Beth L. Hewett’s *The Online Writing Conference* addresses three under-represented yet significant areas of online writing instruction (OWI): the theory and practice of textual exchanges, the nature and substance of dialogic interactions, and the wisdom of depending on traditional face-to-face writing theories and pedagogies to drive the work of OWI. She pays close attention to tutoring approaches based on textual interactions with online learners, an often overlooked field of inquiry. The added relevance of these textual approaches is becoming obvious from the perspective of disability and accessibility in light of the emerging research in OWI.

Hewett questions the privileging of oral discourse (through telephone and audio-visual conversations) in online tutoring, and argues for reinstating the student-generated text as central to the teacher/tutor/student conference. In her own words, “OWI necessarily requires the teacher/tutor to use one-to-one computer-based teaching strategies: to teach deliberately and to intervene through online conferences using the student’s text, instructional commentary, and other sources” (xvi). Hewett rightly questions the relevance of summative remarks in audio-visual interactions in lieu of textual ones.

Hewett’s focus on the dialogical interactions between instructor and student in both synchronic and asynchronic encounters also serves a useful pedagogical purpose. Whereas the research on all kinds of online interactions among student-peers abounds, efforts for understanding one-to-one online student-instructor exchanges in OWI so far have been relegated to sporadic discussions in textbook chapters and journal articles. Hewett surmises that “the silence [about instructor-based one-to-one online instruction] suggests that one-to-one teaching does not occur online, that one-to-one online pedagogy is transparent, or that one-to-one interactions are not considered teaching at all” (xvi). Here, the author reminds us that writing center pedagogy is ultimately a one-to-one proposition between teacher/tutor and student and that this arrangement is as relevant in online tutoring contexts as it is in face-to-face contexts. To fill this lacuna in the OWI literature, Hewett articulates a theoretical framework for “problem-based teaching” accompanied by a wide range of practical strategies for one-to-one settings.

Another area where Hewett provides a useful critique of the current OWI is in her questioning of the transference of face-to-face theory to online settings. She stresses the need for exploring the full potential of the virtual pedagogical
setting so that OWI develops its own medium-specific theory. She explains that traditional writing pedagogy is different from OWI in that student composing and instructor feedback in the former go through a type of textual and face-to-face, interpersonal and interactional cycle, whereas the interactions in OWI are intrinsically textual. She asserts that “the fundamentally textual nature of teaching and learning in the virtual environment is at odds with such a one-to-one transference” (xvii). Hewett backs up her claims with the growing OWI research literature. She claims that this research shows that the convergence of traditional writing instruction theory and related pedagogical practices in online settings brings some disconnects between contemporary composition theory and practice to the forefront, which Hewett labels as a lack of “semantic integrity.” She sees this disconnect not as a flaw but an opportunity: for OWI to develop writing instruction theory specific to online settings and subsequently distinguish itself from traditional instructional theory. Her hope is that this new OWI theory, with its “semantic integrity,” will assist students in learning what they need to know to develop and improve their writing on a case-by-case basis from a problem-centered perspective.

Hewett further suggests that at this stage in OWI’s development as a field the theories guiding our practice must be drawn from observations of and speculations about how students write in online environments. “The result of semantic integrity,” according to Hewett, “is instructional language that provides sufficient information to students, offers clear guidance about potential next steps (which includes teaching students how to make choices and encouraging them to do so), and works to prompt new or different thinking—all through textual commentary” (xviii). She stresses that “[t]o teach through text—which includes but goes beyond holding online discussions, lecturing by means of digital handouts, or providing summative evaluation of writing—is a challenging task” (xviii). Questioning prevalent theories of composing—expressivist, social constructionist, and postprocess—all of which exhort teachers against direct intervention in students’ composing processes and allot a greater role to in-class peer interaction and feedback, Hewett explains that in online pedagogy “what is digitally recorded is the sum total of the interaction. Without the sounds of phatic language and the unspoken messages of body and facial language, digital intervention is the only way to teach writing and revising” (xix). Hewett acknowledges that some of the intervention strategies she proposes here are implicit in the eclectic practices of contemporary face-to-face writing instruction. Later in the book, she expands on three such eclectic practices: modeling writing and revision, consistently using targeted mini-lessons that require student action, and listing next steps that explicitly guide students toward future drafts.
Besides exploring these three central themes, the book is also rich in ongoing commentary on the availability of training for instructors, the missing disciplinary standards for quality control of online writing courses mushrooming all over the country, and much-needed best-practices documents to guide the online classroom.

If I were to point out some of the areas where this book could go further in the next edition to meet our writing centers’ burning needs today, tutoring for multimodal writing and specialized audiences would be on the top of my list. While Hewett’s focus on text and text-based feedback is well reasoned, this discussion could also provide us a better understanding of the multimodal trends in composing she outlines elsewhere. As Hewett mentions, many of us are employing sound and video to connect with our students remotely whether or not they are enrolled in our online writing courses. Online conferencing research is already contributing to this aspect of face-to-face learning (see Ascuena and Kiernan) but more research and theory is needed. Likewise, the burgeoning population of English language learners in our courses and the entry of students with disabilities in large numbers into our colleges during the past decade also beg for sophisticated approaches in order to serve these groups sufficiently. Recent scholarship from the perspective of disability studies has begun to address some of these issues but we must also deal with these concerns inclusively in all other research (e.g., Babcock; Brizee, Sousa, and Driscoll; Hewett; Keidaisch and Dinitz). A multimodal approach is an option worth exploring to meet these learners’ specific needs. I’m sure that Hewett is cognizant of these concerns as she speaks more broadly of some of these gaps (xv).

From this reviewer’s perspective, between these two pedagogical poles (face-to-face and online/multimodal) lies the blended, or the hybrid—the space where face-to-face and online meet, mingle, intersect, and interact. Many of the questions about OWI raised in this book and elsewhere might be answered if we examine those transitional zones between the two pedagogies where the characteristics of the two appear in one shared space, sometimes blending into a single whole, becoming one, and at other times, standing apart. The phenomenon observed on these borderlines might pinpoint the causes of why the teaching and learning members of the face-to-face and online communities act and react in certain ways. They might underscore the performance factors that stand behind the failure or success in each of these environments.

As early as 1984 Stephen North wrote, “Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (76). Hewett’s The Online Writing Conference does a marvelous job of enriching our repertoire of techniques and strategies for interacting with our nascent writers in virtual settings.

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Works Cited


