An Emerging Model for Student Feedback: Electronic Distributed Evaluation

Beth Brunk-Chavez and Annette Arrigucci

In this article we address several issues and challenges that the evaluation of writing presents individual instructors and composition programs as a whole. We present electronic distributed evaluation, or EDE, as an emerging model for feedback on student writing and describe how it was integrated into our program’s course redesign. Because the curriculum and delivery were significantly redesigned, the evaluation of students’ work required reconsideration. The redesign opened a space for us to interrogate grading practices at the individual classroom/instructor level, at the programmatic level, and at a more theoretical level.

Even as Kathleen Blake Yancey observes a “fourth wave” of writing assessment emerging in 1999 (“Looking” 500), it seems that composition grading practices have changed very little in the past few decades. While assessment theorists such as Bob Broad and Brian Huot encourage the development of local standards, and Yancey promotes assessment as a knowledge-making endeavor (484-85), grading in composition courses is not well understood and largely left to individual instructors to work out on their own. Concerns over instructor workload, fairness in assigning grades, and uniformity of grading standards are common for many composition programs. Moreover, even as online and/or hybrid courses have become permanent fixtures across the country, and as scholars such as Diane Penrod and Carl Whithaus put forth new frameworks for grading as composing moves into the twenty-first century, it seems many composition programs have yet to fully incorporate technology into grading.

In this article we address issues and challenges that the evaluation of writing presents individual instructors and composition programs as a whole. We will then present electronic distributed evaluation, or EDE, as an emerging model for feedback on student writing and describe how it was integrated into our program’s course redesign.

Institutional Context of Course Redesign

Faced with a variety of challenges familiar to many composition programs—increasing enrollment; an “out-dated” curriculum; the preparation of graduate teaching assistants; and the retention of undergraduate students from their first to second year at the university—our composition program implemented a large-scale redesign, facilitated, in part, by
the National Center for Academic Transformation and funded by a Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board grant. The redesign of English 1312, the second-semester first-year composition course, sought to meet Anne Beaufort’s recommendation that writing courses should be “taught with an eye toward transfer of learning” (7), as well as to embody her five domains of process, rhetorical, genre, subject-matter, and discourse community knowledge (19). With assignments designed to incorporate each of these domains, students learn and practice strategies for a variety of writing contexts and discourse communities that they may encounter in the academy and in the workplace (9-12). In place of argument-based secondary research papers, students now work on projects such as a discourse community map, a comparative genre analysis, and a literature review and primary research report. To better equip students with the technological skills and strategies needed to communicate effectively, the redesign integrated digital literacies into the curriculum as well as the delivery. Digital projects include a collaborative documentary and an advocacy website, and all sections are taught as hybrids where students meet in class for 80 minutes once a week and complete the remainder of their work online.

Because the curriculum and delivery were significantly redesigned, the evaluation of students’ work required reconsideration. The redesign opened a space for us to interrogate grading practices at the individual classroom/instructor level, at the programmatic level, and at a more theoretical level.

Issues with Evaluating Writing

Assessment theory has developed and changed significantly over the past 60 years, as Yancey, Edward M. White, Peter Elbow, Richard Haswell, Huot, and others have shown us. However, as Yancey also notes, for most colleges and universities little has changed with the long-standing model of writing assessment/evaluation in composition classrooms: “Our model of teaching composing … (still) embodies the narrow and the singular in its emphasis on a primary and single human relationship: the writer in relation to the teacher” (“Made” 309). Yancey further describes the traditional model of delivery for composition courses as a “one-to-one tutorial model” where compositionists have sought to “reduce class size … to conference with students, to respond vociferously to each student paper, and to understand that in our students’ eyes we are the respondent who matters” (310). The labor-intensive nature of assessing student writing is one reason, among several, for keeping class sizes low.

Composition programs, however, are challenged to deliver the one-to-one tutorial model. From an administrative viewpoint, the tutorial model is expensive. While other first-year classes are taught in large lecture halls, composition programs struggle with the costs of hiring enough qualified instructors to keep courses within the 20 to 25 NCTE-recommended class size. While some predicted and cautioned that online learning would allow administrators to increase class sizes, it appears that while reducing the
classroom space required, it has had little effect on course capacities, and rightly so when one instructor is still responsible for commenting on and evaluating the whole of students’ writing.

A second challenge is that writing program administrators need to hire instructors who have composition backgrounds, yet programs often rely on teaching assistants and adjunct faculty who may not be well-prepared to teach writing. In “The Long Revolution in Composition,” Anne Ruggles Gere voices what many have observed: “The teaching of composition is often entrusted to graduate students with little classroom experience or to literature specialists with no training in composition, and some departments still appoint as WPAs persons who have no expertise in composition” (128). Yancey observes that “the result of this staffing practice … is that composition itself is too often not defined as the concepts, materials, and methods of a discipline” (“Delivering” 204). Instead, the courses may reflect the varied expertise, interests, and preferences of the individual instructors.

Third, issues such as grade inflation and instructor bias are concerns for instructors and WPAs. National data suggests that “grade inflation has been an issue in academia since the 1960s” (Rojstaczer and Healy). Reasons for this are many, and they include pressures to retain students, instructor attitudes, and “subjective and motivational factors” such as student improvement, effort, and persistence in the course (Schiming). Realizing that true objectivity is never attainable, compositionists often question the fairness of assigning grades to student writing. For example, a group of composition instructors acknowledge some of the issues underlying grade inflation in their 1998 article “The Conversation Continues: A Dialogue on Grade Inflation.” Nick Carbone states:

It’s easy to see, now, that students would think effort was worth an A. … Because the standards are different and difficult to explain sometimes, and because many teachers design courses where students are meant to succeed, not wash out, and because many teachers work extra hard at helping students do well, who regard students’ lack of success as sometimes a teaching failure on their part, it’s easy to see where the charges come from about grade inflation and low standards. (190)

In other words, the nature of many writing classes, and the attitudes of many instructors, lead students to believe that it’s not entirely the quality of their work, but the extent of their efforts in the class that should earn them a successful grade. It’s possible that this pedagogical approach can be detrimental for students who succeed in the class by trying hard rather than becoming competent in the coursework.

Beyond the general approach to the class, student grades may also be affected by instructors’ individual perceptions of students. Melanie Sperling found that an experienced teacher she observed responded differently to students at different ability levels, creating different social experiences for each student (199). For example, to a student who enjoyed writing, the
instructor showed herself as “positive, peer-like, and sympathetic” to the student’s experience. To a student who was a non-native speaker of English, her comments were “negative, didactic, and focused on the mechanics of his text” (192). While Sperling does not negatively comment on the instructor’s shifts in response, she writes that the data “raise questions regarding the relationship between classroom experience and student differences” (193). These findings point to the difficulty of treating each student equally when evaluating their writing.

Fourth, studies of student and instructor preparation for, as well as attitudes toward, commenting and assessment indicate that there is room for improvement in commenting and grading practices. In 1982, Nancy Sommers wrote that, “for the most part, teachers do not respond to student writing with the kind of thoughtful commentary which will help students to engage with the issues they are writing about or which will help them think about their purposes and goals in writing a specific text” (154). More recently, Maria O. Treglia notes the “contradictory and confusing” results of studies examining types of commentary made by L1 and L2 teachers. She finds that research not only reveals disagreement in response approaches but also leads some to question the usefulness of written commentary in general (68). Although her findings suggest that students’ revision practices are more dependent on the writing task or revision suggested in the instructor’s comment than the nature, or wording, of the comment, she also makes the important point that “what works for one student and instructor may not work in another context or between another teacher and student” (84). Therefore, instructors need to comment and evaluate writing in ways that help students succeed in any writing situation, not just their individual classes.

Compositionists have devised a range of solutions to mitigate these concerns. Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow propose contract grading, in which all students receive an agreed-upon minimum grade for completing certain criteria (246), as a way to “resist grade inflation” (252) and make grading less subjective to the preferences of the individual instructor (255). Additionally, data from studies on collaborative grading by George S. Peek, and Nedra Grogan and Donald A. Daiker, have shown that anonymous, collaborative grading is “more rigorous than the traditional method” (Peek 76) and tends to lower grades slightly, “between a third and half a grade” (Grogan and Daiker 29). Still, given these several challenges, it would stand to reason that students enrolled in different sections within one program would receive highly diverse educations in writing and would be evaluated quite differently depending on the background, interests, and experiences of the instructor. The instructors, however, are not to be blamed, as these hiring practices and lack of program cohesiveness have long been issues for many writing programs. Fred Kemp agrees that the challenges stem from a failure of administrators, “who are pretty good with ideas but maybe not so good at managing organizations” (“Computers” 106). We need to do a better job of turning composition theories into action at the programmatic
level. EDE is our First-Year Composition program’s attempt to acknowledge these challenges at the individual and the program level, devise solutions for these challenges, and put them into action.

**EDE as an Emerging Model**

As mentioned, the redesign of our curriculum and delivery required that our program reconsider our traditional grading practices because, in large part, “the changes wrought in writing with technology would produce different writing, and that different writing would call for different assessment methods” (Herrington, Hodgson, and Moran 204). We also desired to address systemic inefficiencies with grading practices that varied widely from course to course, tended toward grade inflation, and consumed a great amount of time for the instructors. Our redesign was committed to seeing that all students meet the same goals and objectives for the course, as well as to providing consistent high-quality and fair feedback on all projects. With a more rhetorically-informed curriculum, and one where students would be encouraged to publish their work, the program also sought to create an environment where students would learn to write for an unfamiliar audience rather than their singular instructor. Therefore, we sought a new model of evaluation.

Similarly faced with an increase in enrollment, the varied preparation and proficiencies of First-Year Composition students, as well as the reliance on graduate students as instructors, Texas Tech University created software called TOPIC² to implement distributed learning and assessment for its First-Year Composition courses in 1999, making it the first composition program to evaluate student writing using this method. According to Rebecca Rickly, a Texas Tech writing program administrator, the system has enabled First-Year Composition to be administered in a way that is in line with program goals. The courses provide “more and varied writing experiences,” “timely, helpful feedback,” and “frequent peer and self-critique” (191). She claims the curriculum is more “criteria-driven,” and the program is “fiscally responsible” (193). She also notes that with TOPIC, students at Texas Tech receive a more uniform education across course sections because standardized criteria for each project are presented in class and then used by what Texas Tech calls “document instructors”—or graders—to assess the drafts and final versions of the projects (194). Finally, another benefit is an improvement in the quality of comments on and evaluation of student projects. Rickly finds that, “the criteria-based feedback [students] received clarified what was wrong and right with their writing and gave them focused, specific direction to improve” (194). Additionally, students can rate the quality of the feedback they receive, allowing for the continual improvement of the document instructors’ work.

While Texas Tech laid the foundation for innovative approaches to the teaching and evaluation of student writing, our program thought it important to create a system organically, one that reflects our local program goals and challenges. Thus, eight months before piloting EDE, a collaborative of
Instructors drafted and revised what would become the common assignments of the program, the scoring guides used to evaluate students’ projects, and the steps involved in the new grading system. We piloted 20 sections of the redesigned course in the first year. During this period, full-time lecturers and PhD students provided feedback and revised the course and its processes as needed. Over time, the program has settled on using EDE to evaluate four of the course’s six major projects (and provide draft comments for two of these), for 70% of the grade. Instructors evaluate two major assignments, for the remaining 30%³ and assign the final grade.

Although some of the details and sub-processes have changed as we continuously improve, the following steps have remained constant. On scheduled dates throughout the semester, students upload their drafts and final projects to a website that randomly distributes the submissions and makes them accessible to the graders. Before each commenting and evaluating cycle, a group of first-year graduate student teaching assistants (master’s students studying rhetoric and writing studies, creative writing, and literature as well as rhetoric and composition PhD students), which we call “the committee,” meets for at least two norming sessions. During these sessions, they discuss strategies for effective comments and scoring, review the assignment and scoring guide, read several student examples, and apply the scoring guide collectively and in small groups. They are also assigned to an experienced lecturer who provides individual feedback and answers specific questions throughout the cycle. The week before norming, the committee members observe the composition classes so that they have a strong sense of the work students are doing.

In summary, our version of EDE has the following features:

- Program-wide workshops provide both theoretical grounding and practical tips for teaching the common assignments.
- Instructors provide classroom instruction to students using common assignments.
- Students upload drafts and final projects (of most major assignments) to a website.
- Normed graders comment on, evaluate, and assign grades.
- One grader is randomly assigned each student’s assignment.⁴
- Grading is done anonymously using program-generated rubrics.
- Students and instructors are able to access drafts, draft comments, final projects, and rubrics with scores and brief comments.
- Instructors assign end-of-semester grades.

Each part of the process is in continuous feedback and revision so that all parts of the process—students, instructors, and the committee—can work most efficiently and effectively.
Program Benefits of EDE

Five semesters into using EDE, the benefits to our students, instructors, and the program have become clear. Some were expected; others presented themselves over time. First, instruction and grading became more uniform and less biased as students were assigned grades based on the quality of their writing according to a program standard rather than instructor preferences. EDE helps us to combat what Rojstaczer and Healey describe as a lack of “transparency in the nature of grading in American colleges and universities. In its place,” they suggest, “there is collective hearsay and conventional wisdom, and as is common with such pieces of information, this collective ‘knowledge’ is often completely wrong” (Rojstaczer and Healey). We suspect this was often the case for composition instructors in our program. Without education in grading practices and theories and an understanding of program goals and standards, many writing instructors are left with the “I know what a B is” approach to grading. The grading guides and the norming of the committee to those standards does a better job of creating transparency with grades and assures, as much as possible, that students across all sections are evaluated uniformly. Grade inflation is, in part, a result of bias, and at our university, program-generated grade reports from the past several years have indicated that in some semesters, nearly 40% of students enrolled in traditional composition courses received A’s as their final grade. While high quality work should certainly be reflected in the grade assigned, our program was concerned with the practice of awarding A’s for B or C-level work, as well as passing students who had not yet achieved competency in the course.

As expected, we found that using EDE did show a different pattern of grade distribution than the traditional sections (see fig 1).

After the pilot year of the redesign, the percentage of A’s dropped from about 34% in the traditional course to 22% in the redesigned ones. B’s have gone up, from 24% to 30%, and C’s have gone down, from 15% to 13%. A simultaneous concern and expected outcome is the percentages of students who need to retake the course. There may be a variety of reasons for this. However, the slight increase in D’s, from about 5% to 6%, may be attributed to fewer students being passed when they have not yet shown competency in the course. Rather than passing them along, retaking the course should better prepare these students for college-level writing and rhetoric projects. The number of F’s and W’s has also increased, and faculty development workshops continuously promote effective ways to keep students engaged and enrolled in the course. However, while EDE has a strong influence in the distribution of grades, we can’t argue that it is the only reason for these changes: a more challenging curriculum and hybrid delivery also influences the grade ranges as well as institutional and personal influences.
Because EDE helps to minimize bias in grading, we wanted to know if students perceive the system as a fair grading process. In five semesters of survey responses, 20% of students said EDE was not fair; 80% of the students responded in the positive or were not sure (see table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>59% (392)</td>
<td>21.3% (141)</td>
<td>19.7% (131)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1, Student responses to the survey question: In general, do you think the grading system used this semester was fair?

In a focus group interview conducted during the first semester of the pilot program, 4 out of 5 students who participated said that using EDE was a good idea because it reduced instructor bias in grading based on personality. Amanda said: "I thought it was good because it prevented instructor bias because sometimes when the instructor doesn't like you they don't grade accordingly." Another commented: "I do like that you have an unbiased party grading the final drafts because then the grading is very fair." Of those who reported that they thought EDE was unfair, most found it did not take into account student effort, which is largely measured through the relationships students build with their instructors. Students who commented negatively on the surveys made suggestions such as "the instructor should have more power in the grading system. The people who try hard and better themselves..."
throughout the course should receive higher grades as well as those who already do [well].”

These student responses acknowledge that EDE evaluates the writing on its quality. However, they express a discontent with the fact that the committee members don’t have immediate contact with students and therefore can’t factor hard work, time spent, participation, eagerness, and attendance into their project grades. Rickly also reports that, with TOPIC, students can feel “disadvantaged by [their] lack of relationship with the teacher. Showing eagerness, being prepared, speaking out in class, and simply ‘working hard’ did not influence their grades, and many who had relied on these strategies in the past felt frustrated” (194). While some of that relationship, we are certain, still factors into the 30% of the final grade determined by instructors, students may experience frustration when submitting their projects throughout the semester.

A second benefit of EDE is that, given the tight instructional budgets and the limited classroom space that many campuses are experiencing, EDE allowed us to increase our class size slightly without overburdening instructors with additional time spent commenting on and evaluating major projects. Every fifth redesigned course allows us to save money on one part-time instructor and the space of one classroom.

Data from the three years prior to our redesign and the three years following indicate that the program has been successful at reducing our dependence on part-time instructors (which also allows us to be more selective) as well as the demand for classroom space, enabling us to schedule all sections in computer classrooms, an essential element for our redesigned curriculum. Taking into account the decrease in enrollment, the number of sections has been reduced by 17% for an average of 20 fewer sections per year (see table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Students/year</th>
<th>Sections/year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008-2011</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2008</td>
<td>2108</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2, Average students and class sections per academic year

Third, several accreditation agencies require that graduate student teaching assistants attain 18 hours of graduate credit before becoming the teacher of record for that discipline. Then students are funded for just one or two years of teaching thereafter. With EDE, graduate student teaching assistants can acquire valuable and intensive hands-on experience by evaluating writing according to program standards before instructing in the classroom. As a result, these TAs are well-prepared to teach a course that has a program-wide identity as indicated by common course goals, assignments, and evalu-
Kemp suggests that a composition program’s high turnover rate, of something like 25% to 30% per year, leads to a faculty who is perpetually inexperienced. The result, he argues, is that little that is “very productive goes on in general education required classes taught by inexperienced teachers” (“Freshman Comp”). To complicate the situation more, many English department-funded TAs are not learning how to teach writing or studying composition theory in their graduate classes. Not only are some programs’ teaching staff inexperienced, they may also be generally unprepared. EDE, through the work and training required to do it well, enables TAs to enter the classroom well-aware of the curriculum and program goals and well-prepared to teach writing. Long-time instructors can also be encouraged to participate in the evaluation process by working with the graders. As a result, all members of the First-Year Composition community are aware of, and deeply involved with, the program goals. Even if graduate students ultimately teach for just two semesters, EDE prepares them to do so.

In a survey of the graduate students who had worked on the committee and then moved on to teach, 100% agreed that the norming and grading processes helped them understand the goals and purposes of the FYC program. When asked if the activities prepared them to teach, 70% said yes, 20% said no, and 10% were undecided. When asked if and how the norming and grading contributed to their understanding of the goals and purposes of our program, one TA responded: “Becoming more and more fluent with the assignments as well as what [the students] were/are working towards helped us to better understand not only the assignments, but what the students needed to understand in order to successfully complete the course.” When asked if and how the TAs thought the grading process helped prepare them to teach the next year, another commented: “it familiarized my eye with diverse student writing. It also reminded me of the diverse cultures (and the styles of writing) I would encounter.” Another reflected that “the grading process helped me get to know the assignments intimately. It also helped me to see the problems that arose for students in their writing, which allowed me to bring attention to those problems in class.” Several also echoed one TA’s comment that taking the time of “breaking down each assignment, looking at examples, and working out/debating why certain things were evaluated in specific ways helped me to then prepare my students to approach their assignments with these different criteria in mind.” Although several TAs mentioned that they felt less prepared to teach the first-semester course (which does not use EDE11), one did acknowledge that the grading “allowed me to better prepare my 1311 students ... by knowing how students will be expected to effectively analyze and communicate ideas in the next semester.” Few other training experiences could prepare TAs so well. Additionally, because the demand for part-time instructors is decreased and the savings have been reinvested into the graduate program, First-Year Composition has built a larger teaching assistant cohort (from 22 in fall 2008 to 30 in fall 2010). This strengthens our program because we
are able to prepare instructors well rather than hiring part-time instructors who may not have experience teaching in the program.

A fourth benefit of EDE is that the uniform curriculum and grading system allows us to make adjustments to the entire program's curriculum and delivery as needed. Studies indicate that students are able to give valuable information on course effectiveness including “formative feedback to faculty for improving teaching, course content, and structure” (Chen and Hoshower 72). The feedback, however, is only valuable if teachers learn something from it, if teachers value the new information, if teachers understand how to make improvements, and finally, if teachers are motivated to make improvements (Centra 81). Because this feedback is collected at the program level, rather than from the individual instructor, the program is able to make informed, far-reaching changes. Small changes can be addressed in workshops and take effect immediately. Larger changes are compiled and published once a year in the local Guide to First-Year Composition. Instead of creating a Guide that attempts to address all the needs of different sections without, often, satisfying any, the program has created a valuable local textbook for our students and instructors. Susan Lang similarly notes that at Texas Tech “the program has evolved into a fluid, dynamic model of networked learning. Program administrators can make adjustments to improve the experience based on information collected and analyzed from ... multiple feedback loops” (558). In addition to a more profound understanding of students' strengths and weaknesses, we continuously measure the effect of the evaluation process with online surveys for students, TAs, and instructors, as well as with student focus groups. In these ways, EDE is an ever-evolving project informed by wide-ranging data.

A fifth benefit is that EDE allows instructors to invest additional time in developing and revising the curriculum and instruction as well as in coaching their students on their writing projects. Although their work addresses grading contracts, Danielwicz and Elbow make a point that resonates with EDE:

our main goal is a system that can help teachers and students ... who want to think more about writing and less about grades. Our immediate goal is to put more energy into figuring out which activities most reliably produce learning, and less energy into figuring out a numerical grade for a piece of writing. (249)

Because our program was engaged in a wholesale redesign, the experienced instructors used the time that they would normally spend on grading and invested that into creating and improving the in-class and online scaffolding for assignments. New instructors, such as the graduate students entering the classroom, spend more time preparing and planning for effective face-to-face and online instruction. Instructors report that they dedicate more time to helping students learn effective technology applications and strategies for their projects. Additionally, instructors are able to focus more on responding to students’ questions, drafts, and concerns. In an interview,
one instructor reports feeling like she “can spend more time on the composing process, on getting students from invention to final projects,” than when she was spending her time grading the previous assignment. Instead of focusing on those individual grades, instructors teaching with EDE can take a more holistic view of the writing goals students achieve and then focus on the ones with which students need more assistance.

Finally, **EDE emphasizes to students that they are not writing for a singular, known teacher, but they are composing for an audience who doesn’t know their personalities, their class attendance, or their efforts.** EDE forces students to recognize and write with a larger audience in mind, thereby widening the rhetorical path for their work. While instructors sometimes suggest that students imagine different audiences for the assignments, it can be confusing to students when their instructor is still the audience who will assign a grade. While EDE doesn’t expand the audience beyond the academic/graded sense (there is still a specific assignment, with a specific rubric, and a specific group who will grade the project), it does push the boundaries beyond the one-to-one model. Additionally, because students will produce a documentary and a website that can be shown at a public event and/or published to the internet, practicing writing to an unknown audience prepares them for these rhetorical tasks.

When students know their instructor will not be evaluating the projects, they can’t as easily trap themselves into the “just tell me what I need to do for an A” mentality, but need to instead focus on writing effectively for an unknown audience. Some students have suggested that writing for someone other than their instructor is a scary thing, but others have found confidence in the effectiveness of their writing by following the program-created guidelines for projects, attending class regularly, taking feedback from their peers and instructors, and being tutored at the University Writing Center.

### Questions, Critiques, and Concerns

These several benefits have improved our program in specific and far-reaching ways. However, not every First-Year Composition program would experience the same results. In fact, many instructors, scholars, and administrators may have a difficult time imagining that EDE is an effective method for teaching writing and running a program. We contend that many have cast a critical eye on EDE because the model so radically challenges long-held assumptions that inform the way composition courses are taught. We agree that such a radical change deserves careful consideration, and its implications should be fully explored. In this section, we will consider several concerns and the extent to which we have been able to address them in our program.

When we first proposed applying for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board grant that would support this redesign, several of our long-term instructors experienced what Kemp calls “the psychology of loss” (“Computers” 108). They were shocked, understandably, at the idea of separating
instruction from evaluation in a composition class. One significant concern was whether using EDE would diminish or remove instructor’s authority. If grades play the role of reward or punishment, what would instructors be able to use in their place? How would instructors connect with their students otherwise? In “A New Way to Grade,” published in the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2006, Paula Wasley similarly reports that the most common complaint of Texas Tech graduate student instructors was that “the system erodes their authority and autonomy as teachers” (A6). Some instructors were dismayed that they could not reward with higher grades those students who showed effort in class. So, for our program directors, this fundamental shift required discussing the theoretical, pedagogical, and practical reasons informing the change, as some instructors believed they were “in trouble” or weren’t trusted to evaluate their students fairly. To strike a balance, we decided to have instructors evaluate 30% of the students’ work and also be responsible for calculating, determining, and submitting final grades. We have found that this arrangement has worked very well. Instructors are still responsible for the final decision, but that final decision is informed through a variety of measures.

Another concern is that once into the process, some instructors feel that the common curriculum, with its program-wide due dates, does not allow for flexibility and makes the semester feel “grade-driven” as the goal becomes getting the students to submit their work by the due dates. (Of course, this concern also exists in programs that have common assignments and due dates but do not use EDE.) Again, our program has adapted by creating submission windows that are open for several days and by varying possibilities for feedback in the drafting stages. Instructors are encouraged to think less about the final submission and more about the instruction that students need to move through their writing processes. They are also encouraged, though, to keep their students on track and avoid situations where students are behind in their submission.12

Michael Knievel raises questions about the delivery of grades based on his experience working with TOPIC at Texas Tech. In his 2001 Kairos web text “Gauging the Value of Online Grade Posting: An Inquiry into Full Disclosure,” Knievel wonders if issuing grades online—or outside of the immediate context of the classroom—suggests to students that the grades are static and not open for discussion. “The grade has a feeling of fixedness, of being already decided, added to the average and backed by the legitimating force of technology.” He therefore privileges “the immediacy of face-to-face grade disclosure” (Knievel).

We suggest that this notion of grade negotiation creates an unfair system as not all students are comfortable negotiating grades with their instructor. However, we recognize that there will be times when a project does require another look, and created in the program a “grade review” process in which students must articulate clearly why their project deserves a better grade. Effort and tutoring at the Writing Center are not valid reasons.
Instead, students must review their project according to the scoring guide and articulate why their grade is not reflective of their project’s quality. Again, because the review is not handled by the individual instructor, but by a grade review committee, the student can feel more comfortable with the request and will likely receive a more fair assessment. Additionally, it diminishes the advantage that those bolder students hold over the ones who accept their grade, whether it’s delivered in class or online.

Given that using EDE is unlike what students had experienced in their previous composition classes, many critics’ first response is “students will hate this.” However, we were surprised to see that the number of requests for a return to the traditional model was relatively small and that students indicated general satisfaction with the system. Of the students who responded to our surveys over the last five semesters, 53.3% were satisfied or very satisfied, and 22% were neutral. This indicates that less than a quarter of the students responding to the survey were dissatisfied (see table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Very dissatisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Very satisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>9.4% (62)</td>
<td>15% (99)</td>
<td>22.3% (147)</td>
<td>41.7% (275)</td>
<td>11.6% (76)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3, Student responses to the survey question: How satisfied were you with the grading system used in the English 1312 course?

Students in the focus groups generally felt that they were more on their own with keeping track of assignments and grades. “You have to (be) more responsible because you have to look at your comments and be more independent,” Miguel said. Similarly, several students in focus groups suggested that EDE created a different relationship with their instructor. They saw their instructor more as a resource than as an evaluator. They reported emailing their instructor more frequently to ask questions and/or visiting the Writing Center often. Otherwise, most found that it didn’t change their relationship with their instructor. “[It] didn’t change my interaction with the teacher … I was in the Writing Center a lot and so was the professor. He really helped shape drafts,” Marcus said.

However, students do have some justifiable concerns with EDE. Some notice a disconnect between what they learn in class and what is emphasized in the evaluation phase. One student commented: “They do not know what goes on in our class, so that’s probably why they grade extremely hard.” Students may also find a difference in the comments they receive on drafts and then the graded project. One focus group student says: “The comments I received on the rough draft were excellent. What was commented was that it was an ‘A’ paper that only needed minor corrections. I was thrilled and so I corrected my paper and submitted with confidence. When I got the final grade...
I was more confused than upset when I received a ‘C’.” In these instances, students won’t see the draft feedback as valuable because the motivation for submitting drafts is primarily to get a better grade on the final project. The program uses this feedback from students to revise rubrics, improve the committee’s norming sessions, and encourage more thoughtful feedback.\textsuperscript{13}

On a more theoretical level, Catherine Gouge, in “Conversations at a Crucial Moment,” criticizes Texas Tech’s characterization of EDE as “objective” and argues that any such claims “challenge much current assessment theory” because “subjectivity in assessment is unavoidable” given that readers bring their own values to a reading and evaluation of a text (351). Even evaluation according to a rubric reveals a certain bias according to the instructor or program which created it. Gouge also states that using this system “to deny students to the subjectivities of their evaluators does not ensure objectivity in evaluation—it simply denies students access to the more experienced writer-subjects who are responding to their writing” (356). Gouge disagrees that assessment and evaluation, to be valid, must be anonymous (356) and contends that distributed grading “denies [students] access to what could be an innovative intersubjective writing-feedback process” (356). There certainly are contexts where it is important for students to have access to, and to feel a personal connection with, the person who is evaluating their work. However, we argue that First-Year Composition courses, particularly the second-semester courses, can be improved by urging students to envision an audience beyond their instructor. While some students may well want to sit with the person who evaluated their project, alternatives such as their instructor or a tutor at the Writing Center are also good sources of feedback. In other words, the students do not necessarily suffer from this “denial of access.”

\textbf{Conclusion}

The questions, concerns, and critiques against EDE are valid for a number of reasons. However, our experiences and willingness to continuously review and revise have made the shift a worthwhile effort and have resulted in a stronger First-Year Composition program. We argue that EDE creates a program-level system that creates greater transparency for students, instructors, and administrators, as well as creating a program that can more effectively reflect on and improve itself. We believe our results with grade data, student and graduate student perception, space and money saved, as well as continuous improvement of the program, demonstrate that EDE is a viable option for grading in First-Year Composition programs, particularly at large public universities with graduate programs.

\textbf{Notes}

1. The data in this article was collected under IRB approval from the University of Texas at El Paso: Study #80228-1 Analyzing Student Attitudes Toward Online
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Hybrid Classes and Study #92452-5 Study on Second-Semester Composition Course Redesign.

2. TOPIC stands for Texas Tech Online/Print Integrated Curriculum. Its second version is called ICON (Interactive Composition Online).

3. The 30% graded by the instructors includes a presentation and an advocacy website as well as other projects that the instructor wishes to assign.

4. Unlike Texas Tech, which uses two graders per project, we have only been able to use one grader. However, during the fall semester, when the number of students enrolled is not as high in 1312 as the spring, we have asked committee members to double score projects to determine if the grades are significantly different between graders and then make adjustments to the norming if needed. The EDE team helps to determine if the original score can stand or if the score needs to be revised. This process not only provides the opportunity to provide fair evaluations of the students’ work, but it also provides additional opportunity for helping those graduate students who may need a bit more assistance with the evaluation process.

5. Bias can manifest itself in a variety of ways, both positively and negatively for students. Schiming includes: attention to the personal issues of students, use of “subjective or motivational factors,” and faculty attitudes.

6. The traditional course grade data in this chart and described here is from Fall 2005 through Spring 2009. The redesigned course grade data is from Fall 2009 through Fall 2010. After Spring 2009, no traditional sections were offered. Redesign pilot grade data is excluded from this chart.

7. Continued studies in this area will demonstrate the complexity of grades and the challenges of evaluating impacts on grade distribution. While we find our results to be significant in these first few years of using EDE, extended data analysis is required for a more definitive conclusion.

8. Students were asked to participate in online surveys after submitting their second major project and at the end of the semester. The results are taken from the end-of-semester surveys. From Fall 2008 to Fall 2010, 928 students participated in this survey. Participation was voluntary, though instructors did offer extra credit points to students who participated.

9. We should note that students volunteered for the interviews, so the students are not a representative section of all students in the course. Student names have been changed to protect their identities.

10. In Fall 2010, 16 First-Year Composition graduate students responded to this survey.

11. We do not use EDE in the first-semester course primarily because we do not have enough graduate teaching assistants to support the work load of evaluating those assignments as well.

12. One concern that must be addressed every semester is what happens when students don’t submit their work on time and the window for submission on MinerWriter has closed. After testing various solutions, we are currently allowing the individual instructor to decide whether or not the project should be evaluated. This helps us to ensure that students with legitimate reasons for not submitting on time are still able to receive credit.

13. Over the last five semesters, the committee has reviewed between six and ten grades a semester.
Works Cited


