

FOSTERING PERSISTENCE AND STUDENT CONNECTIONS IN ONLINE WRITING COURSES: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

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According to the American Council on Education, only six in ten students in the United States who earn more than ten credits at two- or four-year schools actually complete a degree. Those who depart, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, tend to do so between the first and second terms or between the first and second years. At community colleges, only about 50% of students earn credit for a single term (Cohen and Brawer 56), and online courses often see a 10-20% higher departure rate than traditional courses (Smith). Few of these students ever seek counsel before deciding to depart (Hermanowicz 89). While first-year writing instructors are among the academic professionals with whom first-year students are most certainly in contact, there is very little research that indicates how such instructors can help—or may be hindering—student persistence. Researchers in higher education administration, educational psychology, and numerous other fields often interchange the terms *retention* and *persistence*. In general, the former pertains to the advancement of students from their first to second semesters, and the latter refers to success in graduating students (see Crissman; Edward). I will, therefore, use the term *persistence* throughout this essay, as my aim is to support composition instructors in helping students to reach their ultimate academic goals. Kevin Griffith, Jennifer Crissman, and Pegeen

Reichert Powell are among the few scholars to take up this issue and to call for compositionists to support student persistence.

Yet, other disciplines have yielded research that is relevant and applicable to first-year writing courses. Amaury Nora surveyed 893 students across three southwestern universities and reported that students' identification with their peers contributes quite significantly to their overall sense of affiliation with the institution and their persistence (202). Similarly, Andrea Dixon Rayle and Kuo-Yi Chung surveyed 533 first-year students and found that feeling as though one matters "remains important to the success of college students" and that those students who felt more social support also felt that they mattered more to their institutions and felt less academic stress (30). Indeed, helping students build relationships and affiliation with one another, through learning communities, peer networking, and collaboration, may support both student persistence and academic improvements.

Learning communities have also been found to promote student success. In "Impact of Learning Communities on Retention at a Metropolitan University," Stephanie Baker and Norleen Pomerantz employed three research methods: delivering surveys to 608 first-year composition students, conducting focus groups in four learning community classes, and comparing data between 328 learning community students and 328 control group students. They found that learning communities have a positive effect on students by building relationships and interactions that result in higher GPAs and somewhat higher rates of retention (115). Marisa Saunders and Irene Serna also examine student affiliation and find that it is correlated with students' academic performance, "The students who have succeeded in creating new networks have achieved a mean grade point average of 2.84 compared to a mean grade point average of 2.59 earned by students who continue to rely heavily on their old networks" (159).

Clearly, research suggests that students' social connections are as important, and in some cases more important, than academic factors such as G.P.A., at predicting student persistence (see

Baker and Pomerantz; Maestas, Vaquera, and Muñoz-Zehr; Nora; Ralye and Chung; Tinto). Indeed, Saunders and Serna liken belongingness to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, positing that cultural capital is established via networks of relationships that offer membership within discourse communities. The value of one's cultural capital is determined by the size of the network one can mobilize (Bourdieu 248; Saunders and Serna 148). Read this way, cultural capital becomes a measure of community embeddedness. According to Jay Corwin and Rosa Cintron, students who possess more cultural capital are less likely to leave their institutions; they write, "Those students [who] have a more difficult time integrating into the social environment face a more difficult route to gaining satisfaction . . . and persisting to the second year" (35). How can online writing instructors facilitate relationships among students who may never meet face to face in ways that will facilitate mattering, belonging, and affiliation?

Online writing courses offer many opportunities for students to engage with their peers; however, these opportunities are only leveraged if they are a part of the instructors' pedagogy and theoretical understanding of how knowledge construction occurs. Beth Hewett and Christa Ehmann fear that

Some [compositionists] have tended to compare the asynchronous interaction against the traditional face-to-face interaction in a deficit model whereby its only strengths appear to be such pedagogically acceptable traits as primary attention to the writer's stated needs, locally focused embedded commentary, and global end commentary. (70)

In online writing courses, there is a distinct risk of instructors relying on current-traditional pedagogies in what instructors—especially those with minimal training in rhetorical theory and composition pedagogy and a reliance on textbooks and outmoded instructional practices—may perceive to be the absence of face-to-face guided inquiry, discussions, and debates (Hewett and

Ehmann 39). Indeed, online writing instruction can reproduce many of the practices of outmoded composition pedagogies, such as expressivism, current traditional or mode-based instruction, or a pure process approach, and has moved through this evolution in much the same progression as the larger composition discipline (Hewett and Ehmann 39).

Such pedagogies do little to encourage students to interact with their peers, outside of perfunctory peer reviews. However, online writing instruction has the potential to go well beyond these anachronistic but still widely utilized approaches to composition pedagogy and embrace social constructivist epistemology. Social constructivist epistemologies promote knowledge creation through social mechanisms, including but certainly not limited to peer interaction in activities such as peer review, collaborative writing, and communities of inquiry. These very peer relationships can also pave the way for mattering. In fact, social constructivism underlies many contemporary notions of online writing instruction and underpins practices that promote student persistence. In this article, I draw a connection among social constructivist epistemologies, collaborative learning communities, and student persistence. I adopt Karen Burke LeFevre's continuum of social constructivist perspectives to situate online writing technologies to optimize their pedagogical use for collaborative knowledge construction that promotes peer interaction and, therefore, persistence.

Social Constructivism and Online Writing Instruction

Social constructivist epistemologies have influenced writing instruction to various degrees for the past forty years. Lev Vygotsky asserted that exchanges between people of various backgrounds help them to gain more complex viewpoints. Jerome Bruner theorized that “. . . development is intrinsically bound up with interaction” (13). Jean Piaget observed that learning needs to be connected to the learner's life and context for him or her to

make meaning and that it happens in exchanges between equals, not instruction from someone in power. Finally, Kenneth Bruffee's work emphasizes the collaborative, peer-oriented nature of learning in composition practice. Peter Elbow's pedagogies, so often associated with expressivism, are also remarkably social constructivist in their peer-based, collaborative approach. Elbow put forward the notion of the "teacherless writing classroom," in which students could collaborate in small groups without the hindrance of an instructor dominating their discourse decisions.

Today, social constructivism is at the core of much online writing pedagogy and has evolved into praxis in numerous ways, such as collaborative writing projects and online writing communities enabled by online writing technologies. In *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes*, Hewett and Ehmann write,

The educational uses of [online writing instruction] have been rooted strongly in the social constructivist epistemology, wherein knowledge is understood to be dynamic, provisional, and developed and mediated socially as people operate within various "communities" of knowledge. (33).

They acknowledge two strands of social epistemic collaborative learning: one oriented toward ideologies and critical discourse, the other oriented toward task completion. In online settings, these two may converge (33, 37). The two strands converge in online writing instruction when instructors use collaborative methods for both rhetorical discussions as well as exchanges instrumental to assignment completion. Thus, online writing instruction is ideal for collaboration, collective writing, and communities of practice.

Scott Warnock agrees that social constructivist epistemologies underpin online writing instruction. He suggests that online writing instruction is a "progressive" (and superior) form of writing instruction, due to the sheer volume of writing, the

opportunities for collaboration, the increased interactions, and the authentic audience (“Teaching” xi). Warnock describes the power of online writing instruction:

When you migrate your writing course online, students are writing to you and to each other in virtually all of their course communications, expanding ideas of audience, purpose, and context each time they contribute to a message board, generate a blog entry, or engage in an email-based peer review. (xi)

He contends that by using technology, “We could say that we are meeting students even more effectively . . . because, maturing in the interactive age of Web 2.0, they are increasingly accustomed to having dialogue instead of simply being passive recipients of information” (32).

Warnock along with Hewett and Ehmann highlight the opportunities that arise when writing courses are conducted online; students write more frequently, they read each other’s writing more frequently, and they develop shared texts for real audiences through collaborative and collective writing. This presents a unique opportunity for online writing instructors to leverage the many writing technologies at their disposal—message boards, wikis, blogs, eportfolios, Google Docs, and social media sites—to foster social constructivist epistemologies and promote peer collaboration, which is central to building peer relationships that, in turn, enhance the likelihood of persistence. However, there is also a risk that instructors who are unschooled in social constructivism will adapt online writing technologies haphazardly, perhaps using technology simply for technology’s sake, unless they carefully consider how each writing technology is helping students construct knowledge and construct peer relationships. Toward this end, it is useful to adopt LeFevre’s social continuum for writing, which she expands upon in *Invention as a Social Act*. LeFevre’s continuum places writing (and in particular inventional) practices within four categories ranging from least to most socially

situated: Platonic, internal dialogic, collaborative, and collective. Notably, these dimensions focus on the canon of invention as it is often perceived to be impoverished in both contemporary and online writing instruction. After reviewing this continuum, I examine how writing technologies can be utilized in online writing instruction in ways complimentary to knowledge construction and peer collaboration.

The Platonic Perspective

The Platonic perspective conceives of invention as “private, asocial . . . engaged in by an individual who possesses innate knowledge to be recollected and expressed” (LeFevre 50). The Platonic view of invention assumes that the solitary writer is writing independent of the many factors that have shaped his or her subjectivities and writing style, topic, tools, and process. While this is arguably true of certain genres and writing situations, including expressive and personal writing, it is rarely the case with academic writing. Nevertheless, the Platonic view cannot be readily dismissed from discussions of invention and technology because of its long history of preeminence among writing instructors, creative writers, and writing students who hold fast to the conception of the solitary writer expressing his or her interiority (Wendt 86). In “Why Wikis are Wonderful for Writing,” Sharon Albert and Clif Kussmaul write, “Writing and community are not words that instinctively go together for most college students. Students often consider writing a solitary pursuit [yet] . . . effective writing is not a solitary endeavor” (50). Furthermore, contemporary online writing pedagogies may still rely upon this notion of writing as solitary in self-paced models akin to the correspondence courses of yesteryear, for which students worked in relative isolation and mailed work to their instructors for grading. While the Platonic perspective does not lend itself to collaborative work, explaining the social nature of writing to students may help them understand why writing projects involve significant peer interaction.

The Internal Dialogic Perspective

LeFevre argues that the internal dialogic perspective conceives of the mind as having “internalized social dictates” that conduct an “internal . . . dialectic with another ‘self’” (50). She continues, “. . . the internal dialogic model . . . does not require that the inner conversation be in terms of opposites. The main feature of this model is that it conceives of ideas as generated through a dialogue—sometimes a dialectic” (55). This is an important differentiation. When writers use technologies to conduct research, for example, they may encounter new information that contributes to or alters their internal dialogue in a productive, but not oppositional, nature. Contemporary online writing pedagogies often rely heavily on internal dialogic perspectives, particularly in their use of the writer’s journal, often intended to draw this dialog out through metacognition and reflection. Reflective activities create opportunities for students to consider things that may buttress their persistence: their personal literacy, their support systems, and their persistence plans.

The Collaborative Perspective

The collaborative perspective on invention posits that people interact to invent. According to LeFevre, the collaborative perspective differs from the internal dialogic perspective in that invention is less a result of the individual mind than the interaction between people. An interaction is signified by “a response or adjustive reaction by another individual” (62). LeFevre considers face-to-face peer review groups, small group discussions, and critique sessions to be collaborative (63). Through collaboration, students make connections with peers, identify peers with whom they share common circumstances, and forge relationships critical to their affiliation and ultimately to their persistence.

The Collective Perspective

The collective perspective is based on Emile Durkheim’s “social collective” and the “assumption that invention is neither a purely individual nor an interpersonal act or process; rather, it is

. . . transmitted through such things as institutions, societal prohibition, and cultural expectations” (Tinto 50). Vincent Tinto also refers to Durkheim’s “social collective” when he warns that poor integration with the social collective can lead to student departure, which underscores the connection between collaborative work and persistence. Writing developed by a collective is becoming increasingly common due to technologies that allow for multiple authors. This may benefit students struggling to persist, particularly if the collective writing is done through sustained writing communities. Research suggests that learning communities result in somewhat higher rates of retention, a finding relevant to online writing programs (Baker and Pomerantz 115).

Differentiating Perspectives

The key differentiator among these perspectives is the level and manner of student interaction, which can fundamentally affect student persistence. The Platonic and internal dialogic perspectives involve essentially no interaction, although the latter acknowledges the social forces on intellectual processes, while the collaborative and collective perspectives acknowledge that meaning is derived through social interactions. Because all writers are situated within larger social systems that have shaped their intellect, ideologies, and access to information, there is considerable overlap among the internal dialogic, collaborative, and collective perspectives, hence LeFevre’s representation of them as a continuum. LeFevre asserts,

Writers do not invent in a vacuum. Expectations of society, attitudes fostered by institutions, funding preferences of public and private agencies, tacit rules about the nature of evidence and procedures for inquiry, and availability of equipment and materials—these are but a few examples of what influences our inventions. (78)

In terms of direct peer-to-peer involvement, the collaborative and collective perspectives offer online writing instructors excellent frames for considering how their pedagogies align with social constructivism and, therefore, may foster greater connectedness within an academic community and subsequently improved persistence.

Collaboration can be approached in diverse ways. Kathleen Blake Yancey and Michael Spooner, in “A Single Good Mind: Collaboration, Cooperation, and the Writing Self,” write about two ways to approach collaborative writing: hierarchically or dialogically. Hierarchical collaboration is when collaborators provide independent contributions to a final artifact, for example, when students each prepare different sections of a report, presentation, or proposal. Dialogical collaboration is when collaborators work together on each piece of the whole, through the entire writing process (49-52). Hierarchical collaboration is similar to LeFevre’s notion of the collaborative perspective, while dialogical collaboration is similar to the collective perspective. In online writing instruction, most instructors rely on both hierarchical and dialogical collaboration although the latter allows students to provide a more cohesive final product and requires them to negotiate rhetorical problems together as a collective unit. This negotiation facilitates knowledge creation and peer relationships. Saunders and Serna stress that peer relationships, social networks, and community memberships support student persistence (148).

Leveraging the Social Epistemic Nature of Online Writing Technologies

When new technologies become available, instructors may use them simply because the technologies seem novel, expeditious, or engaging. While these are legitimate reasons, by situating writing technologies in a social epistemic framework for collaboration, it is easier to see how they support learning and promote peer affiliation. In this section, I survey common course technologies,

in particular collaborative technologies, and align their instructional uses with LeFevre's continuum, thereby proposing that instructors leverage technologies in ways that promote the social, epistemic nature of writing and invention while simultaneously promoting peer-to-peer relationships to enhance persistence. I limit my discussion of online writing technologies to those commonly found in word processing and presentation software products and learning content management systems as these are the most familiar and accessible tools to many online writing instructors.

Word Processing and Presentation Technologies

Early scholarship on computer-mediated composition focused on the changes that word processing tools brought to the writing process and to the ways in which knowledge was constructed using these technologies. Today, they are an accepted part of writing programs, whether traditional or online, and are generally necessary for students to complete writing projects. The most common word processing and presentation technologies are Microsoft Word and Microsoft PowerPoint although other software products exist and are used by some students and instructors.

Web 2.0 Technologies

Web 2.0 technologies differ from the first generation of Web technologies, now known as Web 1.0, in their level of interactivity. Unlike traditional hypertext pages, which are a digital conveyance of a relatively static, inalterable text and images, Web 2.0 technologies provide rich generative and communicative opportunities. Madeleine Sorapure, author of "Information Visualization, Web 2.0, and the Teaching of Writing," defines Web 2.0 as "a platform, with applications and files stored on the Web rather than on a user's desktop" that is defined by participation, "the participatory Web, the social Web, the read-write Web" (60). Although there are numerous types of Web 2.0 technologies, most contemporary scholarship focuses on

hypertext creation, blogging and micro-blogging, contributing to wikis, generating social media, and participating in social networks. Of course, introducing social networking tools within courses require special considerations, including access, privacy, and propriety. Thus, it may be preferable for writing instructors to leverage those tools that are, increasingly, contained within the LCMS, such as blogs and wikis, so that students can participate in these within the relative privacy and security of the course.

Learning Content Management System Technologies

Common LCMSs include Blackboard, Moodle, E-College, Sakai, Angel, Pearson Learning Studio, OpenClass, and DesireToLearn. Each of these systems has features that allow instructors to manage their virtual classroom and interact with their students, such as bulletin boards for announcement posting, drop-boxes for assignment submission, and grade books for grade transmission. Most LCMSs provide a minimum of four interactive technologies that allow students to interact with their instructors and peers: instant messaging for virtual office hours, email options to send messages and files, discussion boards to facilitate small or large group discussion threads, and nonpublic blogs and wikis. LCMSs were among the first Web 2.0 technologies that allowed learners to exchange information, upload files, and participate in discussion forums, bulletin boards, and email lists.

Implementing Online Writing Pedagogies to Foster Persistence

Online writing courses vary considerably in the extent to which they leverage writing technologies. At one extreme, some instructors try to mirror traditional courses. They may post an online lecture via a presentation program, such as Microsoft PowerPoint; assign readings from an e-book; require students to take selected-response quizzes; and submit essays in document format using email or other uploading features. At another extreme, some instructors leverage the virtual environment and design assignments and assessments that involve utilizing a whole

host of presentation technologies and interactive Web 2.0 features.

Where do various writing technologies fall on LeFevre's continuum and how can online writing instructors leverage writing technologies to provide their students with an experience rich in a social epistemic notion of invention and not simply focused on formulaic, arrangement-based, current traditional pedagogies? In this section, I align each of the most commonly used LCMS technologies to LeFevre's continuum and then extrapolate the types of writing assignments that might cultivate digital literacies while promoting persistence through peer collaboration and affiliation.

Platonic Digital Pedagogies

Due to the socially situated nature of knowledge construction, it is unlikely that LeFevre would consider any writing, including personal writing, to be truly Platonic in nature. Even fiction writers are not tapping into the deep wells of their isolated imaginations but drawing on socially situated, mediated, and constructed experiences. While it may seem that some free-writing activities lean toward this category, these are generally in response to a prompt and, therefore, socially derived. The use of writing technologies complicates the Platonic perspective even more as access to and engagement with technologies are constructed out of social experiences situated within social settings. For this purpose, writing instructors neither can nor should try to achieve the Platonic perspective but rather should remain aware of it as an influential, if not anachronistic, ideology that continues to affect how some instructors and students conceptualize writing. However, it may benefit students to realize that writing is social and, therefore, that peer interactions are critical for knowledge construction.

Internal Dialogic Digital Pedagogies

The internal dialogic perspective, when integrated with other perspectives, can be an effective part of learner-centered and

persistence-based online writing instruction. When writing independently and in the absence of research, writers are certainly drawing upon their own knowledge and reflecting on their lived experiences. This is valuable as they transition into (or re-enter) post-secondary studies and situate their learning experiences within the larger contexts of their lives. While this perspective may not prompt students to form peer relationships, it does underpin reflective activities, such as digital literacy narratives.

Literacy narratives, such as those recommended by Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher, help instructors determine how comfortable their students are with writing and digital technologies and make learner-centered diagnoses early in the term. Literacy narratives do not represent a reversion to modes-based personal narratives or expressivism. Unlike the traditional personal narrative, which requires only that the writer recount a personal experience, and unlike expressivism, which holds that all writing comes from within the individual, the literacy narrative intends, as its goal, that writing students begin their studies by describing literate practices in their lives, families, and communities; consider their first experiences with technology, and how those experiences may have influenced their current attitudes toward technology; and evaluate the power dynamics associated with digital technologies and literacies in an information-based society (see Selfe and Hawisher). Literacy narratives help students recognize the social nature of literacy and underscore the importance of collaborative writing.

Internal dialogic writing technologies might include word processing, which allows writers greater freedom in collecting, arranging, and revising their material, demonstrating that internal dialog happens throughout the composing process. Similarly, using the Internet as an exploratory or research tool could foster an internal dialog, in which a writer forms new schemas based upon contributions of many authors. They may also serve as good opportunities for students to learn how to upload files to the LCMS's assignment submission feature, often known as a drop-box. Digital literacy narratives require very little, if any, research

and collaboration (although both of these may enrich the experience) and also serve as a diagnostic assessment.

Blogs are increasingly appearing within common CMLSs. In “Blogs: Where the World Wide Web and the Writer’s Journal Meet,” Stephanie Vie considers blogs as a hybrid of the journal, diary, and daily news that mash up features of Web sites, bookmarks, commentary, and social networks and are frequently updated, dynamic, and fresh (71). Because of their dual nature as both personal and public, Vie maintains blogs are the next evolution of the writer’s journal. Vie notes that because of blogs’ similarity to the daily news, instructors may encourage daily writing, which many writing instructors require in their writers’ journals (“Blogs” 77). In terms of persistence, blogs form another connection point for students who may feel isolated in the online environment (“Blogs” 74-75).

While blogging might seem non-collaborative, it may help students persist by promoting peer-to-peer affiliation when students read, reference, and hyperlink each other’s blogs. Vie notes, “As bloggers link to each other’s work, they form complex networks of relationships” and continues, “Hyperlinking between blogs can reinforce for students that blogging is truly writing within a community” (“Blogs” 75, 79). Blogging may be the ideal writing technology for literacy narratives and other types of reflective writing that give fellow readers insight into the authors’ lived experiences. Students may realize that their peers are also transitioning into the academic environment; struggling with conflicting personal, professional, and academic demands; and entering courses with varying levels of technical adeptness.

Collaborative Digital Pedagogies

Collaborative digital pedagogies are at the very heart of persistence-based instruction. Rayle and Chung found that those students who feel more social support and connections generally feel a greater degree of mattering and less academic stress (31). In online writing courses, peer connections begin through collaboration facilitated by a number of common LCMS tools.

Instant messaging allows learners to interact synchronously with their instructor and their peers. Email allows learners to interact asynchronously by sending messages, drafts, and hyperlinks to peers and others involved in the research process, such as librarians, tutors, and interview subjects. Discussion boards allow instructors to facilitate whole and small group forums. However, technology alone does not foster collaboration; many discussion threads in online courses are simply individual responses to an instructor's prompt (see Moran).

Rather, LCMS tools, such as instant messages, email, and discussion threads, become collaborative when student writers use them to negotiate meaning, form consensus on issues, and exchange ideas for individual and group projects. LeFevre contends, "Invention may be at some times a joint social enterprise, and at others, an interaction in which people's efforts are aimed at enabling one primary agent to invent" (66). M. Ellen Wendt describes collaborative invention strategies in synchronous chatting in her article "When Two (or More) Heads Are Better than One: Collaborative Writing and Technology in the Freshman Composition Classroom." Wendt credits the informal, dialogic nature of instant messaging with allowing student writers to experiment with language, exchange ideas, and clarify concepts with less embarrassment or performance anxiety (92). Susana Sotillo studied two groups of students, including 12 and 13 students respectively, in computer mediated writing courses. Sotillo found that instant messaging replicates many of the syntactic features of in-person dialog, whereas email exchanges form opportunities for lengthier, more developed, and more complex exchanges, both of which can benefit tentative writers who are practicing rhetorical and linguistic skills in low-stakes exchanges (106-7). Synchronous chatting can aid in collaboration, especially as peers work through invention exercises.

Similarly, in "Bringing Outside Texts in and Inside Texts Out" Jane Mathison-Fife notes that online discussions involve learners who may otherwise hesitate to contribute (37). Mathison-Fife encourages de-centering the instructor by using student-generated

discussion prompts (39). In a course evaluation, Mathison-Fife's students noted that "writing in an online discussion forum seemed informal to them, like participating in a chat room" (43). This kind of informality may elicit greater participation and, therefore, satisfaction and community building, critical for retention efforts. Thus, rather than simply asking students to post their earliest memory of using digital technology in school, instructors can prompt more collaboration by asking students to compare their experiences to those of other students or to determine the collective level of digital literacy across their cohort and extrapolate how to raise everyone's level of expertise, democratically offer technical tips, or provide the best types of peer reviews.

Warnock examines the uses of message or discussion boards and other digital media for sharing ideas, practicing concepts, and implementing low-stakes formative assessment. He describes the beneficial nature of semi-informal message boards:

Writers pay more attention to detail . . . than they would in a chat or text-message environment, but the occasional informal grammar or even Internet-based shorthand is acceptable, as those types of writerly moves sustain the board's dialogic liveliness. ("Low Stakes" 98)

Warnock describes, in particular, the benefits of online discussions and message boards in terms of their equitable nature, authentic audience, volume of posts, and shared construction of knowledge ("Teaching" 70-71). He asserts, "Although I will stop short—but *just* short—of calling them the holy grail of writing pedagogy, message boards provide a means of facilitating the *efficient* sharing of writing" ("Teaching" 69). This sharing of writing with a legitimate audience is perhaps the hallmark of online writing instruction. Warnock focuses on this key opportunity, noting that ". . . online students will read a lot of their colleagues' writing in the course. This reading material can have a much larger presence in an [online writing] course than in an onsite

course” (“Teaching” 63). Here, for perhaps the first time, students are writing to a true audience—aside from their instructor—that could include the larger “public” of the World Wide Web.

Bender describes two arrangements of discussion posts: chronological and thematic. Thematic postings, also known as threaded discussions, allow learners to contribute to multiple discussion threads and, therefore, follow multiple conversations (32). Bender warns against becoming overly routine, writing “A semester is a long time, and it might become heavy and cumbersome if the entire time is spent opening up new discussion forums to correspond with new mini-lectures” (118). To avoid this routine, it is pragmatic to engage learners in numerous types of digital projects, building upon skills acquired in prior projects, so that the projects become progressively more challenging.

While online writing instructors note the value of collaborative technologies, and they fall within social epistemic notions of writing, there is scant research that connects collaboration to longstanding peer-to-peer relationships. That is, there is no guarantee that asking students to collaborate will result in friendships outside of class, ongoing social support, or develop into a relationship substantial enough to support persistence. However, well-constructed collaborative activities offer the *potential* to seed peer-to-peer relationships. Indeed there is research, such as the works of Wendt, Mathison-Fife, and Warnock, that demonstrates that students feel comfortable using collaborative tools to share information, exchange ideas, and experiment with writing. Writing technologies are the primary means of student interaction in online courses and they provide pedagogically legitimate ways for students to begin to engage in ways that may deepen bonds and provide the backdrop for shared experiences. Instructors can use them in ways that foster collaboration on persistence-based writing assignment content, such as transition plans, and offer opportunities for students to identify with other students, such as reading each other’s literacy blogs. The intersection between writing topics and writing technologies may be a powerful way to help students persist.

Collective Digital Pedagogies

The cooperative and collective perspectives overlap. Asking students to reference discussion board postings to determine the collective level of digital literacy within one cohort and make inferences encourages students to work collaboratively on something that affects the collective. However, they are not working collectively on the same singular artifact or product. To differentiate between two overlapping concepts, collaborative work results in individual (but peer-influenced) products whereas collective work results in a singular product with multiple contributors. One of the most accessible tools for collective writing is Google Docs, which allow learners to share their documents in ways that foster brainstorming, critique, peer revision, and group writing, while allowing students to use word processing programs with which they may already be familiar, such as Microsoft Word. In “Learning From Coauthoring: Composing Texts Together in the Composition Classroom,” Michele Eodice and Kami Day explore the benefits of coauthoring in digital formats. They emphasize that students do not just sew together individual writing but actually negotiate writing down to the word and see the evolution of changes through versions (194).

An example of the differentiation between collaborative and collective writing technologies is between discussion boards, which mirror collaborative dialog, and wikis, which mirror the collective writing. Discussion boards are intended to be read and *responded to*, while wikis are intended to be read and *amended or revised*. Similarly, while discussion posts are attributed to a solitary author, wikis are attributed to groups. Wikis are collections of hypertext pages to which a multiplicity of users can contribute. Unlike other software and Internet technologies, wikis do not require specialized design or coding knowledge and make it easier for students to begin writing and join the conversation. In “Using Wikis as Collaborative Writing Tools: Something Wiki this Way Comes-Or Not!” Susan Loudermilk Garza and Tommy Hern suggest that the immediate visibility of wiki changes allows writers to accommodate personal, stylistic, and technical differences, as

well as encourages students to recognize that writing is a social, collaborative act. Garza and Hern discuss ways in which wikis make collective writing less threatening, more flexible, and more process than product oriented.

According to Sharon Albert and Clif Kussmaul, there are more than one hundred wiki engines, but many instructors rely on those provided by their LCMSs (51). They describe wikis as emphasizing text and content over layout and design and offering contributors the ability to view previous versions (51). They write, “Wikis can provide a clear visual map of a text’s features. Students can mark specific textual features with different formatting styles and comment on the text interlinearly within the page or intertextually, creating hyperlinks to related pages such as glossaries” (52). Albert and Kussmaul recommend wikis for peer review because they are easily accessed and modified; are used for several rounds of review; provide a “clean” version of the composure; and allow the author to retrace the changes and make revisions (54). Thus, they write, “students can then learn not only from the critiques they receive on their writing, but also from the process of critiquing and responding to critique,” and when peer reviewers disagree, student writers are forced to confront conflicting recommendations (54-55). Furthermore, wikis provide the ideal tool for process-based formative assessment by allowing instructors to view changes, revisions, and progress (55).

Garza and Hern stress the social nature of wikis. They write, “Wiki technology is a tool that enables writers to get into the mess and the social nature of writing.” They assert that wikis provide a means to negotiate collaborative practices. Users must negotiate the titling, structure, and procedures necessary for their work to be started, amended, and completed. Because pages can be added, edited, and adapted at any time, wikis focus on writing as a process, not in terms of isolated drafts and completed products. Although wikis may initially seem complicated to students and instructors, they enhance learners’ digital literacies in relatively low-stakes but highly collective ways.

While wikis offer much by way of social epistemic writing pedagogies, they become persistence tools when instructors use them to foster peer relationships based on writing assignment topics that support persistence. By asking students to collectively produce transition and persistence plans with hyperlinks to peer blogs that provide insight into digital literacies, instructors are connecting persistence-based writing assignment topics with a tool that encourages students to build rapport and relationships.

Indeed, persistence plans can take many forms in the online writing course. They may simply be alphabetized tips that learners contribute to a class WIKI on learner generated persistence strategies, such as “form friendships,” “select a mentor,” “schedule courses with a friend,” and “use discussions to reply to one different person each week.” Alternately, persistence plans can be quite involved, requesting learners to research their career goals, draw explicit connections to their academic plans, identify risks to those plans that may compromise their success, and plan specific strategies for both avoiding those risks and reacting to any impediments that threaten their goals. In both cases, these writing assignments are highly relevant to learners and are improved through peer collaboration. It is important to note, however, that despite the overt focus on persistence, the writing instructor is at no time assuming the role of an academic advisor. While advisors help students select courses and degrees to attain specific goals, writing instructors help students with entirely different sets of activities: formulating ideas and inquiries; conducting multifaceted research to clarify these ideas and inquiries into claims and arguments; and building plans for how these claims and arguments can be sustained over time through particular practices. In other words, the writing instructor’s focus should be on the writing process underpinning the articulation of the persistence plan, not the goals that are informing the persistence plans. While this may be, in many cases, a fine line, it is no different than supporting a student writer through any other kind of research-based writing in as unbiased a manner as possible. Indeed, persistence-based

writing plans may encourage learners to visit an academic advisor, as one part of their research activities.

In Summary

As online writing instruction becomes increasingly common, it is possible that instructors may limit themselves to current traditional pedagogies that are perceived easier to implement in online formats, such as a reliance on discourse modes, arrangement, and syntax. What may go unleveraged is the opportunity to reinvigorate the social epistemic nature of invention through collaborative and collective work. Collaborative and collective work allow learners to construct knowledge; build rapport and affiliation; see commonalities in their backgrounds, beliefs, and situations; and extend relationships beyond the online writing course. By recognizing that online writing instruction is underpinned by notions of social constructivism; by understanding that online writing courses can be as, or more, collaborative and inclusive than traditional face-to-face writing courses; and by acknowledging that online writing instruction epitomizes learner-centered instruction and persistence-based instruction, instructors are able to build digital curricula that cultivate student connections.

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