were aware that the study was being conducted. Did this potential scrutiny lead to more or less engagement with course activities and/or censoring of comments that students may have made in

online discussions? Realistically, however, the conditions would be similar in any study in which the students had chosen to participate (regardless of my role as researcher), yet I do wonder to what extent that situation was further impacted by my role as the instructor. Furthermore, although I aimed to include myself as a member of the course community on a number of occasions, it is difficult to assess at this point the extent to which an instructor can remain a member of the course community—another student, essentially—while also assigning grades. Reflecting on the results of the biography postings activity discussed in chapter 5—specifically, that students had not responded to my introductory bio post although I had invited them to respond to as many posts as they wished—I was concerned that from the beginning students would not see me as a member of the course community, and in turn, perhaps not see themselves as co-teachers. As the semester progressed, however, I made additional attempts to participate in course activities and assignments as a member of the community, and students seemed to respond favorably to my efforts. For example, I completed the introductory research assignment with students (see Appendix G), and during week four of the course, I, too, posted my research findings to the discussion board, later even sharing a sample essay with students as they prepared their own assignments for submission. I was pleased to discover that I received twelve responses from students as part of the general responses to discussion board postings for the week. Although my attempt to decenter the course aligned with my stated role as a member of the community and my deliberate choice to involve students in the course teaching as I described in chapter 5, the evaluation of course work and assigning of grades was still my responsibility alone. This fact does not seem to have had an impact on the way in which students interpreted or responded to the questions regarding *Decentered Teaching* in survey responses, yet it might serve as a useful outcome for future research.

When considering the related issue of collaboration—essentially the expected outcome of decentering the course—study responses again reveal that students were aware of the collaboration taking place within the course and that they responded favorably to this concept and pedagogical strategy (see chapter 4 for a full discussion of these findings). What is missing, however, is a gauge of what activities students cited as collaborative and to what extent they believed that they were learning from and again *teaching* within those interactions with other students. Of course it is reasonable in a study of thirty-eight students that not all students responded favorably and/or recognized the impact of collaboration, yet it seems important to consider the extent to which students' personal learning styles impact their perceptions. For example, one student, while he/she indicated an understanding of collaboration, “[. . .] *prefer[ed] to be independent,*” while another explained “*I don't feel like I'm learning Collaboratively, [sic] I feel like I'm learning Independently and that's more important to me.*” Critical to future research in online distance learning grounded by feminist, decentered approaches is a continued exploration of the impact of student learning styles and motivations on their success in these courses as well as the impact of their contributions to course activities on other students enrolled in the course. We also might question if these two students would describe their learning in a face-to-face classroom as having been independent as well simply because they prefer learning in that way or if the exclusively online environment simply encourages independent learning because of the isolation inherent in working individually at a computer.

Still, at the end of the semester, the majority of survey respondents (73.7%) revealed that they had been at least somewhat involved in shaping the course, with 10.5 percent explaining that they had been very involved. For a virtual first-year writing course in which there were no required f2f meetings, these student self-assessments suggest that it is, in fact, possible to

maintain a significant level of student engagement at a distance and to begin to meet the goal of decentered teaching set out by much of the literature on distance learning.

Interactivity and Student Success

Although ongoing research that blends feminist rhetoric and pedagogy and exclusively online first-year writing courses over the course of multiple semesters and across institutions is needed to further explore the implications of this study, the current results are significant for a number of reasons. First, in keeping with both the findings of research in online learning, which suggest that interactive environments foster student success (Berge; Canada; Cooper, “Anatomy”; Cooper, “Online”; Farrington and Bronack; Kazmer; Knowlton; Singh and Pan; Woods and Ebersole; Woods and Keeler), and the goals of first-year writing pedagogy, which place significant value on the social aspects of the writing process (Anson, “Distant” 54; see also Council of Writing Program Administrators), this course design, as illustrated by students’ survey responses, allowed for a high level of interactivity between the instructor and students and among students. Beginning with the first study survey, students also placed high value on interaction in describing the ideal online first-year writing course, and subsequent study response revealed that the course did meet this student expectation. As I discussed in chapter 4, at midsemester, all of the students described the level of student-instructor interaction as at least *Somewhat Interactive*, with an overwhelming majority (81.5%) who felt that the course was *Highly Interactive*. Similarly, all of the students described the level of student-student interaction as at least *Somewhat Interactive*, with nearly three-fourths (70.4%) selecting *Highly Interactive*. Considering these numbers then, we can conclude that the course activities and the centering of the course around the discussion board contributed significantly to the level of interactivity since both became occasions and sites for this collaboration. Although students also had the

opportunity to communicate with peers via WebCT email—messages to which I would not have had access—the most frequent and consistent site of interaction within the course was the discussion board both for assigned weekly discussions as well as unassigned question and FYI posts.

By the end of the semester, however, while all of the students described the level of student-instructor interaction as at least *Somewhat Interactive*, the number of students citing a *Highly Interactive* experience decreased more than twenty percent (from 81.5 percent at midterm to 57.9 percent). Again, all of the students described the level of student-student interaction as at least *Somewhat Interactive*, but a similar decrease (from 70.4 percent to 57.9 percent) existed in those selecting *Highly Interactive* in the final survey. As I described in the previous chapters, this decrease may have been the result of fewer students completing the final survey, offering an inaccurate representation of the majority of student opinions, and given that study results were anonymous for the duration of the study, there is no way to determine if the same students had responded to all three surveys, certainly a limitation of the study. However, there are still important conclusions to be drawn from this data.

First, it appears that the level of interaction decreased both among students and between the instructor and students suggesting perhaps that course assignments presented fewer opportunities for interaction within the community as a whole. Beyond the middle of the semester, students were fully engaged in their own research projects, and although weekly discussion board posts still constituted a significant portion of course assignments, after week eleven—four additional discussions remained—I no longer assigned common readings since students were responding to and evaluating research resources tailored to their specific semester research topics and were drafting research proposals and drafts of their final projects. Instead,

prompts called on students to discuss questions/issues that they were still struggling to address in their research, to post sample works cited entries, and to post sample introductions that would allow them to communicate effectively with their audience as they moved toward the final project. Although I continued to respond to student posts and they too were required to offer feedback to their peers, the lack of a common topic or a genuine opportunity to *discuss* as they had done for much of the semester may have contributed to the feeling that the discussion board became more tailored to the individual as a source of reference/information and less focused on the larger community. Although my asking students to respond to one another was guided by the assumption that these responses still would allow them to contribute to the success of the online community, I see now that this success was actually much more individual based upon the nature of the final research project (see Appendix H). While I would not want to shift the focus of the semester research project to one that is collaborative among the group since students should be able to demonstrate working successfully on an individual project as first-year writing students, I do envision how I might frame this work within a shifting responsibility as a member of the online community; realistically, it might be a logical progression in our discussion of civic rhetoric to remind students that members of communities generally play different roles within those communities, mirrored in this case by the students' varied research topics, yet in supporting one another, they still contribute to the success of the larger community. Perhaps this explanation could have fostered even greater interaction among the group and the feeling that students were contributing to each other's learning. Since the more significant decrease exists among my interactions with students, I am concerned here that students may have felt abandoned during the later weeks of the semester despite my continued responses to their discussion board posts. Again, I wonder here if the work that students completed on individual research projects

led to this assessment of interactivity and if their focus on peer response of writing assignments with their peers gave the impression of less interaction with me. Reflecting on the extent to which I had become a member of the community as evidenced by student responses to my posts, perhaps my continued posting on my own research could have fostered increased interaction since students would have had the opportunity not only to view my postings as models but also to respond to my work.

Second, guided by the goals of feminist rhetoric—that an ability to draw from personal experience, to hear many voices, and to work within collaborative environments leads to the construction of knowledge—student survey responses indicate that collaboration within this course allowed:

- *students to “grow as writers” within “a small community”*
- *for the “sharing [of] ideas and information”*
- *for “positive growth on all sides”*
- *students to “come together to learn from one another”*
- *“students [. . .] to work together to provide feedback [. . .] and [get] the job done”*

These responses, both at midterm and at the end of the semester, combined with students’ positive assessments of the ways in which their ideas were valued by me and by their peers (see discussion in chapter 4) attest to the development of a “student-centered, cooperative community” (Cyganowski 68) at a distance in which many voices—not only the voice of the instructor—combined in the co-construction of knowledge, what Gearhart terms “a mutual generation of energy for purposes of growth” (57). Furthermore, although the course was an exclusively online distance course, a focus on writing and students’ development as writers was not compromised given that 84.3 percent felt *At Least Somewhat More Comfortable* with writing

in general by the end of the semester (21.1 felt *Much More Comfortable*) and 84.2 percent felt *At Least Somewhat More Comfortable* with college-level writing assignments by the end of the semester (15.8 felt *Much More Comfortable*).

Finally, considering the increase in retention and the number of students successfully completing the course (discussed in chapter 4) these results begin to reveal the potential in online learning when feminist rhetoric fosters student-centered, collaborative environments, affirming Knowlton's assertion that "only by working together can individual students reach their own highest potential" (12). Over the course of the eight semesters from which I drew comparative data for withdrawal rates, the course assignments remained relatively similar although readings and both the frequency and content of discussion board posts varied. The most marked variable, however, and what I intended to examine in this study, was the impact of feminist approaches in the design and delivery of the course, an approach that I did not implement deliberately in any of the previous semesters during which I taught this course. Furthermore, the increase in student commitment to the revision process evident by the number of students who chose to meet with me in my office to discuss their writing, who shared drafts of their work with me via email, and who chose to revise and resubmit their writing after receiving the initial grade as is worth mentioning here. Although I had offered students the opportunity to stop by for conferences in previous semesters, far fewer students had taken advantage of this opportunity.

Furthermore, study participants remained much more engaged in the peer response process during the study, generally offering detailed and constructive feedback to aid their peers during revision. In past semesters, students simply would not submit peer drafts and/or would not respond to peers' essays, and students who intended to participate fully in the process often would be left with little to no feedback and/or no opportunity for response. After the first round

of peer response during this study and with similar frustrations from students, I made minor adjustments to the peer response process that would allow only those students who were fully prepared to participate. Again, combined with the feedback that many students sought from me as well as their continued revisions, this improved process of peer response—framed again within the goal of civic rhetoric and community action—is likely to have contributed to the increase in student success. Although I did not ask students to reflect specifically on peer response in survey responses, future research might investigate the specific impact of student-student feedback in online writing courses on students' development as writers perhaps even compared to instructor feedback.

A Feminist Community

The connective feminist thread running through the course was most evident, perhaps, in my involvement in the discussion board and my intention not to evaluate but instead, as I discussed in chapter 4, to highlight the students' voices, to call students to think critically, and to allow them to support each other in the construction of knowledge. Revisiting both student posts as well as my responses over the course of the semester, I see evidence for having met each of these goals, yet what I am less sure of is how *public* the work of this community actually became over the course of the semester. One of my very specific objectives in beginning this study as I discussed in chapter 4 was to avoid the amount of one-to-one teaching that Blair and Hoy describe in their study of adult learners in online writing courses. In attempting to create a thriving community at a distance, I intended for the teaching and learning to be collaborative and inclusive of all of the members of the group. To that end, the most obvious course strategy that I included in this study and course design in order to meet that goal was the *Questions* thread, intended to mimic and improve upon the question-answer process of the f2f classroom—one

student asks a question, and all students benefit from the instructor's answer—yet also to reinforce the students' roles as co-teachers by allowing them an immediate and on-going opportunity to support their peers and to model this support for other students. Since the majority of course communication did take place on the discussion board, it seemed obvious, initially, that all of the exchanges, including those on the Questions thread, would be public—accessed and read by all members of the community. Was that really the case, however?

With the discussion board as the center of the course, as I have described in previous chapters, much of the highlighting of voices, calls for critical thinking, and co-construction of knowledge that I hoped to promote with my responses to students existed in responses to students' posts, generally to individual posts by individual students. Although it is obvious that some students read those responses to their message because they in turn posted a follow up to my post, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which *other* members of the community read those very same messages and noted the highlighting of voices, calls for critical thinking, and co-construction of knowledge that I was aiming for. Had my responses actually benefitted other students? Initially, I began scanning the number of posts read by each student—WebCT allows for this level of surveillance—when I posted grades/points for the previous week's discussion board posts each Monday or Tuesday. Although this kind of surveillance leaves me feeling uneasy, especially because students were unaware of this feature, and is one that I may not have discovered if it were not offered on the *Grade Discussions* screen, initially, I believed it might help me to assess the number of my posts that students were reading. I soon realized, however, that students could (as could I) select any number of posts in a given discussion and *Mark as Read*; obviously the system-generated tally would be inaccurate in those cases. Since I had not considered this issue until I began reviewing study results after the close of the semester, I had

not considered asking study participants about the number of posts they read on average each week. Potentially, then, a fair amount of one-to-one teaching did take place in this course if my response posts were not widely read. However, one important difference is worth noting when comparing what Blair and Hoy describe to what took place in my courses: while much of the interaction that Blair and Hoy discuss took place via email between student and instructor—a kind of “invisible” teaching (37)—my posts were visible to all students and essentially public. In other words, the potential for public access did exist whether or not students took advantage of that option. In planning for future studies, researchers might consider investigating the connection between the number of discussion board posts that students read and their involvement in the course community, their development as writers, etc. Furthermore, in planning online courses, distance teachers might consider how to make the *Questions* thread a better-integrated part of the course, working toward increased participation and co-teaching. Realistically, however, as many compositionists would agree, one-on-one teaching generally is an integral part of first-year writing courses, and isn’t necessarily something we would want to work against in every case when courses are moved online. Yet in keeping with the feminist goals of this study, it is the potential for co-teaching and socially constructed knowledge afforded by the discussion board that we should attempt to highlight when these courses take place in exclusively online environments.

Finally, I want to offer one final reflection on the feminist angle of this study: the potential connection between the number of study participants and the effect of the decentered, collaborative approach. Within the first week of the course, students were required to read or listen to an introduction to the course that included the explanation of Our Online Community (see chapter 5), an introduction to the study that I was conducting, and a link to the

consent/confirmation form (see Appendix A) that each student was required to submit indicating both that he/she had read all course information and policies and would/would not participate in the study. I deliberately included the consent form within introductory materials to ensure 1. that all students received that same introduction to the study, including my explanation in more than one place that participation was not required of any student, and 2. that I received a signed consent form from each student. Since I always have required students to submit a confirmation email during the first week of class indicating their understanding of course policies and expectations and affirming their decision to remain enrolled in the course, I felt that requiring students to submit two separate emails—one for the confirmation and one for the consent—simply would create one additional task in an already task-heavy week.

What I had not considered prior to the start of the study, however, was the extent to which the students' participation in the study—to *impact future sections of this online course*, as I had noted in my introduction to the study—might reflect or be mirrored in their desire to remain active participants in this community at a distance. In other words, was there a correlation between the large number of study participants—roughly seventy-eight percent (78%) of students initially enrolled in the course—and the larger success of this feminist approach? Were students who were more likely to participate in a study calling for their feedback more likely to offer feedback to their peers, to share their ideas and opinions, on the discussion board, and to work toward the social construction of knowledge? Were these participants also more likely to expect and to foster high levels of interaction with their peers and instructor and to look for opportunity to shape their online course community? Extending this study over multiple semesters and, perhaps, across institutions would provide comparative data that might begin to offer answers to these questions.

Looking Ahead

Given the limits of this study discussed in this chapter as well as the small sample of participants and the demographic profile of survey respondents, future research also might explore the impact of feminist rhetoric in online first-year writing courses among a more gender-balanced population or within a predominantly male online writing course as well as among a population of non-traditional students. Furthermore, researchers might work to investigate the impact of feminist rhetoric on online learning across disciplines yet with a specific focus on General Education courses. Since few studies focus on online distance education among undergraduate and, specifically, among first-year students, it is important to expand our efforts in researching these areas since undergraduate offerings of online courses are likely to increase with each academic year. Furthermore, compositionists might explore the ways in which we can continue to foster co-teaching among students enrolled in online courses and how we might expand opportunities for civic participation within these virtual communities. In other words, how might we share teaching with students in ways that help them to grow as writers and thinkers while supporting their peers toward similar growth?

Although a collaborative and student-centered approach may be new for students and difficult to adjust to, by enacting a feminist pedagogy in online writing courses, both in framing course activities and in responding to students, we may begin to reach our goals for online education while expanding both our and our students' notions of what it means to communicate and to learn in the digital age. While shifting instructor power can result in more work both for instructors of online courses as well as students enrolled in these courses, the opportunity to create collaborative environments that allow students to learn from course materials, from the instructor, and from each other (Berge) certainly align with our goals as compositionists and

teachers of first-year writing. Ultimately, in combining the goals of feminist pedagogy described in the previous chapters, first-year writing, and civic rhetoric in our design and delivery of online writing courses, we can begin to fulfill our vision for significant learning experiences for our students that will be as good as or better than their experiences in the traditional classroom.

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APPENDIX A

Consent and Confirmation Email

I, (type your name), have read the course syllabus and policies and confirm my understanding of the expectations and requirements for this online course, and further affirm that by remaining enrolled in English 1102 (your section number), I agree to adhere to these guidelines.

I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years old and (Please type an **X** in one box below)

☐ I agree to participate in the research study, *Decentered Online Writing Courses: Collaboration, Communication, and the Co-Construction of Knowledge*, which is being conducted by Ms. Letizia Guglielmo, Kennesaw State University, (770) 423-6764. I understand that this participation is entirely voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time and have the results of the participation returned to me, removed from the experimental records, or destroyed.

☐ I do not agree to participate in this study.

The following points have been explained to me:

1. The purpose of this research project is to assess the experiences of students enrolled in this online English 1102 course and to determine the specific impact of course assignments and activities on students' development as writers as well as their satisfaction with this online learning environment.
2. The procedures are as follows: (1) I will be asked to allow the researcher to observe my work in this course. (2) I will be asked to complete 3 anonymous electronic surveys over the course of the semester. (3) I may be asked to participate in a personal interview conducted by the researcher after final grades for the course have been reported at a time that is convenient for me.
3. No discomforts or stresses are anticipated, and no known risks exist.
4. I understand that the researcher may refer to and quote from my work and/or use portions of it as an example in presentations or publications resulting from the study, but my name will never be used. These materials will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent unless required by law.
5. The survey results will be anonymous, and the information that I share during the interview will not be released in any individually identifiable form. Furthermore, my participation or decision not to participate in this study will have no impact on my grades or standing in this course, and I understand that participation in this study is not linked in any way to my ability to complete English 1102 successfully.

By typing my name here, I am digitally signing this consent form.

Letizia Guglielmo
Signature of Investigator, Signed digitally 1 January 2008

Signature of Participant, Date

PLEASE SAVE THIS FORM AFTER DIGITALLY SIGNING YOUR NAME, PRINT A COPY FOR YOUR RECORDS, AND EMAIL A COPY TO MS. GUGLIELMO VIA EMAIL ATTACHMENT IN WEBCT VISTA.

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to Dr. Ginny Q. Zhan, Chairperson of the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, #2202, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (770) 423-6679.

APPENDIX B

KSU IRB Approval

From: <gzhan@kennesaw.edu>
To: Letizia Guglielmo
CC: Ginny Zhan
Date: Wednesday - November 28, 2007
Subject: Study 08-104: Decentered Online Writing Courses: Collaboration, Communication, and the Co-Construction of Knowledge

11/28/2007

Letizia Guglielmo
Department of English
1000 Chastain Road, #2701
Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591

RE: Your application dated 11/20/2007 Study number 08-104: Decentered Online Writing Courses: Collaboration, Communication, and the Co-Construction of Knowledge

Dear Professor Guglielmo:

Your application has been reviewed by IRB members. Your study is eligible for expedited review under FDA and DHHS (OHRP) 7. Individual or group behavior designation.

This is to confirm that your application has been approved. The protocol approved is completion of anonymous pre-, mid-, and end-of-semester online surveys and participation in personal interviews. The consent procedure described is in effect. In reviewing your consent procedure for this study, your inclusion of the following special classes of subjects was taken into account: students.

Please make sure that respondents' IP addresses will not be collected.

You are granted permission to conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. The study is subject to continuing review on or before 11/28/2008, unless closed before that date. At that time, go to <http://www.kennesaw.edu/irb> and follow the instructions for closing/continuing your study.

Please note that any changes to the study as approved must be promptly reported and approved. Some changes may be approved by expedited review; others require full board review. Contact me at 770-423-6679; email: gzhan@kennesaw.edu if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Ginny Q. Zhan, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair

APPENDIX C

PreSurvey

PreSurvey 1102**1. English 1102 PreSurvey**

Please take a few moments to answer the following questions regarding your previous experiences with writing and with online learning as well as your expectations for this course.

1. Please describe your gender.☐ Female☐ Male☐ Other**2. Please indicate your age.**☐ 18-24☐ 25-34☐ 35-44☐ 45-54☐ 55-64☐ 65 and older**3. Are you a**☐ freshman☐ sophomore☐ junior☐ senior*** 4. Have you completed other English courses at Kennesaw State University?**☐ Yes☐ No*** 5. What grade did you earn in your most recent English course?**☐ A☐ B☐ C☐ D☐ F*** 6. Describe your most recent English course (prior to the course in which you are currently enrolled).**☐ face-to-face (traditional)☐ online course*** 7. How would you describe the level of student-instructor interaction in your most recent English course?**☐ highly interactive☐ somewhat interactive☐ no interaction*** 8. How would you describe the level of student-student interaction in your most recent English course?**☐ highly interactive☐ somewhat interactive☐ no interaction*** 9. How would you describe your level of comfort with writing in general?**☐ very comfortable☐ somewhat comfortable☐ neutral☐ somewhat uncomfortable☐ very uncomfortable*** 10. How would you describe your level of comfort with college-level writing assignments?**☐ very comfortable☐ somewhat comfortable☐ neutral☐ somewhat uncomfortable☐ very uncomfortable

PreSurvey 1102

* 11. How would you describe your level of comfort interacting with your instructors?

- ☐ very comfortable
 ☐ somewhat comfortable
 ☐ neutral
 ☐ somewhat uncomfortable
 ☐ very uncomfortable

* 12. How would you describe your level of comfort interacting with your peers?

- ☐ very comfortable
 ☐ somewhat comfortable
 ☐ neutral
 ☐ somewhat uncomfortable
 ☐ very uncomfortable

* 13. What does Decentered Teaching mean to you and how comfortable are you with this style of teaching?

* 14. What does Collaborative Learning mean to you and how comfortable are you with this style of learning?

* 15. How would you describe your level of comfort with basic computing?

	very comfortable	somewhat comfortable	neutral	somewhat uncomfortable	very uncomfortable
Word Processing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Navigating the Web	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading and Sending email	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Email attachments	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 16. How would you describe your level of comfort with computer-mediated-communication (CMC), not including email?

	Very comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Neutral	Somewhat uncomfortable	Very uncomfortable
Posting to discussion boards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in online chats/communicating in chatrooms	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 17. Is this the first online course in which you have enrolled?

- ☐ Yes
 ☐ No

18. If you answered No to the previous question, list previous online courses that you have taken (indicate whether they are courses taken at KSU or taken elsewhere)

PreSurvey 1102 Spring 2008

- * 21. What, if any, drawbacks or potential problems do you associate with online learning?

- * 22. Thinking about face-to-face (traditional) settings, how would you describe the ideal first-year writing course (be as specific as possible here, noting interaction among students and the instructor, assignments, activities, etc)?

- * 23. Thinking about exclusively online courses, how would you describe the ideal first-year writing course (be as specific as possible here, noting interaction among students and the instructor, assignments, activities, etc)?

- * 24. To what extent do you hope to be involved in shaping this course?

☐ very involved

☐ somewhat involved

☐ neutral

☐ somewhat
uninvolved

☐ not involved at all

- * 25. Briefly describe your expectations for this online section of English 1102, including, if applicable, any fears.

APPENDIX D

MidSurvey

MidSurvey 1102 Spring 2008**1. English 1102 MidSurvey**

Please take a few moments to answer the following questions regarding your experiences in this course up to this point in the semester.

1. Please describe your gender.☐ Female☐ Male☐ Other**2. Please indicate your age.**☐ 18-24☐ 25-34☐ 35-44☐ 45-54☐ 55-64☐ 65 and older**3. Are you a**☐ freshman☐ sophomore☐ junior☐ senior*** 4. How would you describe the level of student-instructor interaction in this course?**☐ highly interactive☐ somewhat interactive☐ no interaction*** 5. How would you describe the level of student-student interaction in this course?**☐ highly interactive☐ somewhat interactive☐ no interaction*** 6. How would you describe your level of comfort with writing (in general) since the beginning of the semester?**☐ much more comfortable☐ somewhat more comfortable☐ equally comfortable☐ somewhat less comfortable☐ much less comfortable*** 7. How would you describe your level of comfort with college-level writing assignments since the beginning of the semester?**☐ much more comfortable☐ somewhat more comfortable☐ equally comfortable☐ somewhat less comfortable☐ much less comfortable*** 8. How would you describe your level of comfort interacting with your instructor (in this course) since the beginning of the semester?**☐ much more comfortable☐ somewhat more comfortable☐ equally comfortable☐ somewhat less comfortable☐ much less comfortable*** 9. How would you describe your level of comfort interacting with your peers (in this course) since the beginning of the semester?**☐ much more comfortable☐ somewhat more comfortable☐ equally comfortable☐ somewhat less comfortable☐ much less comfortable

MidSurvey 1102 Spring 2008

* 10. Describe your level of agreement with the following statements.

	strongly agree	agree somewhat	neutral	disagree somewhat	strongly disagree
I am an active member of a writing community within this course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that my ideas and contributions are valued by my instructor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that my ideas and contributions are valued by my peers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 11. What does Decentered Teaching mean to you and how comfortable are you with this style of teaching as a result of this course?

* 12. What does Collaborative Learning mean to you and how comfortable are you with this style of learning as a result of this course?

* 13. How would you describe your level of comfort with basic computing since the beginning of the semester?

	much more comfortable	somewhat more comfortable	equally comfortable	somewhat less comfortable	much less comfortable
Word Processing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Navigating the Web	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading and Sending email	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Email attachments	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 14. How would you describe your level of comfort with computer-mediated-communication (CMC), not including email, since the beginning of the semester?

	Much more comfortable	Somewhat more comfortable	Equally comfortable	Somewhat less comfortable	Much less comfortable
Posting to discussion boards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in online chats/communicating in chatrooms	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 15. Are you currently enrolled in other online courses

☐ Yes

☐ No

* 16. What, if any, benefits do you now associate with online learning?

MidSurvey 1102 Spring 2008

- * 17. What, if any, drawbacks or potential problems do you now associate with online learning?

- * 18. With what aspects of the course are you most satisfied at this point in the semester?

- * 19. With what aspects of the course are you least satisfied at this point in the semester?

- * 20. To what extent do you feel that you have been involved in shaping this course?

☐ very involved

☐ somewhat involved

☐ neutral

☐ somewhat
uninvolved

☐ not involved at all

- * 21. What suggestions, if any, can you offer for the second half of the semester?

APPENDIX E

EndSurvey

EndSurvey 1102 Spring 2008**1. English 1102 EndSurvey**

Please take a few moments to answer the following questions regarding your experiences in this course.

1. Please describe your gender.
☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Other
2. Please indicate your age.
☐ 18-24

☐ 25-34

☐ 35-44

☐ 45-54

☐ 55-64

☐ 65 and older
3. Are you a
☐ freshman

☐ sophomore

☐ junior

☐ senior
*** 4. How would you describe the level of student-instructor interaction in this course?**
☐ highly interactive

☐ somewhat interactive

☐ no interaction
*** 5. How would you describe the level of student-student interaction in this course?**
☐ highly interactive

☐ somewhat interactive

☐ no interaction
*** 6. How would you describe your level of comfort with writing (in general) since the beginning of the semester?**
☐ much more comfortable

☐ somewhat more comfortable

☐ equally comfortable

☐ somewhat less comfortable

☐ much less comfortable
*** 7. How would you describe your level of comfort with college-level writing assignments since the beginning of the semester?**
☐ much more comfortable

☐ somewhat more comfortable

☐ equally comfortable

☐ somewhat less comfortable

☐ much less comfortable
*** 8. How would you describe your level of comfort interacting with your instructor (in this course) since the beginning of the semester?**
☐ much more comfortable

☐ somewhat more comfortable

☐ equally comfortable

☐ somewhat less comfortable

☐ much less comfortable
*** 9. How would you describe your level of comfort interacting with your peers (in this course) since the beginning of the semester?**
☐ much more comfortable

☐ somewhat more comfortable

☐ equally comfortable

☐ somewhat less comfortable

☐ much less comfortable

EndSurvey 1102 Spring 2008

* 10. Describe your level of agreement with the following statements.

	strongly agree	agree somewhat	neutral	disagree somewhat	strongly disagree
I am an active member of a writing community within this course	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that my ideas and contributions are valued by my instructor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that my ideas and contributions are valued by my peers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 11. What does Decentered Teaching mean to you now and how comfortable are you with this style of teaching as a result of this course?

* 12. What does Collaborative Learning mean to you now and how comfortable are you with this style of learning as a result of this course?

* 13. How would you describe your level of comfort with basic computing since the beginning of the semester?

	much more comfortable	somewhat more comfortable	equally comfortable	somewhat less comfortable	much less comfortable
Word Processing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Navigating the Web	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading and Sending email	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Email attachments	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 14. How would you describe your level of comfort with computer-mediated-communication (CMC), not including email, since the beginning of the semester?

	Much more comfortable	Somewhat more comfortable	Equally comfortable	Somewhat less comfortable	Much less comfortable
Posting to discussion boards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Participating in online chats/communicating in chatrooms	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 15. Are you currently enrolled in other online courses

☐ Yes ☐ No

* 16. If you answered YES to the previous question, please compare your learning experiences in other online courses to your experience in this course.

EndSurvey 1102 Spring 2008

* 17. What, if any, benefits do you now associate with online learning?

* 18. What, if any, drawbacks or potential problems do you now associate with online learning?

* 19. With what aspects of the course are you most satisfied at the end of the semester?

* 20. With what aspects of the course are you least satisfied at the end of the semester?

* 21. To what extent do you feel that you have been involved in shaping this course?

- ☐ very involved
 ☐ somewhat involved
 ☐ neutral
 ☐ somewhat uninvolved
 ☐ not involved at all

22. How would you describe the discussion board Questions thread?

- ☐ very useful
 ☐ somewhat useful
 ☐ neutral
 ☐ not very useful
 ☐ useless

* 23. Describe your level of participation in the Questions thread and what factors influenced your decisions to post and/or to respond to questions.

24. Reflect on any instances of silence over the course of the semester; what caused you to be silent (to withdraw, not to participate, not to share your ideas, etc)?

* 25. What suggestions, if any, can you offer for the second half of the semester?

APPENDIX F

Guidelines for English 1102 at KSU

(developed by the Composition Committee, Dept. of English, Kennesaw State University)

English 1102 at Kennesaw State University extends and reinforces the objectives in English 1101, but focuses on writing from sources. At the end of the course, the instructor should be able to certify that students can write at an acceptable level in the university; that is, this course should prepare students to write, read, and think in ways that will allow them to do the academic work that they will be assigned across the university. Thus students at KSU should sit for the Regents Essay Examination during their 1102 course.

Students who finish 1102 should be able to think through competing claims; apply a theoretical concept in order to evaluate or interpret phenomenon; find outside sources on a particular topic; organize information in a paper that is unified, coherent, and free of the most egregious surface infelicities; and use the conventions of a system of documentation accurately. But chiefly students should be able to write about the complexity of an issue.

Readings for 1102 should come from across the disciplines. While it is certainly acceptable to use a literary work, or one that has had "literariness thrust upon it," as critic Terry Eagleton puts it, this course is not, as it is in many universities, an introduction to literature. It is rather a writing course that introduces students to some of the ways knowledge is created at the university. One goal of the course, therefore, is introduce students to texts and genres across the curriculum.

Another goal is to introduce students to the different kinds of evidence that disciplines use to construct their arguments. As English faculty, we are not trained nor are we expected to teach students how to write advanced papers in their majors. And we certainly cannot teach a course in research methods that will prepare students for any eventuality they may encounter at the university. It is sociology's job to teach students to do sociological research and to write upper-level papers in sociology, just as it is the task of literature professors to teach students to carry out literary research and then to write literary criticism. But it is our task to show students that not all texts are the same and that not all academic arguments rely on the same methods.

Two main approaches seem to be prevalent among instructors of 1102 at Kennesaw State University. One is the "research" approach. Many instructors who take this approach either use or have used Ballenger's *The Curious Researcher*. Here students read about a given broad topic—like community, or place, or work—and then spend most of the semester using various research methods to explore that topic. As students research, they write reports on their research, analyze what particular sources mean, reflect on the relevance of the research, compose annotated bibliographies, deliver oral presentations, write extended arguments, and so forth.

The other approach is more "text-based." Many who take this approach focus on a particular topic—like the Ideal Society, Language and Self, Death and Dying—using readings from across several disciplines, either collected by the instructor or by the makers of "across the disciplines" anthologies. Students use those common readings to write various kinds of papers that critique, evaluate, analyze, and synthesize sources. Students then are asked to go beyond the assigned

texts and search for sources that allow them to extend their arguments on the topic. Here, again, students write reports on their research, freewrite on what they are learning, compose annotated bibliographies, deliver oral presentations, write extended arguments integrating sources, and so forth.

Despite the emphasis on reading and on research, English 1102 is still primarily a writing course. The purpose of the readings and the research is to engage students in the academic enterprise. But the main purpose of the course is to teach students to write in ways that are acceptable in the academic community. Thus, we use invention exercises, peer groups, multiple drafts, free writes, editing lessons, and so forth—all the pedagogical techniques we know or can devise to help students learn that what they write is better when it goes through a complex, recursive process.

The course thus reinforces and extends lessons on rhetoric—purpose, audience, genre, style, and voice. Perhaps the most important lesson we can teach in 1102 is that the student counts in this enterprise—her voice, his curiosity, the answers she finds, his relationship with the audience, the topic she selects, the research question he formulates, the thesis she composes over time. That is, we help students to do their own intellectual work rather than merely to hand in assignments. Thus we use class time to discuss explicitly the ethics of language use and academic integrity, and we teach them how to construct texts in way that will uphold their integrity.

For most instructors at Kennesaw State, teaching a "research project"—wherein there are many phases and different kinds of student texts supervised by the teacher—or teaching a "researched essay"—wherein students write a sustained, clear, critically thought-out argument supported by a variety of sources—is more productive than teaching the "research paper"—wherein, at worst, students merely download a paper from the internet or, at best, hand in a patchwork quilt of quotations. Many instructors find it more effective to assign a number of small papers than one very long paper at the end. Ideally, the final paper should be a culmination of work done throughout the semester.

APPENDIX G

Intro Research Assignment

The Assignment

For this assignment you will watch a television program (at least 30 minutes in length, including commercials) on a topic of particular interest to you on a network of your choice. If possible, try to watch the program at least twice in its entirety, taking general notes on

the program
 the commentators/narrators/hosts
 the information provided
 the design, layout, and graphics
 the commercials and advertisements
 anything else that seems particularly interesting or important to you

Examples of or suggestions for useful programs might be rating specials on VH1, MTV, CMT, BET, or Bravo; documentaries on the History Channel; local or national news specials; etc. Plan to access program schedules on network websites and check with me if you have any questions about your program choice. Note that a number of networks now allow you to watch full episodes of programs on their websites.

The Research

After viewing the program, come up with a list of at least **5 questions** from your notes.

- What additional information do you need to better understand the program or topic?
- What left you puzzled or confused?
- What was surprising, even shocking?

Search for answers to these questions and related information using any resources that you choose and making note of those resources and your search process. Take at least **40 minutes to an hour** to work through this part of the assignment. Keep in mind that research really can go on endlessly as you delve further into the topic and find related ideas that you might want to explore. This research is preliminary and is designed simply to give you some exposure to how you might go about finding answers to your questions.

Sharing Your Findings

Once you have begun researching answers to your questions, you will have an opportunity to share your findings with peers on our course discussion board.

Finally, plan to draft and to submit a narrative essay of at least 500 words (following guidelines for Document Format) in which you accomplish the following:

- briefly summarize the program/topic
- introduce the questions that you generated
- discuss your primary findings, and, as you begin finalizing your preliminary research on this topic
- explain how you might use the program as a source for a larger research project (hypothetically, of course)
- explain how you could develop a research project around this topic or around the specific questions that came to mind, trying to imagine how the project could move beyond this program, or alternately, how it might deal with one very specific detail in the program

Since this assignment calls for a Narrative Essay, you are welcome to use **first person** but should address how this research might benefit a larger audience and how, realistically, you could turn this preliminary research into a project that would be of interest to that audience. See syllabus for due date.

APPENDIX H

Final Research Project***The Assignment***

Combining the research and critical opinions that you have formulated throughout the semester, you will compose a final argumentative essay of 6-8 pages (1500 - 2000 words **minimum**) or a comparable project* in which you clearly explain, respond to, and analyze the topic. The project should not serve merely as a restatement of the information that you have found in your research through the opinions of scholars in the field (the typical research paper) but should instead **add** to the preexisting thoughts and ideas about the subject—the conversation.

You also have the opportunity to create a website, multimedia project, bound book/guide, etc. for this assignment instead of the paper that still meets basic assignment guidelines, including a works cited page/bibliography. Please contact me with questions or ideas before you get started.

*A **PowerPoint presentation** does not meet the requirements for this project although I am happy to discuss projects that may be supplemented by PowerPoint presentations on an individual basis.

Tips for Success

- You should work to express clearly and to support a claim in your project; your purpose is twofold, both to inform and to persuade.
- Your project should include 5-6 sources that you have consulted during the semester on your topic. Feel free to use additional sources as necessary.
- Sources that appear on the works cited page (bibliography) must be **cited within the project**. Use proper MLA style (or a citation style appropriate for your audience/discipline—contact me if you are not using MLA) for both. Incorrect citations will count against you.
- Avoid using the first person unless you have personal experience that will act as evidence in support of your argument, and only use first person in that section of the essay.
- Avoid allowing your sources to take over your project—respond, comment, explain. Remember that this project is **yours**; make your argument clear and convincing for your readers.
- Your audience and purpose will determine how you approach the project and what information you choose to include.
 1. *What do you hope to accomplish with this project?*
 2. *Who are your readers and what do they need to know?*
 3. *Why will they want to read/view/use this project?*
 4. *What do they bring to the table?*
- Be sure to use proper grammar and mechanics throughout.

Invention Writing and Drafting

After conducting research and developing your ideas on your subject, the next step in preparing for your project is brainstorming and planning. Even before you draft, be sure that you take time to organize your ideas and to omit ideas that will be irrelevant to your larger purpose. Planning and thinking ahead will save you a great deal of time and frustration during the revision process. Using the suggestions for invention writing and planning posted on our Vista site, prepare a completed peer draft to workshop with your peers on the day that peer response will take place. **Include a description of your audience and purpose on your draft.**

Due Date

The final project is due during the final week of class and will count as the final. **Be sure that you have included a copy of each source used in the project and a description of your audience and purpose.** Submit completed projects to my office in an envelope or folder OR via email attachment in Vista.