Saying Yes to Online Learning: A First-Time Experience Teaching an Online Graduate Course in Literacy Education

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A literacy education professor teams up with a colleague whose specialization is technology and education to analyze students’ contributions to a graduate course taught online for the first time. This article explains the modifications that the instructor made to a face-to-face course to adapt it to an online learning environment. The online format provided an effective forum for in-depth discussion of the topics and issues and for students to develop relationships with their peers and their instructor. Over 60% of students’ notes went beyond descriptions of classroom practices and observations reflecting on practice using the article ideas and evaluating the ideas in the article. On average, students received 3–5 comments from their peers each week and one or two from their instructor. The instructor found a pedagogical advantage in online teaching as a result of the increased accessibility to all students’ thinking about the topics and the greater opportunity for all students to participate fully.

Keywords distance learning, graduate teacher education, online learning

Distance learning has been part of higher education in nearly every discipline and every postsecondary institution for more than a decade. Faculty members have watched nervously as distance courses encroached on their traditional dominion, first as an alternative means of reaching remote students, then as a new opportunity to expand offerings and bolster enrollment and revenue streams. Many instructors who were asked to teach an online course did so tentatively, as teaching online added new challenges while sacrificing the direct personal exchanges that are so important to teaching. It was felt that students at a distance, while hard working and serious about their studies, would be unable to connect meaningfully with their peers or instructors (Kanuka, Collett, & Caswell, 2002). Teaching online could consume even more time and energy than teaching in the classroom, as the instructor had to be perceived by students as being “right there” online with them, leading by example with time and energy commitment, or else students’ participation would quickly fade.

In this context, we present the results of a case study of one graduate online course in literacy taught by an instructor who had never before taught online. The first author is the literacy education professor who designed and taught the course, and the second is a Canada Research Chair in technology and education; both in a department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at a Canadian faculty of education. Having taught in rural communities far from university campuses, the first author believed before she started teaching the course, that online courses provided opportunities that had never before been available to teachers who were not physically able to complete graduate work without considerable personal sacrifice. Her experience was borne out by a review of research on online teaching.
(Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006), which concluded that online instruction “is welcomed by students because it provides learners with convenience and autonomy” (p. 116). Online courses can be taken by participants on their own academic schedule, allowing a professional to earn a degree while still working. This “in vivo” approach to education offers advantages to instruction if students can be engaged in making connections to their ongoing life experiences.

We also view online graduate work as a way for teachers to experience firsthand the affordances of new technologies in their own learning. There is ample research showing that new technologies are changing communication practices in students’ worlds and expanding understandings of what it means to be literate (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Nixon, 2003). Teachers need to be familiar with the new literacies of their students’ lives outside classrooms and teach in ways that build on those literacies.

We begin our report of the research with a review of the literature on two aspects of online learning that are pertinent to our research: interactions among students and with their instructor in online courses and the quality of online learning.

Review of the Literature

Interactions in Online Courses

In both face-to-face and in online formats, interaction among students and between students and their instructor is a critical factor contributing to students’ learning and to their commitment to and satisfaction with their courses (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). Research examining the quality of interactions among students and between students and their instructors in online courses has shown mixed results. Kanuka and Anderson (1998), for example, found a lack of fluidity and conversational language and the absence of negotiated meaning or new knowledge construction in online course interactions. Yet, there are other reports of research findings that asynchronous discourse replicates the dynamics of face-to-face courses (Ahern & El-Hindi, 2000).

Furthermore, some research findings show that students have greater opportunities to contribute and to get feedback from their instructor and peers in the online format than in the face-to-face format (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Schrum & Berge, 1997). Almost half of the females surveyed in Sullivan’s (2002) research found that the sense of anonymity in the online community gave them greater confidence and more opportunities to participate in class discussions than they had experienced in face-to-face settings. Similarly, Althaus (1997) found, in a study of 142 undergraduates, that students earned higher grades when they chose to participate in an online discussion that was an optional component of a face-to-face course. The researchers attributed the higher grades to the greater opportunities to contribute and to reflect on others’ contributions in the online format.

Quality of the Learning in Online Courses

In the absence of face-to-face contact, the interactive nature of online learning necessitates the mediation of communication through print, sound recordings or visual images. Although webcasts and podcasting are becoming more prevalent, writing continues to be a significant form of communication in online courses.

The relationship between writing and thinking has been well documented (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Emig, 1971; Fulwiler & Young, 1982; Tierney, Soter, O’Flahavan, & McGinley, 1989). Fulwiler and Young (1982), for example, explain:
“Writing allows authors to distance themselves from experience and helps them to interpret, clarify and place value on that experience; thus writers can become spectators using language to further define themselves and their beliefs” (p. x). While writing in online learning environments, students have more time to shape their ideas than they do when discussing issues and questions in once-weekly class meetings. The physical processes involved in writing demand sustained attention to a topic. Attention must also be placed on using and/or reshaping the norms and conventions of written language in ways that highlight the intended meaning, rather than obscuring it. All this attention leads to discoveries of new connections between ideas and a fuller understanding of the concepts. In addition, the permanence of the words on the page allows students to revisit their ideas and to modify, refine, or extend their initial thinking. When speaking face to face, the ideas are more ephemeral and fleeting. They cannot be re-examined with the same level of scrutiny that written language can be. The lasting aspect of written ideas allows students to more easily respond to and build on the contributions of others, leading to a more resonant development of ideas.

A number of studies comparing the quality of content-related participation in online and face-to-face formats found that online courses fostered a deeper learning of the course topics because students had more time to think about ideas and information in the assigned readings and their peers’ and instructor’s contributions to course discussions (Davidson-Shivers, Tanner, & Muilenburg; 2000; Rennie & Mason, 2004). In these studies, online instructors, particularly those who were new to online teaching, were surprised about the quality of the dialogue developed online.

Not all research showed such positive learning outcomes of online learning, however. Inaccurate or inconsistent interpretations of readings or peers’ contributions to the online conversations were often unchallenged in Kanuka and Anderson’s (1998) research examining 11 college students’ online learning. The researchers applied a constructivist interaction analysis model to the online course discussions of the 11 participants and found that the majority of the conversations did not move beyond the first of five stages: sharing information and opinions. They found little or no evidence of stage 2 thinking (discovering and exploring dissonance and inconsistencies), stage 3 thinking (negotiating and constructing knowledge), stage 4 thinking (testing and modifying newly constructed knowledge), nor stage 5 thinking (stating and applying new knowledge). Thomas’ (2002) study of undergraduate students’ interactions in an environmental studies course also showed that students’ thinking, as represented in their online course contributions, did not go beyond “picking up ideas.” Students did not integrate ideas, nor extend the ideas to more abstract thinking.

A number of studies concluded that effective teaching is a greatly influential factor in both online and face-to-face teaching. The quality of students’ learning is influenced by the instructor’s input (Collett, Kanuka, Blanchette, & Goodale, 1999). Rohfield and Hiemstra (1995) explained that student learning was enhanced when instructors assumed “the responsibility of keeping discussions on track, contributing special knowledge and insights, weaving together various discussion threads and course components, and maintaining group harmony” (p. 164). One instructor in Lewis and Abdul-Hamid’s (2006) study felt that his/her teaching was more student-centered and that self-assessment was a natural part of teaching in an online format. This instructor said, “When I see what they’ve written, I get to see how they’re learning and I can intervene at that point . . . So, in a sense, the demands of the online [course] make me a better teacher . . . I have to constantly assess what worked and what didn’t work because I have before me weekly the results of what worked or didn’t work” (p. 95).
Based on her reading of previous research and her strong belief in the connections between writing and learning, the first author, unlike the instructors in previous research who had taught online courses for the first time, expected that the quality of students’ learning would be high in the online format. In spite of an awareness of previous research, she was surprised, however, at the degree to which she came to know her students and at the extra effort that many students made to build relationships with their online peers.

In the following sections, we describe the first author’s decision making in designing an online graduate course on theory and practice in literacy learning and teaching, and present an inductive analysis of the interactions between students, peers, and instructors in the course. Our research addresses the following research questions:

1. How did the online format influence students’ building of relationships with each other and with their instructor?
2. How did the online format influence students’ demonstrations of their learning?

Methods

Participants

There were 14 graduate students, 9 female and 5 male, in the course. All were in the same graduate program in curriculum studies and teacher development. Two students had taken a previous online course together, but none of the students were part of a cohort. Ten students were classroom teachers, teacher-librarians, music teachers, special education or English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers (a handful stayed at home with children at the time of the course), two students were school administrators, and two were educational software developers. The nine teachers and two school administrators had been teaching for 5–20 years. Students hailed from northern and western communities in our Canadian province, from two other Canadian provinces, an American state, and from Singapore. Six students lived within an hour’s commuting distance of the university. The majority of students had taken most or all of their graduate courses online.

The instructor had been teaching face-to-face graduate courses in literacy as an education faculty member for 10 years prior to teaching the online course. She was not particularly technologically knowledge and adept, but had numerous resource people in her institution with whom she could consult. She volunteered to teach the course online at a graduate program meeting after the program coordinator identified the great need for such courses within the department.

Research Setting

The instructor had previously taught this graduate course on theory and practice in literacy instruction five times in a face-to-face format. Replacing the weekly three-hour face-to-face meetings with ongoing, asynchronous written conversations placed new demands on her before the course began. Following the recommendations of colleagues who had laid online tracks before her, she framed her course in two-week blocks instead of the weekly themes she had used previously. These blocks included the following topics over the 13 weeks of the semester:

Block 1: 1st week—Introduction to course and each other
Block 2: 2nd and 3rd weeks—Approaches to teaching reading (bottom up and balanced)
Block 3: 4th and 5th weeks—Approaches to teaching reading (top down and multiliteracies)
Research proposal due at end of 3rd week
Block 4: 6th and 7th weeks—Approaches to teaching writing and reading/writing connections
Block 5: 8th and 9th weeks—Socio-cultural issues in literacy
Literature review due at end of 5th week
Block 6: 10th and 11th weeks—Approaches to beginning literacy instruction
Block 7: 12th and 13th weeks—Discussion of students’ research findings
Research paper due at end of 13th week

This gave students time to read, question, think, wonder, argue against, and integrate the ideas that their peers, teacher, and the articles had presented. For the design of the first week, she began with a “getting to know each other” activity that served a secondary purpose of developing online skills such as: creating notes, building on peers’ notes, creating links to websites, and uploading documents.

Having a week without readings also provided a time buffer for students who had not been in touch with the instructor to get directions for ordering the course package prior to the class start date (students are asked to contact their instructor when they register for an online course). In Canada, the copyright rules do not allow instructors to post a copy of course readings on the course website for students to download. Simple links on the Internet can be provided. However, if articles that do not have Internet links are used, then students must be sent hard copies of the articles. The instructor asked a local copy shop that had purchased rights to copy educational materials to produce the package and mail it to students who were unable to pick it up at the store. The two students who lived outside the country did not receive the materials in time for the second week discussions. Their participation was constrained because of lack of access to the readings. After consulting with other online instructors, the first author has found that this is a common frustration; one that she intends to try to overcome by using Registrar information to contact her students weeks before the course begins.

The course used the Knowledge Forum software, in which online discussions progress as a series of aggregating notes (and notes upon notes)—leading to the development of a knowledge community (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994). Appendix A provides further details of this introductory activity for the course, which included the following distinct “views”:

1. Announcements View—where the instructor posted logistical information and course details in order to ensure that the only surprises cropping up for students were pleasant ones.
2. Coffee Break View—Similar to the breaks in conventional three-hour classes that provide students with a chance to get to know each other, the coffee break view provided a forum for casual conversation. (Like instructors in Lewis and Abdul-Hamid’s (2006) study, the instructor created a space where students could chat about topics unrelated or peripherally related to course content and get to know each other.)

The specific assignments also looked different from those in the face-to-face version of the course. Once again, colleagues who were veterans of online instruction alerted the instructor that students would be putting huge amounts of time into their online contributions. Thus, she revised her evaluation scheme to recognize the rigors of the online interactions by devoting 40% of the grade to students’ contributions of notes within the Knowledge Forum. Appendix B provides the scoring guide used to assess students’ contributions. In personal e-mails, the instructor sent students qualitative feedback on their contributions in the sixth week and the 13th week of the course.
The major assignment of the course, an empirical study into a question related to literacy, was also modified in order to succeed within the constraints of the online medium. Students were required to submit an initial research proposal (worth 10% of their grade) early in the semester. This research proposal, together with the online conversations that took place before it was submitted, replaced the meetings that the instructor previously held with students in the face-to-face version of the course. Students then submitted a literature review for their research study (worth 15% of the grade) and finally, the results of their research (worth 35% of the grade), just as they would have done in a face-to-face class.

Online conversations in each two-week block were structured around sets of readings on a particular literacy topic. For each new block of readings, the instructor introduced the articles and provided some guiding questions (in the form of Knowledge Forum “notes”) to initiate the conversations. She drew on the work of Greene and Land (2000), who had found that guiding questions helped students to focus their thinking about course content. One note provided a broad picture of the topic and the readings. Other notes addressed specific readings. While these notes were given to students as possible starting points, they were always encouraged to pick up on threads of the topic/article that interested them, and to pursue those ideas further.

In this way, a new online version of an existing course was forged. Because this was the instructor’s first effort to teach in this format, she made an effort to retain as much of the earlier successful course content and activities. Still, it was clear from the outset that the shift in course format would require changes to the syllabus, to the assignments and to the assessment rubric. These changes were made to address the “longer wavelength” of online exchanges, and to give value to the heightened emphasis on the written word.

**Data Sources and Data Analysis**

To answer our research questions about students’ learning and their building of relationships, we analyzed two two-week blocks of course online discussion notes. Within the two-week blocks, the number of notes within a particular topic thread ranged from 113 in the sixth block (on the topic of beginning reading and writing) to 161 in the fourth round (on the topic of writing theories). After an initial analysis of a small set of notes, we met to come to an agreement on the categories and then continued the analysis of students’ written notes from the second and the fifth of the two-week blocks. We chose the second block because it offers insight into students’ introductions and initial ideas, and the fifth block because it was close to the end of the course, but not the final block when students were preoccupied with their final projects. In addition, just prior to the start of the fourth block, the instructor had sent students feedback relating to their online contributions. Thus, it was expected that the notes from the fifth block would represent more thoughtful, reflective content from students’ online exchanges.

In the second block, on the topic of reading theories, there were 141 notes in total, including the four notes used by the instructor to set up the discussions. In the fifth block, on the topic of sociocultural issues, there were 147 notes, including the four notes used by the instructor to set up the discussions. Through inductive analysis of the notes, we identified three types of notes:

1. **Personal Connection to Readings**: interpreting, critiquing, questioning, extending, or supporting the ideas in the article with personal experiences.

*Example: Here, the student examines his classroom interactions through the lenses offered by two of the theorists in the articles.*
Note Title: Power

I have taken more than a few courses that have discussed this culture of power, and those who believes it exists and does not. Being a white male from an upper-middle class background, I did not see how this ‘culture of power’ existed in today’s society. However, this does fit with Delpit’s idea that ‘those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence” (p. 282).

My reasoning for this stems back to the fact that I also had to work very hard to achieve the things that I have achieved in my life. Because I may be the one who has “power” does not mean that I can simply coast through life and things will be given to me because of it.

However, after reading the Heath article as well and reflecting on the students that are currently attending my school, I can see how even though I had to work for my accomplishments, it may be a harder—and definitely is a different—battle that those who are stereotypically “without power” have to face.

In terms of Delpit’s conclusions, I have always felt a certain responsibility to provide students with the skills to be successful in the “real world.” I currently have a bulletin board that has English and Spanish terminology and sentences, and encourage the Spanish-speaking students to use the English side of the board and also the English students to use the Spanish side. I have had the conversation with my students as a whole about formal and informal language and the implications of both. My classroom, I like to believe is a culture of constructive criticism. Students correct each other as well as myself when we do not use professional or formal language. I do believe, as Delpit put it, that those with power have a responsibility to teach those without the reasons for this power struggle.

(2) Knowledge Building notes: building on peers’ ideas by questioning, stating beliefs, observations, answering questions, describing personal experiences to topics that stemmed from the readings.

Example: This student builds on ideas that had been contributed in earlier discussions.

Note Title: Hidden Curriculum

Hmm, the “hidden curriculum” . . . I remember having a discussion in another course (curriculum-based) where it was argued that there really shouldn’t be a hidden curriculum. That we, as teachers have to be explicit in all of our expectations. But I wasn’t completely sold. I’m not sure that it’s possible not to have a hidden curriculum. It seems to fit as you say with Delpit’s theory of power. We expect our students to behave in a specific way and when they don’t a flag of concern is raised. Perhaps a student doesn’t participate or understand a lesson that seems natural to others in the class. Is it a sign that they don’t have the ability . . . or have we not used language and methods that the student will respond to, or perhaps have we used language and methods that the student will not respond to?

This is a difficult situation to judge. We want to treat our students equally, but by doing so we seem (to Delpit) to be placing some students at a disadvantage. Delpit suggests that we should answer these communication difficulties through “identifying and giving voice to alternative world views.” Easier said than done, but it’s certainly something to be conscious of.
(3) **Relationship Building notes**: agreeing, cheering on, thanking, hoping, joking with peers or instructor.

*Example:* Here, a student commends a peer for a link to an article that inspired thought.

**Note title: Wow!**

Thank-you, (student’s name)! That was a wonderful, thought provoking article you gave us. For me, it was very eye opening.

It also allowed me to visualize issues through the “Canadian” lens.

The instructor viewed her role as that of contributing notes that motivated discussion, clarified ambiguities, or offered general insight. Here are some examples of the instructor’s responses to students’ notes:

**Note Title: The Web and Culture of Power**

Indeed, the categories that Delpit writes about in terms of inequities don’t have as much relevance when communicating on the web. No one knows who you are and you can even create a different persona on the Web. I guess we all picture what the person looks like or sounds like who is writing a blog or email or whatever electronic text we read, but our assumptions are based on the language the person uses and the things they write about. In one respect, I guess the Web opens up other ways of being that are valued—I’m thinking that the way I write would not be valued if I entered into my nieces’ MSN messages, for example. I don’t know the symbols and expressions that these adolescent girls use to communicate, so I’d probably be caught as an outsider in no time at all.

**Note Title: Filling Up the Backpack**

Marie Clay, in “Change over Time” wrote that teachers need to fill up the backpacks of children who might not have all the knowledge and experiences that would be considered fundamental and would be assumed to be in the backpacks. She developed Reading Recovery™ with the belief that every child’s backpack could be filled, regardless of what was in it when she/he came to school. Myself, I have a lot of faith in good teaching to build on what every child brings to school.

We noted many examples where students included relationship-building comments in addition to article-based and peer-based notes. We calculated percentages of each type of note for students’ notes and for the instructor’s notes within each block.

To determine the depth of thinking in each of the notes, we used a three-point scale. A score of 1 was given when students simply described classroom observations or teaching ideas, asked questions, agreed with peers, or stated their beliefs. A score of 3, was given when students evaluated ideas from the articles, weighing them against their own experiences and observations, extended the ideas to new contexts, elaborated on the ideas using readings from other courses, the Internet, or general reading, as well as ideas from presentations, etc. Students also made inferences about the ideas in the articles and critiqued current practices using these ideas. A score of 2 was assigned if the note was more than an observation, teaching idea or belief, but did not show the depth of thinking that merited a score of 3. We each read each note and assigned a score from...
1 to 3. Where disagreement arose, we discussed our rationales for the scores we assigned and came to consensus.

Findings

Our analysis of the online interactions in blocks 2 and 5 revealed these key findings:

1. Building relationships and creating a class community was a strong component of the online interactions.
2. The online format provided an effective forum for in depth discussion of the topics and issues, with students demonstrating growth in terms of the depth of their thinking as the course progressed.

Relationship Building

In order to measure the inclusiveness of online conversations, we identified the number of contributions made by each student and the number of times that peers and the instructor responded to each student’s notes. In the coffee break view, one student asserted the importance of knowing that peers and the instructor were paying attention to what she had written, and how this helped her feel like a valued member of the community. She wrote: “I always check to see who is reading my notes.” Knowing that others from the class were reading and interacting with what had been contributed was extremely valuable to the level of involvement in the class.

As Table 1 shows, three students in block 2 did not receive any responses. These students had not received the package of readings delivered by mail as print documents, so they were not able to make many contributions until the last day of the block. In block 5 all students received responses from the instructor but two students who posted their contributions toward the end of the two-week block did not receive responses from peers. Overall, however, students received more than one response, with 35.8% in block 2 and 49.9% in block 5 receiving 3–6 responses from peers. One of the two students who received the greatest number of responses often asked questions about classroom issues related to the readings. The other provided additional readings and offered advice to the inquiring student. On average, students received 3–5 comments from their peers each week and one or two from their instructor. Overall, this produced an atmosphere of dynamic, sociable interaction.

Students and their instructor devoted time and energy to building community throughout the course. The instructor integrated encouragement and other rapport-building discourse into notes about the themes and topics for each block, but did not write notes that were exclusively oriented to community or relationship building. Table 2 shows that approximately 55% of the instructor’s notes were peer-based in both blocks. In block 2, 54.5% and in block 5, 57.8% of students’ notes were peer based. Slightly less than 10% of students’ notes and none of the instructor’s notes were solely written for the purpose of developing relationships in both blocks. Notes that contained some relationship-building language were evident in 27.7% of the instructor’s and 25.7% of the students’ notes in block 2. When writing notes on the articles or on topics raised by peers in block 5, students were less likely to include relationship-building elements, with only 11.1% of the article-based and peer-based notes containing such elements.
| Number of responses | Block 2 | | | Block 5 | | | |
|---------------------|---------|----------------|---------|----------------|-------|
|                     | **Number of students receiving these responses** | **Number of students receiving these responses** | **Number of students receiving responses from peers** | **Number of students receiving these responses from instructor** | **Frequencies** | **Percentages** | **Frequencies** | **Percentages** |
|                     | Frequencies | Percentages | Frequencies | Percentages | Frequencies | Percentages | Frequencies | Percentages |
| 0 responses         | 3          | 21.4        | 2           | 14.4        | 2          | 14.4        | 0          | 0.0          |
| 1–2 responses       | 3          | 21.4        | 5           | 35.6        | 1          | 7.1         | 9          | 64.2         |
| 3–4 responses       | 2          | 14.4        | 5           | 35.6        | 3          | 21.4        | 3          | 21.4         |
| 5–6 responses       | 3          | 21.4        | 2           | 14.4        | 4          | 28.5        | 2          | 14.4         |
| 7–10 responses      | 3          | 21.4        | 0           | 0.0         | 2          | 14.4        | 0          | 0.0          |
| 11–17 responses     | 0          | 0.0         | 0           | 0.0         | 2          | 14.4        | 0          | 0.0          |
Table 2
Types of notes that students wrote in two 2-week blocks of the course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of note</th>
<th>Block 2 (Topic of readings: Reading theories)</th>
<th>Block 5 (Topic of readings: Sociocultural issues)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|                                          | Students’ notes  
\( n = 101 \) | Instructor’s notes  
\( n = 36 \) | Students’ notes  
\( n = 109 \) | Instructor’s notes  
\( n = 34 \) |
| Article-based                            | 37  36.6 | 16  44.4 | 37  33.9 | 15  44.1 |
| Peer-based                               | 55  54.5 | 20  55.6 | 63  57.8 | 19  55.9 |
| Relationship-building                    | 9  8.9 | 0  0.0 | 9  8.3 | 0  0.0 |
| Elements of relationship-building found in article- and peer-based notes | 26  25.7 | 10  27.7 | 12  11.1 | 10  29.4 |

*Note.* The percentages of article-based, peer-based, and relationship-building notes add up to 100. The category, “elements of relationship building found in article-based and peer-based notes” is a subset of the article-based and peer-based notes.
Students’ Learning

Table 3 shows that more than a third (36.6% in block 2 and 33.9% in block 5) of students’ notes were article based and just over 44% of the instructor’s notes were based on the readings in both blocks. Our analysis of all notes written by students showed that 62.7% of block 2 notes and 71.3% of block 5 notes went beyond descriptions of classroom practices and observations (a score of 1) to reflecting on practice using the article ideas and evaluating the ideas in the article (see Table 3). Overall, their course contributions reflected deep, focused thought on the topics and themes of the course. There was a slight decrease in the percentage of notes demonstrating the highest level of thinking between block 2 and block 5 (from 42.3% to 40.5%), although the frequency of notes remained the same at 58. Perhaps the strongest evidence of students’ growth is that they contributed 10% more notes in block 5, as compared to notes in block 2 that demonstrated thinking beyond the superficial, descriptive level (level 2).

In summary, students’ learning was evident in the increase in more nuanced and reflective notes from block 2 to block 5, and the corresponding decrease in more superficial descriptive notes that they contributed to the ongoing conversations about topics raised in the readings. Students’ comments were article-based in approximately one-third of the notes in each block. What was particularly remarkable was the extent to which students extrapolated on the article topics and responded to topics that their peers raised. In this respect, the online course was surprisingly socially interactive. Students and their instructor also found ways to build relationships with each other—student to student and student to instructor—by either writing affinity-centered notes (students only) or by folding relationship-building comments into article-centered notes (instructor and students). The online environment was quite inclusive, in that almost all students received responses from their peers and all students received
comments from the instructor. While all students contributed at least one note to the discussions, there was a wide range in the number of responses that students received from peers. The number of peer responses appeared to depend on the frequency and timing of their contributions and whether they had included invitations for response from peers and instructor.

**Implications for Teaching Online Courses**

We found that the highly interactive format of graduate seminars was well suited for adaptation to online instruction. The small group and whole group discussions that often characterize graduate seminars are readily mapped onto an online format. Moreover, there is a pedagogical advantage in online teaching because both the students and the instructor have increased accessibility to all students’ thinking about the topics and there is greater opportunity for all students to participate fully. As in Sullivan’s (2002) study, the first author had found that in the face-to-face class meetings, attempts at whole-group discussions often provided a forum for the ideas of the more self-confident, assertive students who readily voiced their perspectives and insights in a large group. Students who were nervous about airing their views in front of their peers tended to fade into the background of such conversations, in spite of the instructor’s efforts to include them. When she tried to provide a forum for all students to participate fully by asking them to form small groups, she was then herself only privy to snippets of what students were talking about. If she chose to sit with one group in each class, she would only hear a few students’ ideas. Students in those small groups also had access only to the perspectives of those in their own group. In the asynchronous online class, however, all students as well as the instructor had access to the entire corpus of ideas in the discussion.

The opportunities for the instructor to extend and direct students’ conversations into new directions are greatly increased with online learning, as well. The first author was able to introduce spontaneously relevant theorists and research studies to students in her online contributions, broadening students’ experience with information relevant to their perspectives and questions on the articles and topics of each two-week block. In that respect, the two-week blocks worked well. The depth of understanding of literacy topics, as demonstrated by students’ weekly online contributions was noticeably deeper than what the instructor had observed previously in her face-to-face small-group and whole-group discussions. In part, as found in previous research (Greene & Land, 2000), that depth could be attributed to the notes and starting points that she provided at the beginning of each two-week block. It could also be attributed to the instructor’s continuous and prompt feedback, as previous research conducted by McIссас, Blocher, Mahes, and Vrasidas (1999) showed that students’ positive learning experiences in online courses correlated with the instructor’s ongoing participation in the conversations. One student even asked for permission to share some of the starting notes with another university instructor who was teaching online courses. Another student wrote in an e-mail at the end of the course: “You have been so supportive and elaborative in answering and commenting on all of our questions, points of view and personal/classroom stories.” Our findings support Greene and Land’s (2000) conclusion that students benefit from back-and-forth discussion with their instructors to help them clarify and extend their understanding of course content.

Instruction in online courses demands that the instructor be deeply engaged in the class community in order to make sure all learners are participating fully. Without a
high level of care and engagement, the instructor will quickly lose the attention and respect of students, and the community will never form (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). The amount of structure and instructor input varies with students’ needs. Graduate students generally desire more autonomy, whereas undergraduate students tend to need more dialogue and structure from their instructors (Kanuka, Collett, & Caswell, 2002). Like the instructors in Lewis and Abdul-Hamid’s (2006) study, the first author was conscious of the need to be fully engaged in the classroom community and at the same time, to provide space for a healthy flow of student conversation that encouraged discoveries and new learning, and challenged students to take responsibility for their learning.

There is no question that online instructors could be actively involved in the course they are teaching at any time of day, any day of the week (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). The first author tried to create space for herself each week day to check the course website. Usually there was little activity in the first 3–4 days following the posting of topics for discussion at the beginning of a block. Thus, while some days the website check took only a few minutes, on other days responding to students’ notes took 60–90 minutes. Having more than 14 students in the class would certainly have made the time commitment burdensome if the first author intended to continue the high level of interaction with students.

The ongoing interaction with students provided learning opportunities that could only be matched in face-to-face courses if the teacher was extremely fastidious in requesting submissions from students in order to provide formative feedback. Such regular access to students’ thinking about the readings might be made possible through videotaping student interaction in small groups or asking students to write their responses following whole-group discussions. In the online version of the course, because students’ contributions to the learning conversations were written, there was greater opportunity for reflection and a greater sense of ownership and commitment to their ideas. The asynchronous format allowed students to enter into the discussions when they were ready, with available time. Students were able to read their peers’ and instructor’s notes as many times as they needed and had more time to reflect and make connections to their own teaching practices than would have been afforded in face-to-face classes. Having a greater percentage of the course grade devoted to such ongoing participation also instilled a greater sense of commitment to learning the content of the course. The students found the e-mails sent by their instructor providing feedback to be very supportive of learning.

To design courses that engage students and capitalize on the new affordances of online instruction, course instructors might take advantage of the connectivity between students by adding peer review, brainstorming, wiki authoring, reflection, and critiquing activities. Even when simply mapping an existing face-to-face course onto an online offering, there is an important process of adjusting the design to fit the new medium. In some cases, it may even be that a course originally taught in the classroom is better suited to an online format than to a lecture or seminar format. These are questions that educators are only beginning to address, and that will require many years of trial and refinement. Only through the application of general principles to specific course designs within an instructional domain can we come to understand the nuances of effective online instruction. To that end, we hope we have richly illustrated this one case in terms of the challenges of the topic domain, the pedagogical objectives of the course, the design of activities and assessments, and the achievement of students.
References


Sullivan, P. (2002). “It’s easier to be yourself when you are invisible”: Female college students discuss their online classroom experiences. *Innovative Higher Education, 27*, 129–143.


First Week Activities

This activity gives everyone a chance to find out whom we’re conversing electronically with and to try out the various technical skills that are needed to do a course online.

Use the information in the view “Web KF—Getting Started” to help you carry out this activity by September 18.

1. Create a new note by writing a short bio of yourself. Please use these questions as a starting point (you can add new items or ignore particular ones on this list):

   A) In what city and country are you living and what do you like best or find most unique about where you live?
   B) What makes you stand out from others? What is unique about you?
   C) What is your teaching assignment/other work that you are doing right now?
   D) What led you to the work that you’re doing right now?
   E) What do you enjoy reading? Are there authors/journalists/bloggers whose work you really enjoy/admire? What is enjoyable/admirable about their work?

2. Write a title for this note. Use your answer to question (B) above to help you shape your title.

3. Create a link to a web site that gives information about the author/journalist/blogger that you admire.

4. Write a 50–100-word review in Word or Word Perfect of one of the best book/newspaper article/web site/blog, etc. you’ve read lately. Then upload the document, creating a link that others can click on to read your review.

5. Build on to someone else’s note.

Voila! You’ve done all the things that you’ll need to do in an online course.
I’m looking forward to reading your notes to get to know all of you!

Shelley
## Appendix B

Scoring criteria for online contributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Total: 40 points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Initiates and builds on ideas with relevant new information or original thought</td>
<td>___ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To a great degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To some degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Asks reflective and probing questions</td>
<td>___ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To a great degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To some degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Connects theory to examples/practice</td>
<td>___ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To a great degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To some degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Shows thorough understanding of course content and concepts</td>
<td>___ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To a great degree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To some degree</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ No</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Supports the community</td>
<td>___ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To a great degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To some degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Contributes 2–3 times/week or more on average</td>
<td>___ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To a great degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To some degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reads 60–70% or more of the notes weekly</td>
<td>___ Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To a great degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ To some degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>