Collaborative Course Design and Communities of Practice: Strategies for Adaptable Course Shells in Hybrid and Online Writing

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Abstract:

In this article, we explore how a community of practice approach to online course design and instruction can provide an alternative to curriculum models that rely on the use of standardized course shells. We share our experiences developing hybrid and online versions of a first-year composition course at a large public university in the United States. We then analyze excerpts of departmentally-sanctioned teaching journals to trace the community of practice that emerged when instructors in our program began teaching the courses, and discuss the complicated relationship between instructor agency and shared curriculum. Our experiences motivate us to advocate for (1) courses designed through the collaborative efforts of instructors, instructional designers, and writing program administrators, and (2) courses implemented in concert with a community of practice, where first-time instructors discuss strategies for revising and adapting course shells with more experienced instructors and designers. Ultimately, we argue that a community of practice approach to online writing instruction (OWI) validates teachers' knowledge of their materials and their students' learning, and creates an opportunity to privilege instructor agency alongside the use of shared course shells.

Key Words:

community of practice, online writing instruction, hybrid courses, first-year composition, teaching journals, collaborative course design, course shells

Introduction

Best practices in online writing instruction (OWI) have been a central topic of conversation within writing studies for over a decade. However, few have examined the potential for communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as a model for OWI or addressed the role of collaboration between instructors and designers during course design. In this article, we explore how a community of practice approach to online course design and instruction can provide an alternative to curriculum models that rely on the use of standardized course shells.

We focus the discussion in this article on the specific context of college-level, online and hybrid[1] *writing* instruction. Across the United States, institutions like ours[2] require that incoming students complete a first-year composition (FYC) course that prepares students for college-level writing. Consequently, many sections of the course are offered each year, and those courses are typically taught by graduate student, adjunct, or non-tenure track instructors. The FYC course at our institution includes assignments such as a digital literacy narrative, a persuasive letter to an authentic audience, a rhetorical analysis of an academic research article, and an argumentative essay. The courses have small class sizes (20-25 students) and privilege both interactive learning (peer review, small group discussion) and a multi-draft writing process (students revise essay drafts throughout the course and submit a final portfolio of revised work). Our institution offers approximately 30 sections of first-year composition each year, which are primarily taught by graduate student instructors.

Advocates for OWI argue that the student-centered, individual, and active learning pedagogy that online learning advocates prioritize (Anderson, 2008, Snart, 2010, Palloff & Pratt, 2007) is already common in writing instruction, making online learning a natural fit with writing pedagogy (Hewett & DePew, 2015, Neff & Whithaus, 2009, Warnock, 2009). While the transition from face-to-face to online writing instruction may not require a significant shift in pedagogical ethos, designing and teaching an online course requires more time on "up-front planning, more detail in design, and just as many, if not more, contact hours with students" (Blair & Monske, 2003, p. 447). Given these conditions, many online writing instructors report feeling not only overwhelmed by the

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[1] *We acknowledge that "hybrid" instruction can refer to a variety of learning spaces and styles, but at our institution, we define "hybrid writing instruction" as instruction time that is split evenly between time in the face-to-face classroom and time in an online learning management system. When we refer to "online writing instruction," we refer to courses taught entirely in online learning management systems.*

[2] *This article focuses on course development at the institution where Whithaus currently serves as Professor and Writing Program Administrator, and where Stewart and Cohn completed their doctoral work (both graduated in June 2016). Throughout the project, Stewart was a PhD student, then candidate, in the School of Education and Cohn was a PhD student, then candidate, in the English Department. Both Stewart and Cohn pursued a designated emphasis in Writing, Rhetoric, and Composition Studies.*

workload required to develop and teach online courses, but also exploited (Anson, 1999, Blair & Monske, 2003, Bryan, 2006; DePew et al., 2006, Shea, 2007).

This increased workload is often mitigated by the use of course shells, which contain pre-designed content for instructors to use (and re-use) when they teach. In the most extreme instances, a design team (consisting of an instructional designer, subject matter expert, and technical expert) develops a standardized course shell that includes all of the activities, instructions, and learning materials for a particular course; this course shell is then provided to an instructor who does not have access to edit or revise the materials created by the development team (Caplan & Graham, 2008). The instructor's primary role in these situations is to grade discussion forums and essays. The lack of instructor participation during the development, and the lack of access to edit or revise the course content, characterizes the shell as "standardized." An alternative to "standardized" course shells are "adaptable" course shells, which, Rice (2015) argues, "work well if there is teacher ownership" (p. 404). This approach involves a design team, or, more commonly, an instructor at the institution, developing an online version of an existing face-to-face course. Like a standardized course shell, an adaptable shell includes a complete corpus of activities and assignments, but in this situation, instructors have permission to revise and adapt the material in ways that fit their own teaching personalities and their students' needs.

As part of a larger multi-campus research and curriculum development project, the writing program administrator at our institution (Whithaus) asked two graduate student instructors (Stewart and Cohn) to create adaptable course shells for our hybrid and online FYC courses. Prior to the hybrid and online course shell development, our institution had only offered face-to-face FYC courses. Our decision to create course shells was a direct response to the OWI scholarship that cautioned against the exploitative workloads of online course development. However, we were also aware of the potential dangers of standardized course shells, namely, that instructors may feel locked into perpetuating "canned content" or a "teacher-proof curriculum." When instructors use content that they have not developed themselves, they may feel a loss of agency or frustration that the curriculum does not meet their students' individual needs (Snart, 2010). In addition, Remley (2013) has shown that enlisting instructional designers who are not familiar with course content or instructors who are not familiar with a particular set of online learning tools can negatively affect students' learning outcomes. The challenge for OWI researchers, then, is to find ways to support faculty without overburdening them, and to simultaneously maintain instructor agency and accessible, high-quality online courses.

This article offers strategies for providing support while also facilitating instructor agency: in addition to creating adaptable course shells, we recommend approaching course design as a collaborative task, and approaching course implementation as a community of practice. By describing our experience with these approaches, we aim not only to make visible the extensive collaborative labor of designers and instructors and to acknowledge the ways in which instructors can participate in a community of practice, but also to highlight the necessity of establishing institutional practices that support hybrid and online course delivery.

While existing writing studies scholarship has explored the process of collaboratively producing academic articles (Roen & Mittan, 1992, Yancey & Spooner, 1998), conducting collaborative research (Bulger et al., 2011, Neff, Potts, & Whithaus, 2012), and the value of collaborative or team teaching (Barratt, Parrott, & Presley, 2011, Brunk-Chavez & Miller, 2007), we found little attention in the literature to the collaborations that enable course *design*, beyond one example of collaboratively designing a face-to-face Scientific Writing course (Combs, Frost, & Elbe, 2015). The exception is Brunk-Chavez (2010), who has argued that by "flip[ping] the script" we can "create a program community that builds upon and actively promotes the strengths of the highest quality teachers" (p. 153). Connecting faculty development with program, curriculum, and pedagogical development can build, and even strengthen, the shared institutional materials within a writing program. For Brunk-Chavez (2010), the labor of design is always implicitly collaborative as instructors build upon institutional materials (e.g., a shared or sample syllabus and associated artifacts) and implement ideas they encounter while speaking with other instructors, participating in professional development workshops, or attending conferences (i.e., what North (1987) calls *lore*). In the development of hybrid and online courses, traces of that collaboration may be more easily visible in the form of digital artifacts and versions of course shells than the hallway conversations or the passing along of syllabi and classroom activities from instructor to instructor, but the importance of fostering these collaborations are not always made explicit.

Extending Brunk-Chavez's (2010) discussion of course design as a community experience, we frame our discussion of course implementation with Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of a community of practice. In a community of practice, Lave and Wenger (1991) explain, learning occurs "through the process of becoming a full participant" (p. 29). The learner is not "taught" in the traditional sense of the term; rather, she learns the practices of a community by participating alongside more seasoned community members. Lave and Wenger (1991) also explain that the process of community participation is intimately tied with identity: as a newcomer develops into a full participant in the community, she comes to define herself by her participation in that community's set of practices. In our case, writing instructors new to online or hybrid teaching were invited into the conversation about designing online activities, as opposed to being told to deliver fixed content. Through synchronous and asynchronous exchanges, instructors discussed software tools, the course curriculum, and the online pedagogical techniques with more experienced instructors and course designers. Their developing fluency as online writing instructors was thus tied to and shaped by the community of practice that formed among the instructors. Our experiences have led us to conclude that a community of practice around online writing instruction not only creates opportunities for first-time instructors to observe and interact with more experienced instructors, but also enables instructors to feel like they are contributing to the larger goal of successful OWI at the institution. Online instructors, in other words, need to progressively develop their own identities as online writing instructors. We propose that a key way of doing this is by allowing instructors to share their ideas and strategies for modifying course shell material so that course materials do not feel statically standardized, but instead, are truly adaptable.

In the pages that follow, we first offer some brief context into the scope of the online and hybrid courses we designed, noting how even at the development stage, collaboration crucially impacted the ways that the course shells were developed. Furthermore, the collaboration that characterized initial curriculum development created an environment that enabled a community of practice to emerge during implementation. To demonstrate this, we analyze instructors' contributions to a communal "teaching journal" (a shared Google Document), illustrating the emerging community of practice, but also noting the challenges instructors experienced as they attempted to balance a sense of ownership over the course materials with the realities of teaching with a course shell. We end this article by noting the value of collaborative course design and a community of practice approach to OWI, and also calling for more research on the ways collaboration can combat the challenges online course designers and instructors face, especially in terms of developing and modifying course shells.

Context

This article details the collaboration we experienced as we developed hybrid and online first-year composition (FYC) courses at our institution, and the ways that collaboration evolved into a community of practice among the instructors who taught the courses. The project began as a collaboration across three, large research institutions on the West coast. Working with principal investigators (including Whithaus), faculty, and graduate students (including Stewart and Cohn), the project's main goal was to develop three online writing courses that undergraduate students from different campuses could take to fulfill their lower-division writing requirements. The three campuses collaborated for two years, working together to develop what were called "course modules," or series of individual online activities that could be used in a variety of contexts at an individual instructor's discretion. The "course modules" model was similar in principle to NCTE's OWI Open Resource Project (2016), an open repository curated by the CCCC Online Writing Instruction committee, for instructors to browse successful online course activities for their individual discretion. Our project developed these "course modules" only for internal use among instructors in our program, though we similarly encouraged instructors to pick and choose among the modules they thought worked best. During this development phase, Stewart and Cohn beta tested online activities from the modules in the face-to-face FYC courses they taught. Stewart and Cohn were selected to participate in this project because of their research interests in online writing instruction and digital literacies; Stewart also had prior experience as an online instructor and instructional designer.

While the multi-campus project engaged in a rich process of collaboration, it did not lead to fully implemented courses. The responsibility for moving from modules to course delivery fell to the individual campuses. As the director of the writing program at our institution, Whithaus wanted to use the resources generated from the multi-campus team as well as knowledge about best practices for OWI as a backdrop for local site- and course-specific development work. This commitment to collaborative curriculum design meant that multiple instructors would engage in developing hybrid and online curricula at our institution. Their work on these learning activities would be vital to the success of the hybrid and online courses over the long term. It was at this point that the

graduate student co-authors (Stewart and Cohn) were tasked with creating an initial course shell.

The first step was to consider how the five course learning outcomes identified by the multi-campus collaboration would become manifest in the course shell. In addition to the cross-campus learning outcomes, we wanted the hybrid and online sections of first-year composition to mirror those of our campus's face-to-face sections—regardless of how the courses were delivered, we needed to have roughly the same expectations and outcomes for the students. Thinking through how these expectations and outcomes could be met guided the collaborative design work that followed, and laid the groundwork for a community of practice among the larger group of instructors who eventually taught the courses.

Once the course shells were developed, we moved into the implementation phase of the project. The first five sections of the hybrid course were offered in the fall of 2013, and the first section of the online course was offered in the winter of 2014; all three authors taught the first quarter that hybrid sections were offered, and Stewart taught the first section of the online course. Figure 1 summarizes the course offerings during the first two years of implementation.

2013-14	Fall: 5 hybrid Winter: 5 hybrid, 1 online Spring: 5 hybrid, 2 online
Summer 2014	2 hybrid, 2 online
2014-15	Fall: 6 hybrid, 2 online Winter: 6 hybrid, 2 online Spring: 6 hybrid, 2 online
Summer 2015	2 hybrid, 2 online
Total: 50 sections, 20 instructors	

Figure 1: Hybrid & Online Courses Offered 2013-2015

As Figure 1 illustrates, 20 different instructors delivered 50 sections of hybrid and online first-year composition over a period of two years. Three of the instructors were faculty in the writing program (Whithaus and two full-time lecturers); the other seventeen instructors were graduate students (including Stewart and Cohn). This is a typical distribution of first-year composition (FYC) instruction at our institution. Instructors were selected based on demonstrated excellence in face-to-face FYC instruction.

Collaboration at the Development Stage

As collaborative course designers, Stewart and Cohn initially had to reconcile their different approaches to activity, or module, design. Individually, they created different kinds of materials even though they worked with the same set of institutional constraints and guidelines. For example, Figures 2 and 3 (crafted by Stewart) and Figures 4 and 5

(crafted by Cohn) show that the two authors had different purposes in mind for the early modules. Stewart authored her module as a way to give her audience of instructors options for teaching the course differently. Cohn, on the other hand, authored her module with the eventual student audience in mind rather than the instructor audience.
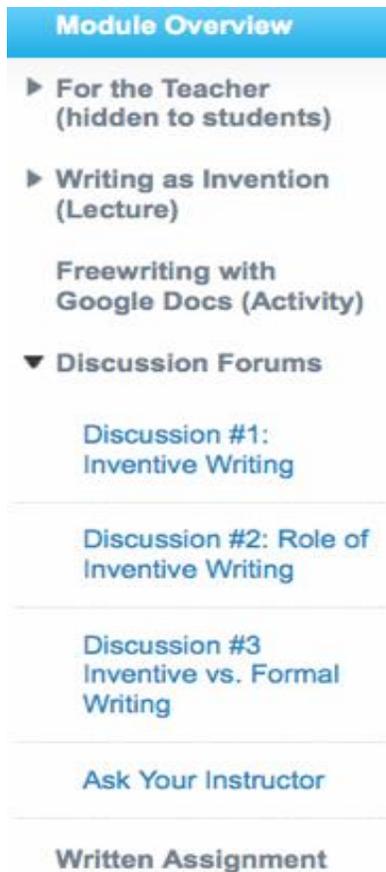
Module Overview

▶ For the Teacher
(hidden to students)

▶ Writing as Invention
(Lecture)

Freewriting with
Google Docs (Activity)

▼ Discussion Forums

Discussion #1:
Inventive Writing

Discussion #2: Role of
Inventive Writing

Discussion #3
Inventive vs. Formal
Writing

Ask Your Instructor

Written Assignment

Figure 2: Screenshot #1 of a Module Created by Stewart

If you are using this module...

... as a supplement to an on-campus or hybrid course, then it's pretty much ready to go. You just need to:

- Add your contact information in the Ask Your Instructor discussion forum.
- Indicate the time and date for the synchronous Freewriting with Google Doc activity.
- Determine the written assignment prompt(s) students will use for the written assignment.

... as part of an asynchronous online course, then you will need to migrate these activities to your online course. I suggest you:

- Add your contact information in the Ask Your Instructor discussion forum.
- Add a Post your Introduction discussion topic for the first day of class.
- Edit the module overview so it is a course overview, and add Meet the Instructor, Faculty Expectations, and Faculty Profile pages.
- Edit the Freewriting with Google Docs activity. Currently this is synchronous, so it will need to be adapted. I suggest:

Figure 3: Screenshot #2 of a Module Created by Stewart

▼ Identifying Purpose for
   a Particular Audience

Step 1: Bring Out the
Popcorn!

Step 2: Become a Film
Critic

Step 3: Now, Become
the Producer!

Step 4: Bringing it All
Together

Figure 4: Screenshot #1 of a Module Created by Cohn

DO IT: Watch the two trailers below.

Mad Hot Ballroom:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5wEb_3S2VM

Man on Wire:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIawNRm9NWM

Figure 5: Screenshot #2 of a Module Created by Cohn

When Stewart and Cohn began working together, they had to integrate their individual approaches to create a unified product. By the end of their time collaborating, they wound up creating course modules that became a clear combination of their initial, individual visions. Figure 6 is an example of this merged effort, as it shows both Stewart's interest in offering a database of resources for the instructor to use and pick from and Cohn's vision of a "step-by-step" approach for a student user experience. While they did not necessarily go into the collaboration assuming they would merge their approaches in this particular way, frequent conversations facilitated the creation of course material that felt unified, rather than disjointed.

Tests & Quizzes 🖉
Chat Room 🔊
Syllabus 📄
Gradebook2 📊
Mailtool 📧
Sections 👥
Site Editor 📝
Help ❓

Week Two in Class
Invention (Brainstorming)

Invention Strategies

- **Listing**: Write down words or phrases about your topic.
- **Mapping**: Use drawing (or an online tool) to demonstrate the relationship between the words/phrases you brainstorm.
- **Freewriting:** Type or write without stopping for ten minutes.
- **Looping**: Pick a phrase or idea from a previous freewrite and use it as a starting point for a new freewrite.
- **Talk it out:** Record yourself talking out loud about your topic and then transcribe the recording or take notes while you listen.
- **Discovery Draft**: This is a freewrite that focuses on your paper topic and stays specific.
- **Journaling**: Keep a journal throughout a course, writing in response to the readings and the class discussions. When it comes time to write your paper, read over the journal and create a new entry where you think through what you want to write about.

Step One: Listing

One way to approach your literacy narrative is to identify a person, place, or event that demonstrates the influence of new media or technology on your identity as a communicator. Complete a chart (like the one below) by listing people, places, or events that you can think of that have influenced your literacy development. In the other column, briefly note (a few words is fine) the nature of that influence.

Possible People, Places, or Events	Possible Anecdotes to Describe the Person, Place, or Event
Example: My father	he taught me how to use a computer
Example: learning how to type	showed me how quickly I could

Figure 6: An Example of a Course Module Developed by Stewart and Cohn

The culmination of these informal collaborative efforts made it clear at the project level that conversations between instructors facilitated a productive approach to course design, especially online design. Unlike face-to-face instruction, where instructors can adapt their pedagogical strategies based on students' real-time reactions, online instruction requires written or pre-recorded content; consequently, as Blythe (2001) has argued, online instruction especially benefits from user experience research, which collaborative design emulates as instructor-designers compare strategies and adapt approaches based on multiple users' input.

Building Collaboration Program-Wide: Implementing the Hybrid & Online FYC Program

Our collaboration during the development phase of this project encouraged us to facilitate collaborations among the course instructors during the implementation phase. Specifically, the program worked to empower instructors' voices in conversations about course design and pedagogy in three ways: (1) bi-weekly meetings to reflect upon the experience of teaching the course, (2) a mentoring program where more experienced instructors met with new instructors prior to and during the first few weeks of a term, and (3) teaching journals.

These strategies for facilitating a community among instructors emerged naturally; in fact, the first quarter of hybrid course delivery was in many ways an extension of the close collaboration Stewart and Cohn enjoyed to create the course shell. Part of this was because we expected to use our colleagues' experiences to revise the curriculum, and part of this was because, during the first quarter of hybrid instruction, we were actively developing the online course shell. In this spirit, we arranged an initial meeting with the instructors to orient them to the curriculum and offer a training on how to create a copy of and adapt the course shell. This meeting, which was led by graduate students for their graduate student peers, established a shared social situation early on and

undoubtedly influenced the creation of an environment in which a community of practice was possible. At minimum, because the majority of the instructors were graduate students, a traditional "teacher/learner dyad," in Lave and Wenger's words, dissolved and, instead, "a richly diverse field of essential actors and, with it, other forms of relationships of participation" emerged (p. 56). For example, because no one was completely sure what was going to happen when five first-time hybrid instructors taught from a shared, adaptable course shell, it was decided that we'd meet again in the second week of the term. The second meeting was full of questions about the course technology and accounts of what it felt like to teach in a new environment, as well as evaluations of the curriculum in the course shell. It was quickly determined that meeting every other week would be useful. In the second year of the project, these meetings evolved to also include a mentoring program, and both the mentoring and the bi-weekly meetings became a norm for the program, even when the authors of this article were no longer teaching sections of the course.

In that first meeting with the hybrid instructors, we also proposed the idea of teaching journals, where instructors would compose weekly reflections on their experiences with the course. We hoped the journals would prove useful tools for eventual revision of the hybrid and online courses; we had no idea they would also prove so useful to future first-time instructors, who often remarked that they read the previous term's teaching journals in preparation of teaching their own sections. The journals were set up as a simple Google Document with a heading associated with each week of the course (i.e., Week One Online, Week One in Class, or, for the online class, Week One, Week Two). Each quarter, a group of 6-7 instructors were asked to select a font color and add their weekly reflection under the appropriate heading, accompanied by their name. The number of instructors invited to participate each quarter depended on how many instructors were teaching sections of the online and hybrid courses; typically, one instructor taught one section each quarter. Instructors often read each other's reflections and added in responses, indicated by their font color and brackets (see excerpts below for examples). The instructors were not required to contribute to the journals, and there were no instructions regarding what information should be included in the reflection or how long the reflections should be. We found that the instructors were not resistant to participating, which we attribute to the fact that they found the journals useful, participation was voluntary, and there was a pre-existing graduate student community.

Typically, the majority of the instructors (approximately 5-6 out of 6-7 instructors) teaching in a given quarter would actively participate in the journals for the first 4-6 weeks of the 10-week quarter, and then participation would wane. Often, journal entries would refer to reading other entries, describe ways instructors borrowed teaching strategies from one another, and pose questions to the group. The discussion that occurred in the journal usually began or extended conversations in the bi-weekly meetings, and they usually focused on the course technology or pedagogical strategies.

One of the most positive results of the bi-weekly meetings, the mentoring program, and the teaching journals was the emergence of a community of practice. The teaching journals are particularly interesting because they reflect in writing the informal conversations and relationships that comprise the community. This unique data source

offers an unusual view of a community of practice because it captures the emerging community, as well as the instructors' shift from "newcomers" to "old timers" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 56-57). While future research might couple an analysis of teaching journals with instructor interviews, the journals are sufficient for our purposes of exposing the value of a community of practice that forms through negotiating the challenges online writing instructors face when teaching with adaptable course shells.

We analyzed trends in the journal entries and, in the following pages, share some typical concerns we noticed online instructors faced when teaching with adaptable course shells. We received written permission from all of the instructors to include these excerpts, and have used pseudonyms to maintain anonymity, with the exception of teaching journal excerpts written by the authors of this article, who are identified by their first names (Mary, Jenae, and Carl). These examples ground our subsequent discussion of the challenges and benefits of using adaptable course shells for a program's online writing instruction while building a community of practice.

We begin with a typical example of instructors discussing technical difficulties. In the excerpt below, two hybrid instructors were having a problem with the Gradebook:

> Elizabeth: Quick question: The quiz grades are not showing up in gradebook ...I think this problem is distinct from the one Jessica mentioned. Thanks!

> [Jessica: I was having this issue with one quiz also, I finally just unlinked it from gradebook so the students wouldn't keep getting a scary "can't be put in gradebook" error and entered the scores by hand. Not the most technologically advanced solution, but it works…]

> Thanks Jessica! I did basically the same thing after calling IT at Carl's suggestion. ... To fix it:

>> delete item from the gradebook

>> go to "tests and quizzes" and select "settings" in the published quiz

>> "toggle" the grading option (first select not sent to gradebook, then send to gradebook, you may have to repeat this).

<div align="right">Excerpt from the Fall 2014 Teaching Journal</div>

Both instructors not only identify the problem and a potential solution, but they also directly address each other in the document and write with the expectation that others will read their entries, hence Elizabeth's step-by-step explanation of how to resolve the problem. These direct and practical discussions indicate that the instructors expect to learn from and support each other in their common goal of teaching first-year composition.

Although many of the conversations about hybrid and online instruction, especially in the first two weeks of a quarter, mirrored the above excerpt's focus on technology, it was equally common for instructors to discuss course content. In the excerpt below, the instructors discuss an assigned reading. The first instructor felt that the reading was not appropriate for his students, and the second instructor responds with an alternative reading that she used in her section of the course:

Derek: When discussing Hawisher and Selfe, I really had to break down their main arguments for them into simple terms they could relate to. Otherwise, this article was just far too scholarly for them (which makes sense, since its audience is other scholars). ...

[Jenae: This audience issue is one reason I decided to ditch H&S for Baron. I think the H&S still has a lot of value, but I think in future quarters, instructors may want to find a better excerpt ... or use something like the Dennis Baron article I've started to use]

Excerpt from the Spring 2014 Teaching Journal

In Jenae's response to Derek, she shows that she shares his concerns about the article and describes her own solution (replacing the article with a different reading), implying that Derek might want to follow suit the next time he teaches the course. Jenae also directs her comments to the wider audience of instructors, noting that, "in future quarters, instructors may want to find a better excerpt," and recognizing that her individual solution, the Baron article, is an option but not necessarily the only possible solution. In this way, Jenae indicates her expectation that instructors will individually revise the course shell curriculum, and will in part base their decisions on the conversations within the instructor community.

In addition to discussing the course technology and content, instructors spent time reflecting on how the course delivery changed their teaching practices. Especially in reflections about the online course or online portions of the hybrid course, instructors shared strategies for communicating with their students, such as:

Abigail: I sent a pretty lengthy email to the class detailing what needed to be turned in this week because everything seemed a little too quiet (no visitors to office hours and only one student email). Sure enough, after sending the email, I got a few more student responses asking for follow-up. It's so interesting to me that this seems to be a trend ... I can only assume that my initial contact with the students makes them feel more comfortable asking more questions? This isn't exactly a super-relevant observation to the activities this week, but it's been something I've been noticing about the hybrid format.

[Jessica: I'm finding the same thing Abigail: my students tend to make contact after reminder emails much more than before. I'm assuming most of them are pretty busy worrying about the classes that are in person, so it takes that extra push to get them thinking about this online work.]

Excerpt from the Fall 2014 Teaching Journal

In Abigail's reflection, she moves beyond a narrow discussion of the weekly activities, and she suggests that this is beyond the expected use of the teaching journal: "This isn't exactly a super-relevant observation to the activities this week." Despite Abigail's feeling that a more general reflection on hybrid teaching is outside of the teaching journal norm, we saw these types of entries frequently, and believe that reflecting on and reading others' reflections on teaching in a new delivery format was a critical part of instructors moving from peripheral to full participants in the OWI community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35-37). Jessica's response to Abigail

shows solidarity, confirming that, she, too, reaches out to her students via email during the online portions of the hybrid class, and finds that the need for this is a fundamental difference between teaching face-to-face and teaching hybrid.

Finally, the teaching journals offered evidence that instructors were not only reading each other's entries and responding with support during the quarter, but they also adapted their approaches to technology, content, and communication based on interactions with the community when they transitioned into their second quarters of teaching hybrid or online. For example:

> Marilyn: In order to help them create their [WordPress] sites, I uploaded Derek's quick start guide in addition to the more in depth guide provided. For students who don't have a lot of time on their hands, I felt Derek's guide provided a good alternate solution. (Thanks, Derek!)

> > Excerpt from Winter 2015 Teaching Journal

> Jenae: I changed the "Defining Writing" activity a bit from last quarter and used Carl's variation on it. … This was definitely the best part of the class. Students opened up here a lot more and seemed engaged in the activity.

> > Excerpt from Winter 2014 Teaching Journal

> Abigail: First real webinar! I found it extremely helpful to watch almost all of Kerry's recorded webinar from her first class to figure out what problems to expect as the class got going. Most students arrived early to the webinar (I noticed that Adam recommended this to his class and followed suit), which gave them some time to familiarize themselves with the technology. … Once class started, I introduced myself and did a brief overview, then went around and had students introduce themselves and something about their physical location (I think this was originally from one of Mary's webinar plans).

> > Excerpt from Winter 2015 Teaching Journal

Marilyn incorporated Derek's help documentation for a course technology, Jenae followed Carl's recommendations for revising an activity, and Abigail modeled her webinar facilitation after three other instructors' strategies. These instructors each leverage past instructors' experiences with teaching the course to adapt the course shell in ways that make them feel more comfortable and confident in teaching the course, and then report back to the community, presumably with the assumption that future instructors will similarly benefit from their experiences.

Because the instructors are learning how to teach hybrid and online courses while they participate in a community of more seasoned instructors, and because they begin their participation by reading others' accounts of teaching these courses, they are functioning as a community of practice.

Teacher Agency & Standardization

While there are many benefits to the community of practice model of online writing instruction, there are also limitations, especially in terms of balancing teacher agency and course shells. A community of practice invites conversations about multiple ways to

accomplish a common goal; standardized course shell identify a singular approach for accomplishing that goal. Adaptable course shells attempt to have the best of both worlds, but the reality is that even if the shell is adaptable, the "official" strategy for delivering curriculum is published in the departmentally-sanctioned shell. Ideally, a community of practice model for OWI would encourage instructors to articulate and negotiate diverse approaches to best practices, and then allow those negotiations to inform individual revisions to the adaptable course shell. In practice, a course shell that evolves in response to a community is problematic.

Part of the problem is logistical. For example, the below excerpt from the teaching journal shows how revision of the course shell between quarters resulted in an error:

Adam: Regarding peer response for the problem essay: there are some conflicting instructions in the Week 4 online course shell. Some of the instructions direct students to prepare and submit their drafts before class in week five. The peer response is then to be conducted in class. But the module itself for the problem essay currently resides in Week Four online.

Jenae: Yes, I bumped into this error too. This problem occurred because we had peer review happening in class in the original shell, but after fall quarter, thought all peer review should happen online. But maybe it's good to give instructors this leeway. Personally, I found it useful to do the peer review online this quarter, but how might we build in that flexibility without making the shell confusing, I wonder?

Adam: It can probably be productively done both ways. I decided early on when I was prepping for the class that I'd do the peer response in class week 5 (today); there was so much packed into last week's online section, and such a constant barrage of due dates for the students. It just felt cramped to require a full working draft out of them in time for a full peer response session in the two days left before class.

Excerpt from Winter 2014 Teaching Journal

Jenae explains that the error Adam found in the course shell (conflicting instructions about when to complete peer review) was the result of the fall quarter instructors wanting to move all peer review online. Jenae goes on to note that she liked having peer review completely online, and wonders how future course instructors might feel comfortable indicating the choice of whether to conduct peer review online or in class "without making the shell confusing." Jenae is aware that her shell may be used by future course instructors and is considering how she can use her course shell as a way to share the pedagogical flexibility that Adam desires. Adam responds that he chose to conduct his peer review in class *because* he found the course shell, with its "constant barrage of due dates," confusing. This example thus points to the major challenge of merging a community of practice and a course shell: in order for the shell to be functional, details like due dates have to be incorporated into activity instructions, but in order for it to be responsive to individual instructors' needs, those instructions must be adaptable. Furthermore, the task of adapting a course shell in response to instructor feedback can result in multiple versions of a shell or, as was the case in this instance, conflicting information in different parts of the shell.

These challenges are further complicated by the fact that, while the instructors readily adapted course materials that supported face-to-face and synchronous online (i.e., video webinar) activities, they often felt unable or unwilling to make direct changes to the asynchronous online activities in the course shells, despite the fact that the shells were deliberately created to be adaptable (instructors had full access to add to, revise, or delete all of the content). Instructors' hesitancy to make changes to the asynchronous activities is evidenced by our analysis of the teaching journals, which revealed almost twice as many instances of instructors describing changes to the face-to-face and synchronous online activities as descriptions of changes to asynchronous online activities. Furthermore, when instructors did make changes to the asynchronous online activities, they were more likely to add elements or rearrange content than to change existing content. For example, in the teaching journals, instructors reported adding videos or screenshots to supplement existing material in the online course and reported adapting their courses to account for scheduling concerns like institutional holidays. Occasionally, instructors reported making changes to the asynchronous activity instructions, but these were relatively minor. For example, one online instructor described adding additional instructions for avoiding technical difficulties when using an online annotation tool, as well as more specific instructions regarding the types of comments students should compose during an editing workshop; other instructors reported replacing resources, like articles in lieu of a library research guide, or using one tool, "a.nnotate" in lieu of another tool, "BounceApp," for providing feedback on student websites. In all cases, the instructors maintained the activities' basic goals and tasks.

In contrast, online instructors' teaching journal reflections frequently described the ways they adapted their strategies for the synchronous online webinars, including both what occurred during the webinar and when and how often they meet with their students. Similarly, hybrid instructors described many and various adaptations to their face-to-face sessions. Some of these adaptations maintained the spirit of the activities outlined in the shell, such as when an instructor converted a verbal discussion into a class creation of a Google document; others introduced completely new activities, such as when an instructor designed an activity around three key issues she identified from reading students' essay drafts; and some maintained the topic of an activity but changed the actual task at hand, such as when an instructor converted a discussion of an article about revision into an activity about revision based on a YouTube video. Many instructors also reported skipping synchronous or face-to-face activities in the shell on account of available time. These instructors took broad liberties with the synchronous and face-to-face materials in the course shell, but did not take the same liberties with asynchronous activities.

We suspect that the instructors' hesitancy to adapt the asynchronous online activities is, first and foremost, a result of instructors lacking ownership over the course materials. As Adam, an online instructor, wrote in the teaching journal:

> I feel design-wise and layout-wise like I'm still moving into this class and making it my own. At this point it still feels very much like someone else's class that I have stepped into, and I am not always 100% certain of the reasoning behind every one of the things I am doing.

Similarly, Derek, a hybrid instructor, wrote, "I felt like less of an expert on the assignment, as I didn't write it, and I have never taught it before. This was probably the most difficult part of the class." In contrast, the authors of this article felt quite comfortable rearranging and rewriting online activity instructions, which makes sense—as developers, we had both more experience with the technology and a stronger sense of ownership over the materials. When two online instructors, Kerry and Teresa, adapted the 10-week online course for a 6-week summer course, they similarly reported more confidence in making changes to the course shell. It may be that instructors need time to adjust to teaching in a new environment before they are comfortable creating their own activities; if this is the case, then it would then be reasonable to assume that once instructors have more experience teaching in hybrid and online environments, they will adapt more activities. This was certainly the case with Kerry, who wrote in the teaching journal that she imported activities from the hybrid course into her online course. Similarly, Adam wrote in the teaching journal during his third quarter teaching online that, "third time in, I am finally comfy enough with the technologies to let those fade into the background and just teach."

However, the issue of ownership over the materials does not explain why instructors were fairly likely to revise face-to-face and synchronous online activities, but unlikely to revise asynchronous activities. One explanation is that the asynchronous materials are both *written* and *published* within what instructors are introduced to as a departmentally-sanctioned course shell; as such, they seem more permanent. There is evidence for this in the teaching journals: when instructors made minor changes to the asynchronous activities, they would often qualify these descriptions with statements like, "I hope that's okay." Other instructors expressed concern about making changes for fear of "breaking" something or somehow "messing up" the shell.

Our hope for future iterations of the program at our institution is a community of practice that not only combats feelings of isolation and supports instructors as they overcome technical difficulties and learn new pedagogical strategies, but also encourages instructors to take more ownership over the asynchronous activities and more willingly adapt the online course shells we provide. Of course, it is important to recognize arguments against course shells, including the fact that, as Snart (2010) puts it, "strict, top-down institutional control of hybrid [and online] design and development is not a precondition for successful blended learning" (p. 104) and, in the worst case scenarios, standardized curriculum and course shells can favor "managerial convenience" over pedagogy (p. 117). While we recognize the potential dangers of course shells, we also agree with Hewett (2015) that providing instructors with a course shell has several clear advantages. First, course shells provide a useful starting point for reducing instructor workload. In fact, we maintain that it is unreasonable to ask every first-time hybrid or online instructor to create a complete online course from scratch, especially when that instructor may only be assigned the course a week or two in advance. Second, course shells promote accessibility by providing materials that are ADA compliant. This creates an important foundation upon which instructors can build as they become more expert in teaching future iterations of the course. We also agree with scholars who remind us that, "at its core teaching is a matter of human relations" (Fitzmaurice, 2010, p. 53), and that, "teaching is a personality-driven endeavor" (Warnock, 2009, p. 180). The human nature of teaching and learning means that two

instructors can use identical tools to facilitate the same learning activity within the same interface and create very different learning experiences; in other words, when course shells are deliberately created to be adapted by the instructors who use them, they may constrain, but they do not dictate what kinds of teaching and learning are possible. For us, the critical difference is between *standardized* course shells, for which we do not advocate, and adaptive, shared course shells, for which we do advocate.

Our team created an adaptable shell that instructors have the freedom and flexibility to revise, and then coupled that shell with professional development and training in the form of the bi-weekly meetings, mentorship, and teaching journals. However, while these training and support strategies effectively facilitated the formation of a community of practice, they did not prompt instructors to adapt the course shell as freely as we had expected and encouraged. A common recommendation in the literature in response to these types of challenges is increased instructor training (e.g., Breuch, 2015); we echo that call, but add that the training needs to directly address strategies for maintaining instructor agency in response to course shells, and for adapting asynchronous online activities. We would also point out that while there are many benefits to pre-course training, a community of practice that supports instructors *while* they are teaching is also valuable.

Conclusion

Collaborative course design and a community of practice approach to OWI offer a counter-narrative to the top-down model of controlling curriculum and instruction. More specifically, providing a space for writing teachers to discuss and customize hybrid and online course shells with designers, administrators, and other instructors extends Brunk-Chavez's (2010) vision of "embracing our expertise" as an important move within writing program administration. This approach requires a willingness to acknowledge that expertise is shared and that good ideas about how to organize online and hybrid courses emerge through conversations and collaborations at both the design and implementation phases of course delivery. Additionally, this approach situates writing programs as not only sites where undergraduate students learn, but also locations where graduate students, faculty, instructional designers, and writing program administrators learn and develop techniques to improve teaching. It is also important to note that, in our program, the participation in the community of practice, including contributing to the teaching journals, serving as a mentor, and granting permission to copy a course shell, is voluntary; as such, our instructors' intellectual property has been preserved, to the extent they wish it to be.

This article emerged from our own experiences with developing techniques for dealing with the reality of course shells. We began by collaboratively designing an adaptable course shell that would provide a starting point for first-time hybrid and online instructors, thus deliberately working to avoid the issues of workload exploitation described in the literature (Anson, 1999, Blair & Monske, 2003, Bryan, 2006, DePew et al., 2006, Shea, 2007). We then encouraged the instructors to modify and adapt the course shells to meet their own teaching styles and the unique needs of their students, following Rice's (2015) recommendation. As described in our analysis of the teaching journals, the instructors actively participated in a community of practice as they

discussed their adaptations and described adopting other instructors' modifications. However, the journals also revealed that instructors were reticent to adapt the asynchronous activities in the shells, despite their apparent readiness to adapt face-to-face and synchronous online activities. An important next step for our work is to develop strategies for encouraging more adaptation of asynchronous activities. We also call for more research on teacher agency and ownership, especially in asynchronous, online instruction.

While not illustrated in the journals, we anecdotally know that in years two and three of the project, instructors began copying other instructors' course shells (e.g., the shell that their mentor used most recently) instead of the "official" course shell, thus proliferating the variety of activities available throughout the community of practice. This phenomenon reinforces the fact that the curriculum in this program is not standardized, and the course shells function more like a shared syllabus than a standardized template with "canned content." We believe this approach to course shells allows the positive outcome of preventing first-time hybrid and online instructors from having to design a technology-mediated learning environment from scratch without also completely negating instructor agency. Future research should investigate this question more closely, surveying and interviewing instructors about their perspectives on the benefits and drawbacks of adaptable course shells, as well as their attitudes toward independent, shared, and standardized curriculum.

Another important next step for our campus is to decide how to maintain the rich collaborative processes that emerged from (1) a grant-supported, multi-campus development group and (2) informal collaboration among graduate students, instructors, and writing program administrators invested in hybrid and online learning. At this point, with approximately one-third of first-year composition courses offered in a hybrid or online format, our plans include developing an administrative position that will be primarily responsible for supporting the hybrid and online instructors. This position requires an understanding of collaborative course design and the iterative practice of having course instructors—graduate students as well as faculty—adjust an established course shell for their own sections. The position also involves sustaining the community of practice, which includes but is not limited to setting up teaching journals, inviting instructors to participate in bi-weekly meetings, and maintaining the mentoring program. Finally, an important challenge for this position is to investigate and develop a sustainable method of revising the "official" course shell in a way that is responsive to instructor feedback.

The curriculum and pedagogy for our hybrid and online courses is neither more open nor more closed than that which has occurred historically in our face-to-face sections of first-year composition. However, the process of building technology-mediated learning environments is more labor intensive, requiring more stakeholders (Neff & Whithaus, 2009); our experience suggests that this can be positive, particularly if we embrace collaborative course design and a community of practice approach to OWI. This requires an acknowledgement on the part of writing program administrators that it is not only the design of the course shell and curriculum that matters for developing courses and maintaining curriculum. Rather, the ways in which instructors contribute to and are invested in particular learning activities are as important as the adaptable course shell,

syllabus, and curriculum. This work is essential for the delivery of effective writing instruction, which can and should be measured by the interactive process of designing curriculum and the individual work of leading students through customized versions of shared activities.

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