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**Asynchronous Online Instruction: Creative Collaboration  
for Virtual Student Support**

### **Introduction**

Working with students relegated to a satellite campus to complete their degree has heightened our awareness of the academic divide that exists for distance learners in terms of academic support. What an administration sees as an opportunity to expand offerings, students often see as exile from vital resources—the campus library, tutoring center, and of course, food areas. The institutional answer to this dilemma has been to increase online course offerings. For students, one of the attractive features of online learning is convenience. The overly popularized image of taking courses while in pajamas conveys a message of easy-going nonchalance in which students can essentially learn at their leisure. However, once students actually enroll in an online course and discover the rigor involved, this notion is rapidly deconstructed. The actual convenience of online can be called into question when considered from a variety of vantage points. Students in face-to-face courses have quicker access to the instructor, who is available in class to answer questions immediately. Equally, their peers are more accessible, explaining why collaborative activities seem to progress more smoothly in traditional courses than in their online counterparts. Such discrepancies may explain why, in online courses, students who typically go without these integral services subsequently struggle.

The idea of online learning and synchronous learning seems to be oxymoronic. While shying away from online classes as a “convenience” for students, we respect that flexible, less traditional platforms can be advantageous for academic success. Yet, it is not practical to assume success without academic support systems—we do not assume such in the face-to-face classroom. Online instructors commonly connect writing assignments to library and writing center resources. Should their absence diminish the quality or quantity of the student’s educational experience? Online courses can, as Scott Warnock suggests, “provide a needed method of delivering courses to people whose lives have undergone significant disruption” (xix). This is our student population. Much of the research written on writing theory-to-practice tended to discuss more theory than practice. A burgeoning field of online writing research is expanding, but there is a dearth of

information on practical application as it relates to academic support for writing instruction. While there are those writing about technology and its impact on tutoring centers, the voice linking these centers to online support is relatively silent. Similarly, librarians are providing virtual links to their resources; however, few are being summoned into the virtual classroom to maximize their expertise.

This discussion describes a project in which an online composition instructor incorporated asynchronous online options from the college library and tutoring center to increase the academic support available to her students and thus provide a more robust learning experience. Initially, mutual interests in virtual learning, along with an online pilot project in the tutoring center, helped to bridge this support gap. However, our endeavors were met with challenges beyond our control. What began as the work of one instructor soon became a collaborative project of three dedicated professionals with limited means. There were no additional physical or financial resources to link classroom content with brick and mortar resources. The lack of institutional support to provide equivalent support in the online environment only broadened the scholastic gap for all online learners within the college. As a result, these challenges precipitated creative collaboration that began as nothing more than an enthusiastic endeavor of three people who were committed to student success in online writing courses. As we grappled with methods for providing this support, the dilemma of synchronous methods that attempt to recreate the face-to-face classroom, versus asynchronous methods that meet the needs of our student population, became the focus of our work. Ultimately, our research concluded that asynchronous methods continue to be a viable option if they are empowered with clear, distinct learning outcomes and incorporate asynchronous reconfigurations of support services.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Much as how synchronous methods were, in some sense, an answer to the apparent deficiencies in asynchronous technologies, our approach reverses these roles. Synchronous learning environments seemingly wield a wealth of potential in recreating the conventional classroom experience, particularly the more dynamic features of the classroom; however, it is important not to presume this potential as a foregone conclusion. Although powered by a longstanding and expanding theoretical tradition coupled with the rapidly evolving technological sphere, synchronous distance education and support hold inherent ideological and problematic pedagogical nuances that hold a less satisfying potential. This potential is one in which synchronicity becomes a reified concept that supplants methodology in favor of a simulated learning experience.

The problematic characteristics of synchronous online education stem, in part, from a fundamental and often-cited theory in distance education.

Michael Moore's theory of transactional distance points to a specific form of separation innate in distance education, one not entirely composed of geographic space but rather facilitated by it to create a distance experiential in nature. This distance, in turn, is reflected in learning as "the gap of understanding and communication between the teachers and learners caused by geographic distance . . . [which] must be bridged through distinctive procedures in instructional design and the facilitation of interaction" (Moore and Kearsley 223). In order to bridge this gap effectively, transactional distance theory focuses on three interconnected elements: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. These elements stand as cornerstones to Moore's distance education theory, and they can be formulated in numerous mediums in order to lessen distance and positively influence the learning experience for students. Despite the multiplicity possible in Moore's approach, there is a natural inclination towards favoring synchronous methods to bridge this distance, which subsequently unveil problematic features of both his theory and synchronous environments in general, primarily those of technological determinacy and dialogic singularity.

For many individuals, the primary obstacle regarding synchronous education is technology. If the university and students are supplied with the proper technological resources, they are more likely to overcome transactional distance. Moore argues that in order to create an environment conducive to more meaningful distance education interactions, more synchronous technology is required to "permit a more intensive, more personal, more individual, more dynamic dialogue" (25). These sentiments unveil an inherent technological determinacy laden within synchronous methodologies. In order to bridge transactional distance and re-establish conventional models of instruction and pedagogy over the internet, technological facilitation is required.

This argument has two implications: (1) that technology and not pedagogy largely determine the success of online education and support and (2) the face-to-face format can be re-created via synchronous technologies. The simulative potential of synchronous support and instruction cast a false reflection, one that contends that by transmitting audio and visual elements of a classroom in real time, educators have the proper ingredients to construct a classroom in any digital space. More, however, is required. It is the instructor, working in collaboration with the students, which determines how transactional distance is bridged. As Vartouhi Asherian rightfully argues, "Learning objectives should dictate proper instructional methodology and not the availability of specific technology" (18). This commitment transcends technology and allows for a variety of objectives that enables instructors to utilize tools for their particular course aims and goals. Both in terms of form and content, the online course can be a profoundly human process, one through which transactional distance is bridged by human hands even in digital environments.

Connected to the technological determinacy held within synchronous methods is a dialogic singularity located at the heart of Moore's theory. Dialogue is one of the fundamental pathways through which to lessen transactional distance, which is not surprising because dialogue is also a crucial element in the face-to-face classroom. Moore initially defines dialogue quite generally as "a series of interactions having positive qualities other interactions might not have. A dialogue is purposeful, constructive and valued by each party" (24); however, this generality is somewhat contradicted by Moore's support of synchronous methods and his position that dialogue is influenced by "environmental factors" (25). The ability to generate dialogue is the primary reason instructors favor synchronous over asynchronous methods, maintaining that asynchronous forms of instruction lack a student-teacher connection (Huang and Hsiao). Yet, accepting this position neglects other forms of dialogue, asynchronous in nature, that possess comparable forms of positive interaction of equal value.

Once again, the ability for synchronous methodologies to mimic face-to-face environments compels many to presume their superiority, but this technologically determined mimicry instills a dialogic singularity that one should not readily accept. Instead, reformulating online instruction and support under a different guise that is receptive to a variety of dialogue and discourse types could yield just as powerful benefits for both instructors and students. In order for the online course truly to achieve its educational promise, our models for online instruction and support should be as flexible as possible, open to a variety of methods, technologies, and experiences, so that we can meet the needs of students and unveil a new dynamic in online education that avoids mimicking face-to-face courses and instills a more powerful relevancy in the online space. These sentiments are what powered our approach to the online composition course experience. By reconsidering asynchronous methods through the lens of the academic support sites like the library and the tutoring center, we generated a support system that enabled transactional distance to be reduced regardless of the temporality involved in the process. Understanding the three perspectives within this system will not only demonstrate the unique voices and methodologies that each presence lends to our program, but will illustrate how the synergy between our distinct educational missions served as a cornerstone in our program's success.

## **Describing our Approach**

### *Faculty Perspective*

Online teaching often brings out the suspicious nature in all of us. Administrators are concerned about the quality of instruction and maintaining consistency; faculty is concerned about academic freedom and controlling their own curriculum, and students are concerned that the

technological expectations are beyond their capabilities. More than one student has complained that they are in the class to learn about writing, not about computers!

On the other side of this issue lies simple pragmatics. Two-year institutions typically have a smaller physical footprint, and these limitations often compel colleges to consider online offerings before we have faculty fully prepared to implement such instruction. Adopting a constructivist theory of learning precipitates our enthusiasm for the co-construction of knowledge, and we forego training for making this happen in the virtual classroom. Limited financial resources often supplant best practices in the rush to offer courses that meet the needs of a burgeoning enrollment. As is the case at our institution, limitations also exist on the technology available for online synchronous interactions. Not only is this a virtual restriction, it also pigeon-holes our students into "assigned" timeframes during which they *must* interact with their peers and learning activities. In cases such as this, online learning becomes nothing more than a technological twin of the face-to-face classroom experience, simply taking up less physical space but constrained by invisible walls. Asynchronous learning allows us to teach beyond these walls, while at the same time increasing the exposure to the same support systems proven to help students succeed.

Although scholars in online course design, such as Robin Smith as well as Marjorie Vai and Kristen Sosluski, suggest that the online interaction dilemma is a simple process that can often be solved by organization, step-by-step instructions, and effective communication that leads to consistent collaboration, little is said about the pedagogical impact of including academic support as a link to achieving specific learning outcomes that lead to such interaction. For most educators, instruction is intuitive, either because of previous teacher education training or based on their own learning experiences, though course design sometimes impedes our success in delivering interactive content that is often second nature. We depend on the reliable techniques that have worked, forgetting that our online students are removed from support that can offer another meaningful perspective. Faculty need training that enables them to predict the quandaries students experience behind the screen, late at night, when few, if any, resources are available. Such, however, is not the case when support systems are in place to penetrate the barriers of synchronous activities.

While Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson suggest that engaging students in the learning process typically promotes knowledge attainment, we should not limit our understanding of meaning-making to the simultaneous absorption of information. True of many humanities-based courses, but specific to online writing courses, text is the principal medium of communication. Although communication is a concept that might seem instinctual to a writing instructor, such is often not the case. Writing instruction is an energetic, and sometimes animated, process; it

goes beyond skills-based learning because, as Linda Adler-Kassner and Duane Roen explain, it “involves studying how texts are produced, used, distributed, and circulated in particular contexts” (20). An instructor might facilitate research by interweaving it into a discussion of Rogerian versus Toulmin argumentation in a face-to-face classroom, where the skills piece of the puzzle is simply explained rather than modeled. Embedding a librarian with interactive assignments reinforces such a concept while providing the students with hands-on application. The instructor and librarian collaborate on the content and provide learning experiences that complement the concepts, and the librarian becomes responsible for the corresponding instruction and its assessment.

Similar to the instructor/librarian collaboration, a writing tutor becomes a valuable asset to students distanced from such campus services. Adding a tutor to an online writing course offers effective writing support in ways that cannot be duplicated face-to-face. Weekly exposure to the course content gives the tutor an opportunity to follow, systematically, the scaffolding assignments as they build throughout the semester. The tutor is simultaneously introduced into the course via a chat room or discussion along with the instructor and students. By providing specific guidelines about the expectations of online tutoring, the stage is set for interactive exchange between someone less intimidating perhaps than their instructor but an academic partner. While there are a plethora of sophisticated programs that tout success for such an endeavor, our students primarily depend on email—simple and effective. As Michael Spooner and Kathi Yancey suggests, email “presents a different opportunity to learn . . . a genre that is increasingly becoming more a part of intellectual and work-day experience” (qtd. in Condon 46). By creating what Kenneth Haley and Karen Heise call a “window of access” (16), tutors afford students the benefit of learning within the context of the writing assignment and the larger significance of the writing event. Students become independent collaborators with the support team, and, as Janet MacDonald suggests, they “no longer need to work in isolation but can join other learners in an electronically supported community” (2).

It is often assumed that classroom discourse is a detriment to asynchronous learning; many believe that its relevance is downplayed in the virtual classroom, particularly the observable non-verbal cues. Jonathan Finkelstein suggests that non-verbal discourse has the potential to change the very nature of learning if an instructor is tuned in to his/her students (75-76). For the perceptive instructor, this phenomenon is translatable to the virtual environment. For example, introductions are typical early assignments in an online classroom, and carefully crafted prompts compel students to divulge individual characteristics that become a recognizable part of a student’s communication repertoire. As Joan Thorman and Isa Zimmerman suggest, “Online, all the personal connections that are auto-

matic in the face-to-face classes need to be carefully orchestrated to gain students' attention, confidence, and participation" (84). As online students become more experienced, they develop a virtual language that may require instructors to *read between the lines*. Such skills are enhanced all the more by the presence of an online support team.

The virtues of synchronous methodologies lay in their ability to simulate face-to-face structure, accountability, and instructor control; we have, however, discovered that asynchronous instruction better lends itself to the student-centered classroom. Such an approach provides the flexibility often needed in online classes, where instructors' expectations adapt to students' needs, and vice versa, while maintaining the integrity of the course content. From the faculty perspective, asynchronous teaching and learning can accommodate these needs within the defined parameters of an online course without confining the student to the invisible walls of the institution.

### *Librarian Perspective*

One crucial component of asynchronous (and synchronous) student and faculty distance learning support is engineered by the library. Both synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences can be facilitated by librarians embedded within a particular course's Learning Management System (LMS). Though the definition of embedded librarianship may vary widely, activities common to librarians embedded within an LMS include posting links to course-specific research materials, offering personalized assistance, generating information literacy course assignments, and moderating research or assignment-based help forums. The provision of these embedded library services often initiates from faculty's concern regarding equivalent access to library resources for their distance learners as compared with traditional, on-campus learners. This idea of equivalency, also referred to as "mandated support" by the Association of College and Research Libraries in their *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services* document, states that library service to distance learners must "provide equivalent library service and learning resources to all of the institution's students, faculty, and other personnel, regardless of location." Other major points in the document provide important considerations for librarians in their outreach to distance learners—disability access, direct human access, investment of personnel, assessment, and information literacy among them.

Interestingly, the *Standards* document does not utilize the term "embedded," nor does it provide concrete examples of specific activities librarians may take part in to support distance learning. This open-endedness allows librarians to work within the framework of the *Standards* document to serve individual courses, programs, and institutions creatively, employing a variety of methods to reach students with information literacy content.

As co-educators in the online environment, many librarians naturally utilize a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous methods to reach students. This use of both methods also aligns Steven J. Bell and John Shank's concept of "blended" librarianship, combining the traditional librarian skill sets with technological know-how and instructional design expertise (374). Synchronous learning opportunities for distance learners could include library information literacy sessions via web conferencing software and conferencing via video, chat, or telephone. Conversely, distance learners' asynchronous contact with librarians could include access to specific librarian-generated content corresponding to course or assignment goals as well as interaction opportunities such as discussion boards, blogs, or email.

As these embedded librarians with blended skill sets serve groups of distance learners, much is still being discovered about the nature of teaching online, but a Project Information Literacy study indicates that college students generally do not rely on librarians as information sources (Head and Eisenberg 3). In fact, the same study uncovered that librarians rank last in the information-seeking hierarchy—behind course readings, course instructors, and even Google (15). Then how do we connect with this elusive group of students, who, recapping the aforementioned study Knight and Loftis ask, "[W]ill not search out library provided resources or the librarian without directed guidance?" (364). When passive asynchronous methods prove too isolating and ineffective, librarians often turn to synchronous communication tools to illicit instructor-student interaction. Though it pre-dates online learning, Moore's distance education theory of transactional distance certainly applies to the choice of many embedded librarians to include synchronous learning opportunities in their classes. Web conferencing, video chat, or other methods may be viewed as means to reduce transactional distance brought about by the physical separations in distance education (Moore, "Theory of Transactional Distance" 22-23).

But are synchronous methods innately better than asynchronous ones? In the realm of library instruction for online learners, asynchronous learning can be much more effective when passive methods are abandoned for course-integrated ones. A librarian posting a video tutorial in the LMS that relates to some information literacy concept is an example of a passive asynchronous librarian interaction—and one quite common to typical embedded librarianship. Yet, a similar level of student passivity occurs when students synchronously watch a librarian-led demonstration of the same concept via web conferencing software. It follows that students will react passively to library-provided content that is provided passively. Students may engage with the provided information, but more than likely, they will revert to the information-finding tactics most familiar to them (Head and Eisenberg 15). Lessening the transactional distance between students, librarians, and library resources is not merely a matter of face-to-face contact. It is about tackling the asymmetry of students' information literacy skills and a course's student learning outcomes.



Extending the “extraverted” approach to embedded librarianship wherein librarians “push out content at time-appropriate moments,” asynchronous course-integrated instruction incorporates library assignments released at time-appropriate moments (Knight and Loftis 365). In our model, for example, the librarian may create an assignment where students watch a research database tutorial and practice searching for information sources. This occurs during a portion of the course when students are actually researching and drafting a writing assignment, giving them the opportunity to develop and hone information literacy skills at their point of need. Extending this “extraverted” approach, students turn in a research worksheet demonstrating their mastery of the search tool as part of the librarian-administered assignment, also serving the ultimate practical purpose of bibliography building. As in a for-credit information literacy course—which a 2012 study demonstrated to be the best method of teaching information literacy—students enrolled in an online course with for-credit library assignments have multiple touch points to practice information literacy activities (Mery, Newby, and Peng 375). These librarian-administered assignments require a high degree of librarian-faculty collaboration, but the student benefits in this model are great.

Our collaborative experiences in this realm often began as informal emails of bulleted ideas or learning goals. The librarian then pitched information literacy assignment ideas to the instructor, having the potential to morph based on instructor feedback, assignment changes, or adjusted timelines. As the findings in 2012 study also indicate, the asynchronous, for-credit online information literacy courses were found to be more effective than even a synchronous, in-person library session that a student enrolled in a traditional, in-person class experiences (375). In our librarian’s experience, this is also the case. By embedding within a class for a term, a librarian may experience the full gamut of students’ learning processes as well as a much deeper level of commitment than a typical “one-shot” information literacy session. This prolonged and more meaningful exposure to students in their real-time learning environment leads to better understanding of their needs and research missteps. When for-credit, online information literacy courses are not available, it follows that the asynchronous course-integrated model represents the best alternative to teaching information literacy concepts.

### *Tutoring Perspective*

More so than the library instruction and even classroom instruction, conventional tutoring relies heavily on face-to-face methodologies. The reasons for this position are numerous. First, there is the substantial problem-solving element ingrained in the tutoring process. A student seeks tutoring because he or she is often struggling with general and/or specific aspects of the assignment. Ideally, these challenges are worked out collaboratively

in real time, so the dialogic element, integral to tutoring, occurs with maximum fluidity. An ascending proverbial staircase is collaboratively built by student and tutor as each conversation exchange preferably yields an illuminatory experience that further facilitates greater understanding and a more powerful grasp on course content and skills.

This conversational essence is what lends considerable ethos to synchronous tutoring methodologies. Sam Van Horne discusses how synchronous tutoring can connect with students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) to build their understanding of the writing process: "tutors can use specific communication strategies in online synchronous conferences to determine students' situation definitions and prompt them to progress through the ZPD and achieve situation redefinition" (96). Moreover, other scholars, such as Stephen Neaderhiser and Joanna Wolfe, have discussed how synchronous tutoring possesses considerable communicative potential, "synchronous tutoring as offering the best of both worlds, for tutor and student can actively discuss things online and yet both must articulate their contributions in writing where they can be saved for later reference" (50-51). The excitement, fueled by the dynamism resonating with synchronous methodologies, has thus led many to favor synchronous tutoring over asynchronous tutoring options with only technological limitation (of either students or the tutoring center itself) serving as the prominent barrier to offering fully synchronous tutoring programs.

Despite this embrace of online synchronous tutoring methodology, our collaboration has demonstrated that asynchronous tutoring still holds considerable relevance, but this relevance is contingent on our reoccurring themes of transferrable outcomes and reconceptualizing methodologies. In order adequately to offer asynchronous online tutoring that is not merely an online editing/proofreading service, one must first have a strong recognition of what outcomes the asynchronous session should reflect and how a reconfigured methodology should be employed to reach these outcomes. Once again, any asynchronous online instruction should not be conceived as an *exact* digital counterpart to a face-to-face method. Instead, it represents a new form of learning, a different road to venture towards a similar juncture. Moreover, while the desired outcomes may differ depending on the mission of the college and the needs of the students, our tutoring center sought to craft an asynchronous methodology that would foster a dialogue independent of temporal immediacy, one through which a gradual learning experience could be created through a series of preserved digital utterances exchanged back and forth between tutor and student.

How does this ambition work in practice? On the surface, our asynchronous tutoring methods seem overly simplistic. Once the tutor (typically an adjunct) is embedded in the course and promotes the service via our course management system, the entire tutoring process incorporates the most basic technologies, primarily email and the comment feature in

Microsoft Word. However, not unlike how a face-to-face writing tutoring session can resemble a conversation, the *content* of the emails holds substantial learning potential. The initial phase of the session revolves around the tutor examining the structural weaknesses of the essay and translating those weaknesses not in the form of observations (e.g., your thesis statement is too general), but rather as *questions* (e.g., "How might your thesis statement be made more specific?"). Although it requires more time, the tutor is concerned with specific problems rather than general writing skills. Because he or she is embedded in the class and thus aware of the assignment, the tutor is encouraged to dwell on the specifics of the paper, engaging in a dialogue regarding how the specific content of the essay can be rendered in the most effective form. This leads to the second phase of the tutoring session during which, ideally, the student translates those questions into means of improving the paper as well as asking his or her own questions.

This question-based, back-and-forth asynchronous learning experience proves to be rather efficient in terms of yielding a stronger essay. Within three or four exchanges, students and tutors collaboratively engaged in a process that culminated in better essays, which reflects more thorough skill acquisition. This outcome was reflected in the grades as well. In 2011-2012, we offered asynchronous online tutoring to 18 sections of online English composition, and out of the 26% of students who utilized the service, 95% received a C or higher, compared with the 46% of non-users who enjoyed similar success. Naturally, online tutoring alone cannot account for these outstanding numbers; many of these students would have been successful regardless of the program's availability. Nevertheless, having that digital space to workshop essays, gradually improve them, and engage in the process of writing represents a powerful commitment by our college in enabling our students to become better college writers.

Certainly, synchronous methods have more similarities with face-to-face methods, but they are not interchangeable. Face-to-face, synchronous, and asynchronous tutoring possesses their own array of benefits and drawbacks unique to the methodology. Judy Artz, Kristine Barnett, and Jesskya Scoppetta helpfully divide synchronous and asynchronous methods in relation to the writing process, stating, "it is quite possible that we will find that synchronous tutoring suits the early stages of the writing process when writers benefit from conversation, whereas asynchronous tutoring complements the later stages when writers' ideas are more formulated." In the midst of this discussion, our college has enjoyed success with asynchronous methodologies, success that is magnified by the convenience of the service, the limits in technological proficiency of our student population, and the means through which it encourages a process-centered writing process realized through multiple drafts. However, the immediacy of the service is largely disrupted, and some students are frustrated with the turnaround time (in our case, tutors respond to students within 48 hours)

as well as the reality that our program is not a editing service. Regardless, the important takeaway in this investigation is the realization that asynchronous methodologies still hold relevancy in the developing world of online tutoring, particularly when those developing the tutoring program recognize the inherent power embedded in asynchronous technologies and how that power can be allocated to realize specified learning outcomes.

With a growing body of literature and an increasing number of tools at their disposal, instructors have numerous pathways to traverse in terms of updating their online courses, each one approaching the problem of transactional distance in different ways. In reflecting on the nuances of our approach, three crucial themes arise: (1) process reconceptualization, (2) educational outcomes over technological imperatives, and (3) multiplying interactions. All three of these concepts blend together in our program, instilling a powerful interactive potential in our asynchronous methodologies.

### *Process Reconceptualization*

Instructors who attempt to pour their face-to-face pedagogy, assignments, and methods into an online environment will often be dissatisfied with the results. Even with the uncanny ability of synchronous technology to recreate certain features of traditional classrooms, the difficulties generated by transaction distance complicate the process. From the very outset, the three of us collaborated on the shared realization that the processes of practicing college writing would have to be reconceptualized by the online space. Instruction, research, and tutoring—the three fundamental processes within our program—would have to be reconfigured for the digital space. Figure 1 below summarizes important process metamorphoses embedded in our initiative.

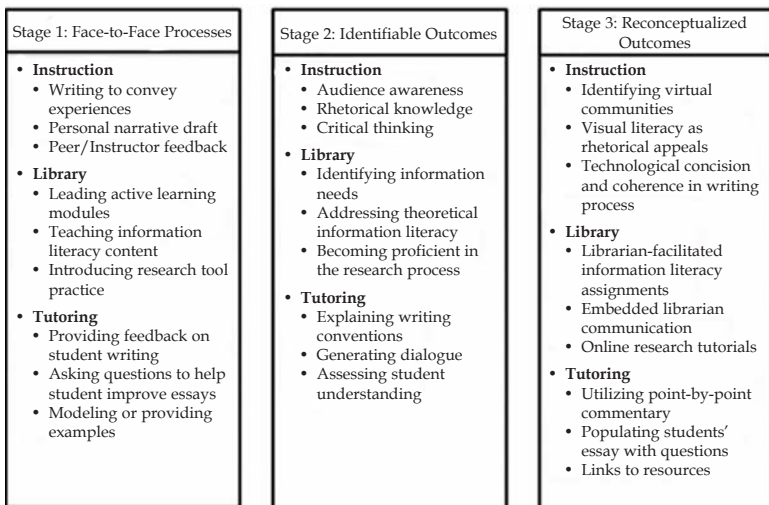


Figure 1. Process reconceptualization progression

For each of these processes, we utilized a reduction-expansion progression. First, we reduced the mainstays of our instructional and support face-to-face programs to the outcomes we hoped the students would learn. As presented here, these concepts range from a variety of program tropes, including modes of instruction, assignments, and means of interaction. After reducing these concepts to their basic components, we recalibrated them to correspond with the technological space we inhabited. The outcomes were more or less the same. However, the processes in achieving these outcomes were reconceptualized and expanded for the digital realm. Sometimes, this was a formal discussion or decision. Other times, it was more of an informal, trial-and-error approach. Regardless, each area of support engaged in an exciting reimagining of their educational processes—specific to an asynchronous online course where spatial-temporal disruptions served as both permanent obstacles in our environment as well as utilized negative space where learning could take place.

### *Educational Outcomes over Technological Imperatives*

Technological imperatives are inherent in any online course. They represent features of technology that become entrenched in the learning experience. Transactional distance is one such imperative. Synchronicity and asynchronicity are as well. Despite this presence, an instructor can choose to perceive technological characteristics as positive, negative, and neutral and react accordingly. Many instructors perceive these elements as positive and seek to incorporate more technology within their online courses. Other instructors look on them in a negative light and can either reduce the influence of technology in their classes or integrate more technology that possesses different forms and functions.

In our collaboration, we saw the technological imperatives within our classroom as neutral concepts. They represented embedded facets of our environment, tools we could utilize, and means through which we could achieve our course outcomes. However, we also perceived technology as having a secondary role in the classroom experience and instead favored educational outcomes as the fundamental essence powering our technological usage and our learning experiences; therefore, our classes would be more outcome-centered (to which we ascribed a positive modality) instead of technology-centered. For every technological usage, there would be a set of outcomes involved. This practice has two implications.

First, instead of technology serving as an educational dead end for students, the outcomes (and processes within them) serve as bridges linking the students back to the instructor, librarian, or tutor, which instills an important humanist component to our courses. For instance, the technology employed by the tutor and librarian (email, resources, tutorial videos, etc.) all functioned as links that lead the student back to a content expert with whom the student can collaborate. Students were not left on the tech-

nological island but rather engage in active process – each ideally building their writing ability. Second, many of the processes behind our technological utilizations directly corresponded with writing processes that are integral to building their compositional knowledge. Figure 2 summarizes the most pertinent process-technology-process constructions:

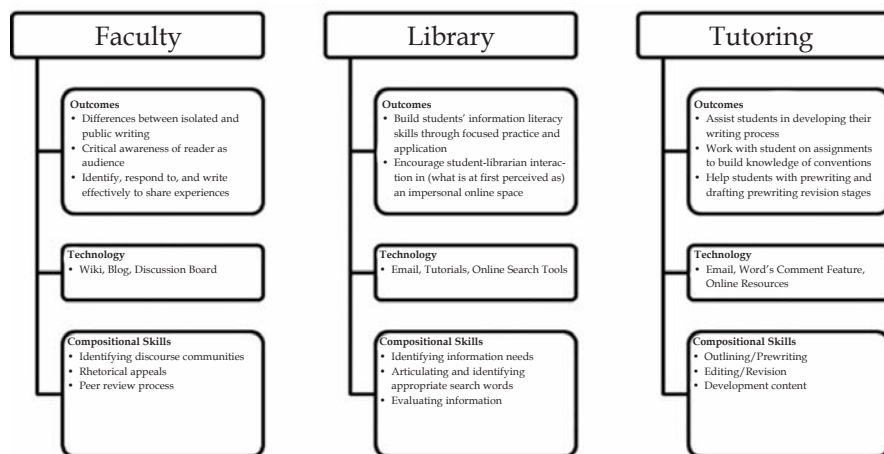


Figure 2. Outcomes to compositional skills representation

Within this approach, much of our technology is nested in processes generating from the content expert that fosters both student-collaboration with the instructor, librarian, or tutor as well as enable students to work independently to further acquire important compositional skills. This occurs dozens of times throughout the course, so that every time students are using a piece of educational technology, the possibility for human interaction takes shape.

### *Multiplying Interactions*

The final theme of the discussion is how our model, by engaging a variety of interactions with different specialists, effectively multiplies the interactions students are exposed to and can utilize within the course, which, in turn, maximizes their potential for learning. More than most fields, composition is about the fluid process of interactivity between students, faculty, and support services such as the library and the tutoring center. Moreover, expanding students' interaction with these different support sites (faculty included) positively influences the students' writing acumen, not only by expanding basic components of composition like vocabulary and rhetorical devices, but also by acquiring the embedded processes necessary to developing their writing process.

What makes our approach so effective is the variety of interactions students can engage with as well as the outcomes these interactions yield in regards to the students' proficiency in the writing process. In addition to the typical set of interactions within an online course (which is traditionally limited to instructor to student as well as student to student), two more potential sites of interaction are added with the inclusion of the librarian and tutor. Figure 3 emphasizes both the three crucial interactive spheres as well as the practices resonating in each relation.

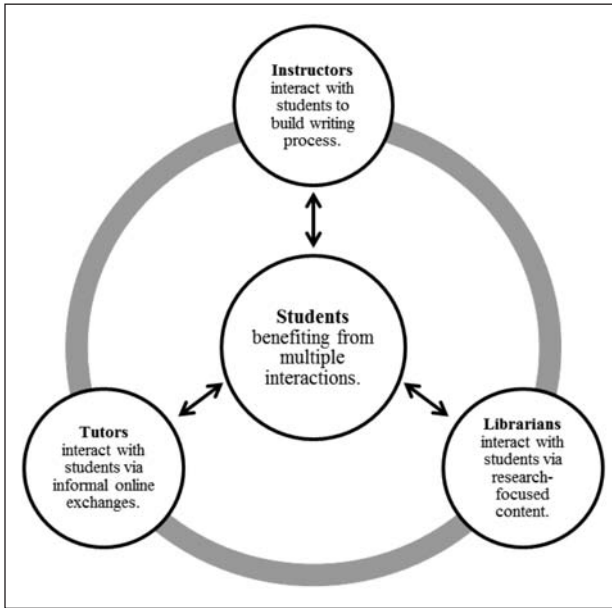


Figure 3. Interaction relational model

Three important outcomes stem from this diagram. The first outcome is that connectivity linking the three spheres. Correlating with the writing process, these interactions involved with instruction (fostering a process-based writing approach), the library (research and information literacy), and tutoring services (prewriting and revision) all come together within the students' writing with each sphere engaging the student in the specific writing practices embedded in the field. The second outcome is that distinctiveness of each field so that even though there are common nuances, each sphere is distinct. This proves important because even though collaboration between the instructor and the support services is implied, there are still interactions independent to the collaboration. This proves important in the tutoring field, which is often perceived as an informal space

where students can share their writing and concerns without the somewhat authoritative connotations linked to their instructor relationship.

The final outcome is the richness exhibited in the students' writing as a result of the multiple interactions invigorating the online course. The emphasis on integral aspects of writing—provided by the librarian and writing tutor—offers the students the opportunity to grow their writing skills, which is reflected in the students' essays. With greater participation, students are more likely to compose essays with stronger development, better grasp of citation conventions, and better source integration. Oftentimes, these skills fall through the gap in a digital space; however, with multiple interactions, students have a more comprehensive classroom experience imbued with a centralized model that, in some sense, makes it superior to the face-to-face counterpart.

## Conclusion

As the distance education movement expands throughout the college landscape, an array of technological processes is becoming integrated into composition, including automation and synchronous methodologies. These processes can hold positive or negative implications depending on one's viewpoint. However, two things remain constant: (1) learning composition (or any subject) online changes several crucial facets of the educational experience, regardless of the technologies involved; and (2) learning how to write is an intensely human process that incorporates a variety of interactions with different individuals. These two principles guided much of our collaboration. One of the greatest challenges in online instructions is breaking the mindset of *replicate* to one of *re-create*. We had long been developing methodologies of support for face-to-face venues, but the opportunity to transfer these methods online required a new vision, one that had each of us re-conceptualize our methods, so we could support students as they achieved course outcomes. For numerous reasons, our technology was simple and asynchronous, but that was not our primary concern. In the case of writing instruction, simplicity is actually advantageous. Because the primary mode of communication in the online classroom is written interactions, students are typically more actively involved in employing a variety of writing forms than in face-to-face instruction. In such a case, technology is simply a medium to facilitate these interactions. True, many who innovate and continually revise the 21st-century digital classroom may criticize our methods as too rudimentary, but we should remind ourselves that composition is possible with just a pad of paper and a pen as long as people come together, share their writing, and learn from one another.

This premise is the foundation of our approach. As William Condon suggests, "The technology, whether synchronous or asynchronous has little impact on the outcome if not used thoughtfully and effectively" (61).



Instead of searching for the right technology to create collaboration, we attempt to maximize the collaborative potential within our technology. We do so by enhancing our online composition courses *with people*. Including the librarian and tutor in the online course is beneficial to student learning because these professionals bring diverse experience, knowledge, and a passion for what they add to students' learning, which enlivens the institutional sterility not uncommon in online courses. Each contribution from the instructor, librarian, and tutor maximizes the potential for the students to make their own contribution—both to the course and their learning, and these contributions are not limited to those perceptible in the students' papers or email exchanges.

In the consideration of synchronous and asynchronous instruction, "better" and "best" are perhaps not the prudent evaluative terms to use. Perhaps these methodologies should be driven by both the possibilities and limitations they present to the student population. Finding the benchmarks that predict success within each platform may serve as the best indicator of choice for institutional support. One certainty is, however, obvious: academic support is vital and should be made available to all students. Discovering ways to enhance this support in the online environment is crucial to the continuance and success of distance learning programs—moreover, to the success of students.

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