Writing in Online Courses: How the Online Environment Shapes Writing Practices, edited by Phoebe Jackson and Christopher Weaver. Myers Education Press, 2018. 327 pp.

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The online writing environment both shapes writing instruction and is shaped by it, that is the contention in Phoebe Jackson and Christopher Weaver's collection of essays, *Writing in Online Courses*. The authors claim that teaching writing classes online compelled them to "rethink how writing functions" in their classes (xi). The collection examines how technology has changed the writing process, how students negotiate identity online, and how academic discourse is learned in online environments. The collection is not a "how to" or "best practices" guidebook, but rather a fresh examination of the principles and theories of process pedagogy from an online perspective. To that end, the landmark process work of Donald Murray, Janet Emig and Peter Elbow, the social constructionist theories and practices of Kenneth Bruffee and David Bartholomae, and the discourse community theories of Patricia Bizzell are re-explored, re-interpreted, and re-discovered. The technological insights of Gail Hawisher, Cynthia Selfe, Paul Takayoshi and Brian Huot are reconsidered for what they might reveal about how technology changes our teaching. It's an exciting and revealing collection.

Back in the Dark Ages of Education—before cell phones, the internet, Wi-Fi or online classes—I taught a distance learning class for the University of Alaska Southeast. My dozen students were scattered all over the archipelagos of Alaska: from the Pribilof Islands in the northern Bering Sea, to Baranoff Island (where I lived and taught), to Wrangell Island so far south it nearly touches the state of Washington. Most lived on isolated islands where the only access was by ferry or seaplane. To reach these students, the university relied on fax machines and long distance telephone operators. Before each weekly class meeting, I would phone the operator to announce that I was ready, and the operator would connect me with the students in a conference call. The phone lines often crackled with interference, students disappeared into silence from time to time as the phone carrier switched from one satellite to another, and the pace of our conversations was dictated by that slight pause between your speech and someone else's response, rather like a poor cell phone connection today. It was a crude technology, but it was all we had. Freshman comp by telephone.

I expected problems. I anticipated that I would end up doing more of the talking than I normally did in my writing classes, and I was prepared for our hour and a half of weekly class time to fade into long silences during the waning hours of the evening. But none of that happened.

For the very first phone call, I had read the student essays ahead of time (hence the fax machine) and selected passages for discussion. But that proved unnecessary. The first time I read a selected passage aloud, someone asked, "Who wrote that? It's wonderful!" When the writer identified herself, someone else asked the writer to read the whole essay. Aloud, over the phone! And the moment a writer finished reading, someone would begin asking questions. "When did that happen to you?" "Why did you choose to write about it?" "I had a similar experience, but have you ever …"

And so our sessions began week after week, with students reading their essays aloud and others chiming in with comments, questions and praise, every night for fifteen weeks, with class extending well beyond the proscribed ninety minutes most weeks.

What surprised me most about that experience, and why it's pertinent to this book review, was the enthusiastic, extemporaneous, detailed responses the students gave to each other's essays. I've taught dozens of workshops in the usual classroom settings, and invariably I have to plead with students to respond to their peers' writing, or structure activities or create criteria to direct their feedback. But not with my isolated Alaska students.

Why, I wondered during that semester in Alaska, were their responses so different in kind and quantity than any other workshop I've taught? I asked them at the end of the last class, why had they responded so immediately, so enthusiastically and so consistently to hearing their classmates read their papers over the telephone?

They told me: because they craved contact with others, because the anonymity of the phone made it easy, because—as one student put it—"I couldn't wiggle in my desk, I had to listen hard." The very characteristics of our distance class which I anticipated would create problems for a workshop generated instead the best student feedback I've known in my forty- year career of teaching writing.

Anonymity, the need to connect, and forced focus made the workshop hum. Not coincidentally, these are the same qualities touted as the virtues of online writing instruction in essay after essay of Phoebe Jackson and Chris Weaver's anthology, *Writing in Online Courses: How the Online Environment Shapes Writing Practices*.

While the traditional classroom pushes strangers together in a (usually) cramped room, online classes leave students in their individually selected spaces. This anonymity, H. Mark Ellis, Kristine Larsen and Liane Robertson suggest in their essays, creates a "safe space" for students, where they feel secure enough to engage the material and classmates in ways inhibited by face-to-face contact in a traditional classroom. Larsen describes how the safe space of her online science classes permit non-science majors to ask questions they might not ask

in a traditional classroom. Ellis argues that anonymity and the safe space of online instruction encourages "dispositional changes" in student thinking in his sociology classes. Robertson joins both of them in claiming that students in online writing courses have more agency in their own educations, precisely because online instruction is anonymous and "safe."

Agency, it would appear from the majority of the essays in this collection, is a significant and consistent benefit of online instruction. Andy Buchenot argues that online composition classes promote agency by "complicating" the experience of reading and writing. Phoebe Jackson echoes that assertion in descriptions of her online literature classes in which students experience "continuous engagement" with literary texts, with critical texts about literature, and with their classmates' written responses to both.

Patricia Webb Boyd invites students in her online business writing classes to construct, reflect upon and enact their professional identities during the course. The online environment, she claims, allows students time to "formulate and edit" their responses to their classmates' newly constructed professional identities. The personal interaction encouraged by digital discussion groups and online chat groups Linda Di Desidero calls "facework": She argues that the online environment has the potential to be a powerful tool for facilitating both learning and personal growth through such facework.

Christopher Justice makes a similar claim for his online ecology classes, suggesting that the convergence of hybrid courses, writing in the disciplines and ecocriticism might be the "brightest place yet" for composition's future.

Likewise, Chris Weaver, in his essay on using recorded comments in writing classes, sees "exciting possibilities" for online writing teachers, especially in the potential for online courses to create learning spaces that are "experimental, tentative and playful rather than just evaluative." Those possibilities seem especially rich to Chris Anson because of their potential to help retain at-risk students and reach students with varied learning styles. Anson's essay describes his experiment with screen capture technology that replaces written or face-to-face teacher commentary.

Reading this collection of essays makes it obvious that technology is guiding pedagogy these days, and while an old compositionist like me might be skeptical, the passion and enthusiasm in this collection of essays gives me pause. And hope.

Nick Carbone admits, in the collection's first essay, that as new software tools are developed, teachers are left wondering how to keep up. "The trick," as Carbone calls it, is to determine "what you want students to do." Keeping the focus on students, and not on the technology, reveals many of the promising possibilities the other essays in the collection celebrate, potential that derives

from the underlying characteristics of online instruction: anonymity, safety and the agency derived from them.

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