

Controlling the number of teaching hours in online writing courses

Robert Lankamp, Assistant Professor, University of Leiden, r.e.lankamp@let.leidenuniv.nl

Abstract

Dozens of studies in mainly American professional journals have reported unforeseen problems with online writing courses. One often reported difficulty is that online writing courses tend to require far more teaching time than their face-to-face counterparts. This paper offers a detailed overview of the ways in which online courses take up so much teaching time. It is proposed that much of that excess time is taken up with activities which are not related to teaching, and that the root cause of the problem is a perception that online courses are not so different from face-to-face courses.

Introduction

Online and distance courses are becoming increasingly popular, especially in the United States. Many of the American online courses are online academic writing courses at institutions of higher education. According to Blakelock and Smith (2006), approximately 70% of all US institutions are offering fully online courses in 2003 while 80% offered hybrid courses (p.146). There are no overall figures for other countries, but the percentages are probably rising fast.

Courses in writing are especially suitable for online instruction because there is almost no complex course material that requires face-to-face explanation or elaboration by teachers. Most of the course is not taken up with the absorption of new knowledge, but with the development of skills by means of various types of exercises and assignments in which the intervention of teachers is not necessary until the exercise or assignment has been completed.

Other advantages of online academic writing courses have been summed up in publications such as Casanave (2004), Peterson (2001) and Thompson (2004). One often mentioned advantage is that asynchronous communication by e-mail makes messages from instructors available 24/7, and an instructor's electronic feedback on assignments is more easily processed because it is always legible. Second, students seem to find online instruction more interesting. Third, online writing courses are also cheaper for students -- all of the material is freely available on the internet, so no expensive coursebooks are required.

A fourth advantage is that it is easier to engage students because communication by e-mail or on discussion boards makes for less inhibition -- shy students can express their ideas freely; foreign accents disappear. Moreover, students are often more supportive of each other's writing assignments on discussion boards than they would be in classrooms, where the communication is dominated by the teacher and where students are often expected to criticize each other. At Leiden, in the online Masters thesis training course (LOTT, or Leiden Online Thesis Training), many students liked the possibility of communicating with each other about the course material and about assignments on discussion boards, with instructors staying out of the discussion. In the evaluation of other courses, students explicitly praised the possibility of communication with each other on the discussion board.

Fifth, it is arguable that advanced academic writing courses with mandatory class attendance are not efficient in the pedagogical sense. The assumption in those courses is that students are able to adjust to learning to the rhythm of one or two classes a week. However, for some students this rhythm is too fast, and for others it is too slow. In face-to-face courses, preparation for writing assignments is often discussed weeks in advance, which is far too early for many students. The solution is the 24/7 walk-in virtual classroom provided by an online course.

Online courses are more efficient than face-to-face courses in other senses as well. Students save time because they do not need to go to school to attend the course. Instead of compulsory class attendance,

there is face-to-face contact with instructors only when deemed meaningful. For instructors the main advantage is that the time set aside for personal contact with students is used efficiently for the students who need it most. This is especially important in writing courses, where some students need more student-teacher time than others to help them improve their writing.

An added incentive for the development of online courses was the fear that if universities did not develop online writing courses, the market would be dominated by courses developed by commercial institutions. This was anathema to most instructors in higher education.

There are many additional advantages of a specialized thesis course such as LOTT. For one thing, it is better than a book on thesis writing. There are many books on thesis writing – a recent “thesis writing” book search on Amazon had 81 hits. Whereas such books are undoubtedly helpful in various ways, studies such as Paltridge (2002) support the experience of the developers of LOTT that they do not deal sufficiently with the practical problems that come with the specific subjects of theses. For instance, none of the books found on Amazon dealt with theses about literature and linguistics, typical thesis subjects for Leiden English students. Obviously it is possible to write sufficiently specialist books on thesis writing, but designing and implementing online courses is cheaper and faster, and online courses can be adapted much more easily to accommodate new insights.

Second, for Leiden Masters students, LOTT offers more than just the list of abstract guidelines offered on most of the other online thesis writing sites on the Internet. LOTT is a genre-analysis based learning environment that offers practical and detailed information about structure, language and style which may be internalized by means of practical exercises. Third, LOTT is a time-saver for thesis advisors. Thesis advisors may focus on content matters, while the basics of structure and language can be left to LOTT. Fourth, LOTT is meant for non-native speakers of English, and aims at pragmatic as well as linguistic competence. At Leiden, as in all other Dutch universities, almost all Masters programs are in English and consequently there are large numbers of students who are required to write a thesis or dissertation in English. These students almost always have difficulty in meeting the requirements of thesis writing and research. They view writing a thesis with apprehension and put off writing it (or even thinking about it) as long as possible. LOTT offers the possibility of dealing with many difficulties before the actual writing and research begin.

Disadvantages of online writing courses

The disadvantages of online writing courses were spotted from the outset. For instance, Savenye et al. (2001) reported that many students do not enjoy reading from computer screens (p.377). Many students lack the skills required for academic uses of the computer, such as word processing, working easily in online course environments, or searching for electronic publications. In addition, in some cases students are regularly unable to access the course due to one technical/administrative problem or another. According to Hailey et al. (2001), posting messages on discussion boards can be stressful if nobody reads them or if adverse replies are posted (p.393). Many institutions lack sufficient computers, and students often have to wait for their turn on a computer. Computers that students use at home may be old, making Internet access slow and frustrating. All of these difficulties have also cropped up at the Leiden English Department online courses.

As for disadvantages for the teachers, it was feared that, after having designed the course, they would be replaced by more junior and thus cheaper staff, the perception of administrators being that it was the computer course, i.e. the technology, that was doing the teaching, and not the instructors (cf. Blythe 2001, Brady 2001, DePew et al. 2006, Miller 2001). Since numbers of students in online courses are not constrained by available places in classrooms, administrators feel that class sizes can be a lot bigger than those in face-to-face courses, and since instructors do not need to repeat instruction in different classrooms, the compensation for instructors in online courses can be significantly lower. This is certainly also the case at the Leiden English Department -- class sizes for the online thesis training course are double or triple of that of ordinary face-to-face class sizes.

Moreover, as it will be illustrated in the main part of this study, the workload for instructors in online courses is actually heavier than in face-to-face courses. According to Blakelock and Smith (2006) and Hailey et al. (2001), online writing courses require more work than their face-to-face counterparts. Many studies show that fully online courses require more up-front planning, more detail in design, and at least

as many contact hours with students than traditional, classroom-based courses (Blair and Monske 2003). Reinheimer (2005) found that teaching online writing course took 85% more time than teaching a face-to-face course. Blakelock and Smith (2006) reported that many school administrators do not recognize that online courses require at least as many contact hours with students than traditional, classroom-based courses (p. 143). At the Leiden English Department, the compensation for instructors for the online thesis training course is only two thirds of that of face-to-face Masters courses.

Many studies in the United States have identified details of the heavier workload of online writing courses. They are identified as the time involved with organizing technical support and logistics; time involved with course design; time involved with increasing the status of online courses and fighting misunderstandings; exigencies required by online communication with students (dealing with student expectations of online courses, managing discussion boards, providing feedback on writing assignments, dealing with complaints, teaching the technology).

As will be shown below, many of these time-consuming activities are only indirectly related to teaching or they are not related to teaching at all. These include the time involved with organizing technical support and logistics, and the time involved with increasing the status of online courses and fighting misunderstandings about them. In other cases, the excess time spent seems to be the result of a perception that online courses are not so different from face-to-face courses, with the result that the time that is needed for online courses does not replace the time needed to teach face-to-face courses, but is added onto it. As will be shown below, this phenomenon is most clearly visible in matters related to course design as well as in online communication with students (dealing with student expectations of online courses, managing discussion boards, providing feedback on writing assignments, dealing with complaints, teaching the technology).

Time spent on activities only indirectly related to teaching (or not at all)

Organizing technical support and logistics

Time is lost when a computer breaks down. Local networks might fail due to a technical problem, a major hacker attack, or a virus. If there is no backup of the files on the central server, months of work is lost. Equipment malfunctions can cause irritating delays. Much time is spent in simply waiting for the technology to resume its work. Programs may freeze, so that the Task Manager has to be started up, the frozen program shut down and then restarted. Sometimes the computer needs to be rebooted, when for example programs will not start up for any reason. The license for an essential bit of software may run out and one has to spend time finding out where the new license code can be retrieved and then of course it has to be installed and often the computer needs to be rebooted. And then of course for hours or maybe a whole day the Internet might be down, Blackboard might be down or e-mail might be down. And then of course the network might be very busy so that downloads or uploads or running student work through plagiarism detectors takes an annoyingly long time. Finally, the software at the workplace may be set up so inefficiently that an annoyingly large number of clicks is needed to get from one place to another, or stacks of error messages need to be clicked away before the software starts up.

At many workplaces, administrators consider online courses a saving of expenditure, so that there are too few experts that can solve the problems with the technology. Thus, in case of a malfunction, teachers have to wait for days or perhaps even weeks before the available experts can find the time to solve the problem. Clearly, the time lost here has nothing to do with teaching. Lack of adequate technical support is detrimental to teaching efficiency, which in most institutions is a vaunted ideal of the administrators.

A related issue is the time lost in getting the technology to the students. Often, beginners in online instruction seem to believe that finding the right software and making sure that it works properly is just about all of the work needed in setting up an online course. Unfortunately, it is not as simple as that. What is more important -- and very time consuming if one does not care to research how matters have been done at other institutions -- is getting the software to the students. Administrators will often insist on trying the cheapest solution first, and if that does not yield the desired results, and if the administrators admit it, and it can take years before they do, the next cheapest solution is attempted and so on. "Cheap is expensive," as they say in Dutch, and this applies especially to the time teachers are expected to put into attempting to apply cheap but ineffective solutions.

The history of one of the first CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) programs at the Leiden English department is illustrative. The program worked well, the problem was getting the program to the students. In the first instance, after a series of time-consuming meetings between teachers and administrators, a system was set up where the program was accessible on computers in computer classrooms. These computers were all connected to the local area network. The advantage was that instructors could check up on the progress that students were making. However, as a belated economy measure, the teachers' office computers were not connected to the same local area network, so that the advantage of having the software in the computer classrooms disappeared.

From the point of view of the students, one problem was that at the time there were not nearly enough computers to go around. There were twenty-four computers for almost the entire university, and of the twenty-four a number was always broken. As a result, there were numerous student complaints, all of which had to be dealt with by teachers, and in turn this resulted into more time-consuming meetings between teachers and administrators. The other problem was that the program was only accessible to students who possessed an account. This meant that the software could only be used relatively late in the academic year, since it took months to clear up the muddle of who was eligible for an account and who was not. Since courses were organized per semester, this meant that online courses could not be taught in the first semester. Nevertheless, in the second semester it invariably turned out that there were students who should have had an account but did not. The students complained to the teachers, who then had to take the time to attempt to communicate these complaints to the administrators.

After many time-consuming meetings, it was decided to attempt a new system. The system of the accounts was abandoned, and henceforth any student with a current student ID could get a key to a computer classroom at the security desk, the idea being that they would hand the keys back in when they were done. This system failed because the students hung on to their keys, so that the keys were soon in very short supply, leading to more student complaints, leading to more meetings between teachers and administrators. In the end a system was devised where students could simply take home a CD-ROM. With that, student complaints dwindled to a trickle, mainly about incompatibility between the software and their hardware.

This is not, however, the end of the story. The original software has been replaced by newer, faster, better software. To get it to the software, the administrators have not decided to put it on CD-ROMs, by now the tried and tested system. Instead the new software is going to be uploaded to a website, and to access it, students will need an account.

A final issue relating to technical support and logistics is the question whose responsibility it is to teach the technology to the students. At Leiden, the Masters students who use the LOTT online thesis training course possess fewer computer skills than one might expect and they frequently need coaching in basic word processing skills such as setting line spacing, using tabs to indent the first lines of paragraphs, selecting fonts, using online dictionaries and thesauruses, etc. Often they do not know how to search for material on the online MLA, let alone find the online MLA. They have to be taught about privacy issues, plagiarism, spelling and grammar checkers, commenting, editing using features like Track Changes, credibility of websites, copyright and the ethics of conversations on discussion boards, the value and dangers of adopting an alternative online persona. Older students and some international students have even fewer skills. Teachers spend a lot of extra time coaching the students in these matters. However, teaching the technology and how to use it in the above senses should not be the sole responsibility of the online instructor. All of the skills named above are needed in any course where students use computers to write with and use the Internet to get their information. This is almost all courses. It follows that teaching the skills should be a department-wide responsibility. At the Leiden English department, there is no centralized effort, no single course that deals with this. Instead, every teacher contributes in their own way.

Increasing the status of online courses and fighting misunderstandings

In many American publications the concern has been aired that the very success of online writing courses is a threat to the quality of future courses. Perhaps one of the greatest threats to the quality of online writing courses today is the commercial notion of "efficiency" espoused by many university administrators, which is used to justify large classes (and for students in a class means more time spent by the teacher on giving feedback), poor rewards for instructors, and relatively junior and inexperienced staff to teach the

courses. As for the latter, Valentine (2002) notes that it is "risky to put course materials online, because once there, administrations may hire less qualified and cheaper workers to deliver the 'technologically prepackaged course'".

Blair and Hoy (2006), Blair and Monske (2003), Blakelock and Smith (2006), DePew et al. (2006), Inman and Corrigan (2001), Redd (2003) and Samuels (2004) note that at North American universities, online writing courses tend to be taught by graduate students or temporary faculty, all ineligible for tenure-track status, an approach that undermines course quality. Futász and Timár (2006) report that in Europe the situation is not much different.

Another concern reported by Blair and Monske (2003) is that "that online courses will be increasingly seen as 'products' rather than pedagogy of which the intellectual ownership lies with teachers" (p. 447). Similarly, Werry (2002) fears the onset of "electronic sweatshops in which teachers lose control over the products of their labor, in which their work is automated, reproduced, and commodified" (pp. 137-138). None of this is going to be an incentive to develop good courses and to teach them well. The only means of correcting the ideology of commercial efficiency is a "scholarly approach to the ongoing development of praxis for computer-mediated instruction" developed by instructors and other practitioners of online academic writing courses (DePew et al. 2006, p. 53). As observed in DePew et al. (2006, p. 64), "the field needs to actively observe best practices, study the outcomes of these practices (...) Writing instructors, from adjuncts to full professors, can provide a grassroots perspective" of how an online writing course "should be developed and managed." Selfe (2003) suggests developing a culture of support for teaching with technology at one's institution, set up or lobby for faculty/staff technology experiences, lobby for representation on technology committees etc. (pp. 30-31). The conclusion is that teachers of online writing courses often spend much time in getting their courses accepted at their institutions, and that this time-consuming activity is only indirectly related to teaching.

Increased workload due to face-to-face methods in online courses

Course design

The second cause of the extra time needed to teach online writing courses is the perception that online writing courses are not so different from face-to-face courses. One important area in which this process occurs is course design. Studies such as Blair and Monske (2003), Blakelock and Smith (2006), Pachnowski and Jurczyk (2003) and Reinheimer (2005) have concluded that designing online writing courses takes much longer than designing traditional writing courses. The experience at Leiden is the same. The LOTT online Masters thesis training course took a year to develop with one full-time and two part-time members of staff working about 20 hours per week. The question is why did the design of this course take so long.

The main reason was that the design of the course was approached in the same way as the design of a face-to-face course. Face-to-face writing courses are often idiosyncratic to instructors and suited to the teaching methods that they like. Putting together a new course is a matter of cannibalizing old courses and searching for new material in libraries and on the Internet.

For an online course, the material obviously needs to be online, and here is where the first snag was hit. While there was plenty of material on thesis writing on paper, very little online material could be found on the Internet or elsewhere. This entailed that some of the material for the course would have to be created from scratch, and other material (such as examples student theses) would have to be converted for online use. Both of these activities turned out to be extremely time-consuming.

Since it was clear that designing the course was going to take much more time than originally envisaged, financial support was needed from the Arts Faculty, and securing that support also cost extra time.

None of the designers had any idea of what an online thesis writing course looked like and what kind of problems were going to be faced. Some sort of course modeled on American online writing labs was loosely envisaged. Fortunately, in return for their money the Arts Faculty demanded that the course be placed on Blackboard. This saved an enormous amount of website design time. Still, deciding on the organization of the course and the layout of the pages on Blackboard was time consuming.

Communicating with students

In the received pedagogy of online writing courses, instructors are encouraged to compensate for their invisibility by being more than transmitters of knowledge or skills and evaluators of student work. Liu and Sadler (2003) suggest that, in the absence of face-to-face interaction, online instructors should somehow personalize their interaction with students. Similarly, (Rilling 2005) advocates online instructors acting as guides and cheerleaders, as peer leaders rather than as evaluative pedagogues. All this, according to Rilling, requires active and thus time-consuming participation of the instructor. Rilling also notes that, depending on how the courses are organized and how many instructors are involved, the student does not have the option of selecting a specific instructor to work with. In that case, e-mail communication between student and instructor comprises a single exchange, not an extended relationship.

However, many students seem to have high expectations of communication with teachers in online writing courses. Several American studies -- Blair and Monske (2003), Brady (2001), Hailey et al. 2001, Ko and Rossen (2001) and Thompson (2004) -- have found that, since online courses are available 24/7, students somehow expect instructors to be available all the time as well, and if they are not available, it is somehow a dereliction of duty. They expect staff to respond to e-mails immediately or at the very least on the same day, so that uninterrupted time for research and professional writing is cut. Students write e-mail messages to an instructor and then send follow-up messages within the hour if they have not received a response. In the end, instructors find themselves responding to student communications for most of the day.

There are various views and how to deal with this situation. Hailey et al. (2001) for example take the position that time-consuming communication with students is an integral feature of online courses and should be accepted. All e-mails and posts should be responded to immediately, with a view to reinforcing support for students. Nevertheless, this is a position which is more suitable for face-to-face teaching, where in a classroom or during office hours instructors respond immediately to students' comments and questions. This is convenient because both parties are present in the same place at the same time. Such is obviously not the case in online courses which are available 24 hours a day, but where staff and students are not present 24 hours a day, and if they are present at the same time, it is sheer coincidence. For online courses, students should be encouraged to expect replies to posts or e-mails only during certain times of the day and to observe deadlines if they wish a timely response. In addition, after some experience with the online course has been gained, a list of replies to frequently asked questions (FAQ) might be included in the course.

At Leiden, it has been attempted to channel student communication in weekly face-to-face question and answer sessions. Somewhat surprisingly, attendance of these sessions is minimal or even naught. It may be the case that when students have questions they ask each other on the discussion board -- and this suspicion was borne out by looking at some of the messages on the discussion board. In other words, at Leiden not overmuch time is involved in communicating with students about questions about the course or about assignments. However, this may be a feature of a local culture. As for the U.S., Blair and Hoy (2006) and Stroupe (2003) report an increased demand of motivated students in online writing courses to receive assistance from the instructor as opposed to peers, since the instructors are the ones seen as having the skills and the knowledge. Since tuition is far higher at American universities than at European institution, American students may expect a correspondingly higher level of "service" from their teachers.

Nevertheless, the notion of personal communication with students is a construct that belongs to face-to-face teaching and in principle does not have a place, or need not have place, in online teaching. In writing course especially, students' need to communicate with their teachers during the process of completing an assignment very often arises from the type of general insecurity about writing which is related to lack of experience. Since part of any good writing course's objective is to help increase students' self-confidence and self-reliance, communication with teachers should be strictly limited to matters relating to the evaluation of assignments.

Discussion board management

The advantages of discussion boards have been documented extensively, and at Leiden the experience is overwhelmingly positive. On the other hand however, managing discussion boards can take up much of the instructors' time. For instance, discussion board prompts need to be conceived and implemented. After a course is done and before the new one begins, contents of old discussion boards need to be cleaned up at decision needs to be made what to do with them. If teachers wish to work with discussion boards, these activities are inevitable.

What is much less inevitable is the tendency of some instructors to treat the contents of discussion boards as if they were conversations between students in face-to-face classes, in other words, as conversations that the teacher can tell students to stop, or as conversations in which the teacher can intrude. This type of extra effort by instructors in discussion boards is not only unnecessary, but it is tantamount to spying on the students. Students frequently assume that their conversations on the discussion board are not monitored, and consequently they may be rather free in what they say. Some instructors find it necessary to spend a lot of time reading what is on discussion boards and then sending students messages with criticism or expressing amazement at the times at which (often unearthly) messages were posted. This annoys the students, and the time spent by instructors in annoying the students this way does not contribute in any useful sense.

On the other hand, Blair and Monske (2003) and Hailey et al. (2001) report that emotional outbursts between students may occur on discussion boards -- in the online texts, tone is hard to read and create, there are no other social context cues and there is no moderating presence of an instructor as there would be in a face-to-face class. The question is whether it is the responsibility of instructors to monitor discussion boards to ensure that the contents of postings remain within the bounds of propriety. Clearly, the answer must be that it is. It would be very strange indeed if instructors disclaimed responsibility for discussion boards full of invective and other strong emotions.

Another similar issue of discussion board management, which also falls under the responsibility of the instructor, is reported by Hailey et al. (2001). Students can become stressed or insecure if no one replies to their posts on the discussion board. One way to overcome this problem is to assign responses. Selfe (2003) proposes a structure of the discussion "with three groups: group 1 provides the initial posts, group 2 is responsible for responses to those posts, and group 3 evaluates the contents of the initial posts and responses (with extra credit given to those who jump into the discussion). The groups then rotate responsibilities as the term progresses" (p. 19).

Dealing with student complaints

Another time-consuming activity is dealing with student complaints. Apparently, students may be less inhibited in making complaints online than in face-to-face situations. Hailey et al. (2001) reports that in online classes students tend to send their complaints not just to the teacher -- who is apparently seen as only one of several authority figures to whom complaints can be sent. Students may, "in a few heated minutes, fire off copies of complaint up and down the entire university hierarchy, e-mailing advisers, department heads, college deans, university presidents and provosts, local newspapers, and even state politicians" (p. 392). According to Hailey et al., multiple and strongly worded complaints from more students "can blow a minor problem out of proportion and can damage a teacher's career for before the teacher even knows that he or she is in trouble -- especially if the addressees include powerful political figures such as a state governor who has a particularly strong interest in online education. In one case, a student who was auditing a class wrote more than thirty vitriolic letters in a single, two-week period" (p. 392).

Hailey et al. also report that that students worried or panicky about technical problems (such as a breakdown of the home computer or the loss of files) also tend to contact instructors in much the same way that customers irate over products or services tend to vent their frustration on the first company employees they encounter, regardless of where responsibility lies.

At Leiden, the number of complaints in the online thesis training course is very small, about one per year. When they do occur they tend to be fairly emotional and students immediately write to persons higher up in the hierarchy than the instructor, which necessitates time-consuming meetings and correspondence with the receivers of the complaints. To prevent complaints that can and should be resolved between

teachers and students from being broadcast prematurely, it is advisable to identify the appropriate avenues for complaints on the course syllabus.

Giving feedback

Feedback to student work is a time-consuming part of any kind of writing course. Giving feedback in online courses is a good example of how time spent on activities that are customary for face-to-face teaching is not replaced by time spent on activities associated by online teaching, but added to it. The first reason is the purely technical one, that is to say, many instructors in online writing courses like to download and then print out student work, write in the comments, download the student file again, transcribe the handwritten comments onto the student file, and then e-mail it back to the student. This is the consequence of a reluctance to write comments on screen. What is more, for many instructors, typing takes more time than writing, so that electronic feedback takes up more time than writing comments on hardcopy work.

Conclusion and Implications

In sum, this study has shown that teaching online writing courses can consume a lot of the time of the instructors, and by no means all of that time is directly concerned with teaching -- much of the time seems to go into dealing with technological and logistical difficulties and other matters which are not directly related to the teaching or not related to teaching at all. Much time also goes into matters that are customary for face-to-face courses, and this time comes on top of that time spent on matters that are typically in the domain of online courses.

There are a number of implications about the ways in which the time spent working with online writing course can be reduced. First of all, it is a bad idea to begin an online course if there is no adequate technical support and logistical framework which is necessary for the operation of an online course. One of the first tasks in planning an online course should be setting out what the conditions are for a course to be able to work, and whether the institution is willing to pay for that. The next step should be searching for an existing course, or the framework of an existing course to avoid reinventing the wheel. Finally, a study should be made of how other institutions successfully linked students with computers, and how communication with students can be managed in a reasonable fashion, for instance by implementing communication protocols. In this context it should be noted that there is a curious reluctance of writing teachers to become informed of the experiences of writing teachers elsewhere. Perhaps this is because they believe that reading up on such matters takes too much time. However, the case could be made that not reading up results in much more expenditure of time.

The second implication is the training of teachers. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, early proponents of online writing courses saw student empowerment as a major advantage of online teaching, in the sense that the lack of the physical presence of the teacher would allow students to learn to work independently. However, online instructors who encourage students to have high expectations of them and their role can contribute to an anxious kind of dependence among the students. In online writing courses, what was customary in face-to-face courses is very often no longer relevant, and in the interest of efficient time management should be discontinued. Nevertheless, many teachers will feel responsible for anything at all that affects the learning of their students, no matter how unrelated this may be to actual teaching, such as technological breakdowns at school or at the student's home. Perhaps it should just be accepted that for extrovert and experienced teachers it is much easier and probably much more pleasant to relate to students in face-to-face courses than in online courses.

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