The Mediation of Literacy Education and Correspondence Composition Courses at UNC–Chapel Hill, 1912–1924

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Tracing the correspondence composition courses taught at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill from 1912 to 1924, this essay argues that examining distance education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can reveal possible problems or solutions to issues composition instructors face in twenty-first-century debates about moving first-year composition courses online, particularly in rapidly developing Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). This essay develops a theory of literacy mediation built on Deborah Brandt’s notion of literacy sponsorship, claiming that more attention needs to be paid to how literacies are mediated by institutions, particularly when institutions support composition instruction that occurs off-campus as in distance education. Writing programs need to ensure that face-to-face and online students receive comparable instruction and that all students, regardless of the spaces in which they take composition courses, understand the institutional and programmatic values of composition on their physical or virtual campuses.

Correspondence study has often been overlooked as a precursor to online distance education and as an important presence in rhetoric and composition histories. Although some scholars, such as Marthann Schulte, acknowledge the historical beginnings of distance education, they often claim, as Schulte does, that distance education did not truly emerge until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries with the advent of online forms of education. Others, such as Chi-Sing Li and Beverly Irby, also overlook correspondence courses as historical precursors to online distance education, largely because such education did not occur through electronic and telecommunicative technologies. In “Designing Efficiencies,” Kevin Eric DePew, T. A. Fishman, Julia E. Romberger, and Bridget Fahey Ruetenik argue, “It is crucial that instructors of DE writing courses familiarize themselves with the many histories of this subdiscipline and that they consider how the embedded ideologies influence the narratives that are constructed to rationalize the use of DE in university settings” (64). This article answers their call, offering composition scholars one example of composition taught through correspondence from the early twentieth century. By examining the ways one particular institution offered composition courses via a correspondence program,
I clarify what this historical analysis offers current discussions about online composition instruction and what is at stake when institutions mediate literacy learning off-campus.

Distance education is often traced to the nineteenth century, with the vocational Pitman Shorthand training program via correspondence that began in 1852, and the college-level correspondence courses at Illinois Wesleyan University in 1874 and the University of Chicago in 1892 (Kett 182; Pittman, “Academic” 110; Watkins 3). Most universities did not fully welcome such extension programs until the early twentieth century, when growing numbers of programs emerged at major universities in nineteen states by 1915 (Pittman, “Academic” 111). The mid-1920s were the heyday of correspondence courses with estimated enrollments at 0.5 million students (Hampel 5), quite a large number when compared to the 917,462 total American undergraduate students in 1925–1926 (Hampel 5). Correspondence courses were offered by both postsecondary institutions and private companies, with the International Correspondence Schools dominating 20% of all annual correspondence enrollments throughout the first third of the twentieth century (Hampel 5). The popularity of these courses can be seen in correspondence enrollment numbers; for example, the University of Wisconsin Correspondence Study Department alone registered 24,555 students between 1906 and 1916 (Watkins 16). Widespread enrollment in extension courses, including correspondence courses, culminated in the creation of the National University Extension Association (NUEA) in 1915. This association’s members included Louis Round Wilson, the first director of the Bureau of Extension at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (formerly known simply as the University of North Carolina before the consolidation of North Carolina universities in 1931), and the NUEA was hosted by UNC–Chapel Hill in 1927. The first public institution to admit students in the United States, one with a historical presence that has yet to be explored in composition scholarship, UNC–CH’s involvement with the NUEA delineates their commitment to distance education broadly conceived. Despite the popularity of correspondence instruction, its dividends were short-lived. With the Great Depression of the 1930s, enrollment in correspondence instruction fell and half the for-profit schools closed; only 18% of the 275 schools open in 1922 were still operating in 1942 (Hampel 7). Distance education did not revive as strongly again until the 1960s.

A more recent manifestation of distance education is, of course, online education. The latest report from the U.S. Department of Education reveals that from 2007–2008, 4,277,000 students—or 20% of all undergraduates in postsecondary institutions—enrolled in at least one distance education class. This figure excludes correspondence courses, primarily including courses delivered through electronic and telecommunicative technologies such as webcasts,
CD-ROMs or DVDs, and computer-based systems (2). It also excludes the rising trend of MOOCs. Online courses and MOOCs are not often connected to correspondence courses, except in passing. Yet varieties of distance education courses often spring from similar motivations and have similar outcomes, despite differences in delivery. Narrowly defining what “counts” as distance education by focusing on online technologies means we miss the crucial connections between today’s online distance education and the correspondence courses first offered over one hundred years ago.

Turning attention to one university extension program’s use of correspondence to teach composition in the 1910s and 1920s, as I do in this article, illustrates how distance education “mediates” literacy learning—a term I employ to build upon Deborah Brandt’s concept of the literacy “sponsor.” Considering the idea of mediation complicates how far institutionalized composition instruction can extend outside of the university, which has historically been limited only by the extension program’s reach. The concept of mediation, or the movement of literacies between literacy sponsors and those they sponsor, illustrates how literacy sponsorship may be even more vexed than Brandt indicates as we examine spaces in which institutionalized literacies are transmitted through sponsors to those physically outside of these institutions. This is particularly true given the low completion rates of online courses, especially MOOCs, and issues with online courses, such as uneven interactions between professors and students, that impact how well students learn literacies valued by specific institutions. Such concerns have been around for a long time; turning to the past illuminates some of the problems that composition scholars, and WPAs in particular, encounter today in the midst of pressures to move composition online.

In this article, I first discuss how scholars have already drawn attention to literacy education occurring outside of schools, offering “mediation” as a valuable way to theorize the degree to which literacies are facilitated at a distance. Next, I contextualize distance learning by focusing on one program, UNC–CH’s extension program, initiated in 1912, and the ways the university envisioned this program operating within the community. I then survey literacy education in particular as it developed between 1917 and 1924, focusing on catalogue descriptions of composition courses and how these evolved in light of UNC–CH’s approach to distance education and its relationship with on-the-ground composition courses. Ultimately, I contend that this historical examination helps us to build upon Brandt’s conception of literacy “sponsors” and new media scholars’ theorization of “mediation” to consider what happens when composition courses move from inside to outside university walls, particularly in online courses today.
Mediation of Literacy Education

Some scholars have explored how literacy learning occurs in the boundaries between home and school spaces. For example, Katherine Adams’ *A Group of Their Own: College Writing Courses and American Women Writers, 1880–1940* traces the literacy education of women writers both during and after college. As women enrolled in colleges, English was a popular choice for a major because it provided them with the opportunity “to envision themselves as influential writers as well as the tools with which to achieve this vision” (Adams 40). As women developed as writers, they formed groups of colleagues both in and out of school, “creating new types of personal/professional groups” and crafting “very influential texts that helped shape their era” (xviii–xix). The women Adams studies took institutionalized writing instruction and used it to transform themselves and their society. Focusing more specifically on what happens when students appropriate and amend school literacies, Kelly Ritter’s *Who Owns School? Authority, Students, and Online Discourse* examines “the acquisition of literacy as it occurs without or, perhaps more accurately, despite the direct oversight of teachers or teacher-figures” (6). She claims that college students “do not feel in control of their own education” and, consequently, use online discourse to “resist and reject teacher oversight . . . particularly in the highly interpretive and value-laden reading- and writing-centered classroom” (15). Like the women Adams studies, Ritter’s study shows how literacies operate between home and school spaces. Unlike these women, however, the students Ritter studies use home and school literacies to assert control over their own education rather than using it to assert their value in society. I here extend Adams and Ritter’s studies to examine how schools facilitate literacy education in largely unexamined overlapping home and school spaces.

Deborah Brandt’s well-known term “sponsor” is useful in my examination of literacies. Explicated most thoroughly in her book *Literacy in American Lives*, the term “sponsor” refers to “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (19). While I find Brandt’s term instrumental in my research, particularly as it accounts for both institutional (school) and extra-institutional (home and work) literacy learning, I find it less helpful when applying this idea to dispersed sponsors as in distance education. When students learn literacies directly sponsored by institutions (such as through the composition courses offered by UNC–CH) but off-campus through distance education (such as in its correspondence courses), sponsorship cannot be traced directly. Students are given instruction in the writing that the institution values, but learning in their home environ-
ments shifts their relationship to this writing in ways that institutions can less reliably predict than with face-to-face students.

New media scholars offer theories of “mediation” that meaningfully interact with Brandt’s theorization of literacy sponsors to focus attention on the act of sponsorship itself. Leah A. Lievrouw claims that the term “mediation” began to appear in the 1970s as “a way to articulate media and interpersonal communication within a total social or cultural context” (309). Her focus on mediation as communication in context echoes Brandt and other New Literacy Scholars’ emphasis on the theorization of literacies in the midst of unique social contexts. Combining these perspectives on mediation and sponsorship refocuses attention on the ways that media and persons communicate; in correspondence courses, this occurs primarily through print documents such as the publications of the extension program at UNC–CH. A central term within mediation theories is “interactivity,” or, as Lievrouw explains it, “the extent to which media and information technologies foster a sense of reciprocity, mutuality, affiliation or feedback among system users, or between users and the system itself” (311). Mediation differs in correspondence and online instruction, particularly because interactivity in these two forms changes. As Jeff Rice argues, online spaces allow for the network building that print technologies did not (“Networks and New Media” 128). In other words, more interactivity exists in online instruction than in correspondence instruction because online instruction can provide more immediate interactions through technologies such as wikis, discussion boards, and video conferencing. In correspondence instruction, mediated primarily through print and the postal service, such immediacy is not possible. Despite this difference, other features of correspondence and online instruction are very similar, allowing for valuable comparisons between these types of writing instruction.

UNC–Chapel Hill’s Correspondence Composition Courses, 1912–1924

Online instruction involves some aspects of correspondence instruction such as the mediation of literacies between postsecondary institutions and individuals located outside these institutions. Additionally, both correspondence and online instruction have been offered in response to similar institutional needs: lack of space for students and classes on campus, potential students who can’t relocate, and budget cuts that affect the support systems needed to offer courses on campus. MOOCs, for example, attempt to reach a much wider range of people, not just college students, with knowledge traditionally exclusive to postsecondary institutions, just as extension programs sought to relocate school knowledge off-campus. Therefore, historical conceptions of correspondence instruction offer a unique lens through which to examine online instruction. To this end, I focus on the ways UNC–CH mediated the
literacies of its correspondence students. One possible objection to this study is that I assume the traditional classroom should be replicated in other environments (i.e., via correspondence and online). This is not my intention. But writing courses that allege to be the same in content, structure, and institutional value should be equivalent even if we debate what “equivalent” means; if face-to-face and online courses are not equivalent, we cannot claim that distance education courses and face-to-face courses serve similar purposes and carry a similar value for students.

UNC–CH is the flagship university of North Carolina’s higher education system, founded in 1789 when state legislature passed an act chartering the university. As the first public American institution to admit students, and one with strong ties to early American extension programs, UNC–CH is a useful example of the ways in which distance literacy education was originally conceived and delivered. UNC–CH first intended to use its correspondence program to provide courses primarily to residential students who needed alternative means of completing degrees, a concern echoed regularly in online education today. But the extension program also mediated the education and values of North Carolina citizens, particularly to convey wartime civics and patriotism during World War I, a form of education later evident during World War II (see Miller; Ritter, To Know Her Own History). As the program grew, it became an important way for North Carolinians to participate in postsecondary education without having to move to UNC–CH’s campus as well as a means for UNC–CH students to earn college credit.

Composition, and first-year composition particularly, has a long history at UNC–CH. The Freshman English requirement (at that time a two-semester sequence also known as English 1–2) for all students has been in place since at least January 1902, when these requirements were recorded in the minutes of an academic faculty meeting. The relationship between the extension program’s approach to composition, including correspondence instruction, and approaches to composition on-campus illustrates tensions between competing forms of literacy mediation. Instruction was similar but not equivalent. Correspondence courses were offered from the beginning of the extension program, but, tellingly, only advertised in the Record, UNC–CH’s student catalogue. Until American involvement in World War I began in 1917, the Bureau of Extension’s main community outreach focused on public lectures and a high school debating union while extension courses such as Freshman English served primarily on-campus students.

Norman Foerster, a UNC-CH English professor whose important role in literary studies and creative writing while at the University of Iowa has been documented elsewhere (see Crowley and Brereton), played a role at UNC–CH as the early (unnamed) WPA, or “Chairman,” of composition (UNC Record
A letter he wrote on August 27, 1917, to Edwin Greenlaw, the influential English department chair from 1914 to 1925, discusses the relationship between correspondence courses and residential students: “In case the total number of freshmen is as large as last year, you might consider the possibility of adding a twelfth section [of Freshman English] in place of a dropped elective. . . . If it seems desirable, as you predict, to substitute some extension work for some of the regular work, I for my part shall be glad to handle all or part of it” (Foerster). The first-year composition requirement and corresponding demand for the course, as noted in Foerster’s letter, made it a natural choice for conversion to a correspondence course, particularly since UNC–CH had already begun allowing students to count correspondence courses from other institutions for credit. The movement to provide this course and others via correspondence to UNC–CH students was the next likely step, particularly since doing so would allow the university to receive income for these credits and ensure the mediation of literacies sanctioned by UNC–CH. In other words, UNC–CH could be more certain that its students learned writing skills it deemed appropriate if students took the course in their English department, even if via correspondence. Freshman English thus became one of the first twelve correspondence courses offered to UNC–CH students (Culp and Dawson 5).

At the same time, World War I influenced what was taught both on campus and off. In 1917–1918, several extension Leaflets offered information about literature courses for citizens. “War Information Series No. 14” offers a course about “National Ideals in British and American Literature,” including “an outline of British and American national ideals as expressed in literature . . . for the use of college classes, reading clubs, and private students” (v). Similarly, even Freshman English offered on UNC–CH’s campus turned students’ attention to wartime issues: the UNC Record for 1917–1918 claims that in this course, a literature-based writing course with a focus on civic themes, students will engage in “intensive-reading’ in American Ideals and other texts” (61). These corresponding shifts illustrate how UNC–CH mediated literacy education on and off campus to reflect and pass on American qualities during war, even though the ways it did so varied according to the goals UNC–CH set for those taking these courses. North Carolinians were instructed to read about war-related issues on their own or in groups because they were not applying these courses to degrees, whereas UNC–CH students were expected to complete this work as part of a college writing course that met institutional requirements for degree completion.

UNC–CH increasingly moved literacy education out of the institution and into the community throughout the period of American involvement in World War I. Such moves may have been partially motivated by the exodus.
of UNC–CH students into the armed forces, as evidenced by several notes in faculty meeting minutes devoted to making concessions for students who were joining the war (including granting them credit for courses not completed due to deployment). Though the student population was augmented by the small number of local women students allowed to attend the school from 1917 to 1925 to help fill classes, the overall loss of students led to the growth of the extension program as indicated by University President Edward Kidder Graham. Throughout his time as acting president in 1913 and as president from 1914 to 1918—his time at UNC–CH cut short by his death in an influenza epidemic (Coates 25)—Graham was known for his dedication to extension work. Sensing an opportunity during World War I to expand the extension program, Graham explained to the faculty on October 24, 1917, that the Committee on University Extension “hoped to assist the country at the present crisis, along lines belonging distinctively to the University” (Minutes 1:8, 485), including lectures and correspondence courses. The English courses offered in UNC–CH’s Leaflets reflect wartime issues, a civic and patriotic mission, rather than mirroring UNC–CH’s “standard” English courses, part of an institutional mission.

The Bureau of Extension at UNC–CH grew rapidly after the war. Chester D. Snell, a former graduate of Columbia University, took over the Bureau in 1921, changing its name to the University Extension Division and beginning the publication of the Extension Bulletin, which replaced the extension section in the Record (Wilson 418). The growth of UNC–CH and its extension program was amplified by a budget crisis during the 1920–1921 school year. In addition to men returning from World War I and seeking entrance into UNC–CH, which continued to admit local women until 1925, Wilson cited the tumbling prices of cotton and tobacco in 1920, vital crops to the North Carolinian economy, as a significant reason that many tried to “enter college in an effort to fit themselves for positions” (320) that they could not otherwise attain. On October 2, 1920, President Graham reported that 2,308 North Carolina high school graduates had been turned away from the university because there was no room for them on campus (Wilson 322). UNC–CH, in addition to lobbying the state for more financial support, responded to these problems in much the same way we have today: by turning to distance education as one way to accommodate more students without greatly expanding faculty, staff, or campus space (see Peterson).

In 1921–1922, information about correspondence courses began to be published in extension Bulletins available to community members, marketed as a way to gain a university-sanctioned education outside of the institution itself: “A University Extension Division is the organization which modern state universities have developed to serve as the channel through which some of the
university culture and instruction flows to the people” (3). Rather than simply listing the courses offered as the Leaflets did, the Bulletins offer more specific outlines of what these courses provide, how much they cost, and how many assignments have to be completed for each course, as seen in this description for Freshman English from 1921:

Freshman English. Intensive reading, chiefly in American prose; extensive reading among selected books and periodicals; constant written composition on topics related to the reading. This course parallels English I in the general catalog. One course. Associate Professor Dargan and an assistant. Fee, $10.00. (Bulletin 1.3 7)

In making these changes, UNC–CH institutionalized a form of education that had previously served, at least on its face, community purposes. Now, the extension program allowed individuals not physically attending UNC–CH to participate in institutionally authorized writing courses and to potentially use these as credits toward a UNC–CH degree. This was one way UNC–CH could reach the North Carolinians they were unable to enroll as students in 1920.9

Even as UNC–CH made moves to extend institutionalized writing instruction into the community, its confidence in the equivalency of these courses with on-campus writing courses was tenuous. One place anxiety about equivalency can be observed is in the course descriptions for English I or Freshman English. By 1921, this course had been offered for eight years via correspondence (albeit primarily to UNC–CH students) and for over twenty years on campus with the correspondence courses now advertised to community members through the Bulletins and to UNC–CH students through the Catalogue. Tensions arose between the course descriptions for the face-to-face course and the correspondence course. In 1923, English I, or Freshman English, at UNC–CH (now a one-semester course) is described as involving, “Intensive reading, chiefly in prose; extensive reading among selected books in the Library; training in reading through a progressive series of exercises; training in writing through exercises in sentence-revision and through frequent written compositions. Fortnightly conferences” (UNC Catalogue 1923–24 136). It includes an addendum that this course was not required for students from the School of Engineering (for whom English 9abc, a specialized writing course, was offered). Alternatively, in the Bulletin the course is listed as “Freshman English. Intensive reading, chiefly in American prose; extensive reading among selected books and periodicals; constant written composition on topics related to the reading. This course parallels English I in the general catalog” (Bulletin 3.1 18).

A couple differences illustrate fundamental tensions at UNC–CH between face-to-face and distance education composition courses. The first is that
these courses, while similar, were not exactly the same given the constraints of correspondence education; therefore, the “fortnightly conferences” were completely omitted from the correspondence course, a difference that shaped how teachers and students interacted and the purpose and value of the course. The second is that the correspondence description failed to mention that School of Engineering students should take a different course (or that any other first-year English courses exist, as English 1a also did for basic writers). Although distance education students could take composition courses for credit, they were not given as many options as residential students and were expected to take the writing courses UNC–CH made available to them. These differences illustrate the tensions in what DePew et al. frame as disconnects between efficiency and instructional soundness. UNC–CH wanted to offer its composition courses to those who were unable to attend its university, particularly because of its inability to house all potential students and because of economic pressures—demands very similar to those placed on universities today. As can be seen, however, composition courses offered face-to-face and via correspondence differed in that students taking correspondence courses were not given the same options as on-campus students. When an institution such as UNC–CH grants the same credit for face-to-face and distance education courses, differences in these courses contradict claims to equivalency and impact student learning.

Just as online courses and MOOCs promise to deliver education to many people, correspondence courses proclaimed a broad public service. Kett claims, “many extension officials latched onto the alternative goal of public service” (300) as they recognized the failed narrative of individual advancement. Despite the “high-sounding language” they used to construct their goals, they “were well aware that public-service activities also spruced up the university’s image and that citizens who felt that the university took an interest in the public welfare were likely to support legislative appropriations for laboratories, libraries, and faculty salaries” (Kett 300). These trends can be seen at UNC–CH. In “War Information Series No. 2,” Greenlaw formally outlines the civic purposes of the extension program:

The center of the organization, as of so much community life, is the public school. American government is based on the conception of an educated citizenry . . . of late we have tried to see more clearly the relations of the school to life. The emphasis, often exaggerated, on vocational training, is one result; the increasing use of the school as a community center is another. (vi, emphasis added)

Greenlaw attributes American democracy to education, but, interestingly, he insists that “school” must become “a community center” that continually
opens up education to everyone rather than a traditional model in which education is only offered to students within the school’s walls. Thus, he outlines one of the benefits of distance education: many more people are able to engage with knowledge offered by a particular institution.

UNC–CH continued to seek ways to mediate the literacy education of North Carolinians both on and off its campus through the mid-1920s and beyond. Its enrollment boomed in 1924–1925 with 2,823 distance education students outnumbering residential students by 300 (Wilson 419). The first page of the 1923–1924 Bulletin contains an “Are You Included?” section that outlines the diverse individuals the extension program can reach: “University courses of standard grade by correspondence offer excellent opportunities to hundreds of persons who are fully qualified to pursue them profitably but who, for various reasons, are unable to attend a university” (Extension Bulletin 3.1 28). As the program grew, UNC–CH promoted its ability to mediate the schooling of many individuals throughout North Carolina who would otherwise be unable to attend the university, even as its residential students continued to take correspondence courses to supplement their face-to-face courses. Literacy education through extension thus became an extra-institutional site of literacy practices. As more brick-and-mortar universities consider offering online courses, particularly MOOCs, they face the concerns UNC–CH illustrates of providing an education to students who are unable or unwilling to physically relocate. Those universities such as San Jose State University, which offer MOOCs, are often characterized as “pioneers” who are at the forefront of educational progress, leaving other schools in the dust, much as correspondence programs were used to enhance the image of brick-and-mortar schools (see Jaschik; Lewin; Pappano). Nevertheless, as indicated by the low pass rates of SJSU students in its initial MOOCs, problems with MOOCs need to be resolved before more institutions embrace them as pedagogically sound alternatives to face-to-face courses.

My examination of UNC–CH’s correspondence composition courses illustrates some of the issues we face today with online instruction. Institutions and writing programs need to consider what is lost and what is gained in transitions from face-to-face to online courses. Although more potential students can be reached through distance education courses, the sponsorship of literacies necessarily shifts when taught remotely. UNC–CH’s correspondence composition courses illustrate the need for composition scholars and teachers to consider how literacies are similarly and dissimilarly mediated on- and off-campus. Doing so can reveal how well online writing courses meet institutional and programmatic goals for first-year writing students and how well students are served by online writing courses.
Composition Instruction in Mediated Online Spaces

UNC–CH acknowledges some limitations to its correspondence program in a 1923 Bulletin: “It is not practicable to offer through extension some courses now being given at the University. Certain courses, by their very nature, cannot be offered as extension classes. Courses that require laboratory facilities are an example” (3.8 7). Although composition was clearly viewed as a subject that could be mediated without face-to-face interaction at UNC–CH in the early twentieth century, it was part of a degree program that could not be completely mediated off-campus. This tension calls into question the degree to which any aspect of education, including writing courses, can be mediated off-campus and still maintain the original goals of an educational institution, department, or instructor (see Hewett and Ehmann; Warnock). It also highlights the ways that literacy education in and out of schools overlap, shaping each other even when directed by an institution for specific goals. Historical studies of composition mediated outside classrooms, but sponsored by institutions, are critical in understanding the directions being taken now in distance education as well as the implications for these kinds of literacy mediations.

Correlations between correspondence courses and online courses can be seen through completion rates for correspondence courses compared to that of MOOCs and online courses. Hampel notes that correspondence course completion was low, with the International Correspondence Schools recording a 5% completion rate during the 1930s (15). Such atrocious completion rates are remarkably similar to the low completion rates in MOOCs; Denise Comer reports only 1.5% of students completed the English Composition I MOOC she taught at Duke University in 2013. Sapp and Simon also found that in four sections of first-year composition (two online and two face-to-face), only 56% of online students completed the course compared to 100% of the face-to-face students (473). Low completion rates for online courses, as with correspondence courses, indicate students’ lack of attention in these courses, which occur in media-rich online spaces but fail to fully utilize these resources (see Rice, “What I Learned in MOOC”), as well as insufficient support for them, particularly for students with different learning styles (see Xu and Jaggars).

The correlation between correspondence courses and online courses can also be seen through their lack of interactivity, especially in MOOCs. Despite the many ways that online courses can accommodate personal interaction that correspondence study could not, such as synchronous chats and video, students still experience problems with interactivity in online courses. In Shanna Smith Jaggars’ study of forty-six community college students who were taking at least one online course, almost all students noted that in online courses “they missed the direct instruction that they received in face-to-face courses, and many
alluded to the notion that without that component, they felt as though they were ‘teaching themselves’” (10). Other studies have found similar outcomes about students needing more interactivity in online composition courses, particularly to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction (see Boyd; Sapp and Simon). Teaching oneself is exactly what students taking correspondence courses were expected to do, as can be seen in the details of the composition course descriptions at UNC–CH. Some online courses undoubtedly are better at mitigating this problem than others, but composition teachers moving their courses online should carefully consider to what extent they can be “present” and how this impacts what their students learn, particularly given the different approaches to writing that various institutions and writing programs use.

Scott Warnock takes an optimistic view that online writing courses help “students write and think in ways previously unimagined” (xxvi), and that they are a “migration” of face-to-face courses into a different environment rather than completely different courses. I argue that institutions must more fully account for changes that occur when composition instruction is moved online, especially into MOOCs. Such courses are clearly not identical because of differences in instruction and interaction when moved online: for instance, the mediation of literacies is not as direct and personal, even with the use of synchronous technologies. Furthermore, the sheer number of students in many of these writing courses ensures that they have to operate differently by incorporating less writing and offering less feedback and assessment from the instructor. UNC–CH moved its composition courses outside its walls but did not fully integrate correspondence students into its campus community—signaled by its failure to inform correspondence students of all composition course options available to on-campus students. Similarly, institutions cannot claim that online writing courses, particularly for students who never attend courses on campus, reinforce institutional or programmatic values to students who do not understand the institutional context in which they take these courses. In order for institutions to adequately mediate the literacy sponsorship of their online students, more work needs to be done to inform them about the mission and role of first-year writing, both on- and off-campus. In these spaces, first-year writing should accomplish similar objectives, even if mediated in different ways, and all students should be cognizant of the valuing of writing and literacy in general within an institution.

DePew et al. claim that “without attention to the tensions that exist between what is most efficient and what is most instructionally robust, decisions will continue to be made that do not reflect what we, within the field of composition, believe to be in the best interests of our students” (64). These tensions were clearly at work at UNC–CH, where what was efficient for correspondence courses often took precedence over what was instructionally sound
or equivalent to face-to-face courses (such as the omission of conferencing from correspondence composition courses). Stakeholders such as administrators and students need to understand what aspects of online composition courses are dissimilar from face-to-face courses through the employment of different course titles and numbers for face-to-face and online courses, explicit information about these differences within individual programs, and our discussion of these differences not just in academic venues but in more open public forums. Students should also be aware of possible constraints, such as different levels of interactivity between instructors and students, on their success in these courses. Composition programs and courses need to make these potential difficulties explicit to students, providing adequate advising about which students are best prepared to take these and which are not.

Finally, UNC–CH’s correspondence courses in the early twentieth century may have attracted more students to the university and ushered them into composition courses they would have otherwise not taken, but these courses failed to inculcate students into UNC–CH’s unique institutional and educational context. Students who took writing via correspondence did not have face-to-face contact with English professors or fellow students. Instead, they completed these courses at home outside of a focused learning community engaged in similar pursuits. Without further integration into UNC–CH, students would not as easily understand the value that the institution placed on writing or its particular kind of valuing (or its brand). Online composition courses operate in a similar context. Institutions and composition programs need to consider the extent to which they can claim the equivalency of online and face-to-face courses when the literacies they mediate off-campus are not entirely their own. Leading orientation sessions about first-year writing or providing students in first-year writing courses with information about first-year writing goals, objectives, and positioning in the institution (which typically occur already but need to be emphasized, particularly in online writing courses) can help all students better understand what writing at specific institutions entails. Examining this history of UNC–CH correspondence writing courses helps us to better understand how institutions mediate literacy learning that occurs off-campus and how we can use this knowledge to improve both face-to-face and online composition courses as well as the literacy learning of all students.

Notes

1. Many thanks to two anonymous Composition Studies reviewers, Jennifer Clary-Lemon, Laura Micciche, and Kelly Ritter for their invaluable feedback on previous drafts of this essay.

2. Following Donahue and Moon in Local Histories and Ramsey, Sharer, L’Eplattenier, and Mastrangelo in Working in the Archives, I outline my research
methodology for readers who may be interested in similar archival research. Because I am focused on how the university situates itself as a sponsor of literacy education to UNC–CH students and North Carolinians rather than how successful their mediation was (which would be a different, but equally valuable, project), I examined the published *Leaflets* and *Bulletins* of UNC–CH’s extension program as well as information about its on-the-ground composition program. The *Leaflets* and *Bulletins* can be found not only at UNC–CH but also at UNCG (its sister school only fifty miles away), making these materials rare but not archival. Other materials, such as UNC *Catalogues*, faculty meeting notes, and letters, are either archival or rare, located at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library and the North Carolina Collection in the Wilson Library at UNC–CH. One of the problems with further scholarship about correspondence and other forms of distance education, particularly composition courses offered via these media, is the scarcity of archival materials that Pittman notes (“Correspondence Study” 32).

3. As mentioned in the previous note, I do so by examining both rare and archival materials from this time period. Unfortunately, further historical information about composition at UNC–CH during this time period, either on the ground or via correspondence, is unavailable. However, these documents provide enough information about correspondence composition courses to trace how the university mediated literacy to correspondence students, even though further details about what was taught or how well students learned to write in these spaces are unavailable.

4. There was a longer tradition of English composition and rhetoric at UNC–CH beginning in 1796 with the appointment of W.L. Richards as “Teacher of French and English” (MacMillan 4) and continuing with a new program of studies devised in 1875 when UNC–CH reopened after the Civil War to include “grammar, composition, elementary rhetoric, elocution, and ‘English Literature, Essays and Original Addresses’” in the completion of bachelor degrees (MacMillan 9).

5. This occurred around 1913 as indicated by a request granted by the faculty on February 18, 1913 from student G.E. Blackshock petitioning for correspondence credit from the University of Chicago.

6. I would extend James A. Berlin’s argument that the Great War pulled English studies into “the center of public school education in the United States” (56) to UNC–CH’s literacy education, which increasingly focused on American values as conveyed through literature.

7. According to the Carolina Women’s Center at UNC, “[d]ue to housing shortages and concerns over propriety, the first-year women must prove they are living with family or caretakers.” In reality, the university limited the admittance of women students to daughters of local residents, discouraging families from moving for this purpose (Dean).

8. After World War I ended, UNC–CH changed the admittance policy so that only women who were pre-med students could attend. It was only in 1963 that women were allowed to enroll in other programs at UNC–CH (Dean).

9. At this time, degrees could still not be completed entirely outside of the university, highlighting UNC–CH’s belief that a degree from its institution could not, and even should not, be completed without some face-to-face mediation of schooling.
10. The general growth of extension programs was noted by Snell at a faculty meeting on February 27, 1923, when he cites regulations at roughly four hundred other universities, colleges, and normal schools who “have anywhere from 300 to 5,000 students in extension classes each year” (110).

11. Pass rates for Spring 2013 MOOCs at San Jose State University ranged from 29–51% for SJSU students to 12–45% for non-enrolled students (Kolowich).

**Works Cited**


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