Fall 12-6-2021

Understanding Community and Engagement in Synchronous Online Writing Instruction

Conner Sutton
csutto26@students.kennesaw.edu

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By

Conner Sutton

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Professional Writing
in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
2021

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Introduction

Online writing instruction, or OWI, presents many challenges and developmental opportunities for instructors regardless of their training or experience. Whether it be determining how to present course content or how to scaffold learning outcomes, adjusting to OWI often causes instructors to feel an overwhelming desire to improve. These questions and challenges for writing instructors were amplified once the Covid-19 pandemic swept the world, turning universities and writing programs on their heads. As we feared for our health and safety, and as agencies like the Center for Disease Control advised against gathering in person, universities were faced with a unique challenge when considering how to move forward. Ultimately, online synchronous learning became a Band-Aid for the bullet hole created by Covid-19, temporarily mitigating the problem but by no means serving as a perfect solution or quick fix. While the web-based, real-time learning ultimately proved to have value in joining people together virtually, the unexpected and sudden shift to online synchronous learning also exposed many challenges for instructors and students alike.

Universities and English departments across the globe opted to use the online synchronous modality to keep classes from being in person. While universities expanding their possible modalities and options is ultimately a positive move, many instructors were not prepared for this shift. As Steven Krause states, "suddenly shifting classes online during a pandemic is **not** really online teaching. It's a lifeboat" (Krause). Blog posts such as Krause's highlight the reality that for many the synchronous modality was simply a means of perseverance, but it was not functioning anywhere near its full potential. Instructors and students alike had a pre-existing perception of what OWI looked like, and the almost-instant shift to synchronous left both parties redefining what online instruction can be.

While synchronous online classes were not completely unheard of prior to Covid-19, they were uncommon at most universities. In my experience as both a graduate student and instructor at Kennesaw State University, I can attest that I had never seen or heard of a fully synchronous composition course at my institution prior to Covid-19. Usage of the modality quite literally appeared overnight. What differentiates an online synchronous class from the “traditional” online class is that the students and instructor meet virtually and in real-time as opposed to online asynchronous classes where the instructor and students are not required to meet whatsoever.

Synchronous meetings allow for real-time discussions, learning, and feedback, which provides the modality many inherent advantages over the traditional asynchronous course. This is not to say that asynchronous courses do not have their advantages as well; however, based on the recent demand for synchronous learning, it seems very clear that many students value real-time, synchronous learning where they can speak to their professor, discuss concepts with classmates, and ask questions without answers being delayed (Scheiderer). Web conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Collaborate Ultra are common programs that are utilized to conduct these synchronous online classes. Each software contains different features and capabilities, but they share a common foundation as well. These programs typically allow for audio-video conferencing, whiteboard and screen-sharing features, and a live text chat as well. While the specifics vary from platform to platform—like how many cameras can be seen at once—the core of these platforms proves to be their ability to connect multiple people in real-time through the use of audio, video, and text.

The new style of teaching and communication that is utilized in synchronous composition classrooms makes the modality somewhat difficult to grasp. While synchronous class is clearly more similar to face-to-face learning it its real-time communication, the modality does not exactly replicate face-to-face learning—nor should it be approached as an attempt to mirror the in-person classroom. Ultimately, synchronous learning serves as a blend between face-to-face learning and asynchronous online learning, combining some benefits and potential challenges from both. Therein lies the complexity of the synchronous modality; it is a slippery, confusing blend of learning that is entirely new in its capabilities and hardships. In fact, as Beth Hewitt and Christa Ehmann aptly state, "The synchronous conference is, in some ways, the most complex and least understood form of OWI" (115). For this reason, it is essential that writing instructors attempt to get ahead of the curve and truly learn, train, and reflect on synchronous writing instruction so that we can be better prepared to teach regardless of the technology or circumstance.

Despite having a unique set of challenges, online synchronous classes have become fairly common and normalized in academia since Covid-19 first brought them into the spotlight. Based on the continuation of synchronous learning in academia as well as the emergence of educational blog posts focusing on the modality, a few things have become abundantly clear. First and foremost, online synchronous classes will not disappear; in fact, this modality will likely continue to grow in popularity and in frequency as technology progresses and best practices can become better defined (Kirk). Second, many instructors have found themselves underprepared and undertrained to teach synchronously online for a variety of reasons. Third, and potentially most important, synchronous online writing instructors have faced low levels of student engagement and a weak sense of community in synchronous online writing courses (OWCs). Educator Amanda Morin highlights these concerns in her blog post "5 Reasons Students aren't Engaging with Distance Learning." She states:

> Whether you call it remote learning, online learning, or distance learning, school looks different during the Covid-19 Pandemic. While some students are thriving in this way of learning, many students don't seem to be engaging in it. Some students may not be present at all. Others may be in attendance, but they aren't turning in work or doing more than the bare minimum. (Morin)

Morin is not alone in these observations, and dozens of other educators have started to voice their concerns as well. In addition to the voices of educators online, my colleagues and I have also experienced these struggles.

As an instructor supported by a cohort of fellow graduate students and instructors, a common issue of student engagement and community became apparent across the board with my colleagues. As we met weekly for our shared practicum, we often discussed the difficulties we had in navigating a foreign modality. We would try to offer solutions and tips that could help each other engage students and encourage participation in the class. We shared both our achievements and our disappointments in the classroom in a collective effort to improve and support each other as we navigated the unknowns of synchronous OWI. This shared frustration combined with the desire to grow as a synchronous instructor is what has driven me to research the ways in which we define, measure, and encourage engagement and community in synchronous OWCs. Because this emerging online modality is here to stay and because of the challenges many instructors have faced, the goal of my research is to explore synchronous OWI in order to better understand how instructors can promote student engagement and develop a stronger sense of class community.

Literature Review

While plenty has been written on the topic of online writing instruction, the vast majority of the existing literature has focused primarily or exclusively on asynchronous writing instruction. Some more recent sources have started to address synchronous writing instruction as well. Still, due to synchronous learning's sudden rise due to Covid-19, far less of the literature will directly acknowledge and account for that modality. Even fewer sources will directly acknowledge student engagement in the synchronous online modality. Thus, instead of having a comprehensive body of literature examining synchronous OWI, I will examine a wide array of sources that consider the following: the foundational texts on OWI, scholarship on student engagement, and emerging literature that directly acknowledges synchronous learning. Overall, these texts can help to guide the way we approach student engagement and community in synchronous OWCs.

Establishing the standard for writing instruction, the Conference on College Composition and Communication's (CCCC) position statements on OWI provide a great starting point to understand what online writing instruction truly is and what should be expected in an OWC. While CCCC's position statements were written in 2013, they remain relevant despite a potential need for additional statements directly addressing synchronous OWI. The first OWI statement is especially relevant to student engagement: "Online writing instruction should be universally inclusive and accessible" (CCCC 7). This position statement proves to be especially relevant because students cannot be engaged in synchronous OWI if the course is not accessible to them. Improving engagement for some while excluding others is not an option, and the literature adamantly supports this stance. The concept of accessibility is one that resurfaces in several works as one that must first be addressed in OWI as priority number one. Researchers like Carrie

Straub and Eleazar Vasquez III have directly built upon this position statement by writing on the impact of synchronous OWI on students with disabilities. Their overall consensus proves to be that synchronous writing instruction as a modality does struggle with accessibility problems but also that the modality provides new, previously-impossible instructional opportunities (Straub and Vasquez III 214). The scope of this literature review is not to dissect each and every way OWI can improve its accessibility in the synchronous classroom. However, accessibility warrants consideration and further research as it relates to students in the synchronous online modality.

Warnock's *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why* is one of the earliest texts to discuss OWI in depth. Though Warnock does not acknowledge or examine synchronous writing instruction specifically, he does provide many pillars of successful OWI that are being echoed and advanced in the emerging discourse. Though Warnock is not focused on engagement within OWI specifically, his works are crucial when discussing any aspect of OWI due to their overall impact on the field. In his work, Warnock places emphasis on how online writing instructors present themselves, and he equates much of the instructor's persona with the way in which students engage with the course. He writes that the way writing instructors "frame [themselves] will influence how [their] students write throughout the course (Warnock 1). Building upon this idea, he also indicates the specific roles or personas that an online writing instructor should avoid such as the "unapproachable sage", "fool", and "harsh critic" (4-6). The main point that Warnock makes in regard to OWI instructor personas is that the way instructors present themselves and respond to students has a direct impact on how the students will interact with the course. Although Warnock is specifically addressing asynchronous OWI (and the textual exchanges between instructor and students such as emails, guidelines, and feedback), this concept easily can be appropriated for synchronous OWI as long as it accounts for the differences between the modalities. The way instructors present themselves in a synchronous course will naturally be different than the way they would in an asynchronous course despite the inevitable overlap. In fact, OWI researchers such as Anna Grigoryan, Connie Snyder Mick, and Geoffrey Middlebrook respond to and complicate Warnock's claim that instructor presence impacts a student's output in OWI.

While Warnock focuses on how textual feedback can impact a student's ability to engage with the course, Grigoryan builds upon this idea to consider not only text-based commentary but also the synchronous use of audio-visual elements as well. Among the most important ideas developed by Grigoryan, the ability to utilize audio and video to engage students in the feedback process proves to be one of her most insightful contributions to the conversation. Grigoryan states that audio-video has been measured as a successful tool in "on-site" (or face to face) classes but that her research is geared towards measuring the success of audio-video feedback in OWI (452). This builds upon Warnock's idea that the way instructors present themselves can impact a student's overall writing output in the class.

What Grigoryan finds in her research is reassuring and suggests that Warnock's focus on instructor presence can transcend modality and circumstance. Grigoryan set out to determine how students respond to and engage with either audio-visual feedback alone, textual feedback alone, or a combination of both audio-visual and textual. What Grigoryan determines in her study is that audio-visual combined with textual feedback in OWI does not directly impact the "type of revisions made," but that it does have a moderate impact on the overall quality of improvements made as well as the final grade received (461). On average, the students who received audio-video feedback in addition to textual feedback scored higher than those who solely received textual feedback. What this indicates is that the technology available in a synchronous writing course can be used to enhance a student's overall learning in the course. While revision is merely one way in which a student can engage with a course, Warnock's concept of instructor persona along with Grigoryan's findings on audio-video feedback indicates that synchronous OWI can greatly benefit from intentional and thoughtful instructor communication to students. With a student's actual writing being one of the key ways they can engage in a composition course, both Warnock and Grigoryan indicate that the way an instructor chooses to both present themselves in the course and the way in which they interact with students can directly impact the level at which a student engages with the course.

Whereas Grigoryan and Warnock directly address the way instructor presents themselves, Mick and Middlebrook claim that these presentations, or personas, should remain authentic (Mick and Middlebrook 136). The reason that this is such an important distinction is that it complicates Warnock's description of developing an online voice. Warnock writes that one should not "[overthink it] to the point of paralysis" but that developing an online voice—or a "stage presence"—is an essential part of teaching writing online (2-4). What Warnock is relying on here is the understood rhetorical element of teaching writing in which a communicator must consider their audience and then adapt their message and delivery for that audience. Mick and Middlebrook, however, rely more on Steven D'Agustino's 2012 "Toward a course conversion model for distance learning." In this article, D'Agustino writes that effective teaching online requires "high authenticity" –a point that Mick and Middlebrook both adopt (D'Agustino 148). While creating a rhetorical persona and being highly authentic do not have to be exclusive, these points in the literature do seem to raise questions. Should authenticity be valued over a rhetorical persona? Is being rhetorically effective more important than being authentic to oneself as an instructor? Maybe there is a blend of the two that could be even more effective. Again, these ideas do not have to be exclusive, but they do seem to complicate the overall understanding of how an instructor should interact with their students in an online writing course.

Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann's ideas can easily be read alongside emerging voices to better understand not only how to engage students virtually, but also how to better train instructors to do so. In *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction,* Hewett and Ehmann spend much of their time concerned with how to properly prepare instructors for OWI, and they hold the following to be true. First, in order to improve as an online writing instructor, one must be able to observe "teaching and learning processes as they occur in their *naturalistic* settings" (Hewett and Ehmann 6). What this means is that, just as an in-person instructor should investigate and shadow in-person classes in order to train and improve their own abilities, so too should online instructors. While they indicate that this level of investigation may take different forms (such as trading questionnaires with fellow instructors, overseeing online discussions, or even telephone interviews with online instructors) the most important aspect of the investigation concept in relation to improving engagement is that it cannot and should not be done in isolation (9). Ultimately what Hewett and Ehmann highlight is that collaboration and investigation will play an essential role in improving any element of OWI—in this case, synchronous student engagement. Regardless of how effective pedagogical approaches or teaching practices are in improving a student's engagement in synchronous OWI, Hewett and Ehmann highlight that these ideas cannot reach their true potential without collaboration and true, investigative training.

Leading the conversation on synchronous instruction, educational blogs—especially those from instructors themselves—provide a unique lens into the teaching experiences of synchronous instructors. College professor John Spencer's blog post "The Real Issue Isn't

Student Engagement" provides a great point of entry into this emerging conversation. As an instructor and researcher, Dr. Spencer has published multiple books on teaching, hosts an academic podcast, and maintains a blog about teacher improvement and student empowerment. What Spencer argues throughout his post is not that engagement is lacking in virtual learning, but rather that student engagement in virtual spaces is directly connected to a student's empowerment and personal distractions. Spencer notes that the physicality of teaching becomes lost in virtual learning and that distraction presents an inherent risk in synchronous classes. He states "Teaching is an inherently physical job. But without an actual room, it's nearly impossible to 'read the room.' It's also challenging to get a sense of engagement in virtual meetings when everyone is in a different location with muted microphones" (Spencer). To combat the potential pitfalls of engagement in synchronous courses, Spencer offers several techniques available to instructors, many of which echo the foundational literature from scholars such as Warnock, Hewett, and even Mick and Middlebrook. This overlap, or continuation, can be seen in Spencer's suggestions to create collaborative learning opportunities, blend both asynchronous and synchronous tools, and keep equity and accessibility at the forefront of teaching.

While Spencer clearly speaks to some of the pre-existing literature, he also provides a new area for consideration by pushing the conversation further in his acknowledgment of physicality in teaching. While voices like Warnock and Grigoryan note the importance of how instructors present themselves virtually, Spencer highlights the fact that teaching has always maintained an element of physicality—an element that is somewhat lacking in synchronous OWI. Spencer advocates for virtual instructors to take advantage of the potential for physicality in the virtual classroom, to allow students to interact with their surroundings and have their presence in the course matter. He also goes on to explain that physicality plays a role in how a teacher can express their passion and interest in the learning taking place.

Spencer raises a great point for further consideration; in an in-person class, an instructor can move around the class, kneel down next to a student, read over their work with them and show their eagerness to help in a physical way. Virtual learning does not allow for this same level of physical signaling, so Spencer’s work naturally raises the question of how instructors can show this same level of excitement and eagerness to help in a synchronous course. Furthermore, what tools are available and what are the best way to utilize them? Clearly, the literature overwhelmingly suggests that the way in which an instructor approaches the class directly impacts the level of student engagement that is given in return, so the future research of this topic seems to be finding a way to innovate and adapt to the synchronous modality.

Methodology

In order to understand the ways that engagement and community can be measured and improved in synchronous OWI, I will utilize a review of the current literature as well as an autoethnography including not only my personal experience but also the stories of three additional writing instructors. Because synchronous online writing instruction is fairly new, I believe that approaching the topic from only one angle may lead to underdeveloped and ill-informed research. For example, if I were to only consider the literature without interviewing primary sources, my findings could become overly hypothetical and lack any concrete backing. However, by utilizing the literature, my personal experience, and the stories of others in the field, my research will be better informed and well-rounded, allowing me to have more confidence in findings.

The literature review will be used as a way to orient myself as a researcher as well as an opportunity to track the evolution of OWI from its conception to the present. In order to provide an honest and well-rounded literature review, the sources will vary in their publication dates, modality, and authors. By varying the sources, my research will consider a wider range of voices and ideas so that the academic discourse better reflects the overall topic as opposed to a niche corner of the discourse. It is also important to note that much of the newer discussions on the topic of synchronous OWI take place on academic and personal blogs. While research on asynchronous writing instruction has appeared in traditional, peer-reviewed articles and books since the mid-2000s, synchronous OWI is fairly new, meaning comparatively little has been published on it. For this reason, older texts will also be considered as a reference point in order to better understand and evaluate synchronous OWI.

Building upon the literature review, I will utilize an autoethnography in order to study my own experiences, background, and history as an instructor who has taught an online synchronous writing course. Mariza Méndez defends the use of autoethnographic methods in her article, "Autoethnography as a Research Method." She states that autoethnography has the advantage of connecting to the audience through empathy and genuine reflection (282). Méndez also describes autoethnography as a "valuable form of inquiry" due to the method's ability to shed light on unseen realities (282). My story as a synchronous writing instructor has the ability to do just that. My unique experience with synchronous writing instruction will allow my research to build beyond the literature and begin to consider how my specific experiences with the modality can either supplement, complicate, or support the existing discourse.

In order for my autoethnography to be as effective as possible, I will take many precautions. First, it will be approached critically with a thorough consideration for bias, context, and detail. Because my history with online synchronous writing instruction is only one of thousands, it must be treated as such—one instructor's experience and not a universal truth. Despite the inherent limitations of the autoethnographic method, it still provides countless benefits to my overall research. In addition to providing concrete and anecdotal examples that can enhance our understanding of the current literature, my specific background will build the current discourse by considering specific elements that only my experiences can bring. For example, I believe that my first class being taught synchronously while also being a graduate student (and during a global pandemic) provides an extremely niche corner of synchronous writing instruction that is important to have voiced. While my experience is not intended to be interpreted as definitive truth, it can add needed perspective and consideration, especially in relation to graduate students and teaching assistants (TA's) who are teaching synchronous OWI for the first time.

I will also incorporate the stories of three additional instructors into my autoethnography to provide additional perspectives. I will conduct interviews with college writing instructors who have at least one semester's worth of remote synchronous teaching experience. This method will be used as a way to ascertain the current perception of synchronous OWI across backgrounds and experiences. While my autoethnography has value, I believe the interviews help to check my own bias by allowing for additional perspectives. The interviews will collect basic background data such as age and teaching experience; however, the identities of the participants will be kept anonymous to encourage full honesty without fear of judgment or repercussion.

While several approaches to interviews could be justifiably effective in my research scenario, I believe semi-structured, one-on-one interviews will work best. This means that the interviews will be conducted based on a pre-existing list of questions (See Appendix A) but that I reserve the right to ask unlisted follow-up questions in order to continue conversations and learn new information where necessary. In addition to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, I will be conducting these interviews privately, either in person or via web-conferencing platforms.

Ultimately, no research method is without limitation or flaw; however, diversifying methods can mitigate such weaknesses and encourage stronger overall results. I believe my methodology does exactly that; it begins with an overview of the literature, transitions into a specific autoethnography, and incorporates a broader range of voices through interviews. These methods all serve to inform one another, resulting in a diversified research approach.

Autoethnography

As I reflected on my unique experience as a first-time instructor thrust into a virtual teaching job seemingly overnight, I realized that what I could add to the conversation surrounding online writing instruction was my story as well as the stories of my colleagues. Our experiences are those of first-time composition instructors and full-time graduate students eager to prove ourselves. Instead of waiting for the literature to catch up and meet the current shift to synchronous OWI, I wanted to begin to consider the experiences and opinions of those who are already pioneering this new teaching modality. In addition, this autoethnography will serve as not only a mirror for reflection and growth but also as a window into the world of synchronous online writing instruction for all writing teachers—whether they have shared my experience or not. In order to add other perspectives, I have conducted interviews with three members of my graduate cohort, all fellow, first-time synchronous instructors. Their experiences will help to provide more perspectives as well as to inform my own story. As a believer that honesty and openness can only serve to improve teaching practices, no details of my experience will be exaggerated. As much as I would love to omit my mistakes and the classes filled with awkward silences and potentially-asleep students, I want to represent my experience as accurately as possible. In fact, had teaching synchronous OWI been a walk in the park, it would not have been worth writing about in the first place. Overall, my story as well as the stories of my cohort can display both our successes and mistakes in the synchronous format so that others can gain a realistic view of what it means to teach college freshmen from behind a computer screen.

Before I can begin to share the experiences of first-time synchronous instructors, I would like to introduce the three instructors who agreed to take part in this research. For the sake of their own privacy, their names have been changed; however, every other element of their identity and experience remain the same. The first instructor to be interviewed, Melissa, is a mother and published author who has left corporate America to pursue writing. When she first taught writing in a synchronous online course, she was 48 years old and described her initial feelings towards synchronous teaching by saying she was stressed and "dreading it." Second, Florence is a poet who enjoys art and volunteering; they were 23 years old when first teaching a synchronous OWC and believed they were not prepared to teach in this space because they had prepared for face-to-face. Third, Dillion is a creative writer and massive sports fan. He was also 23 years old when first teaching a synchronous OWC and described his mindset towards the modality as being relieved due to the certainty and safety it offered. I want to thank all three of these participants who have agreed to let me use their stories as they add so much to consider.

My mindset prior to teaching a synchronous OWC was that of relief and dread, much like the rest of my cohort. For over a year, I had been preparing a face-to-face course, and Covid-19 resulted in me having to make an immediate shift to online with no prior experience teaching. This mindset and attitude framed my experience with OWI. According to Nail and Townsend's 2018 article "Do Teachers Dream of Electric Classrooms?" a teacher's attitude towards technology can directly impact the way that technology is incorporated in the classroom (222). This can both be a positive thing and a direct impediment depending on the teacher's attitude and willingness to use technology. In the case of a synchronous writing course like I was preparing to teach, I believe that Nail and Townsend's claim played a major role in determining how I approached the classroom—and likely has impacted and will continue to impact how other writing instructors approach the synchronous modality in the future. It is important to note that I did not want to teach online whatsoever. This feeling paired all too well with my fear, anxiety, and isolation resulting from the pandemic. I felt that the online technology would be overwhelming and that I was not prepared to teach as effectively in a virtual modality. After all, I had been preparing to teach in person for almost a year. The reason I feel like addressing my initial attitude towards virtual teaching and technology is twofold. First, I recognize that as instructors, we cannot expect students to grow or engage in the synchronous classroom if we are not willing to as well. Second, and maybe more important, I realized that my apprehension towards virtual writing instruction was completely unfounded and—honestly—silly. This is not to say that the apprehension I felt was not real or that it was not felt by other instructors—both new and experienced. Quite the opposite, this fear of the virtual classroom is very real, and it *does* affect how we approach the classroom. However, I now see that this is an easy problem to remedy if we address it before instructors ever step foot in the virtual classroom. The question, then, is “how?”

The overall stigma surrounding online learning and the fear of the new or unfamiliar plays a very real, crippling role in how instructors approach the modality. As highlighted by Robert Ubell in his 2017 book *Going Online,* many instructors simply do not want to teach online due to either a lack of experience and training or a simple desire to remain on campus because of its comfort and familiarity (44-46). Initially, I found this to be the case for myself. As someone who had always taken in-person classes and knew the expectations of a face-to-face course, I found it very overwhelming to enter into an entirely new modality. My cohort shared this sentiment as well. Dillion noted that he received no synchronous training whatsoever, Florence felt unprepared for online instruction, and—when asked whether she received adequate training for synchronous OWI, Melissa simply laughed. Ubell seems to be aware, just as Nail and Townsend, that a teacher’s attitude can greatly impact online writing instruction and its effectiveness. My cohort all felt ill-prepared and therefore approached the virtual classroom with far more hesitancy and fear than is necessary. However, my cohort and I were also teaching in the very unique situation of a global pandemic where time for training was very limited. Hopefully, moving forward, TA's and upcoming instructors will be exposed to the synchronous modality prior to teaching whether it be through shadowing or training so that teachers' attitudes towards the modality can become more positive. As stated before, I believe that instructors must first approach the classroom with their best effort and attitude before we can begin to dissect student behavior or place any amount of blame for a lack of engagement. Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann have a really interesting idea on how we might better prepare online writing instructors.

In their text, "Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction," Hewett and Ehmann discuss the literature surrounding online instructor training, ultimately encouraging online training as something that will aid in OWI. They discuss how their experience suggests that "rigorously examining teaching and learning processes as they occur in *naturalistic* settings is essential to advancing in any education-related program" (Hewett and Ehmann 6). What I find interesting about this statement is the use of the word "naturalistic" and the varying ways that word could be contextualized in relation to OWI. Should instructors teaching online only examine online writing courses? Should they examine in-person as well? These are questions that the literature seems to be building towards, but we lack a definitive qualitative or quantitative study to really take an informed stance. This is where I believe my experience can help to inform the literature. As someone who did not receive OWI training or a virtual shadowing experience, I believe that having received such training would have helped immensely. Both Dillion and Melissa agree that receiving synchronous training prior to teaching synchronous OWI should be mandatory, while Florence believes that the opportunity should be made available but not required. Because my colleagues and I were the first to pioneer synchronous writing instruction at our university, we were not able to receive the opportunities that future online instructors will hopefully have. Future instructors will likely have more time and resources to prepare for the online classroom, and I believe that online shadowing and training should be heavily recommended if not mandatory for these instructors.

In my time teaching synchronous OWI, I quickly learned that each class meeting became slightly more comfortable and easier to navigate with time. Dillion shared this experience, saying "I started to like the modality (synchronous) more as time went on because I became more confident in myself." I can completely agree. What helped me gain confidence, and even a passion, for teaching virtually resulted from exposure to the modality. This exposure and familiarity with the modality could have been accomplished through OWI training and shadowing prior to me entering the virtual classroom for the first time, and I believe that I would have been a stronger, and more comfortable, instructor for having done so. I do not want instructors to follow my path and be placed in a synchronous OWC without having first been exposed to the modality. It can be confusing, overwhelming, and discouraging to teach in a foreign modality, and this unfamiliar environment can easily result in feelings of inadequacy that could be lessened if not removed with the proper exposure.

One area of the OWI experience that should also be considered is the sequence of teaching modalities. In other words, should an instructor have to teach face-to-face prior to teaching asynchronous? Should they have to teach asynchronous before synchronous? According to Hewett and Ehmann, one should first learn how to teach asynchronously prior to teaching synchronously (27). Their rationale for why is not very clear, but it seems the underlying assumption is that synchronous teaching requires additional skills and knowledge on top of those required to teach asynchronous. As someone who did not teach asynchronously prior to synchronously, I do not think teaching asynchronously first is a necessary step. When I asked my cohort about their opinion on teaching asynchronous prior to synchronous, Melissa was able to shed more light on why scholars might be suggesting this sequencing. She argued that some instructors may be teaching face-to-face with very little to no incorporation of virtual learning platforms. For these instructors, Melissa stated, teaching asynchronously first might allow them to become familiar with how to operate a learning interface prior to teaching synchronous classes. However, Melissa, like the rest of my cohort, still does not see asynchronous teaching as a prerequisite or logical sequence to teaching synchronously.

I did not have any training in asynchronous pedagogy or technology; however, I was still able to navigate synchronous teaching. If anything, I would argue that teaching synchronously meant that the amount of asynchronous elements in my courses was drastically reduced. Whereas in an asynchronous course, I would have to upload video lectures and spend more time responding to students via discussion boards and emails, in the synchronous classroom, I was able to accomplish much of this work during our virtual class meetings over webcam. If anything, synchronous OWI would serve as a better transition between face-to-face and asynchronous OWI because, as a modality, it lies somewhere between the two. Overall, this is an idea in the literature that cannot be supported or affirmed by the experience of me and my colleagues.

What presented itself as the largest problem in both of my online classes became increasingly clear from the beginning of the semester—student engagement. How would I get my students to engage? What did that even look like in a synchronous class, and how was I to know? Is asking a student to use their camera too invasive of their privacy, and what if the student can’t afford a camera? Is using the live chat feature considered engagement or should the students use their microphones? What if a student logged in the class meeting and then went to go play video games? Would they still receive credit for being present in class, and how would I know without requiring webcams? There were so many potential hurdles and subsequent mental loopholes when it came to determining what constitutes engagement within a synchronous online course. All I knew was that teaching to a blank screen and being met with silence each class warranted pedagogical reconsiderations. These are the questions that prompted my research and that I believe make my cohort’s unique teaching experience so valuable. We have all been faced with these questions far before the literature has caught up to them.

While I felt that student engagement was a major problem in my OWCs, I was shocked to find that not all of my cohort felt the same about their courses; the major difference that seemed to spark these differences was how we defined engagement. While Dillion and Florence both noted that they had issues with student engagement as well, Melissa never felt that student engagement was an issue. What differentiated Melissa from the rest of the cohort, though, was how she defined engagement in a synchronous OWC. When asked what kind of engagement she experienced, Melissa noted that the engagement was primarily if not exclusively through the text chat during virtual classes: “They seemed really engaged in the chat, but there wasn’t much use of microphones” she stated. This is where I realized that there were multiple ways of defining engagement in a synchronous course and that we, as first-time instructors, were left to figure out what that meant on our own. While Melissa felt that students typing in the chat during class was engaging and “intimate,” I felt that it was incredibly distant and cold in the context of my own class. While I felt that responding to instant messages in a virtual class with microphone capabilities seemed like an overall weak form of engagement, Melissa highlighted the fact that college-aged students are used to communicating in this format and are comfortable engaging in this way. When asked about how he defined engagement in a synchronous OWC, Dillion said that he valued “students answering questions with their mics.” In my experience, I defined student engagement as active microphone usage, volunteering in class, and sharing writing during class. Overall, though, the cohort defined and measured engagement in very different ways.

Whether my perception of engagement is “correct” is not the point that I hope to make; instead, it is very important that we begin to consider the multiple ways instructors define and measure engagement and that we are doing so in a way that fosters better learning. In *Teaching Writing Online,* Warnock sees a similar problem with online chats like the one I had experienced. In relation to synchronous text chats, Warnock states, “multiple-user conversations on chat can quickly fall into chaos” and goes on to suggest that limiting the users in a chat to around “four or five” participants would be beneficial (90-91). My experience with synchronous text chats was that they were very jumbled and overwhelming; however, if students are able to truly engage in a text chat and learn, I believe we should pursue that option. If not, I think other concrete methods of gauging students’ overall engagement with OWCs should be defined so that incoming instructors do not face the same confusion and disconnect as my cohort. Based on my experience and the advice of Warnock, I believe that pursuing text chats as a primary source of engagement in a virtual class might not be the most effective.

One of the most important decisions made by first-time synchronous instructors in my cohort was whether or not to require camera usage in the virtual classroom—a decision that directly impacts student engagement. In “Minimizing the Distance in Online Writing Courses through Student Engagement,” Jason Dockter and Jessie Borgman conclude with the idea that incorporating audio *and* video in an online class—as well as other multimedia tools—helps to avoid confusion and minimize miscommunication (220-221). My experience can directly lend credence to this claim. While I did not require camera usage in my classes, every now and then a student would turn on their camera. It was in these moments—where I could see a human being on the other side of the screen—that I could see their physical reactions to my lectures, notice when I had lost their attention, and better adapt my class time to account for their social queues. When a student had their camera on, there was no delay in communication outside of them unmuting their mic to respond, and the communication felt far more natural and productive. However, as I stated, I did not require camera usage in my class despite having the power to do so. In fact, none of my cohort did—even with our unanimous understanding that doing so would improve our level of student engagement. The obvious question here is "why?" and I believe that the answer to the question lies at the heart of the problem I experienced with synchronous OWI.

My cohort did not require camera usage in synchronous OWCs because we viewed camera requirements as an invasion of privacy. Going into the virtual classroom, I did not want to force any of my students to reveal their living or personal spaces to me or the rest of the class. To me, asking a student to show their home, room, or a lack thereof is a very big invasion of their personal privacy. Dillion agreed in his interview, stating "I think it's worth it" to protect a student's privacy at the risk of less engagement. Florence ad Melissa also echoed this in saying that they did not require cameras; however, Melissa also brought up a new way of considering camera usage that may be useful moving forward. She highlighted the fact that our cohort was originally scheduled to teach in-person classes and that our students registered for the classes intending for them to meet face-to-face. Covid-19 clearly demanded otherwise. The point Melissa makes is that requiring cameras may be less of an invasion of privacy if the student registers for the class *knowing* that they will have to use one. In our case, though, our students did not ask to be in a synchronous OWC, and this plays a large role in the decision to require webcams. Moving forward, hopefully, students will enter the synchronous class knowing cameras will be required and, in doing so, will have more agency in choosing to share their personal spaces with the rest of the class.

Not having student webcams in my class made teaching difficult and even discouraging at times. I taught many synchronous classes to a wall of blank screens, hoping that there was an engaged student on the other side, fearing that they were not there at all. As I covered the day's topic, I felt like I was almost talking to myself and not to a class. Speaking to people without being able to see them is something that I grew more comfortable with, but I still do not believe that it is natural or beneficial in any way. When I would dismiss class, most of the blank screens would leave the class meeting, saying "bye" in the chat before leaving. However, a couple of blank screens would remain in the class once it was over. I would ask "do you have any questions?" and hear nothing in response. These were clearly the students who joined the virtual class and were not actively at their computers. Florence and Dillion both mentioned this occurring within their synchronous OWCs as well, which suggests this is not a rare occurrence in this teaching modality.

In addition to students not being present for class, I also experienced extended periods of silence. While any instructor could confirm that silences exist despite modality, I have since taught face-to-face where the silences are not nearly as deafening. Nothing feels worse than explaining a concept, asking your students if they understand, and being met with nothing in return. To make things worse, sometimes I would break the silence by calling on a specific student only to realize that they were not at their computer. Without webcams, synchronous

OWCs allow students to escape responsibility in a way that the face-to-face class would not. Or, rather, I allowed students to escape this responsibility due to the way I approached the classroom. Florence brings valuable insight to these silences in saying that they also experienced these long periods without anyone speaking, but that, pedagogically, they allow room for these silences to occur. To an extent, I agree with this approach; there needs to be time for silence and thought. However, there also needs to be a limit to these silences because—in my experience—synchronous OWI can result in silence far overstaying its welcome.

Lacking webcam usage in my classes hindered the development of students' classroom personas. Scott Warnock has focused extensively on instructor personas in the virtual classroom, writing "You might assume numerous roles in a class, and these roles shift, but you need to be aware that the way you frame yourself will influence how your students write throughout the course" (1). While I hold this to be true in my experience teaching, I can't help but wonder about the other side of the coin—what about the way students demonstrate their in-class personalities? As someone who has now taught in-person courses as well, I have seen far more student personality in the physical classroom than I did in my virtual courses. I attribute much of this to the lack of webcams in my virtual course. When students do not have to show their faces or present themselves to the class, I believe it becomes easier for them to distance themselves from the social element of the classroom. Whereas many of my in-person classes begin with students greeting each other and myself, telling stories about their week, and chatting, my synchronous courses typically began in utter silence. When students do not see each other, there is less reason for them to communicate, express themselves, and connect with each other. This seems like a large contributor to the reason why I found my synchronous courses to lack a community element. If I were to teach a synchronous OWC again, I believe I would want to require webcams to account for all of these potential pitfalls. However, even this decision would have repercussions.

Clearly, webcams and the way they are used play a large role in relation to student engagement and community in the synchronous classroom, but for every negative consequence of not using cameras comes a valid argument for why requiring them can be problematic. In addition to the invasion of privacy that my cohort and I were cautious of, there is also the element of accessibility. While my cohort did not share similar experiences, I had multiple students in my synchronous OWCs who did not have access to a proper webcam or microphone. For some of these students, their technology was simply outdated or minimalist, and for others, their webcams had been damaged. One student in particular apologized for not being able to respond using their microphone when I called on them in class. This student wrote me an email following our virtual class session, telling me how they have to share a laptop with their mother who works from home. When their mother was using the laptop, this student would have to join class on a tablet with a broken microphone and cracked screen. These are the kinds of students that we would be alienating by requiring webcams and microphones in synchronous OWI. Ultimately, the "to require or not to require" question does not have an answer that is without problems. While I agree with Warnock that online chats are not effective in large groups, I also realize that online chats are far more accessible for students. My question is this: do we accept synchronous instruction as a modality that inherently has engagement limitations or can we find tools and methods that can account for these problems?

One way to create a better sense of community and student engagement in the online writing class is by providing icebreakers at the beginning of the semester, according to Scott Warnock (8). Going a step further, Warnock states that he responds to every student's icebreaker in order to “build a connection with each student” (8). As someone who wanted to improve the level of engagement in the virtual classroom, this is a step that I cannot believe I overlooked. While I did assign an icebreaker discussion board post, I did not respond to any of them directly. As a full-time graduate student, time was a precious commodity, so I decided to simply read and grade the icebreakers. Looking back, I wish I had taken the time to connect with my students and give them each the individual responses that their posts warranted. While there is no concrete proof that replying to icebreakers is going to magically create a better classroom community, this seems like such a simple way to show students that you care who they are and are willing to take time to connect. While Warnock is discussing an asynchronous icebreaker, it seems like facilitating an icebreaker in the synchronous classroom would also be a strong way to start off the semester and to make connections with students starting on day one. As a student myself, I always appreciate when a professor is able to see me first as a human being before seeing me as a student; I think that Warnock’s icebreaker responses are a great idea moving forward in any OWC.

Some members of my cohort also utilized icebreakers in their classes and found them to be a very valuable tool to create a classroom community. Florence offered what they referred to as a “get to know me” discussion board to their students. This was a place where their students could talk about their interests, life, and any goals they might have. Stating that this activity was done to add a “sense of community during Covid,” Florence also found that icebreakers were a great way to memorize names, learn their students’ passions, and facilitate better conversations about writing moving forward in the semester. The connection that Florence was able to create with their students despite being in a virtual class was impactful and ultimately created a better place for learning. All of these outcomes from such a seemingly simple activity warrant consideration for icebreakers to become a staple in synchronous OWI.

Similarly, Dillion and Melissa utilized icebreakers in their synchronous courses and found them to be a success as well. Melissa had a unique approach to icebreakers; she would ask her class to share how their day was going by typing out “emoji stories” as she calls them. These were simply a string of three or more emojis that collectively told a narrative about a student’s day. These were used to not only break the ice at the start of the class, but also to gauge students’ attitudes entering the classroom. This is a great idea because not only is it quick and creative, but it also allows the opportunity to humanize the virtual classroom. On the other hand, Dillion offered ice-breaker writing activities at the start of every single class. Whether it be asking students about an item on their bucket list or about an unpopular opinion they hold, Dillion came up with interesting ways to engage students at the start of every single class. He describes these icebreakers as simple writings that add “comfort in the class.” Regardless of how icebreakers were utilized by my cohort—and despite areas that I personally could have improved—these simple activities served only to benefit class community and engagement. These are the kinds of tools that could be taken for granted in a face-to-face course but are almost demanded by the synchronous classroom where community and engagement might be harder to develop.

In addition to how students engage with the course content and me as an instructor, my time teaching synchronous OWI also highlighted another area in which engagement was particularly difficult—collaboration. Mick and Middlebrook state in their work “Asynchronous and Synchronous Modalities” that “high collaboration” is essential for online writing instruction (134). The primary way that I attempted to foster collaboration in my virtual class was through peer reviews; the only problem here was that I had never seen a synchronous peer review. I wondered how I should even approach peer reviews in the virtual classroom. Like any uncharted territory for me in the synchronous modality, I had make a decision and hope for the best. What I decided to do was to add more structure to peer reviews than I would have done traditionally. I provided a "peer-review worksheet" to my students that had anywhere from five to ten questions about their assignment. Scott Warnock advises online writing instructors to provide students with the actual rubric during peer reviews, and I can see the reason why he makes this assertion (117). The reason I decided to add this element of structure to the peer-review process was to account for the potential confusion that can easily occur in a virtual class—whether it be confusion surrounding technology, the grading criteria, or both. Questions could range from something simple such as "Are there topic sentences in this essay?" to more open-ended questions like "What are the major strengths and weaknesses of this essay?" First, I would go over the worksheet with the class and make sure to take questions and make clarifications if needed.

Next, I would randomly assign students into pairs (and the occasional trio when needed) and place them in "breakout groups." Essentially, breakout groups were private lobbies that students could use to communicate directly with their partners without the rest of the class hearing. In these private sessions, students would read through their partner's essay and be able to have a conversation about the ways that they can begin to revise their rough drafts. Overall, I find it extremely difficult to gauge the success of these private, virtual peer reviews. On the one hand, I see an inherent benefit that the synchronous class allows OWI in this setting—students having complete privacy when discussing their essay with their peers. Whereas peer reviews in a classroom might get loud and overwhelming, especially for students who are more productive in quiet settings, the virtual breakout groups allow students the chance to essentially have their own private classroom to discuss their work. What I found in my experience is that this freedom of synchronous OWI is a double-edged sword. While it can offer a private and quiet setting for students, it can also enable students to disengage with the peer reviews. For some, the breakout groups allowed the opportunity to escape responsibility. As the instructor, I could only be present in one breakout group at a time to check in and facilitate. A handful of students informed me that their partner would simply disappear or stop communicating if I was not in the breakout group with them. I found this very difficult to account for because the breakout groups relied heavily on the students engaging. Overall, I found that collaboration was both helped and hindered in the synchronous OWC. While some students took the chance to work privately with their peers and were able to generate productive discussions about writing, others exploited the freedom and were not actively collaborating.

When asked about collaboration in the virtual classroom, my cohort had a variety of responses; however, the commonality in their responses seemed to be that the synchronous classroom hurt student collaboration as a whole. Dillion remarked that he much preferred his experience with face-to-face peer reviews and the natural element of an in-person collaboration. As opposed to utilizing breakout groups, Dillion’s OWC utilized asynchronous peer reviews, which both he and his students found to be less helpful. Florence and Melissa, however, both utilized breakout groups to facilitate collaboration and peer reviews. Florence did not state any strong opinions on the level of student collaboration in synchronous OWCs but did voice a preference for collaboration in the face-to-face classroom. Building on Florence’s experience, Melissa stated that she utilized breakout groups frequently in her class and not just for peer reviews. When a new concept was introduced in her class, Melissa would break her students off into private groups so that they could first discuss their thoughts with a smaller group of peers. She found this to be extremely beneficial as a whole but also reported a few downsides as well.

Her students were far more likely to engage and share their thoughts with the entire class if they had the chance to discuss their ideas in a breakout group first. This was a way that Melissa feels she was successful in building a better classroom community and encouraging engagement. However, there were inevitably students who exploited the privacy of the breakout groups and did not participate or even speak in them. What this shows to me is that synchronous OWI does have tools available to improve engagement but that we have not quite perfected them. While breakout groups offered benefits to those of us who utilized them, they were far from perfect and could be improved moving forward.

Conclusion

Synchronous online writing instruction became commonplace in the wake of a global pandemic. The modality's ability to connect students in a virtual classroom with their instructor allowed a safe and effective way to continue education as the world quarantined and isolated. As vaccines become readily accessible and education begins to gain a sense of normalcy again, synchronous OWI will continue to have value in its flexibility and practicality. The synchronous classroom, while introduced primarily as a result of Covid-19, will continue to be a tool utilized by writing programs and instructors for years to come. The benefits of real-time interaction and the ability to attend class from anywhere in the world are why many will continue to be drawn to synchronous OWI. Despite these benefits though, clearly, there have been some potential drawbacks as well.

As instructors tried to learn and implement synchronous online instruction, many were faced with difficulties with the modality. Whether it be a lack of technological skills, an issue with accessibility, or the fear of entering an unknown space, many instructors were left to do the best that they could. As stated earlier, this was more so "lifeboat" teaching where educators were doing their best to stay afloat and to adapt—not an effective or productive form of teaching at all. For my cohort and I, many of us found that student engagement and classroom community were the two largest issues we faced in the synchronous classroom. Teaching to black screens in complete silence took its toll throughout the semester, and many of us started to realize that the literature had yet to fully acknowledge this aspect of synchronous OWI. In fact, most of the literature on OWI had not acknowledged synchronous instruction at all.

The literature surrounding OWI has primarily focused on asynchronous learning, which had been the predominant way writing was being taught online. Most of the key texts on OWI mention synchronous instruction in passing or either omit the concept entirely. As synchronous becomes more and more prevalent in higher learning, we will hopefully begin to see even more work published on the subject, however, blogs and internet posts have served as some of the most useful places to find content surrounding student engagement and synchronous OWI. Whether it be personal blogs or academic websites, the instructors sharing their stories and communicating with other educators has proven to be where much of the advancement of the modality has been taking place.

Hoping to build upon these voices and push the literature even further, I want my experiences and the voices of my cohort to serve as real, concrete examples of what happens in synchronous OWI. While the literature was catching up, we were learning the synchronous modality firsthand and attempting to make improvements and adjustments as we went. While our experiences were not identical, we all faced difficulty with student engagement and community and attempted to improve the virtual classroom to the best of our abilities. Our specific experience with synchronous OWI validated some of the pre-existing ideas about student engagement; for example, we found icebreakers to be extremely effective in encouraging student participation. However, our experience also contradicted the literature in other ways—one being the presumption that asynchronous teaching experience is necessary for synchronous instructors.

Despite the ways in which my OWI experience has supported and questioned the literature, the most evident conclusion to draw from my experience is that OWI instructors' voices can help us to improve the synchronous classroom. Many of these instructors have helpful stories like the ones of my cohort, and they have already started to raise meaningful questions. For example, the decision to include or not to include webcams in a synchronous class played a crucial role in the classroom. Both the arguments for and against requiring webcams have valid concerns whether it be student privacy, student accountability, or even accessibility issues. If synchronous OWI is going to improve and encourage student engagement and community, these are the kinds of questions that I hope to see the literature start to consider. Ultimately, I hope that scholars are able to hear the stories of those who have been doing the work of establishing synchronous OWI and realize the value that they add to the conversation. While my experience and the experiences of my cohort are limited in their overall scope, I hope that they add to the overall conversation that surrounds synchronous instruction. As a relatively new teaching modality, there are inevitably going to be hurdles and obstacles when it comes to the synchronous classroom. However, I believe that if we listen to the stories and experiences of those who have been teaching writing in the virtual classroom we can work towards creating meaningful improvements.

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Appendix A

1.) What were your thoughts when you were first told you would be teaching synchronously? Was this a modality you wanted to teach in? Do you feel like you were properly prepared and trained?

2.) Did your attitude towards synchronous online teaching change throughout your semester online?

3.) Do you think that an instructor should teach an asynchronous class prior to teaching a synchronous one? Why or why not?

4.) Are there inherent benefits to the modality? Any limitations? Was making the classroom collaborative difficult?

5.) Did you find technology to be more of a benefit or a hindrance to the online classroom?

6.) What level of student engagement did you receive in the synchronous classroom, and how do you gauge student engagement in that modality?

7.) Did you require webcams? Why or why not? How did you know if students were engaged? Did you have more chat or microphone usage from students?

8.) How would you describe the classroom community or environment in a synchronous class? Did it feel closer and more intimate, distant and impersonal, or somewhere in between?

9.) Did you develop any practices, techniques, or activities that you felt were effective in engaging students in the synchronous class? Any that didn’t work?