Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes

Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann
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Reviewed by Jean Kreis

Hear the words "synchronous" or "asynchronous" to describe online communication, and immediately words such as collaborative and constructivist also arise. This, according to Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann, is because online writing instruction (OWI) has epistemological roots in social constructivism, which they explain by giving a very brief overview of the works of Lev Vygotsky, Thomas Kuhn, and Kenneth Bruffee to situate the text's foundation. The authors quickly introduce, however, three additional theoretical constructs as useful approaches for online communication: current-traditional, expressivist, and neoclassical, all three of which the authors explain without disciplinary jargon. Considering these four theoretical constructs, the authors introduce scholars and ideas within a well-conceived framework of principles that are woven explicitly and implicitly throughout all elements of the book. The delight of *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes* is that Hewett and Ehmann never remain locked in theory but always develop the theory into the practical—not only by explanation, but also by example, case study, assessment and reflection—expanding the repertoire of skills for both the experienced as well as the new instructor. As the title implies, the authors focus on one audience but actually address three different audiences.

Hewett and Ehmann divide the readership into functions: those who are tasked with directing a program that includes an online environment (directors); those who train other instructors to teach in an online environment (trainers); and those who are learning to teach in an online environment (trainees). Throughout the text, the audiences are referred to by these terms. Early in the reflection on their own work, however, Hewett and Ehmann acknowledge that educators are adult learners and that given this characteristic, everything they write about the "trainee" invites the reader to substitute "learner," while at the same time substituting "teacher" for "trainer" in this book. With this shift in terms comes a change in who the learner might be. Could Hewett and Ehmann's book work as a guide for teaching directly to the student learner? While the authors do not state this as their purpose, they leave the reader with a chapter of research questions, one of which is "What about the student learner?" Might the principles they offer work for teaching learners, not just educators of learners?

Working from both a theoretical and practical perspective, the authors develop five pedagogical principles that form a foundation for training instructors. The first principle is Investigation. The authors found that any program requires a systemic manner for iteratively reviewing and improving the training program. They believe this process should be empirically monitored in order to verify the improvement of practice. They found "a relative dearth of academic literature and research" on this, even as they found much research calling for the study of online practices. To implement the principle of Investigation they set up a range of qualitative feedback sessions and other questionnaires.

The second principle is Immersion. Research into adult learning shows that immersion into new teaching and learning environments changes the process of thinking, can deepen critical thinking skills, and leads to a new awareness. This Immersion can be done through simulations and other one-to-one modeled meetings.

Principle three is Individualization. In this principle the trainer must come to understand the trainee as a distinct learner with a prior background and set of skills and interests. This process is sometimes seen as a macro-micro process in which feedback is used to tailor a learning experience to the individual learner or to employ a range of activity styles to meet various learning styles.

The fourth principle, Association, acknowledges that trainees desire to build a network of peers, a sense of team, or a connection with others around them. It is worth the effort for trainers to focus on and meet this social need in their trainees. According to Hewett and Ehmann, professional relationships are interactive, affective, and collaborative. The Association principle promotes the development of new online instructors by building relationships that not only addresses practical needs, such as grading partnerships and troubleshooting technology problems, but also develop self-sufficient and mutually supportive teams.

Principle five, Reflection, is descriptive of both external and internal processes. The authors point out that while consistent assessment is agreed upon as a valuable program development tool, the particulars of evaluation rarely align. They therefore emphasize that the most important opportunity to consider in any assessment is dialogue between trainer and trainee. They view the Reflection principle as ultimately for the improvement of teaching practice in online teaching and learning. This can best be done working together. New instructors, while wanting guidance, are also sensitive to critique on performance assessment. As experience increases, so does comfort with one's assessment. Regular evaluation times are used to

set goals and objectives. These become times of "personal ownership in the program."

Once the framework has been set using the five principles, Hewett and Ehmann refocus the text into two teaching divisions: asynchronous and synchronous online training. They continue to use the same clarity of style and solidity of resource information. Additionally, they begin each section with processes, principles, applications, summarizations, common questions, useful evaluations, and various examples. Then they follow each section with in-depth models and simulations that can be used as a direct program guide for training new instructors, or as a model for creating a new program for an institution that wants to examine its own practices of instructing new instructors.

For example, asynchronous online writing instruction is divided into an introductory section entitled *Advice for Trainers* and the instructional section, which is explicitly for introducing the trainee to the many facets of the skill. The "trainer" introduction is replicated in an amended fashion for each of the following sections in the text. It includes background information, tips from the authors' experience, and suggested extra material.

All instructors who have assigned essays to their students will find an affinity with the definition of asynchronous online writing instruction in the second section, which keeps the trainee explicitly in focus. The authors' define online writing instruction as similar to traditional writing instruction in one key way: traditionally, instructors have written to their students via both global metacommentary and embedded, or locally situated, comments. Students are accustomed to receiving essay instruction through their instructors' written remarks.

Building upon this familiarity, Hewett and Ehmann develop in extremely practical ways the theoretical constructs mentioned earlier that have usefulness across the curriculum. The authors explain enough of the constructs to enable the reader to understand what is at work in the practices suggested without using jargon. While the composition discipline knows that the *current-traditional* construct focuses on product over process—such as description, narration, definition, comparison and contrast, and analysis of cause and effect—instructors in other disciplines are able to use the material to clarify their essay assignments and to construct useful assessment rubrics for online work.

The *expressivist* construct uses writing exercises ranging from Socratic questions to journal entries and free-writing or clustering activities. This construct is an example of how the authors utilize the different approaches to generate a variety of writing activities that are different in scope—both in time and labor—for learner and instructor.

The third construct mentioned is *neoclassical* and includes the "canon" of invention, arrangement, style, memory, delivery or exposition, argument, and finally, practical or purposeful writing. All of these construct descriptions are brief. Their examples are detailed and extremely useful.

In the chapter called *Basic Principles of Asynchronous Online Writing Instruction*, the authors place specific examples on how to train instructors to help students with "writing correctness," "idea generation," "organization and arrangement," "audience clarification," "purpose or focus," and "argument."

Hewett and Ehmann have contributed to the field of educational technology what has been sorely lacking—a systematic process for considering how to teach "online practices" to instructors. Moreover, their principles do not rely on specific technologies. Their text, while couched for teaching "writing instruction" online, avoided "teaching writing" online. Instead, *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes* is an excellent example of how to think through—and put into practice—the principles of aligning teaching with teaching teachers online, whatever the field.

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Using Technology in Teaching

Reviewed by Patricia McGee

Given the preponderance of Web-based resources and the expectations that faculty use them, it is difficult to believe that the Internet was not widely used in higher education just 10 years ago. Today, most faculty members are overwhelmed by the amount of information available to help them use technology resources in their classes. Because the majority of today's student population grew up playing and learning with digital technologies, faculty cannot afford to limit the use of information technologies—much less ignore them completely—to support instruction. *Using Technology in Teaching* is a book written for the 75–80 percent of faculty who are not technology savants but are aware of the need to integrate technology effectively into their courses.

The book is valuable for helping faculty, be they new to the profession or experienced veterans, as they consider how technology can streamline instruction, engage an increasingly technologically savvy student population, and increase the quality of instruction with deeper learning principles. Additionally, the companion CD-ROM brings to life many of the illustrations in the book, providing step-by-step, real-time visualizations.

The authors have organized the book's nine chapters by topics that relate to basic functions of teaching. Most effectively, each chapter provides illustrative scenarios familiar to the novice or most-experienced faculty member. Each scenario begins with an explanation of issues and applications in the traditional classroom, followed by how the same issues can be reconceived through technology. In this way, the reader is led from an existing understanding of teaching to a well illustrated and rea-

soned explanation of new strategies. Each chapter ends with some potential drawbacks or consequences of the tactics proposed. Such "fair warning" allows readers to think through their plans and anticipate possible outcomes.

Chapters 1, 2, 5, and 9 discuss management strategies, with the first chapter focusing on communicating with students. Gone are the days when face-to-face office hours suffice. Clyde and Delohery explain the rationale for communicating with students between class meetings and give advice on how to organize this communication. Topics include sending information from students, communicating changes in course schedule to students, setting guidelines for students contacting you between class meetings, and accepting assignments electronically.

Chapter 2 discusses distributing materials to students. Electronic distribution of materials via e-mail or course management systems (CMSs) is probably the most compelling argument for digitizing course materials. Time, resources, and money are saved when materials do not have to be physically reproduced and distributed in face-to-face meetings. The authors identify the most common needs instructors have (syllabus, readings, supplementary materials, making up missed class sessions, and audio-video materials) and show how to systemize distribution.

Chapter 5 illustrates how to connect the different components of a course so that objectives, activities, assessments, policies, and resources can be unified and coherent. Course policies and procedures are often separated from activities and assessments, and the authors show how instructors can embed and link course components.

Chapter 9 gives the reader a process for preparing a course that can address the individual needs of the learner while ensuring that current and relevant resources are used. The authors provide practical tips for locating Internet-based resources, and then spell out strategies not only for providing the resources to students but also for making sure learners are engaged and actually getting something out of the resource provided.

Although not all faculty may be ready or willing to adopt these tactics, the authors provide compelling reasons for moving to electronic management, helping readers figure out where to start.

The remaining chapters discuss pedagogical and organizational strategies that promote learning. The focus of Chapter 3 is organizing and facilitating collaborative learning grounded in higher-order thinking and independent learning. Specific activities are designed to extend discussion outside of class, organize and direct group work, and facilitate peer-to-peer support and feedback.

Chapter 4 examines pedagogical designs for experiential learning, primarily through virtual labs or simulations. Learning objects obtained through Internet subscriptions, institutional or organizational repositories, or textbook providers are shown to be an engaging and effective strategy to replicate what a practitioner might do in the real world. The authors also suggest strategies for providing virtual interactions with experts through chats.

Chapter 6 articulates strategies to improve students' writing skills. Although at first glance those who teach large undergraduate courses might be tempted to skip this chapter, ideas for the management of feedback using CMS tools will reveal some time-saving tactics even for experienced instructors. For example, peer review through discussions and instructor review using embedded comments can shorten traditional pen-to-paper grading.

Chapter 7 explores developing student research skills, which could be an entire course in itself. The authors do a good job of identifying the challenges of student research: poorly developed search skills, poor evaluation skills, limited critical thinking skills, and plagiarism. Although the solutions provided are thoughtful and effectively designed, faculty may find the time needed to implement them are beyond the scope of a semester-long course. This chapter should be used by a program area to integrate across courses to ensure mastery of research skills.

Chapter 8 identifies strategies for assessment and feedback to increase student learning. Clearly the authors believe that feedback is critical to improving student performance. They articulate clear and practical ways to identify student confusion about assignments, helping students to self- and peer-assess, improve student presentations, manage group work, and gather student feedback about course activities. This chapter may be one of the most useful for situations that require technology, as well as those that do not.

The limitations of the book and the CD-ROM lie in the occasionally too-detailed illustrations of specific software applications and in the level of knowledge assumed of the probable audience. The level of specificity may be confusing to those who are not using identical software (all illustrations are from a Microsoft Windows environment, potentially alienating the Macintosh user), and the information will be dated once the software is. The illustrations in the CD-ROM are all taken from one CMS, which will look and feel unfamiliar to those who use different systems. Additionally, the scenarios grounded in learning theory might not resonate with faculty members who are unaware of the range of pedagogical approaches to teaching adults. Many faculty members are technologically sophisticated but less pedagogically savvy.

Clyde and Delohery put forth a model for teaching that is grounded in learner-centered principles, which might be foreign or difficult to adopt for faculty unfamiliar with them. The ideas expressed are not intended to be inclusive, however, but rather to spark ideas for enhancing teaching strategies and extending course interactions. As a reference, this book would be an appropriate tool for all faculty members to have for questions and decisions that educators make daily. New faculty would find many useful and readily applicable ideas that could help bridge first-year challenges. Teaching and learning centers and support staff may use this book as a reference for approaching faculty development and training.

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