THE ADULT LEARNER IN THE ONLINE WRITING COURSE

Cheryl A. Hoy

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Committee:
Kristine Blair, Advisor
Mary Natvig
Graduate Faculty Representative
Gary Heba
Richard Gebhardt
ABSTRACT

Kristine Blair, Advisor

Because a gap in scholarly literature exists concerning the adult learner in the online writing course, I researched the effects of the online learning environment on adult learners in an online intermediate writing course offered through the Adult Learner Services Program at Bowling Green State University. This dissertation argues that online writing courses would better serve adult learners with a learner-centered, community-based online learning course format with educators trained in effective online writing and adult learner pedagogies.

Findings in this dissertation are based on qualitative and quantitative data collected from adult learners in three online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses and from my and a subsequent instructor’s observations of our online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses. In my analysis, I examine the issues for instructors teaching online writing courses for adult learners, which includes the lack of educational preparation for online and adult learning, the implications of previous experiences teaching face-to-face and online courses, the challenges of responsibilities and roles as instructors and as administrators, the expectations of adult learners, and the pedagogy of online course design, online discussions, time constraints, and retention of students. Further analysis of these findings addresses the challenges confronting those adult learners in the online writing course including issues arising from previous educational
and technological experiences, course design, pedagogy, interactions, time commitments, and the online learning environment.

I propose that online writing courses seek a quality designation through a collegiate-based peer review process. Furthermore, online course design and pedagogy for writing courses should ascribe to professional and organizational guidelines for best practices. Similarly, online instructors need to seek educational preparation through their universities and professional organizations in the use of current technologies and technological tools and in the use of an effective online pedagogy with regard to those technologies and tools.

This dissertation calls for further quantitative research, longitudinal in nature, into the adult learner in the online writing course, into the effects and implications of specific technological and online tools such as wikis, social networking sites, and blogs, and into best practices for adult learners and online writing courses regarding these current and emerging technologies.
To my family

for your continuous love and support of me throughout this process and during the course of life
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INTRODUCTION

My interest in adult learning in the online environment, and specifically, in the online intermediate writing course stemmed from my own observations and experiences while teaching online English 207 Intermediate Writing, a course in the Prior Assessment Learning Program, offered through the Continuing and Extending Education Department at Bowling Green State University. The English 112 Varieties of Writing course or a comparable first-year researched writing composition course is a prerequisite for this course and students are interviewed before allowed to register in this class. In this fifteen-week, distance education course, most every student was a returning non-traditional adult learner looking to gain additional college credit beyond the English 207 Intermediate Writing course credit. In this intermediate writing course, students completed a variety of expository course work, collected it into a portfolio, and it applied toward other course credit in various degree programs offered through the university. Student ages ranged from eighteen to sixty-five, and most had a freshman or sophomore ranking. While working with adult learners in this intermediate writing course, I noticed differences in motivation, production, communication, and assessment between the adult online learners and the traditional college student learners in this course as well as in other online, computer-mediated, and on-campus classes. The adult learners struggled to learn how to use and navigate through the technology, as well as apply the course content to their writing and produce written works. As an instructor, I became a writing instructor, coach, technical support person, cheerleader, and manager of the course site. Instructor and student communication extended beyond the virtual walls of the online classroom, as email and face-to-face office meetings became frequent occurrences, and this, in turn, initiated more frequent queries about the course and student progress from administrators because these emails and meetings were not observable in the course website.
Because of my experiences teaching English 207 Intermediate Writing, I began to question if the online learning environment presented different challenges and prospects for the adult learner versus the traditional student learner and for the online instructor versus the traditional classroom instructor. I began exploring and examining my initial questions by researching the current literature on adult learners in online environments and by pursuing opportunities to gain more first-hand experiences with teaching online courses for students of various ages and college ranks and with diverse levels of writing abilities. Thus, the focus of this project centers on identifying gaps in the literature of adult learners in online writing courses, examining issues surrounding teaching and learning in these courses, and proposing teaching strategies to better serve adult learners in online writing courses.

Since my experience teaching English 207 Intermediate Writing, I have gained more insight into online writing courses, instruction, and students by teaching two first-year, second semester English Composition courses that focused on researching and writing academic researched essays. One of these researched writing courses was at a two-year community college in which the twenty students ranged in age from eighteen to fifty years old, with a student status of either freshman or sophomore. This course was a six-week summer semester course in which students wrote an article review, did activities related to research and documentation practices, and wrote proposals, rough drafts, and final drafts, as well as participated in online research, online discussions, and online peer reviews. The other researched writing course was at a university in which the seventeen students ranged in age from nineteen to fifty, with student statuses of freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior. In this sixteen-week course, students evaluated an article, wrote three researched essays, participated in online research, online discussions, and online peer reviews, and completed a writing process consisting of proposals and drafts for each essay. Unlike the English 207 Intermediate Writing students, some of these traditional and non-traditional students had some familiarity with the
online course management system and a few had even taken previous online courses. However, overall and similarly to my experiences with the Intermediate Writing course, many students in these courses also struggled with the technology of the online course site and software issues, along with the expected issues of learning the course content and applying it to written works. As the instructor, I continued my role as guide, technical support, cheerleader, and manager of the course site. These teaching experiences strengthened my stance that adult learners have different challenges and expectations in the online writing classroom.

The common factor in my and other online instructor and student experiences is the course management system, which provides the space for learning, also called “e-learning.” The course management system is an “e-learning technology” as Richard Andrews and Caroline Haythornthwaite assert in their “Introduction to E-learning Research” (6). Andrews and Haythornthwaite continue to explain the concept of this technology:

At its basis, e-learning technology, like all other e-enterprises, depends on hardware, to process digital or analogue signals; software that can encode and decode, collect, store, and forward, and present communications in a visual, textual and/or audios modes; applications and systems that bring together tools to support data storage and retrieval, course management, computer-mediated communication, and collaborative virtual environments. (6)

The course management system provides the virtual classroom where “e-learning” takes place, and “equally important in this technological mix are the people who use the systems—teachers, instructors, administrators, students—each bringing to the e-learning enterprise their ideas of how teaching, learning, and communication should be enacted” (Andrews and Haythornthwaite 6). It is in this “mix” of technology and the people who use these systems where issues and challenges develop. While I have had experiences with WebCT, I am limiting my discussions in this dissertation to my experiences and the experiences of my students within the Blackboard
course management system. Blackboard is the course management system used at Bowling
Green State University and the other colleges where I have had online teaching experiences, and
is the preferred course management system because, as BGSU Blackboard Learning
Management System webpage states:

[Its] flexibility and ease of use allows instructors and students to communicate
and collaborate through real-time chats, threaded discussions, class e-mail, and
online file exchanges. With Blackboard, instructors can create and manage
course web sites without having to know HTML. Blackboard also facilitates the
development of virtual communities and includes an advanced architecture that
allows for web-based integration with multiple administrative systems. (BGSU
Blackboard)

The problems created by the course management system used in many online writing courses
tend to be that either the courses become "teacher-less" courses or they become collective
independent studies rather than a collaborative learning environment where class and group
conversations are held within a discussion board and where assignments and activities require
students to work together.

Guiding my project is one main research question and several sub-questions that focus on
the extent that the existing course format helps or hinders adult learners and the subsequent
implications for development and delivery of online writing courses for adult learners. The
parameters limiting the discussion in this project include the course management system for
online course format and delivery that, typically, is determined by the academic institution; the
knowledge that students are usually familiar with at least some aspects of the course
management system; and, that the course management system’s modules usually are organized
in a reasonably understandable way. Likewise, the length of a course usually is determined by
the academic institution and, therefore, is another limitation. However, my research questions
address the implications of teaching and learning in online writing courses for adult learners.

This project examines the following main research question:

- To what extent do the existing e-learning environment or course management system, online course format, and instructional delivery help or hinder adult learners in the online writing classroom, and what online strategies may better serve adult learners in online writing classroom?

Within this research question, the sub-questions that arise include:

- What are the issues facing instructors teaching writing in online environments?
- What are the implications for development and delivery of online writing courses for adult learners?
- What can be done to help alleviate these issues and implications for fostering better online learning environments for adult learners?

Because of the integration of computers and the internet into the composition classroom, most research focuses on specific aspects of the design, development, delivery, and effects of technology on learning in all areas including K-12 education, workplaces, personal spaces, and higher education. My survey of literature concerning adult learners in online college composition courses first involves a broader research focus on technology as used in traditional writing courses and in distance education in order to explain the impact of technology on the adult learner in an online writing course. Thus, a general survey of the literature found in the areas of technology, composition, and distance education that trace distance education or online learning’s history or theoretical foundations will provide a background from which to delve deeper into the issues of online course format and instructional delivery and the adult learner in the online writing classroom in the next chapter.
Some resources tracing the history of technology in writing and in online or distance education highlighting gaps in research pertaining to not only online or distance education but, more specifically, to the adult learner in the online writing classroom are important to note to provide a basis for further research and to substantiate the goal of this dissertation. The list of books, articles, and studies that discuss issues in distance and online education is extensive, but a notable historical survey of articles published in the scholarly journal *Computers and Composition* about writing with distance education technology is Susan Kay Miller’s 2001 article, “A Review of Research on Distance Education in *Computers and Composition*.” Miller outlines the articles between 1994 and 1999, when e-learning technology emerged. As part of her review, she analyzed twelve articles and found two distinct types of focus. One focus was on the development of distance education theory, and the other focus was on the practice of distance education (Miller 423). The key issues of four of the articles that Miller examined theorized distance education and centered on questioning the nature of online classes and online syllabi, questioning the role of the teacher and idea of intellectual property and making comparisons between face-to-face writing classroom and online writing classrooms (Miller 425). The remaining eight articles that Miller summarizes discuss instructional methods and strategies. When identifying gaps in research on distance education, she calls for more examination of distance education in other fields, contexts, and journals and she calls for additional empirical research, quantitative and qualitative studies, on distance education and writing (Miller 429). “Research,” Miller asserts, “analyzing distance education in different contexts or comparing and contrasting methodologies employed in teaching writing with distance-learning technology would help us to develop a more complex understanding of the possibilities and implications of teaching writing online” (429). Although Miller explores how the development of distance education theory influenced practice, there are still gaps in the research pertaining to adult learners and e-learning. Part of the objective of this dissertation is to contribute to, as Miller
suggests, “a more complex understanding of the possibilities and implications of teaching writing online” (429), specifically to the adult learner.

While laying the groundwork for my research on the adult learner in the online writing course, it becomes necessary to see the progression of technology in education. Linda Harasim’s 2000 *The Internet and Higher Education* article titled, “Shift Happens: Online Education as a New Paradigm in Learning” is an extensive historical survey and broad research study. Harasim dates the 1992 launch of the World Wide Web as the beginning of online learning, and she asserts that subtle changes have been made to online learning because of the invention of the telegraph in 1861 (42). She charts a timeline of computer networking systems and online learning from the 1861 invention of the telegraph to the 1971 invention of email and 1972 invention of computer conferencing (Harasim 43-45). Harasim continues the timeline with the first non-credit online course in adult education in 1981, the first online executive training course in 1982, and the first use of networked classrooms in K-12 education in 1983, to the first online undergraduate course in 1984 and graduate course in 1985 and the first online degree program in 1986 (43-45). She concludes her historical survey with the launch of the internet in 1989 and the World Wide Web in 1992 (Harasim 43-45). It should be noted that the use of the word “online” in Harasim’s descriptions of historical firsts would be more accurately termed “distance” learning because they reflect correspondence through mail services, telephone calls, television transmissions, videos, and email. Online today refers mainly to participation in activities on or through the internet and World Wide Web. Notable dates Harasim includes are the first “online” course in 1989 through the Open University in the UK and the first “online” education in 1996 through the Virtual University (42, 45).

Harasim also discusses three main categories for delivery of distance learning that are still accurate today. The first is an “adjunct” mode in which online learning “enhances” face-to-face and distance learning (Harasim 46). The second is “mixed” mode in which online learning
is significantly in proportion to traditional and distance learning (Harasim 46-47), and the third is the “online” mode in which most or all of the learning is online (Harasim 47-48). Harasim delves into the attributes of online learning environments, such as time, place, communication, multi-media, and computer mediated messaging, to set up a framework for designing online courses which lead to the principles of design, including collaboration, access, and knowledge (49-54). Then, with an analysis of 439 Virtual-U courses, she details the results of learning processes and outcomes and roles of the virtual instructor, learner, course, and university (Harasim 54-59). This article and research sets a foundation for further intensive studies as Harasim provides a starting point from which to measure other changes, such as the effects of technology on adult student learning, which may constitute more paradigm shifts.

Another look at shifting paradigms through the history of technology and distance education, in a more pointed, but detailed, focus, is found in A.W. (Tony) Bates’ 2005 book titled, *Technology, E-learning and Distance Education*. The significance of Bates’ historical trace, for my research, resides in an underlying assumption that, currently, more adult learners make use of the distance learning environment than traditionally aged student learners. Bates chronicles the history of distance learning by grouping advancements into generations. According to Bates, the first generation was “print-based correspondence education” (6); the second generation was a “print and broadcasting approach” that was “mediated by a third person,” such as a tutor, and the third generation had a two-way communication approach, such as with the Internet or video conferencing, that enabled the student and teacher to interact (Bates 7). Bates examines the growth of distance learning through each generation explaining the impact of technological advancements on distance education, examining the decision-making process concerning various technologies and the reasons some technologies remain while others fade, and explaining the significance of those decisions on distance learning and institutions.

“New technologies,” Bates asserts, “are just different, and we need to understand the differences
and the appropriate circumstances for applying various technologies for effective distance teaching and learning” (3). Knowing the past effects of the impact of various technologies on learning and distance education programs will guide future uses of current and new technologies, as Bates informs us, and this, I argue, can be beneficial for adult learners in the online writing course. In addition to knowing the past, knowing the theoretical basis for these decisions is important.

Most of the theoretical basis for best practices in e-learning for all students is from a constructivist perspective, but some sources assert that a new theoretical approach is needed. Bates “resists the post modernist tendency to believe that everything new is good and that there are no lessons to be learned from the past” (ix) as he assesses the positives and negatives of technology in learning. Bates makes a call for new teaching strategies as he concludes, “Technology does provide an opportunity to teach differently, in a way that can meet fundamental needs of a new and rapidly changing society. [. . .] This requires though new approaches to teaching and learning that exploit the unique features of different technologies in order to meet the widely different needs of many types of learners” (225). While not singling out specific types of technology, Bates states that the use of different technologies should be based on an understanding of “how people learn” and “how to design effective learning environments” based on the different technologies’ “educational strengths and limitations” (225).

Similarly, in a 2006 Computers and Composition article titled, “Designing Efficiencies: The Parallel Narratives of Distance Education and Composition Studies,” Kevin Eric DePew, T.A. Fishman, Julia Romberger, and Bridget Fahey Ruetenik note a development in distance education. DePew et al.’s article examines a trend that already values efficiency in the delivery of learning and that embraces the composition theory of Current Traditional Rhetoric, which values efficiency in communication. DePew et al. assert, “As composition studies continues to design social-epistemic pedagogies that challenge and resist the efficacy of efficiency, many
writing programs are repurposing these courses for the DE environment, an environment in which efficiency is valued” (53). DePew et al. take Bates’ call for decisions considered use of technology in education a step further by adding in specific types of rhetoric available through different technologies. DePew et al. make a call “to provide correctives by bringing a scholarly approach to the ongoing development of praxis for computer-mediated instruction” and a strategy they offer is “to complicate notions of an efficient computer-mediated writing process by incorporating visual and digital rhetoric” (53). Bates, along with DePew et al.’s assertions provide an evidential basis for my research into the use of technologies in the design of effective online writing courses rooted in an understanding of how adults learn.

DePew et al. discuss complications arising from the theoretical basis of decisions made in distance education, explore the histories of distance education and composition studies, and examine tensions between cost-efficiency and pedagogy efficiency and the effects on the efficiency of the medium and communication. DePew et al. argue that a focus on cost and medium efficiencies will dominate pedagogy and communication efficiencies (50). Their survey of distance education and composition studies show that distance education can benefit from the knowledge gained through composition studies for online writing instruction, but new narratives are needed (DePew et al. 49-50, 64):

We believe that new pedagogies will result from the creation of new narratives; therefore, the field needs to actively observe best practices, study the outcomes of these practices, and collect the stories of the ‘silent’ stakeholders, particularly instructors and students. [. . .] The field can collect this information by using qualitative methods (e.g., interviews and surveys), examining students’ institutional evaluations of the courses, and gathering anecdotes from instructor prompted discussions about the course and the media. Although this research can
create a plurality of perspectives that might be considered inefficient, it can lead
to more effective pedagogies. (DePew et al. 64)

From Miller to Depew, et al. the need for empirical research and narratives is evident in the area
of distance learning and composition. I am responding to this call by providing research and
narratives in the area of the online composition courses and adult learners.

While previous theories of learning seem no longer adequate for the new technologies
within e-learning, new theoretically based pedagogies are needed. “[A]cademe lacks a pedagogy
for using the Internet. […] As a result, most distance learning courses resemble traditional
classroom courses or poor imitations” (5), asserts Arthur Levine and Jeffrey C. Sun in their
American Council on Education Center for Policy Analysis 2002 report titled, *Barriers to
Distance Education*. Many online writing instructors use the same pedagogies for their online
courses as they do for their face-to-face courses, which I assert is one of the main problems in
online writing classes, especially for adult learners. Martin Weller, in his 2002 book titled,
*Delivering Learning on the Net: The Why, What, and How of Online Education* examines the
advantages and disadvantages of several pedagogies that have been used for e-learning. The
most common pedagogy used for online learning according to Weller is constructivism. In
constructivism, learning is achieved through dialogue with others; the context of learning is
emphasized which leads to a project or research approach; collaboration is dominant, and the
teacher acts as a facilitator (Weller 65). The disadvantages to a constructivist pedagogy,
stemming from the lack of adequate instructor input, involvement, and guidance, include that it
is time-consuming, frustrating for the learners, a “smokescreen for poor teaching,” and leads to
“mistaken beliefs” as the learners may adopt a dominant learner’s view that may be factually
incorrect (Weller 66). Similar to the constructivist pedagogy is a collaborative pedagogy where
social learning through dialogue and group work is dominant. The disadvantages to a
collaborative approach includes fostering dependence in learning, resistance and reluctance of
individual group members, time and task management problems, and assessment of work (Weller 69-70). Constructivism and collaborative learning pedagogies often constitute the majority of online pedagogy as teachers often use an online pedagogy that has been adopted and weakly adapted from their traditional, face-to-face classroom pedagogy. While both constructivism and collaborative learning pedagogies, at first, may appear to be the best approaches for teaching and learning online, when put into practice, the disadvantages of both pedagogies can quickly, and disproportionately, outweigh the advantages.

In contrast to a collaborative learning pedagogy is a narrative strategy for learning. A narrative pedagogy based on storytelling can provide structure, context, and a familiar format, and make a subject more interesting and memorable; however, it is limited in its focus and interaction, and it offers one view (Weller 72-73). When other pedagogies fail in an online class or when no other pedagogy has laid the foundation for online learning, the narrative strategy can engulf the learning environment, causing task management, focus, and assessment frustrations for both students and teachers. While Weller’s description of the narrative pedagogy places the educator as the sage on the stage, the next two pedagogies, place the role of the educator as the guide on the side. Resource-based learning appeals to a range of learners and learning styles, encourages a variety of viewpoints and questions, and promotes the development of skills through active learning (Weller 67). Similar to resource-based learning, where students have the role of finding and learning content, problem-based learning supplies students with a problem about which they have little to no knowledge and asks them to find information and solve the problem on their own. The advantages include self-motivation and responsibility, increase interest and engagement, consideration of various ideas and solutions, development of problem-solving skills; however, the disadvantages include a loss of focus and time, a degree of uncertainty, and a limited range of suitable topics (Weller 71-72). While Weller explores the use of these pedagogies in the online learning environment, new theories are emerging and adding to
the understanding of e-learning. For example, Mike Sharples, Josie Taylor, and Giasemi Vavoula in “A Theory of Learning for the Mobile Age” postulate the theory of mobile learning. Sharples, Taylor, and Vavoula contend that a mobile learning theory does not detract from the current pedagogies, but instead, adds the idea that “New mobile and context-aware technology can enable young people to learn by exploring their world, in continual communication with and through technology” (244). Online courses exhibit more than one of these pedagogies and understanding the strengths and limitations of each is a crucial step for guiding the development of an online course design and its delivery for the adult learner. Because online pedagogy cannot be merely an adaptation of a pedagogy used in face-to-face writing courses, my dissertation will examine a best practices approach for developing an effective online pedagogy for adult learners in an online writing course.

In addition, understanding the history and theoretically based instructional methods of composition and distance learning will help guide new research and scholarship as it has guided my research into online learning for adults. Melody M. Thompson, in “From Distance Education to E-learning,” contends that while research has examined the “student experience, the faculty experience, and institutional policy and management” and to a much lesser extent, “the ethics of e-learning,” the “broad examination of literature reveals a number of gaps in each of these categories where research is needed” (171). Within the student experience, Thompson lists numerous possible research questions concerning course design and support, comparison of the needs and experiences of adult learners and traditionally aged students, retention, and the assessment of student satisfaction and needs (171). Thompson continues to list more questions in the institutional policy and management section including analysis of existing policies and gaps in policies, finance, intra-institutional competition, faculty support and rewards, and quality assessment, control, and improvement (172). Lastly, Thompson notes that the ethical areas of access, integrity of institutions, students, and researchers, and coercive, consensual or supportive
nature of change management have many unexamined questions and implications (173). Thompson’s questions provide rich ground for further research directions. The focus on the adult learner in the online writing classroom responds to the calls for more research in the areas of student and faculty experiences. I will explore the problems facing non-traditional adult college students and instructors of online writing courses and provide strategies for a successful online writing course that meets the needs of the adult learner and the instructor.

Chapter one of this dissertation presents a review of relevant literature pertaining to e-learning, the online writing classroom, and the adult learner. Included in this review are the positions of professional organizations on what constitutes effective online learning and resources that posit criteria for the design of e-learning environments. Several resources are considered authoritative texts within e-learning and within computers and composition. However, the majority of sources examine course development and design in distance education, with instructional design having the most intense focus, and handbooks and resources for the development and delivery of online courses. Another aspect often examined in the research concerning online learning is communication. Many resources discuss the roles of asynchronous and synchronous communication and their pedagogical implications in computer-mediated courses and in online classrooms. Some research concentrates on student conversations within the online communications area, with the politics of communication styles and gender receiving pointed examinations. Focus on students is also evident in literature detailing the characteristics of successful online students. Student and instructor involvement is the subject of several resources that discuss peer and instructor feedback. One of the most investigated areas in online learning is in the area of assessment where student assessment, e-portfolios, and course assessment has the largest concentration of resources. The smallest area of research in online learning examines the underlying assumptions of who adult learners are and what their needs are. In addition to these resources, some resources examine instructional methods and course design
specifically for adult learners; however, resources from organizations offer a thorough discussion of the various aspects of adult learners and online learning. As evidenced in this review, a gap in the literature is present at the intersection of the aspects and issues surrounding online and distance learning and the aspects and issues surrounding the adult learner. My research dissertation contributes to the literature to help fill this gap.

Chapter two details my research study that is the setting for analysis and discussion of the issues and challenges for students and instructors in online writing courses. In this chapter, I describe the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, which is different from the traditional on-campus English 207 Intermediate Writing course. I also describe my study that is the basis for my dissertation. I gathered data from four adult learners in my 2003 online English 207 Intermediate Writing course offered through the BGSU Continuing and Extended Education department. I asked the adult learners to participate in one or more areas including allowing me to use postings in all of the modules in the Blackboard course shell, such as discussion board posts, virtual classroom chat posts, PowerPoint presentations, rough drafts, revisions, final drafts, and finished portfolios. I asked participants to complete and return by email or through Blackboard a post-course questionnaire survey and to participate in an email interview. In addition, I asked for permission to use any emails that were beneficial to my study. I also used data sets from the fall semester 2004 online English 207 Intermediate Writing class and two previous online English 207 Intermediate Writing classes from 2001 and 2002. In addition to the four adult learners from my class and the three other data sets, I interviewed Stan Lewis, director of Adult Learner Services, Kristine Blair, instructor of the fall 2001 and 2002 online English 207 Intermediate Writing classes, and the instructor of the fall 2004 online English 207 Intermediate Writing class. In this chapter, I discuss the controllable variables of the number and type of writing assignments and the uncontrollable variables of the number and type of adult learners.
Additionally, I discuss the quantitative and qualitative collection of data, the feasibility of the study, and the value of my research in the field of composition.

Chapter three of this dissertation provides an analysis and discussion of issues facing instructors of online writing courses. Instructors are teaching online courses as part of their roles as educators on college campuses, and as a result, they have had to redesign and recreate course content and its delivery for the online student and e-learning. Oftentimes, this can seem an insurmountable task, and course management sites can become nothing more than repositories of information that students must navigate and learn on their own. Besides the issues concerning the instructors’ familiarity with the technology and course content, instructional strategies that are natural to the traditional classroom are not easily transferred into an online learning environment, leaving some instructors to decry the inferiority of online education. This is evidenced by surveys conducted by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges and reported by David Shieh in “Professors Regard Online Instruction as Less Effective than Classroom Learning.” One result of the survey, as reported by Shieh, found that “while a majority of faculty members acknowledge that distance instruction offers students increased accessibility and flexibility, developing and teaching online courses can be burdensome” and that “70 percent felt that learning outcomes were inferior” when compared to face-to-face classes. Complicating these attitudes are the issues facing instructors concerning the lack of equitable compensation for teaching online courses and similar administrative concerns.

In chapter four, I discuss the issues facing students, and more specifically, the adult learner in the online writing course. Adult learners are entering or reentering college in record numbers and Bowling Green State University is seeing similar increases. According to BGSU Adult Learner Services & Evening Credit Programs: Frequently Asked Questions, “nearly 1,200 of our undergraduate students are 25 years or older” and many adults are returning to college to update skills, obtain a degree for a new position, or change careers. BGSU Adult Learner
Services & Evening Credit Programs: Frequently Asked Questions, also notes that “[a]lthough BGSU has been known as a residential campus with a majority of traditional-aged students, many adults take courses during the daytime, in the evening, and online while balancing their multiple roles and responsibilities.” Adult learners need flexibility in scheduling and courses as they often have substantial commitments outside of their educational setting. This chapter examines the adult learners’ roles in the virtual classroom, their familiarity, or lack thereof, with the technology used in their “e-learning,” their prior educational experiences with writing, and their various needs and learning styles.

Chapter five concludes this dissertation with the implications of and recommendations for designing and teaching an online writing course for adult learners. The goal of this chapter is to respond to Levine and Sun’s caveat in the American Council on Education Center for Policy Analysis report titled, Barriers to Distance Education that “faculty need to know more about interactive and individualized pedagogy. […] Knowledge of this new pedagogy will be essential if colleges expect success in distance learning” (6). Furthermore, the goal includes following the CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments that states, “The focus of writing instruction is expanding: the curriculum of composition is widening to include not one but two literacies: a literacy of print and a literacy of the screen. In addition, work in one medium is used to enhance learning in the other.” This chapter will address the issues and challenges facing instructors and adult learners in the online writing classroom, using the CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments guidelines for course design, faculty, writing program administrators, and writing programs as criterion. Using these criteria, this chapter will examine the pedagogy of online instruction and the professional development of online educators and recommend a method for assuring quality in online courses.
CHAPTER I: SURVEY OF LITERATURE: TECHNOLOGY IN COMPOSITION AND ADULT LEARNING

Over the past decade more literature added to the field of the adult learner in the online environment; however, still far more literature exists concerning all areas of composition theory and practices in courses, instruction, instructor education, student learning, and assessment in higher education. Similarly, although volumes of literature exist in areas of distance and online education and learning, online course and instructional design, online communication, assessment of students’ work online and of online courses, and in the area of adult learning, there is still relatively little literature on the aspects of adult learning and learners in the online writing environment. Because my research focuses on the intersection of online technology in composition studies and the adult learner, this survey of literature is divided into two main categories. The first category deals with technology and education, mostly within composition studies, and includes professional guidelines, criteria-based course design, and foundational literature in the area of computers, composition, and e-learning. This category also deals with course development and design in distance education, with instructional design having the most intense focus, and includes literature, such as handbooks and resources on the development and delivery of online courses. In addition, this category cites sources dealing with issues in online courses, with communication receiving the most scholarly attention, and with subcategories of the roles and pedagogical implications of asynchronous and synchronous communication, student conversations, and politics of communication styles. Finally, this category includes literature that addresses characteristics of successful online students, peer and instructor feedback, and assessment including assessment of writing, e-portfolios, and course assessment. The second main category in this literature review deals with the adult learner and includes resources examining underlying assumptions about adult learners, adult learner needs,
instructional methods, assessment specifically for adult learners, and organizational training resources.

*Technology in Education*

*Professional Guidelines*

Many sources offer guidelines for developing and delivering a distance education or online course; however, governing professional and scholarly organizations that have created policy reports on distance, online, and e-learning provide a set of standards that all educators of online courses should consider. These professional guidelines are significant in my analyses and discussions of the issues surrounding online instruction and adult learning as they provide an initial foundation of effective practice. In response to the substantial growth of Internet-based courses, the Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers’ May 2000 report, *Distance Education: Guidelines for Good Practice* developed fourteen standards of good practice in distance education for courses, students, instructors, and institutions. Courses, according to the American Federation of Teachers in this report, should be shaped to the potentials of the medium, should be designed to maintain close personal interaction, should have the class size set through normal faculty channels, and should cover all material. Furthermore in this report, the American Federation of Teachers assert that students must fully understand course requirements and be prepared to succeed, must be provided with equivalent research opportunities, must be offered equivalent advisement opportunities, and should be assessed in ways comparable to the classroom-based assessment. Faculty must retain academic control, be prepared to meet the special requirements of teaching at a distance, and should retain creative control over use and re-use of materials. Institutions should encourage faculty experimentation with a broad variety of subjects, should include same-time, same-place coursework for full undergraduate degrees, and should ensure evaluation of distance coursework is undertaken at all levels (Higher Education Program 7-15).
While all of the above standards are sound and well intentioned, the same-time, same-place coursework guideline that states that only up to 50% of coursework should be allowed in distance education, and the rest completed on-campus, needs to be updated. Although in a 2001 report titled, *A Virtual Revolution: Trends in the Expansion of Distance Education*, the American Federation of Teachers provided a synopsis of the trends and their standards in distance education and reasserted, “The guidelines lay out 14 specific standards which, if observed, ensure high quality distance education,” (4). More recently, the American Federation of Teachers Higher Education Department, in their 2003 report, titled, *Technology Review: Key Trends, Bargaining Strategies and Educational Issues*, stands firm on its standards but adds, “Blended learning provides a good example, with its reemphasis on same-time, same-place discourse as a vital part of a high-quality education” (B-12). While blended learning may be optimal, it is not the best choice for many adult learners. I assert that more research is needed to demonstrate that completely online programs do follow these sound principles and have allowed more adult learners to successfully complete undergraduate degrees and improve their employment status. A goal of this dissertation is to show an application of sound principles to online writing courses, which are usually required courses in most all online academic programs.

Similarly to the reports by the American Federation of Teachers, the American Council on Education Division of Government Public Affairs in *Developing a Distance Education Policy for 21st Century Learning* and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in *CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments* developed policies for distance learning, with the CCCC adding their position on the use of technology used for writing in any course, whether it is face-to-face or online. The American Council on Education Division of Government Public Affairs in *Developing a Distance Education Policy for 21st Century Learning* examines issues facing institutions, instructors, and students. These issues include intellectual property policies, ownership of
courses and course material, liability, commercialization, faculty issues of work and time loads, tenure and promotion, class size, and contact hours, student issues of access, disabilities, and privacy, and state and international issues of state approvals, financial aid, and accreditation. These interrelated issues between administrators and educators directly impact adult learners and the success of online learning environments. The American Council on Education Division of Government Public Affairs contends, “Not only do the new forms of distance education portend a change for student populations, but also they will force faculty to develop new modalities of teaching and administrators to provide a new infrastructure for support.” The CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments echoes the American Council on Education Division of Government Public Affairs and the American Federation of Teachers Higher Education Department’s concerns as well as many other resources examined thus far when it states, “As we refine current practices and invent new ones for digital literacy, we need to assure that principles of good practice governing these new activities are clearly articulated.” The CCCC provides guidelines for good practices for faculty, administrators, and writing programs within institutions and lists expectations for course design. Applying the CCCC guidelines to online writing courses will have a beneficial impact on courses, instructors, and students, and because of this highly beneficial impact, these CCCC guidelines hold the most significance in my analyses and discussions of adult learners in the online writing course environments in this dissertation.

Criteria-based Course Design

A few notable resources also offer a set of criteria and guiding principles for effective online courses. In “The Seven Cs of Interactive Design,” Joan Huntley and Joan Latchaw offer seven principle guidelines, such as correctness, clarity, consideration, coherence, creativity, consistency, and curiosity, for the effective web design of online courses. In “Designing Online Courses: User-Centered Practices,” Stuart Blythe examines system and user-centered models of
Web-based course design, asserts that both embody different values, and “presents strategies for adopting a user-centered design paradigm in distance learning” because it embodies “the values most compatible with writing instruction” (329). Additionally, Doug Madden presents seventeen essential criteria needed for good online course design in “17 Elements of Good Online Courses.” And, most significantly, in the much cited article, “Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever,” Arthur Chickering and Stephen C. Ehrmann discuss how good practices should encourage student-faculty contacts, develop “reciprocity and cooperation among students,” use “active learning techniques,” give “prompt feedback,” emphasize “time on task,” communicate “high expectations,” and respect “diverse talents and ways of learning.”

Chickering and Ehrmann’s article is the basis for the CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments’ faculty guidelines. Having standards of quality and knowing the principles as set forth in these resources will aid educators and administrators in the initial stages of planning an instructional design for an online course and in the revision of current online courses, for all learners.

Computers, Composition, and E-learning

Before moving into specific aspects of online education, a few resources for educators and administrators set a foundation for all resources, dealing with all subcategories within e-learning. First, Michelle Sidler, Richard Morris, and Elizabeth Overman Smith’s text, Computers in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Sourcebook, is a premier scholarly resource that “introduces new teachers and scholars to the best thinking and practices that inform sound computer-assisted writing pedagogy” (back cover). Sections in this text include the foundation of computers and composition that “establishes the theoretical framework of the field” (Sidler, Morris, and Overman 5). Also included in this text are sections focusing on literacy and access, writers and identity, writers and composing, and institutional programs that examine “areas of inquiry and application” (Sidler, Morris, and Overman 5). The rhetoric of
new media writing wraps up the text by addressing “recent research that speaks to multimedia composition pedagogies” (Sidler, Morris, and Overman 5). Within each section of the Sidler, Morris, and Overman text are definitive articles from leading scholars such as: “Literacy, Technology, and Monopoly Capital” by Richard Ohmann, “The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class” by Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe, “Distant Voices: Teaching and Writing in a Culture of Technology” by Chris M. Anson, “Technology and Literacy: A Story about the Perils of Not Paying Attention” by Cynthia Selfe, “Feminist Research in Computers and Composition” by Lisa Gerrard, “Pedagogy in the Computer-networked Classroom” by Janet M. Eldred, “The Debate about Online Learning: Key Issues for Writing Teachers” by Patricia Webb Peterson, and “Negative Spaces From Production to Connection in Composition” by Johndan Johnson-Eilola (Sidler, Morris, and Overman vii-x); the issues in this text, and in these foundational articles are then further complicated by yet more articles within each section. Educators and administrators need this basis of composition theory before moving into the various aspects of e-learning, and this resource conveniently has some of the most influential articles of the field.

The next foundational resource that should be on every online educator and administrator’s bookshelf is *The SAGE Handbook of E-learning Research*, edited by Richard Andrews and Caroline Haythornthwaite. Andrews and Haythornthwaite state, “Although there has been considerable development in teaching and learning, as well as in learning design, there is as yet no coherent view of what constitutes research in the field nor of how best to undertake it” (1). The first section of this text discusses the context and history of research in the areas of computers and composition, communication, and e-learning environments. Specifically, the articles in this section trace the histories of asynchronous communication in computer-mediated environments, of computers in composition, of access to computers and the internet and the implications of that access, of the online gaming communities, and of the “theories and methods
of Learning Sciences and e-learning” (Andrews and Haythornthwaite 139). The second section examines theory, the need for it and some possible directions and models for e-learning theories, such as linguistic theory, theories of rhetorical space, cognitive theory, mobile theory, and theories of computer supported collaborative learning. The third section focuses on policy including issues surrounding intellectual property, community, international policies, and gender, age, and personality. The fourth section explores the issues in language and literacy in e-learning, and the fifth section addresses issues in design. This text is noteworthy in its intent to “have provided at least an initial map for further research in the field” (Andrews and Haythornthwaite 46). While Sidler, Morris, and Overman Smith’s text, Computers in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Sourcebook provides a survey of articles addressing issues for computer-mediated composition, Andrews and Haythornthwaite’s The SAGE Handbook of E-learning Research adds in the online component that makes this resource valuable for all online educators and administrators.

**Instructional Design**

One of the most important aspects of developing an online course is instructional design. These recommended books do not specifically deal with technology in the online writing classroom; however, they do offer sound advice for instructional design that easily applies to an online writing course. Educators new to e-learning would benefit from Ernest W. Brewer, Jacquelyn O. DeJonge, and Vickie J. Stout’s book, Moving to Online: Making the Transition from Traditional Instruction and Communication Strategies. Brewer, DeJonge, and Stout discuss the process of moving traditional classroom instruction to online instruction, which many first-time online instructors struggle with as they attempt to take course materials from their traditional, face-to-face courses and upload them to the course website. Brewer, DeJonge, and Stout delve into teaching and learning basics and then move on to trace the history of online learning and the transition from instruction in traditional classrooms to instruction in the online
classroom. Brewer, DeJonge, and Stout examine different content delivery methods, such as the lecture, demonstration, panel and group discussions, and questioning methods. In the application section of their book, Brewer, DeJonge, and Stout discuss role-playing, case study, and simulation methods, and in each chapter, they include definitions, activities, systematic instructions, and rubrics for assessment. Brewer, DeJonge, and Stout’s book is an excellent choice for the instructor new to the online classroom. Taking the process a step further is Patricia L. Rogers who provides valuable resources for using technology to enhance instructional design in *Designing Instruction for Technology-Enhanced Learning*. Rogers includes sections covering an overview and foundations of instructional design and, then more specifically, instructional design for primary education, secondary education, higher education, and learning environments. The section on higher education is noteworthy because of three articles on designing discussion for online courses, using technology for enrichment of learning, and designing and evaluating online instruction. Similarly, the section on learning environments is notable because of the five articles on different case studies that investigate aspects of technology used in online learning, such as hypermedia, blended technologies, and training using adult learning theory for business and industry. These two texts offer a comprehensive look at technology in the online learning environments.

For educators, new or experienced, in e-learning, two books are worthy of a place on their bookshelf. Again, while these texts do not necessarily discuss the online writing classroom, their guidelines and discussions are easily adapted for online composition courses. Notable scholars in the field, Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt in their 2007 edition of *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*, provide valuable examples, case studies, and anecdotes to illustrate effective practices in online environments, and they offer steps for building a sense of identity and community through collaborative and transformative learning practices. Palloff and Pratt recommend adopting new approaches for the
online environment, re-contextualizing the idea of community, understanding the human side of
e-learning, working with the technology, having an effective course design, developing
appropriate program, course, and student assessments, and reflection for instructors and students.
In addition, Palloff and Pratt include an appendix filled with constructive course syllabi,
schedules, and assignments that illustrate the concepts discussed in the chapters. The next choice
after the Palloff and Pratt for the online instructor’s bookshelf is Mercedes Fisher’s 2003 book,
titled *Designing Courses and Teaching on the Web: A ‘How To’ Guide Proven Innovative
Strategies*. In this notable text, Fisher uses a constructivist pedagogical approach for designing
online courses, creating an online community of students through communication, and assessing
students. Fisher includes many helpful appendices, including resources and information on
technology, tools, tutorials, journals, chat, and websites, which enhance her discussions of
design, community, communication, and assessment. Both Palloff and Pratt’s book and Fisher’s
book are excellent resources for instructors of online courses.

While the resources on instructional design do include discussions of theory-based
pedagogical principles behind the design, handbooks for educators on course design tend to leave
out theory and, instead, offer basic strategies for designing an online course. Numerous
handbooks line the shelves in instructor offices, and the following is a sampling of some helpful
handbooks for designing online courses. *The Online Teaching Guide: A Handbook of Attitudes,
Strategies, and Techniques for the Virtual Classroom* by Ken W. White and Bob H. Weight
contains information on instructional methods, technological tools, and instructional strategies
that enrich communication, discussions, and feedback, as well as suggestions for overcoming
many of the challenges online instructors face. In similar aspect, *Engaging the Online Learner:
Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction* by Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson centers
on the idea of engaged learning and describes numerous activities to foster engaged learners in
the online environment. *Online Learning: All You Need to Know to Facilitate and Administer*
*Online Courses* by Mona Engvig analyzes educational innovations, instructional designs, and pedagogical approaches before discussing the needs of community, facilitation, and assessment and how to teach online. Engvig gives special attention to the perspectives of online students, which makes this book noteworthy for all online educators. In addition, arguably the most comprehensive guide listed here is Tisha Bender’s *Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice, and Assessment*. Bender divides her book into three main sections: theoretical implications of online pedagogy that discusses the idea of distance, the role of the instructor, and learning theory; practical applications for course design, teaching, and communication; and, assessment of the online course. Notable chapters in Bender’s book include one in which she builds a model for assessment of online learning, and one in which she presents innovative instructional strategies for online group work, journals, portfolios, synchronous conversations, guest lecturers, virtual field trips, use of websites, team teaching, testing, and grading. While these books are general guides to online instruction, they all have elements of good design principles. Instructors of online writing courses should review several of these books and select appropriate design elements that will foster learning in their online writing classrooms; however, this area presents a gap in resources for the online writing instructor and illustrates the need for more handbooks that specifically address course design for online writing courses.

*Course Development and Delivery*

Designing and delivering online courses presents issues and challenges for instructors, so many resources focus on this area. In “So You are Going to be an Online Writing Instructor: Issues in Designing, Developing, and Delivering an Online Course,” Wilhelmina C. Savenye, Zane Olina, and Mary Niemczyk present guidelines for instructors of online courses. Savenye, Olina, and Niemczyk discuss developing the course by using “systematic principles of instructional design” (372-379), supporting “students in online courses” (379-380), and
supporting “faculty who develop online courses” (380-381). Similarly, Patricia Webb Peterson addresses the issues of teachers’ roles, educational goals, and student learning (359-370) in “The Debate about Online Learning: Key Issues for Writing Teachers.” Linda Boynton discusses the challenges she faced while teaching an online writing course in “When the Class Bell Stops Ringing: The Achievements and Challenges of Teaching Online First-Year Composition,” and she asserts the need for introspection about roles, relationships, and perceptions of students and instructors in online learning. As evidenced by this sampling of articles, issues of roles, goals, and learning in the online environment continues to be the focus of discussions in instructional methods and course design.

Besides the challenges of instructional design, there are also overlapping challenges for online learning and distance education. In “Online Education Horror Stories Worthy of Halloween: A Short List of Problems and Solutions in Online Instruction,” David E. Hailey, Jr., Keith Grant-Davie, and Christine A. Hult examine the problems instructors and administrators face in distance and online learning. Similarly, in “Fault Lines in the Terrain of Distance Education,” Laura Brady looks at the ideologies of distance education and their implications for access, perceptions of teacher roles, and retention patterns. Alfred P. Rovai, in “In Search of Higher Persistence Rates in Distance Education Online Programs,” examines attrition models in on-campus programs and develops a “composite model to better explain persistence and attrition among the largely nontraditional students that enroll in online courses” (1). In response to higher attrition rates for online courses because of “feelings of isolation, frustrations with technology, anxiety, and confusion,” Frederick B. King describes, in “A Virtual Student: Not an Ordinary Joe,” his use of a fictional virtual student who helps establish a collaborative community of learners, who starts discussions, who facilitates learning, and who is a model for others (157-166). Attrition rates continue to be problematic and instructors redesign courses, revise instructional methods, and look to technological tools to help increase student interest in the
course material, while at the same time maintaining the course objectives. Because of these challenges, additional narratives need to highlight successful strategies.

**Issues in Online Communication**

One specific issue of online learning and distance education that has received much scholarly attention is the area of online communication, both synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous communication occurs simultaneously in real time, in online chat rooms, and in some web-based course management software, such as WebCT and Blackboard that have chat features. Asynchronous conversations are dialogues that occur at different times in bulletin board discussion threads and email. The Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers *Distance Education: Guidelines for Good Practice* states online courses should “maximize communication electronically,” and “distance learning courses should, to the greatest extent possible, incorporate both” synchronous or “real time electronic interchange through devices such as chat rooms and discussion groups;” and, “asynchronous forms of communication such as e-mail and computer bulletin boards” (10). Similarly, Patrick Sullivan argues in “Reimagining Class Discussion in the Age of the Internet,” that the use of online communication in a networked classroom environment “offers English teachers opportunities that can help make class discussion more engaging, more worthwhile, and significantly more effective as a teaching tool” (393).

Some additional resources focus on the pedagogical applications for online communication. *Communication and Cyberspace: Social Interaction in an Electronic Environment*, edited by Lance Strate, Ron L. Jacobson, and Stephanie Gibson, provides a theoretical foundation for cyber communication. In “Using Learning Orientation to Investigate How Individuals Learn Successfully on the Web,” Margaret Martinez analyzes the effects of learning orientation, time, and web environment on students’ interactions, thus providing scholarly support for online pedagogy. *Electronic Communication across the Curriculum* edited
by Donna Reiss, Dickie Selfe, and Art Young discusses the design, use, and experiences of using email and other virtual communication in various academic disciplines. In “Teaching Interlocutor Relationships in Electronic Classrooms,” Christyne A. Berzsenyi provides a pedagogical strategy for teachers that “encourages students to become more aware of the power dynamics embedded in the various chat discourses,” and “to recognize how interlocutor relationships are collaboratively constructed through discursive actions” (231). Bette Brickman reports in “Designing and Teaching an Online Composition Course,” that she created “a structured series of questions that students could comment on and debate via the bulletin board,” and she “created a special section called ‘Creative Writing and Stories’” for students to discuss other non-course topics (360). In “Stimulating Collaboration and Discussion in Online Learning Environments,” Jim Clark notes, “Discussion forums have replaced the casual conversations in the classroom and have a permanent written log. Discussions are no longer rapid and experimental. Students have ample time to read other student’s comments, do research, and formulate a detailed response” (120). Beth Hewitt reports on her study of computer-mediated communication (CMC) of peer groups and its influence on the revision of students’ writing, in “Characteristics of Interactive Oral and Computer-Mediated Peer Group Talk and Its Influence on Revision.” Hewitt concludes that CMC “appears to have influenced their [peers] degree of context- and group-focused talk, as well as the quality of their interactive talk” (285). Mike Palmquist, Kate Kiefer, James Hartvigsen, and Barbara Goodlew contend in their research study, *Transitions: Teaching Writing in Computer-Supported and Traditional Classrooms*, that the synchronous communication forum can be used “to begin discussion about an assignment,” “to role-play reactions to arguments,” and “to brainstorm topics for an assignment” (163). Jim Cody discusses how to use online discussion forums to enhance learning in “Asynchronous Online Discussion Forums: Going Vibrantly beyond the Syllabus.” Communication issues are only one part of the pedagogical issues that are still at the forefront of online learning; as
technology changes, so does the pedagogy. Having a variety of instructional strategies that keep
the communication productive is necessary for e-learning.

Along with the pedagogical applications of asynchronous and synchronous
communication forums is the discussion of types of online students and their resulting
conversational styles, which differ from face-to-face to online courses and from one online
course to the next. Assuming that students in an online course form a community for discourse,
the study of conversational styles often is based on students’ online posts in discussion boards
and in chat rooms within the online course. Examining the notion of subjectivity within an
online writing course is Sergey Rybas, in his 2008 dissertation titled, “Community Revisited:
Invoking the Subjectivity of the Online Learner.” Rybas reports that when “Faced with choices
in the level of formality and experimentation, which are enabled by the online discourse, the
students, with almost no exception, felt pressured by the formal conventions of communicating
in an academic environment. The need to adhere to the norms of communicating within an
academic discourse led to the imitation of academic discourse” (108). Rybas’ study of the
“imitation of academic discourse” in online communications within an English 207 Intermediate
Writing course highlights the pressures adult learners feel when re-entering or beginning college,
and especially, within writing courses as this dissertation focused on the online writing course.
Similarly to the scholarly work of Rybas, more research has focused on the communication
styles of students within online courses. Not only does the type of course influence the
conversational style, but the type of students does also. For example, Susan Ko and Steve
Rossen note in Teaching Online: A Practical Guide three types of students and their “trademark
styles” (241). In “Race on the Superhighway: How E-mail Affects African American Student
Writers,” Theresa M Redd and Victoria W. Massey examine the scholarship on email or
asynchronous communication and what it predicts and reveals about African American students
online (246). Diane D. Belcher discusses, in “Authentic Interaction in a Virtual Classroom:
Leveling the Playing Field in a Graduate Seminar,” different conversational styles of a variety of students in an asynchronous class discussion in a class news group. In “Facilitating Debate in Networked Learning: Reflecting on Online Synchronous Discussion in Higher Education,” Rachel M. Pilkington and S. Aisha Walker studied small group collaborative learning and the use of dialogue roles in the online synchronous chat or discussion forum (41). Philip A. Thompsen examines in “What’s Fueling the Flames in Cyberspace? A Social Influence Model” some of the theoretical explanations for the conversational style called flaming. Thompsen observes the “erosion of self-control,” the sense that online conversations are “more impersonal, more blunt, and more likely to produce the kind of friction that leads to flaming,” and the concept of ambiguity in which “intentions are easily misinterpreted—and the slightest spark can touch off a flame war” (333). These articles are significant in the understanding of different conversational styles, but they do not specifically address the adult learner in the online writing classroom; thus, instructors need to create situations and opportunities to meet all learners’ needs in the online writing classroom.

In addition to conversational styles, the politics of communication deals with gender and online communication. In “Women on the Networks: Searching for E-Spaces of Their Own,” Gail E. Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan report, “recent studies of women and technology have begun to question the adequacy of egalitarian narratives for describing e-space” (175). Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe explain the issue further in “Teaching Writing at a Distance: What’s Gender Got to Do With It?” Hawisher and Selfe note that “women appeared to be increasingly shut out as men came online and began to dominate the discussions,” that “women make fewer and shorter contributions than men,” and that they respond more frequently “to men’s postings than to women’s [. . .] thereby reinforcing the offline status quo” (175-76). Additionally, in “Technological Fronts: Lesbian Lives ‘On the Line’,” Joanne Addison and Susan Hilligoss note that “Identifying oneself as a lesbian may actually be more complicated
online than in ordinary physical spaces” (32). Although these articles discuss the politics of communication as they relate to gender, they do not discuss the issue of adult learners and communication regarding the higher number of adult women in comparison to the number of adult men or traditionally aged college students in distance education programs.

**Characteristics of Online Students**

Another area that receives much attention in the scholarly literature is the essential characteristics of successful students in online courses; however, these sources typically discuss the needs of traditional students and not the adult learner. In *The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Working with Online Learners*, Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt identify seven qualities that they assert online students need to have (9-12). Similarly, Lynne Schrum and Sunjoo Hong, in their research study of online students as reported in “From the Field: Characteristics of Successful Tertiary Online Students and Strategies of Experienced Online Educators,” discuss more student needs. Schrum and Hong assert that the needs include an understanding of the tools used in technology, their technology experience, and their learning preferences, study habits and skills, goals and purposes, lifestyle factors, and personal traits and characteristics (9-12). In Yaacov J. Katz’s research study “Attitudes Affecting College Student’s Preferences for Distance Learning,” the results show that in distance learning, a “highly interactive delivery system” is “preferable for students who are satisfied with the learning process,” who “need to feel in control of learning,” and who “are motivated to study” (8). Katz asserts that an “Internet-type approach” is preferable for students who are “independent and self-confident” and who “do not feel that they are in serious need of intense interaction with tutors or lecturers when they go about their learning” (8). In “‘It’s Easier to Be Yourself When You are Invisible’: Female College Students Discuss Their Online Classroom Experiences,” Patrick Sullivan claims that most students who take online courses enjoy them and praise them for their convenience, flexibility of time and place, anonymity, and freedom for expression (135-140). Moreover,
Maria LaPadula reports, in “A Comprehensive Look at Online Student Support Services for Distance Learners,” on her survey about the support services that online students need at the New York Institute of Technology. In addition to these sources not discussing the adult learner in general, they also do not specifically address characteristics of successful adult learners in the online writing classroom, illustrating another gap in the research of this field.

**Peer and Instructor Feedback**

Similar to students’ needs, another aspect of pedagogy often discussed is the use of computer and online technology for peer and instructor feedback on student writing. In “Responding to and Assessing Student Writing: The Uses and Limits of Technology,” Chris Anson discusses responding to student papers by using end comments, separate pages of commentary, or “embedded” comments (238). In an analysis of comments and commentary, in “‘I Just Think Maybe You Could . . .’: Peer Critiquing through Online Conversations,” Lois Rubin reports on her ethnographic study of peer critiquing and concludes that online critiques are more beneficial than handwritten ones. Similarly, Virginia Crank discusses her examination of online peer responding in “Asynchronous Electronic Peer Response in a Hybrid Basic Writing Classroom.” While feedback is an important feature of an online writing course, these sources focus on the actual comments made mainly by peers. One recent case study examines the process of online peer feedback in a writing classroom. Vanessa Paz Dennen and Gabriel Jones, in their case study in “How’s My Writing? Using Online Peer Feedback to Improve Performance in the Composition Classroom,” conclude that the “effectiveness of online peer-feedback activities depends on several factors, including the amount of effort students put in, their own beliefs about self and peer efficacy, the value of their peer’s contributions, the quantity and quality of feedback the students received, and the student’s own level of knowledge and preparation for the activity” (256). While research literature based in traditional, face-to-face learning environments examines the effectiveness of peer feedback in composition courses,
Dennen and Jones’ research provides an effective initial look at using peer assessment in the online writing course.

Assessment

Many resources give instructors a more inclusive look at the issues surrounding writing assessment in the online environment. Diane Penrod in her book *Composition in Convergence: The Impact of New Media on Writing Assessment* examines the effects technology has on writing assessment and proposes “syncretics” to deal with the “convergence of technologies in writing instruction” (169). “Syncretics,” Penrod explains, is “the blending together of differing traditions or schools of thought—in this case assessment and networked writing environments—to offer writing teachers a richer, more varied understanding of how technology can be beneficial for composition pedagogy” (169). Exemplifying the “convergence of technology and writing instruction,” is Dan Davis in “The Paperless Classroom: E-filing and E-valuating Students Work in English Composition.” Davis contends that an “e-filing and e-grading system accommodates any university’s preexisting platform” and “can be an effective and concise method of storing and evaluating papers and communicating with students” because “comments are legible,” because “students and instructors can chart the students’ progress” and because “an e-record” can be kept that aids in final evaluations (170, 173). The area of writing assessment in e-learning is beginning to see more literature, but more case studies are needed to inform instructional practices in which technology affects the assessment of student writing.

One prominent form of student writing assessment is the portfolio. Some online writing courses may still use printed, paper-based portfolios for assessment of student writing and others may use electronic portfolios also called e-portfolios. Taking a paper-based printed portfolio used in face-to-face traditional writing courses and using it as a method of assessment for online writing students can be problematic. Elizabeth Monske discusses some of these problems in her 2004 dissertation titled, *Transitioning in the Fully Online Writing Course: A Pilot Study,*” in
which she studied two online English112 Varieties of Writing courses, which are first-year, researched writing courses at Bowling Green State University. Monske reports, “while a portfolio is still viable, the traditional paper-based portfolio set up does not work in a fully online writing classroom” (97). Monske continues to explain that “Requiring all of the prewriting and drafts to be included in the portfolio was also difficult to maintain” because collecting these materials efficiently “was also a problem” (97). Similar to the portfolios used within the English112 Varieties of Writing courses in Monske’s study, the online students in my English 207 Intermediate Writing also created printed, paper-based portfolios. While the type of documents in my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course differed from those in the English112 Varieties of Writing courses, the same problems indicate a need for a portfolio that is more reflective of online learning as a viable alternative to the paper-based printed portfolio. Such an alternative portfolio, an e-portfolio, has been the focus of much research in the scholarly journal, Computers and Composition. The thirteenth volume of Computers and Composition is devoted to the issue of electronic portfolios and includes nine articles: “Electronic Portfolios” by Alan C. Purves; “Memoranda to Myself: Maxims for the Online Portfolio” by Rebecca Moore Howard; “Down the Yellow Chip Road: Hypertext Portfolios in Oz” by Katherine M. Fischer; “Electronic Portfolios: A Five-Year History” by Jo Campbell; “Cowriting, Overwriting, and Overriding in Portfolio Land Online” by Cheryl Forbes; “‘Going Public’ with Electronic Portfolios: Audience, Community, and the Terms of Student Ownership” by Beverly C. Wall and Robert Peltier; “World Wide Web Authoring in the Portfolio-Assessed, (Inter)Networked Composition Course” by Steve Watkins; and “Portfolio, Electronic, and the Links Between” by Kathleen Blake Yancey. Using e-portfolios, which differ in context and substance from print-based portfolios, as a method for assessment of student writing in online courses, provide a foundation for discussions of the need for technological knowledge as well as pedagogical skills for both instructors and adult learners in the online writing course.
Evaluation of the online course is another area of assessment that is receiving more attention in the literature. Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt note in _Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom_ that course assessment should include student responses on “their overall experience of working online through the institution,” and on “how well the technology worked for them and whether they received the technical support they needed” (153). A response to Palloff and Pratt’s call for student evaluations is in “Quality Assurance for Whom? Providers and Consumers in Today’s Distributed Learning Environment” by Carol Twigg. Twigg lists prompts for students to respond to that “take into account the professional’s perspective—those things that experts believe are necessary to ensure high quality” (21). Taking the student evaluations a step further in an effort to gather researched data to inform this assessment practice is Dominique Monolescu’s and Catherine Schifter’s study of virtual focus groups as reported in “Online Focus Group: A Tool to Evaluate Online Students’ Course Experience.” Monolescu and Catherine Schifter support using groups as a research tool for evaluating students’ online experiences instead of, or in addition to, the current midterm evaluation forms. While these sources are emphasizing the need for course evaluation, specific research and literature is needed for evaluation of online writing courses, for both traditional, on-campus, online, and adult learners.

_The Adult Learner_

_Assumptions_

The underlying assumption in almost all of the literature about online and distance education is that the discussions, studies, and implications apply to a rather homogeneous group of students. This assumption is supported by some literature on adult learners, such as Rita Richey in “Adult Learners,” who defines adult learners as “people over the age of eighteen in an instructional situation, whether formal or informal” (10). However, adult learners do not fit neatly into that group. Even in Richey’s survey about the literature on adult learning, she
acknowledges, “For many, the term ‘adult learner’ is too comprehensive. [. . .] Some view adult learners in terms of age groupings with characteristic physical changes, others in terms of a person’s social and psychological history, and others in terms of typical life events” (10). For example, Lois Lamdin in *Earn College Credit for What You Know* defines the adult learner as someone “who is older than the traditional college student (25+); one who is living away from parents and/or is self-supporting; one whose primary role is other than learner (such as worker, parent, spouse, or retiree)” (219). Deborah Kilgore and Penny J. Rice, editors of the 102nd issue of the quarterly journal *New Directions for Student Services* titled, “Meeting the Special Needs of Adult Students,” give a more detailed summary of the adult learners:

Students in higher education often are defined as “adult learners” or “nontraditional students” if they are twenty-five years of age or older and, more significantly, if they have taken on what we consider adult roles and responsibilities, such as caring for children and other family members, working full-time, or participating heavily in community activities. (Kilgore and Rice back cover).

The key point that Kilgore and Rice make about adult learners is that they are a group of college students who have different life stories than those of traditionally aged college students. The inference, as explained by Richey, is that “life changes have implications for adult learning in terms of learning style, the motivation to learn, and the capacity to learn” (10). These resources attempt to define the adult learner and differentiate the adult learner from the “traditionally-aged” learner. In "Adult Learners in the Classroom," Jovita M. Ross-Gordon concisely examines the assumptions underpinning adult learning in andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformative learning, discusses adult development theories, notes the characteristics and concerns of adult learners and their perceptions of effective teaching practices, and provides a list of recommendations. While the resources examined thus far discuss areas and issues in e-
learning, such as the guiding principles, instructional design, course delivery, pedagogy, communications, student characteristics, feedback and assessment, they do not necessarily apply to the adult learner in the online environment. A further review of the literature about the adult learner in the online writing course shows little to no resources; however, some notable resources are available concerning the adult learner and distance education.

**Needs of the Adult Learner**

One of the most abundant areas of literature about adult learners concerns their needs in an educational setting. Often literature intended for various departments within an educational institution analyzes the needs of adult learners. For example, the 102nd issue of the quarterly journal *New Directions for Student Services* titled, “Meeting the Special Needs of Adult Students” contains eleven articles that consider the best practices that student services can use to meet the needs of adult learners. Kilgore and Rice, editors of this text, “decided to focus on four-year and postgraduate institutions because these institutions often are focused on traditional-aged students despite the growing adult enrollments and are most in need of guidance about how to serve this ever-growing population” (back cover). In particular in this issue, Ellen E. Fairchild’s "Multiple Roles of Adult Learners" examines how the multiple roles of an adult learner creates problems in the areas of the situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers and how the multiple roles can help the adult learner. Similarly, Carol E. Kasworm’s "Setting the Stage: Adults in Higher Education" provides statistics on the enrollment of adults in higher education, analyzes the motivation and goals of adult learners, examines the differences between adult learners and younger learners, and addresses the implications of the research for student services. Kasworm and Fairchild provide valuable evidence, and in Kasworm’s article, valuable statistics that support the position that adult learners are not part of a homogeneous group of students in education, and their multiple roles, motivations, and differences necessitate specific instructional strategies as discussed in this dissertation.
In addition to the literature from student services sources, adult learning literature debates the theoretical and instructional methods for adult learners based on their roles and needs. In *The New Update on Adult Learning Theory* edited by Sharan Merriam, ten articles discuss updates on theories, approaches, and understandings of adult learning. Susan Jurow discusses in “How People Learn: Applying Adult Learning Theory and Learning Style Models to Training Sessions” the characteristics of adults that call for the use of adult learning and learning style theories in instructional methods. In *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson define pedagogy as literally meaning “the art and science of teaching children” (61) and that andragogy approaches learners from the “standpoint of how adults learn” (xiv). In *The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Working with Online Learners*, Palloff and Pratt examine the needs of the adult learner and initially promote a “learning-centered, adult-focused learning” model, which they refer to as “electronic pedagogy” (xiv). However, after reassessing the debate, they realize that they are focusing “more on the learner and a learner-centered educational process” that is “neither pedagogy nor andragogy, but instead *heutagogy*, or self-directed learning” (Palloff and Pratt xv). In lieu of research and literature of the adult learners’ needs in the online writing course, understanding the adult learners’ needs in general is applicable to discussions of instructional methods and course design. These discussions will significantly shape the later chapters of this dissertation that focus on the issues of teaching and the implications of adult learning in the online writing course.

A current trend in the research on the needs of adult learners centers on the examination of emotions and their connection to adult learning. For an extensive overview, volume 120 of *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education* contains many articles on the role of emotions in the learning process. The most noteworthy articles pertaining to adult learning in online courses include: “The Meaning and Role of Emotions in Adult Learning” by John M. Dirkx;
“The Emotional Self in Adult Learning” by M. Carolyn Clark and John M. Dirkx; Carol E. Kasworm’s "Emotional Challenges of Adult Learners in Higher Education;" Regina O. Smith’s "Adult Learning and the Emotional Self in Virtual Online Contexts;" and Edward W. Taylor’s "Teaching and Emotions in a Nonformal Educational Setting." Scholarly research on the link between emotions and adult learning was conducted and reported by Michalinos Zembylas in "Adult Learners' Emotions in Online Learning.” Zembylas summarizes this research:

The findings of this study provide three insights: (1) they show how adult learners (who also happen to be novice online learners) respond emotionally and talk about their emotions in relation to online learning; (2) they call attention to the ways in which emotion talk changes from the beginning of the course to the end, always in response to specific demands and dimensions of online learning; and (3) they reveal the differential emotional responses between men and women in relation to their social and gender roles and responsibilities. (Zembylas 71)

Highlighting the impact of emotions on adult learning in online environments is a significant consideration in the discussions in this dissertation about the issues surrounding adult learning.

**Instructional Design**

The next most often discussed issue in the literature is the instructional design for traditional and online learning for the adult learner. These resources center on learning styles, course designs, and teaching course content effectively. In “Lifelong Learning through the Virtual University,” Chris Evans and Jing Ping Fan compare different modes of learning and discuss “a particular type of learning environment known as the Virtual University” from a “learner-centered perspective” (127). Evans and Fan discuss tools such as “live chat rooms, asynchronous bulletin boards, and conventional interactive multimedia packages incorporating text, sound, graphics, and digital video” (127). Monica R. Webster and Jerome E. Webster discuss designing tutorials in “How to Create Online Tutorials.” In chapter four of Technology-
Based Training: The Art and Science of Design, Development, and Delivery, Kevin Kruse and Jason Keil discuss how adult learners learn and how to design lessons that include “simulations and experiential exercises, collaboration with peers in threaded discussions and chat rooms, and multiple paths to content and learning activities” (105). In addition, in Team Teaching and Learning in Adult Education, edited by Mary-Jane Eisen and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, nine articles examine the instructional strategy of team-teaching and its challenges for adult learning. Again, these resources provide a general look at the adult learners’ learning styles and appropriate course design and delivery, but there is a gap in research and literature that shows how learning styles of the adult learners impact learning in the online writing course.

The most notable resource in instructional design for adult learners is the article, "Distance Education Plans: Course Planning for Online Adult Learners" by Barbara DuCharme-Hansen and Pamela A. Dupin-Bryant who tie instructional design for adult learning to a comprehensive plan for distance education. Using a freshman English course as an example, DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant map a distance education plan that shows “web-based instructors a roadmap for online learning success by incorporating six areas of concentration” that include “assessment, guidance, building community, communication, humanizing and evaluating” (31). According to DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant, the goal is to assist instructors in integrating “online educational strategies that are focused on the needs of learners” (31). A distance education plan is a significant foundational feature of any well-designed online course for adult learners, and this dissertation will use DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant’s roadmap as a guideline for designing an effective online writing course for adult learners.

Assessment

As important as course design and instructional methods is the area of assessment of the adult learner. Questions remain about how assessment of adult learners should differ from assessment of traditionally aged online learners, or if it should differ at all. Merely applying the
principles of assessment as stated in resources examining it in online courses is not sufficient as the adult learners bring in a different set of experiences and needs to the online writing classroom. An article that pointedly discusses assessment of adult online learners is Ginger L. Rosenkrans’ study on the “Assessment of the Adult Student’s Progress in an Online Environment.” Rosenkrans found that the “response paper could be used as an effective formative assessment tool to monitor the progress of students in an online learning environment” because it “encouraged students to form individual positions and defense of ideas, forced students to focus on the meaning of information, forced students to find strengths and weaknesses of cases and issues, made students suggest ways they hope to apply the concepts in their lives, and allowed the instructor to unearth students’ understanding” (156). Having the adult learners take part in their own assessment within a course does attempt to meet their unique need of self-responsibility; however, more narratives and case studies need to be done to add to Rosenkrans’ study and to provide more basis for assessment of the adult learner in the online writing classroom.

In addition to the assessment of adult learners, course assessment is a multi-faceted process. The factors influencing course assessment include the perceptions of administration about the online course. In "Paying Attention to Adult Learners Online: The Pedagogy and Politics of Community," Kristine Blair and Cheryl Hoy discuss issues of public and private space in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course offered through the Adult Learner Services program at Bowling Green State University, the same course and participants that are the subject of this dissertation. Blair and Hoy state, “an equal amount of teaching and learning is taking place in private as opposed to public space in the online writing community, with significant implications for instructor role and overall faculty labor” (44). When a portion of a course takes place in a private space, such as through email exchanges between the instructor and the student, the learning seems hidden from outside observers and this can negatively affect the
assessment of the online course. Blair and Hoy postulate that while problematic, “One option for future documentation could include the use of the blind copy feature on email, documenting both the quantity and quality of interpersonal exchanges” (44). Another influencing factor on course assessment is the recruitment and retention of adult learners. In their research study, “Factors Influencing Adult Learners' Decision to Drop Out or Persist in Online Learning,” Ji-Hye Park and Choi Hee Jun present conclusions that aid in the assessment of online courses:

Internal factors such as course design strategies and learners’ motivation should be prioritized at the course development stage in order to make the course participatory and interesting and to keep learners engaged. Once the course is launched and in progress, however, course administrators and instructors should consider external factors that might interrupt learners’ participation and persistence. (Park and Jun 215).

The key to recruiting and retaining adult learners is to increase their level of satisfaction with the course. Park and Jun assert, “learners are less likely to drop out when they are satisfied with the courses, and when the courses are relevant to their own lives” (215). The goal of course assessment is to measure the satisfaction level or the level that the course design is meeting the needs of the adult learners before, during, and after the course has ended. Later chapters in this dissertation examine the need for course assessment, as it is a significant aspect in the analysis of the issues and implications for adult learning in the writing classroom.

Organizational Training Resources

Information and discussions specifically about adult learning in the online environment are located in organizational resources. Rachel Hudson, Sian Maslin-Prothero, and Lyn Oates examine differences between work-based learners and campus-based learners in Flexible Learning in Action: Case Studies in Higher Education. Also examining the differences between the corporate and university environments is the Handbook of Online Learning: Innovations in
Higher Education and Corporate Training edited by Kjell Erik Rudestam and Judith Schoenholtz-Read. Work-based learning is the focus of The Virtual Learning Organization: Learning at the Workplace Campus, edited by Gordon Prestoungrange, Eric Sanderlands, and Richard Teare. Issues surrounding developing staff, instruction programs, and staff development programs, selecting and developing trainers, and evaluating learners and programs are examined in Staff Development: A Practical Guide, edited by Elizabeth Fuseler Avery, Terry Dahlin, and Deborah A. Carver. The workplace resources do have instructional strategies tailored to the adult learner but only in the content area they address. Missing from the organizational resources are the links between the working adult who needs training and the working adult who is returning to college for a degree.

This survey of literature shows that there are many sources on distance education, online learning, online communication, and online course design, assessment of online students and courses, peer and instructor feedback, and characteristics of online students. In addition, this survey also shows that there are many sources on adult learning with some focusing on the online environment. However, there are gaps in the literature and what is most notable is the lack of scholarly research and articles on adult learning in online writing courses. In response to this gap, this dissertation will address the adult learner in the online writing course by examining the issues instructors as well as the students face in the online environment and determining the extent that the existing e-learning environment, course management system, and instructional delivery methods help or hinder adult learners. In addition, this dissertation will address the implications for development and delivery of online writing courses in general and for adult learners and offer strategies to help alleviate these issues and implications in order to foster better online learning environments.
CHAPTER II: DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY SUBJECT

According to the *Bowling Green State University Course Descriptions: Arts and Sciences*, English 207 is an intermediate writing course offered in the fall and spring semesters and approved for web delivery. Students in English 207 Intermediate Writing work on a developing mastery of the rhetorical principles of planning, executing, and revising prose, and the course emphasizes the strengthening of analytical writing, including expository and argumentative writing, which is valuable for writing on the job (*BGSU Course Descriptions*). The online English 207 Intermediate Writing course is a portfolio-based, three-credit hour course using the Blackboard course management software program at BGSU and under the supervision of Dr. Kristine Blair, BGSU’s English Department Chair and developer of the course and Stan Lewis, director of Adult Learner Services in BGSU’s Continuing Education Department.

The online English 207 Intermediate Writing course is different from a traditional intermediate writing course in an English department in a few notable ways. First, the writing course is a part of the Prior Learning Assessment Program, offered through the Continuing and Extended Education department under the Adult Learner Services program, and its objective is two-fold. This dual objective is summed up on the *BGSU Adult Learner Services & Evening Credit Programs: Prior Learning Assessment* webpage as it states, “Bowling Green State University recognizes learning acquired from experiences outside a formal classroom setting by offering students the opportunity to earn academic credit through portfolio assessment, the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), and departmental credit by examination” and that “[c]redit earned in one of these ways is granted for learning outcomes that are equivalent to the learning outcomes of specific courses in the BGSU curriculum. One or more of these methods may be used to acquire college credit.” Students in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course can gain additional college credit for work, training, and volunteer experiences detailed in a portfolio that is the capstone project in the course. One benefit of this program as stated on the
BGSU Adult Learner Services & Evening Credit Programs: Portfolio Assessment webpage is that students may save time by earning “up to 30 credit hours by developing portfolios” that equate “learning and competencies to those required by specific BGSU courses.” Another benefit is that it may “reduce the costs of obtaining a degree” because the “$70 assessment fee for each course completed by portfolio is substantially less than regular course tuition” (BGSU Adult Learner . . . : Portfolio Assessment). This dual objective means that new and returning students in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course will save time and money while also becoming acclimated to the academic environment.

Second, the adult learners in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course receive approval for the online course prior to registering for this class. Prospective candidates for the English 207 Intermediate Writing course initially need to contact the Adult Learner Services director who will evaluate their “experiences for college-level learning and decide if portfolio assessment is an appropriate program” for them (BGSU Adult Learner. . . : Portfolio Assessment). More specifically, the director will help them to “identify the knowledge and skills” they may have that “may lead to specific course credit” and will “provide guidance and support” as they “explore the portfolio program and work through the process,” according to BGSU Adult Learner Services & Evening Credit Programs: Portfolio Assessment. For my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, BGSU faculty who acknowledged the validity of the adult learners’ experiences referred students to Stan Lewis, the director of Adult Learner Services. The faculty was willing to offer course credit beyond the English 207 Intermediate Writing course credit for those experiences that could be documented and that would fulfill the objectives and requirements of the specified course. Lewis spoke with the adult learners either in person or via the telephone about their experiences, academic plan, and professional goals before deciding to register the adult learner into the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. This selection process is beneficial “because everyone has different experiences and has gained
different types and quantities of knowledge,” and “[f]or qualified candidates, portfolio assessment can be a gratifying and productive academic option,” notes BGSU Adult Learner Services & Evening Credit Programs: Portfolio Assessment. The majority of the students in my course were adult learners and their finished portfolios contained evidence of course specific knowledge in order to obtain additional academic credits beyond the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course credits.

Third, a professional portfolio used to gain subsequent college credit beyond the three credits for the English 207 Intermediate Writing course is the final product of the course. According to Kristine Blair’s online English 207 Intermediate Writing course module, which is the model for all subsequent online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses, these assignments include a critical biography; educational and professional goals statement; resume; research progress report; course credit proposal; a final PowerPoint presentation; documentation such as brochures, newsletters, reports, professional writing, letters of reference, and performance evaluations; and visual documents, such as photographs, certificates, PowerPoint presentations, graphs, charts, and tables (Blair English 207). (See Appendix F to see the original context of these assignments in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course). Students must follow a writing process that involves prewriting, drafting, peer reviewing, and revising documents for the critical biography, educational and professional goals statement, resume, research progress report, and course credit proposal. In addition to reviewing and improving their writing skills, these assignments help students gain “confidence by documenting prior learning” because “[m]any adult learners underestimate what they may already know,” according to BGSU Adult Learner Services & Evening Credit Programs: Portfolio Assessment. Final grades in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course are based on the completion of all aspects of the portfolio process within the required timeframe and the extent to which students have revised their documents to reflect the standards of university-level writing (Blair English 207). (See
Appendix G to see the grading criteria for the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course). After receiving three credits for the English 207 Intermediate Writing course, students can receive additional credits for other college courses by taking their portfolios to other faculty in specific colleges within the university and showing how their documented work, training, and volunteer experiences have met the content requirements based on the syllabi of specific courses. 

*BGSU Adult Learner Services & Evening Credit Programs: Portfolio Assessment* notes that “[f]aculty assessors will accept and evaluate [. . .] portfolios for up to three semesters” after students “have completed the preparation course,” which is the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course.

*My Research Project—Pilot Study*

The purpose of my study was to investigate the effects of the online learning environment on adult learners and their writing in an intermediate writing course. As stated in my introduction, my main research question asked to what extent does the existing course format help or hinder adult learners and what are the implications for development and delivery of online writing courses in general and for adult learners? Smaller questions that addressed my main questions include: What are the issues facing instructors teaching writing in online environments? What are the implications for development and delivery of online writing courses for adult learners? What can be done to help alleviate these issues and implications for fostering better online learning environments for adult learners?

*Research Methods*

*Sample*

The research sample for my study included four data sets: one from the fall semester 2004 online English 207 Intermediate Writing class and three previous online English 207 Intermediate Writing classes from 2001, 2002, and 2003. The research sample included four adult learners who agreed to participate in my pilot study, as well as Stan Lewis, the director of
Adult Learner Services, Kristine Blair, the instructor of the fall 2001 and 2002 online English 207 Intermediate Writing classes, and the instructor of the fall 2004 online English 207 Intermediate Writing class. I was the instructor for the fall 2003 online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. (See Appendix A to read the consent letter for the instructors of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course).

Methodology

A few ethical concerns arose concerning my study. One concern was my role as a researcher for this pilot study because I taught the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course in the fall of 2003 and it was part of my research sample. I became familiar with the four students in my class and their writing, progress, and course grades.

Another concern was that Blair, who developed and supervises the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, is my dissertation committee chair and part of my research sample. She taught the first two online English 207 Intermediate Writing classes in 2001 and 2002 and supervised my 2003 class and the 2004 class. Because she developed the course in its current format and because my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course used the same format with the same activities, writing assignments, and discussion board prompts, the course development and delivery strategy remained Blair’s.

In addition to having Blair in my research sample while teaching this course, I interacted with Lewis who was also part of my research sample. Lewis attended the first day of my online English 207 Intermediate Writing class, which was a face-to-face orientation for those who could attend, to help answer questions concerning the technical requirements needed for participation in the course and questions concerning the portfolio process. While I was the online English 207 Intermediate Writing instructor who read and gave feedback on the written assignments to the adult learners, Lewis also read and gave feedback to me about their written work as he read them in the discussion board postings. I also turned over all of my students’ portfolios to him after I
assigned a grade for the English 207 Intermediate Writing course, so he could review them and make suggestions to the students concerning their use of the portfolio for course credit in other courses.

I acknowledge the breakdown in the roles for research and for the teaching of writing. Because all three of us worked closely, it was hard to separate the roles we played, but this is often the case in the teaching of writing. Students in writing courses often seek feedback from writing center personnel as well as from other instructors, all with the goal of improving their writing and their written work.

Variables

The number and type of writing assignments in this study were controllable variables because these assignments in online English 207 Intermediate Writing course developed by Blair remained the same for each successive course. There were six writing assignments and a documentation section of the portfolio. According to Blair’s online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, for the critical biography assignment, students wrote how their life experiences, including their familial, social, and professional experiences, have shaped who they are today. The critical biography was both a narrative and an analysis that theorized the meaning of those life experiences in relation to individuality and social roles. In the educational and professional goals statement, students described their academic and professional goals and their path to achieving them. For the resume, students documented their skills, abilities, and educational and work experiences. For the research progress report, students discussed their method for gathering information about the course for which they were seeking additional college credits. Students included such research options as interviews, course syllabi, catalog descriptions, course observations, and library searches. The course credit proposal, which was addressed to the instructor of the college course for which students were seeking additional college credits, explained how their life and professional experiences met the goals of the course and how these
personal and professional experiences and activities demonstrated their fulfillment of the overall course requirements. For the final PowerPoint presentation, students developed and delivered an overview and outline of their research and portfolio highlights for the other online English 207 Intermediate Writing students. At the end of the portfolio was a documentation section that contained written documents such as brochures, newsletters, reports, professional and academic texts; support from colleagues and employers such as letters of reference and performance evaluations; and visual documents such as photographs, certificates, PowerPoint presentations, graphs, charts, and tables (Blair English 207).

While the number and type of writing assignments in this study were controllable variables, the number and type of adult learners represented uncontrollable variables. There was no minimum or maximum number of adult learners who could be accepted into and participate in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. For example, the fall 2003 course had four students, three of whom considered adult learners, while the fall 2002 course had eleven students, nine of whom considered adult learners and the 2001 course had eight adult learners. The number of adult learners in the 2004 online English 207 Intermediate Writing classes was not known at the time of this study.

The type of student was also a variable in this study. The type of student and adult learner was dependent on Lewis because he interviewed and accepted students including the adult learners referred to him by other faculty members or recruited for the online course. The adult learners accepted into the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course had differences in writing skills, motivation levels, and external influences that affected their performance and participation in the online class. While the English 112 Varieties of Writing researched writing course is a prerequisite for English 207 Intermediate Writing, some adult learners may have had difficulties with writing to an academic audience and with organization, development, conciseness, syntax, or grammar. Some adult learners were motivated to complete the
assignments and the course quickly with a minimum of peer and instructor feedback, while others were motivated to complete the course and each assignment more slowly, carefully and meticulously revising each written assignment and requiring more peer and instructor feedback. Likewise, some adult learners had few external influences such as other academic courses, employment, families, and technological abilities affecting their performance and participation, while others had several or numerous external influences that may have affected their performance and participation.

These uncontrollable variables could have affected the results of the study, but some precautionary measures lessened their impact. To address the number and type of adult learners participating in the study, I proposed various levels of participation. I asked for permission to look at their online postings in all of the modules in the Blackboard course shell, such as discussion board posts, virtual classroom chat posts, PowerPoint presentations, rough drafts, revisions, final drafts, and finished portfolios. I asked them to complete and return, by email or by a Blackboard post, a post-course questionnaire survey. I asked them to participate in an email interview. If we had exchanged emails and they agreed that they would be beneficial to my study, they could forward them to me through email; however, I did not ask for private emails exchanged between them and myself as their instructor. I asked for permission to look at their final portfolios. Because of the various levels of participation, I had a tiered consent form in which adult learners chose to participate at all levels or only one or two levels of the study, meaning they may agreed to be interviewed, to have their discussion board posts and writings analyzed, and to complete a post-course questionnaire, or any one or combination of these levels. I used those who agree to all three levels as case studies for my research. (See Appendix B to read the consent letter for the adult learners in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course).
Data Collection and Analysis

The study used a triangulation of data obtained from quantitative and qualitative measures in order to provide a better analysis and assessment of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course format in the areas of development and delivery for adult learners and online writing courses in general. For qualitative analyses, I reviewed past data sets and observed the 2004 data set, and I reviewed discussion board postings and writing samples. I conducted interviews with the course developer, director of Adult Learner Services, instructor of the fall 2004 online course, and adult learners. For quantitative analyses, I looked at the number and length of writing assignments, discussion board posts and prompts, and gathered numerical data from the post-course questionnaires completed by adult learners.

I used data from four online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses: one from the fall semester 2004 online English 207 Intermediate Writing class and three previous online English 207 Intermediate Writing classes from 2001, 2002, and 2003. I used these data sets to gather qualitative measurements by comparing the module format and the number and type of activities, assignments, and discussion board prompts, noting how they differ. In addition, I used these data sets to gather quantitative measurements about the number and length of discussion board posts and writing assignments of those adult learners who agreed to this level of participation in my study.

I gathered qualitative data through interviews with Lewis, Blair, the fall 2004 online English 207 Intermediate Writing course instructor, and participating adult learners. I asked the director of Adult Learner Services, Lewis about his expectations for the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course and of possible candidates and instructors. I also asked about the writing of the adult learners including the quality of the writing contained in the portfolio and its use for course credit in other discipline specific courses, and I asked about any concerns regarding the development and delivery of the course. I interviewed Blair about the
development of and the rationale behind the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, about the rationale for the sequenced writing assignments, about the quality of writing of the adult learners in her online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses, and any concerns about the development and delivery of the course. I asked the fall 2004 online English 207 Intermediate Writing instructor about the quality of writing of the adult learners, the sequence of writing assignments, the use of discussion boards prompts, the frequency of adult learners’ participation, and the quality of the adult learners’ posts, peer responses, written assignments, and portfolios. (See Appendix C to read the interview questions for the instructors of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course in their original context). Additionally, I asked adult learners, who agreed to an interview, about their perception of the portfolio process and the possibility for additional credits, about their writing process during the course, and about their concerns about the delivery of an online writing course. (See Appendix D to read the interview questions for the adult learners of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course in their original context).

I asked adult learners who agreed to this level of participation to complete a post course questionnaire in which I used a ten point ranking scale for seven questions and a six point Lickert scale for forty-two questions to analyze quantitatively their perceptions about the development and delivery of the online English 207 course. I had approximately forty-two prompts for the adult learners to respond to with one of the following answers: strongly agree, somewhat agree, agree, somewhat disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. (See Appendix E to read the survey questions for the adult learners of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course in their original context).

I used a qualitative analysis of writing samples and discussion board posts of adult learners who agreed to either or both of these levels. I looked at the quality of discussion such as the appropriateness of the responses or written work to the prompt or the assignment and the
depth of each discussion board posting including each peer response post, and each first, revised, and final version of each writing assignment. I used the information provided by these post course questionnaires and from discussion board postings and writing samples of these adult learners to build individual case studies and to build a collective perspective of the adult learner in the online writing course.

Feasibility of Research Study

The study I proposed was completed within one year. During 2004, I sought and obtained my research sample from the past three online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses, conducted interviews with Lewis and Blair, and prepared for the fall 2004 online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. During the fall semester of 2004, I observed the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, analyzed writing samples and data gathered from past courses, and interviewed participating adult learners from past courses. During 2005, I analyzed writing samples and the data gathered from the fall 2004 online English 207 Intermediate Writing course observations, post course questionnaires, and the interviews from adult learners and from the instructor interviews.

Value of Research

My research is valuable to the study of rhetoric and composition and to the study of distance and online learning. Online courses are an increasing popular form of learning in higher education, especially for the adult learner. Diane Matthews states, in “Distance Education: What Is It? Utilization of Distance Education in Higher Education in the United States,” “The ever-accelerating growth in information technology and the proliferation of distance education are exciting developments in higher education that could bring about some of the most profound changes to the ways we teach and learn” (17). My review of the methods of design and management of online writing courses, and specifically the English 207 Intermediate Writing course, and their effects on the adult learner and to online learning and distance education
programs in general will contribute to the literature in rhetoric and composition journals. In addition, it will contribute to the distance education and online learning journals and can foster a better understanding of the best-practice methods that meet the needs of the adult learner in an online classroom. Some of these needs, as Palloff and Pratt point out, stem from the knowledge that adult learners “tend to be goal-oriented and experienced-based,” and they “see learning as the acquisition of knowledge that can be used in practice or for career advancement” (35). Palloff and Pratt continue to assert that adult learners are “looking for the quickest, easiest way to complete requirements” and are not “seeking the level of interactivity that an undergraduate or graduate student or even a corporate employee would seek” (xv).

However, as shown in the survey of literature, the lack of research on adult learners who participate in online writing courses complicates the understanding of their online needs. In The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development, Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard A. Swanson claim, “Until fairly recently, there has been relatively little thinking, investigating, and writing about adult learning. This is a curious fact considering that the education of adults has been a concern of the human race for such a long time. Yet, for many years, the adult learner was indeed a neglected species” (35). While Knowles, et al. are discussing adult learners in general, adult learners in the online writing classroom truly are the neglected species.

This dissertation will be beneficial to the fields of adult learning, online education, and composition studies, as it will build an intersection between adult learning and the online writing course. The goal of this dissertation is to knit the best practices of current online instruction and delivery with the best practices for adult learning. This fusion is based on my experiences teaching adult learners writing online and as examined in current literature on technology in education and, more specifically, in the field of composition.
The following chapters examine the issues encompassing teaching and learning in the online writing environment and assert a best practice pedagogy for course and instructional design and delivery for the adult learner. By examining the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning in online writing courses coupled with the needs of the adult learner, this dissertation is valuable in that it will contribute to the existing conversations of online learning and adult learners and will inform and promote further research and conversation about this intersection.
CHAPTER III: ISSUES FOR INSTRUCTORS

Introduction

Technological innovations moved into the traditional educational environment and into distance learning, first with the birth of email that augmented the methods of communication and then with online technologies that altered instructional strategies. Roxanne Starr Hiltz and Murray Turoff, in "Education Goes Digital: The Evolution of Online Learning and the Revolution in Higher Education," tag this technological development as one of substitution. Hiltz and Turoff claim, “Online learning is a new social process that is beginning to act as a complete substitute for both distance learning and the traditional face-to-face class” (60). The idea of substitution implies there is an equal replacement of learning, teaching, and the educational environment. Ascribing to this thought causes misconceptions about how to develop, deliver, and assess online learning, resulting in instructional issues for online educators.

As a representative of these issues that challenge online educators, this chapter addresses the issues confronted by two graduate student instructors who taught a fully online writing course, English 207 Intermediate Writing, for adult learners. Along with my observations from teaching the 2003 course, I include data from one of my research participants, Susan, and responses obtained through an interview with the second graduate student who taught online English 207 Intermediate Writing during 2004, whom I have named Michelle. Supplementing these observations, I include relevant interview responses from the BGSU Director of Adult Learning Services, Stan Lewis, and background information about the development of the first and second fully online versions of the Adult Learner Services English 207 Intermediate Writing course from a co-authored article by Kristine Blair and Stan Lewis and a co-authored article by Kristine Blair and Cheryl Hoy. The issues discussed in this chapter include the educational preparation of online educators, teaching experience, instructor and administrative roles, expectations for adult learners, and pedagogical aspects for online learning.
Preparation for teaching online writing courses varies among educational institutions and college departments. However, a consistent and collective preparation of college educators for online learning has not kept up with the changes in pedagogy because of technological advancements. The pioneers who first integrated technology into college writing courses were the innovators who changed instructional strategies based on their successes and failures with various technological novelties. Their anecdotal lessons sparked interest in others who began studying aspects of each technological tool and its effects on learning. The results of these research studies informed professionals in composition studies who examined the role of technology in the writing classroom and who began to integrate various technologies into their teaching methodologies. Courses and professional training devoted to teaching educators to use technology as part of a course or as the course itself, as in online learning, are still slowly evolving. As a result, teacher training involving the study and application of technologies into pedagogy for writing courses in not uniform across the field, resulting in unresolved instructional issues for online educators. Ann Taylor and Carol McQuiggan report the results of their survey of the needs of faculty who teach online courses in “Faculty Development: If We Build It, Will They Come?” Their survey finds faculty questioning the instructional efficacy of learning online and feeling inadequately prepared to design, develop, and facilitate effective online teaching experiences. Related to these concerns is faculty's desire to understand the technology involved in the online teaching environment. While faculty have some interest in enhancing their skills in using technological tools to build solutions, most are more concerned with the instructional design implications in developing their online courses. This includes a better understanding of the kinds of interactions that need to exist in an online teaching environment and how to
make better decisions about the technology selections in order to achieve learning goals. (Taylor and McQuiggin)

Faculty who teach online courses want training in the technology used for online learning and professional development in online instructional strategies because they recognize the importance of developing instructional strategies based on the available technology. This training, often absent from their instructional education, needs to be addressed by the university or college in which the online learning is offered and through educational opportunities in graduate programs or continuing professional development sessions.

At the time of my graduate education and research study, two graduate-level courses in the Rhetoric and Writing Program at BGSU included a segment on technology and writing pedagogy. These courses are English 602 Composition Instructors Workshop, which is an in-service course required for graduate students who are teaching one of the first-year composition courses, and English 620 Teaching of Writing, which examines the various composition theories and methodologies and their best-practice applications to the writing course. Two graduate-level courses in the Rhetoric and Writing Program at BGSU that have a more detailed inclusion of technology in composition instruction are English 728 Computer-Mediated Writing Theory and Practice and English 780 Special Topics Seminar: Online Learning: English Education. These last two courses provide graduate students with first-hand experiences using various technologies for learning and guiding them into developing enlightened instructional approaches. The English 780 Online Learning: English Education course was developed by Kristine Blair, Professor and Chair of the Department of English at BGSU, “in hopes of creating a train-the-trainer model in which advanced graduate students who enroll in the course can become likely candidates for future sections of English 207, Intermediate Writing” online (Blair and Lewis 8). Beyond the departmental offerings, and since my graduate studies, BGSU currently requires a three-week online training course for any educator who wishes to be considered for an online teaching
assignment. According to *Bowling Green State University Center for Online and Blended Learning: Online Course Approval Process*, this online training course, called COBL, “focuses on effective online course facilitation and online pedagogy” by guiding educators through the features of the University’s course management system, Blackboard and through online instructional strategies using Blackboard. These courses and the BGSU Center for Online and Blended Learning training do help educators develop and deliver online courses more effectively but are not course-specific, so educators still need to create course-specific instructional strategies and address course-specific online issues that may arise.

**Professional Development for Online and Adult Learning**

As a Rhetoric and Writing program graduate student at BGSU, my professional development began with my graduate education and an assistantship in which I taught face-to-face writing courses as I took courses toward my degrees. As a first-year Masters Degree graduate student at BGSU, I learned foundational composition theories, pedagogies, and their applications to the face-to-face composition course in English 602 Composition Instructor Workshop. Then, as a doctoral student, I took additional writing pedagogy courses including the English 620 Teaching of Writing and English 780 Special Topics Seminar: Advanced Methods: Theories and Writing, which extended and enhanced my understanding of more compositional theories and practices, mainly for the face-to-face writing course but with some use of technologies. Because of my interest in the use of technology in writing courses, I also took English 728 Computer-Mediated Writing Theory and Practice and English 780 Online Learning: English Education, which augmented my education with specific applications of the available technologies to composition theory and practice.

While I do not have specific course work as part of my professional development for adult learning as I do for online learning, I do have personal experience from which I draw my initial knowledge of effective and ineffective teaching strategies. As an adult learner
undergraduate student, I enrolled in an online philosophy course in a time when traditional
universities were beginning to explore online education. This course was fully online, requiring
students to participate in online discussions, which merely required posting answers to textbook
questions based on the assigned reading, taking online multiple choice and short response
quizzes, and writing a ten page paper and submitting it in a printed, paper form to the professor.
Then, as a doctoral student, I enrolled in the aforementioned Online Learning: English Education
course in which I participated in discussions in the form of chats and discussion board posts and
activities involving online research, writing, group and collaborative work, and online
presentations. In addition to my experiences as an adult learner, adult learners in my first-year
writing courses have shared with me their issues and experiences in face-to-face learning
environments. These personal experiences led me to research adult learning extensively. This
combination of my experiences in online learning and my perspective of adult learning, coupled
with my face-to-face instructional experiences led to my research on the adult learner in the
online writing course.

As the second graduate student who taught online English 207 Intermediate Writing
during 2004, Michelle’s professional development began similarly to mine with education for
teaching in face-to-face classrooms. However, she relays that she was “trained in secondary
English education as an undergraduate.” When Michelle decided to move into higher education,
she began her graduate studies at BGSU and took “English 602 as a first year graduate student
and two additional pedagogy writing courses: The Teaching of Writing [. . .] and Advanced
Writing Pedagogy.” These courses, as mentioned above, mainly focus on writing theory and
practice for general applications. Additionally, at the time of our email interview, Michelle was
enrolled in and taking the “Distance Learning Certificate Program offered through the
University of Wisconsin, Madison.” The Distance Learning Certificate Program offered
through the University of Wisconsin—Madison is a year-long online course that is an optional
group-based course or an individual-based course in which educators “Build knowledge, skills, and leadership in distance/online education and training” and acquire a “foundation in distance teaching and learning, technology, instructional design, and evaluation.” Michelle took this online course and taught the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course before BGSU offered COBL training.

Unlike her educational preparation for online learning, Michelle acquired some professional development for adult learning before she taught the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. Michelle says, “I have taken two training courses in adult learning through the college of technology [at BGSU]. In each of these courses, I developed a learning module that gave me practice in implementing adult learning principles. I have also taught adult learners in composition courses, business communication, and technical writing.” While Michelle had some college course work relating to adult learning, she needed to look beyond her current graduate program and college for such courses. Yet, these courses still did not integrate adult learning with online learning.

Educator training for online adult learning is a key issue for instructors who teach online writing courses. Many special workshops, panel presentations, and sessions for educators are becoming increasingly more available on the issues of technology in composition and the practical application of technology in the writing course at professional conferences, such as Computers and Writing, Conference on College Composition and Communication. In addition, many colleges and universities have initiated faculty development workshops on integrating technology into their courses across the disciplines. Regional learning centers, such as the Ohio Learning Network offer information and resources for integrating technology into learning environments. The Ohio Learning Network, specifically, “helps Ohioans find educational programs that meet their needs, works with colleges and universities using technology to improve teaching and learning, and helps build partnerships among higher education, schools,
businesses, and communities” (Ohio). Opportunities for professional development do exist on a national and regional basis.

Despite the availability of national and regional resources for educators, gaps in pedagogical training on a local level still exist. Ko and Rosen contend that “the availability of reliable and effective training for online instructors” is “rare” and “for those who enroll in a formal training course, the results can be disappointing” (15). Ko and Rosen continue to explain that the “vast majority must learn on the job;” some training courses are taught by those who “aren’t coping well with the exigencies of online instruction” and training is “offered in a conventional classroom setting” (15). Michelle and I had some training in online learning before teaching online English 207 Intermediate Writing; we both continued to seek training in online learning and we continued to teach online writing courses. However, it is noteworthy that we are the exception. Many educators have not had pedagogical training for the online learning environment. Peg Pankowski examines the results of a survey of faculty who taught online undergraduate mathematics courses in her article, “Faculty Training for Online Teaching.” Pankowski reports, “75% of the participants in this research received training to use either Blackboard or WebCT. This technical training generally lasted less than 30 hours and was provided by the college where the faculty member was teaching;” however, “only a third received pedagogical training.” Pankowski continues to say that this “pedagogical training received by most faculty is not adequately preparing them to teach online; instead, faculty are learning online pedagogy by experience,” which echoes Ko and Rosen assertion. In “Beyond the Looking Glass: What Faculty and Students Need to Be Successful Online,” Palloff and Pratt emphasize the need for pedagogical training:

Faculty cannot be expected to know intuitively how to design and deliver an effective online course. Although courses and programs about the use of technology in education are emerging, and attendance at conferences on the topic
continues to grow markedly, faculty have not been fully exposed to the techniques and methods needed to make online work successful. (Palloff and Pratt 374-375).

While technical training in the course management system used for online learning is important, so is training focusing on the best practices for online learning in general and within specific courses such as in adult learning within the online writing classroom.

**Prior Teaching Experience of Online Writing Instructors**

Mostly, educators who teach writing have established effective instructional strategies for successful face-to-face learning environments, but when transitioning the same course into an online learning environment, those strategies are no longer effective for learning. Palloff and Pratt state, “Some faculty members still believe that the online classroom is no different from the traditional one—that the approaches that work face-to-face will work when learners are separated from them and from each other by time and distance” (*Building Online* xv). When those approaches do not lead to successful learning, online educators become critical of the online environment and may reluctantly continue teaching online with little or no alteration to their instructional approach or they may return to teaching only in the face-to-face environment.

In “I’ll Never Do It Again,” Elayne Clift sums up her experiences teaching online:

> I trained for it, I tried it, and I’ll never do it again. While online teaching may be the wave of the future (although I desperately hope not), it is not for me. [. . .]

This much I can say with certainty: I have years of experience successfully teaching in collegiate classrooms, and online teaching doesn’t compare. So I’ll just chalk up my first and only venture to experience and make my way back to the traditional academy. (Clift)

Clift’s reasons for her dissatisfaction with teaching online include the absence of “live human interaction,” the inability to “replicate a lecture online,” the inability to “give each student enough attention,” and the increased workload. In addition, Clift asserts that she could not
“adequately help [students] develop better writing and critical thinking skills or to foster original ideas because there simply wasn’t enough time or a proper forum.” Many educators tell similar narratives to Clift and decide teaching online is not a viable option for them. However, other educators, also, have positive experiences and narratives about teaching online. The difference between these educators lies in the familiarity with the technology and course management system, the comfort level of interacting with students solely online, and the motivation to pursue online instruction assignments and to continue learning about the aspects of teaching online and altering pedagogy as deemed necessary on a course by course and class dynamic basis.

**Face-to-Face Courses**

Valuable lessons are learned through teaching writing in a face-to-face environment. As an undergraduate, I began working with students and their writing in writing centers, at the community college and university levels. When I entered graduate school, I began teaching English 110 Developmental Writing, English 111 Introductory Writing, and English 112 Varieties of Writing, all of which are first-year composition courses, as a graduate assistant for the General Studies Writing program at Bowling Green State University. As a graduate assistant and then a full-time instructor for the program, all of my teaching experiences were in face-to-face classrooms; however, I did integrate technology into the course design as it became available. Most of this integration involved in-class use of word processing on computers and web-based research activities, and with the advent of online course management systems, the use of online discussions, online peer review workshops, and online course information and assignment documents. Technology complemented in-class, face-to-face communication, activities, and assignments, but never did it replace any of my pedagogy. My interest in teaching writing in an online composition course grew from this technological enhancement of my face-to-face courses and my students’ favorable responses to the technological enhancement of their learning environment.
Michelle shares a similar beginning, as her teaching experiences started with secondary education. She reveals, “My teaching background includes seven years of high school English, primarily in the state of California in the mid-eighties and early nineties.” When she began graduate school as a student in the Scientific and Technical Writing program at Bowling Green State University, she taught English 111 Introductory Writing for General Studies Writing. In addition to the English 111 Introductory Writing course, Michelle taught English 110 Developmental Writing and English 112 Varieties of Writing, all of which are first-year writing courses, and she taught Technical Writing and Business Communication at a local community college. While her prior teaching experiences do not include online teaching experiences, Michelle does have related online experiences. Michelle says, “My interest in teaching writing online really stemmed from tutoring online, which I did when I worked full-time as a writing specialist in the BGSU Writers Lab. I also became interested in teaching writing online as a result of my interest in online pedagogy in general.”

Online Courses

Although in some of the face-to-face courses, Michelle and I regularly taught in computer labs and used the online course management system, Blackboard, we had not taught any fully online courses before English 207 Intermediate Writing. Michelle looked forward to teaching online and stated, “While I can’t claim a preference for either F2F [face-to-face] teaching environment or the online environment, I do enjoy the robust dimension that the online environment adds to the teaching/learning experience.” Like Michelle, I, too, eagerly anticipated teaching online because of my positive experiences with integrating technology into my face-to-face writing courses. While I suspected that I may have unexpected challenges, I was confident in my ability to adjust instructional strategies as needed. An optimistic, yet cautionary, approach to teaching online aided my transition from the face-to-face to online learning environment.
Some of the issues faced by instructors, including Michelle and myself, when moving from a face-to-face course to an online course involve the level of familiarity, comfort, and motivation. “Currently, face-to-face classroom-oriented instructors are expected to stretch themselves when it comes to online instruction—a very different medium—to facilitate learning,” acknowledge Adam D. Fein and Mia C. Logan in “Preparing Instructors for Online Instruction” (45). For educators, “stretching” themselves often produces fear: fear of the technology, fear of their delivery of the content and knowledge, and fear of failure. However, unlike Clift and other instructors who dislike teaching online, Michelle and I exhibited a comparable level of familiarity, comfort, and motivation for teaching an online writing course, which decreased our fear. While moving from a face-to-face writing course to an online writing course presents many challenges, recalling the challenges of teaching a face-to-face college composition course for the first time helps with the transition.

In addition to remembering our initial fears and experiences teaching face-to-face, integrating technology into our courses helped prepare Michelle and me for teaching online. Palloff and Pratt state that “the technology enhancement of face-to-face courses has effectively begun to blur the distinctions between online and face-to-face classes,” because “[o]nline learning now takes more than one form, including the use of technology to enhance a face-to-face class, a hybrid class that combines both face-to-face meetings and online work, and fully online courses” (Building Online xv). Michelle and my experiences with blending technology into our face-to-face writing courses became an effective transition into online instruction, thus, increasing our comfort level for teaching online. Advocating teaching a “hybrid” course, one that integrates many of the technologies used in online courses but in a face-to-face course, as a way to “smooth” the transition to “fully online instruction” (14) is Scott Warnock, in Teaching Writing Online: How and Why. Warnock asserts that the “gentler progression from onsite to hybrid, then to fully online, could result in teachers spending their time refining and innovating
rather than worrying about technology issues” (17), which allows educators to “stay closer to [their] comfort zone” (16).

Istructor Roles in Online Learning

One assumption that instructors teaching face-to-face courses have of teaching online is that their role as an instructor will remain the same, regardless of the learning environment. Palloff and Pratt sum up the similarity of these instructional roles when they say, “The role of the instructor, either in a traditional face-to-face or online setting, is to establish his or her teaching presence by ensuring that some type of educational process occurs among the learners involved” (Building Online 110). Before teaching the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, I suspected my role as an instructor would be altered somewhat. I had no difficulty establishing a presence in face-to-face courses but I questioned whether I could successfully recreate that presence in an online course. I thought that my narrative as an adult learner in a collegiate setting would help me to establish a sense of presence with the adult learners but I was not completely certain that I could create an effective teaching presence. Michelle, too, wondered about her own ability to teach online:

I was also concerned with my own ability to teach the course since I had never taught online before. My initial fears about student expectations were allayed by the fact that several students had already taken other online courses. Additionally, I quickly became comfortable teaching the course because I could rely on my previous online tutoring experience as well as my observation of other online instructors. (Michelle)

Like Michelle, I also “became comfortable” with teaching the course because of my experiences with teaching technology-enhanced face-to-face courses and with my experiences of learning in online courses during my education.
In contrast to the similarity of instructor roles in face-to-face courses and online courses, the delivery of the educational process differs. According to Palloff and Pratt, in a face-to-face course, instructors impart knowledge often through lectures and class discussion, but in an online course, instructors facilitate an education by providing a “gentle guidance and a framework as a ‘container’ for the course, thus allowing students to explore the course material, as well as related materials, without restriction” (Building Online 110). In my instructor role as facilitator of the online English 207 course, I guided the adult learners through the learning experience by providing frequent and numerous email announcements and reminders and by posting prompts and responses to students’ discussion board posts. Palloff and Pratt also contend that instructors create a presence when they also act as “a cheerleader and guide attempting to motivate students to go deeper and further with the material than they might in a face-to-face classroom” (Building Online 111). While I did encourage students in my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course to delve “deeper and further” into their writings for their portfolio, most of my “cheerleading” and motivational commentary centered on keeping students on task and finishing the course. Three weeks before the end of the semester, one student, Susan did not think she could complete the course. One of my email threads with this study participant and adult learner, Susan, exemplifies my instructional presence as a “cheerleader”:

**Susan:** Cheryl, unfortunately the course proposal is going nowhere. Not only have I been dealing with issues from the previous email that I sent you a few weeks ago. I broke my big toe on November 21. The break is not in the best place and into my joint. I go back December 15 for x rays to determine if I need surgery. I didn't work at all last week and didn't have access to a computer. Now I am even farther behind with my office duties. This semester has not gone smoothly for me at all. Can you let me know what my options are? Thanks.

**Cheryl:** Hi Susan. Sorry to hear that this semester is not finishing up smoothly
Can you give me some more details about where you are with the course proposal? Will you be able to write at least a general one that can be used for your English 207 proposal? You can always revise it after the semester is over so it better suits your needs. Will you have access to a computer to do and post the Powerpoint presentation? You really are almost finished with the work in this course. Those two assignments are it. I can meet virtually or face-to-face with you to go over your portfolio.

Susan: Hi Cheryl. Sorry for the delay in replying. The soonest I can have a draft done for my proposal will be Monday. Even though I haven't met with Dr. McKay yet, I intend to write it geared toward ENG 207 and IPC 102. I intend to work on the proposal and power point presentation this weekend, as my husband is on afternoons and I know we do not have anything planned on the social calendar. I apologize for letting "life" get into the way of the course. I hate it when I get behind the 8-ball with work and home, and then when health issues (toes) get in the way life gets more difficult. I would like to ask you if it would be possible to take an INC for the course. Our office is going to be closed over the holiday break and I will have the extra time to put my best effort into compiling my portfolio. My portfolio would be ready for final grading no later than January 8th. Please let me know if this is possible and thank you for being understanding.

Cheryl: Hi Susan. I understand how life can get in the way of work and school. Monday would be good for me, except that my home computer crashed last week and I will have no way of checking my email until Monday morning. However, next week Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday will be good days for me to meet with you. As far as times go, 10:00 a.m. is always a good time for me, but you let me know what times work for you. What do you still need to finish for the
portfolio that you would need an INC for? It seems like you already have the assignments done (except for the course proposal), and the Powerpoint will go quickly. Did you view the sample Powerpoint? The last thing to do is to assemble the portfolio, which you'll bring to our meeting. Remember, you will still be able to make changes to the portfolio for each course you are trying to receive credits for, after the semester is ended. The credit for English 207 will be separate from the credits given in IPC 102 and the other courses.

Susan: Hi Cheryl. I have attached my course proposal at where I am at so far. Please review it and let me know if I am on the right track. I will promise to take the time to get the portfolio done before the end of the semester. Thanks for understanding. Thursday morning works best for my schedule. Let me know.

Susan completed her portfolio on time and finished the class. Her situation is not unique though as my role as motivator and cheerleader continued throughout the semester with several students. I frequently exchanged emails, had telephone conversations, and office meetings with all of my students.

Another role of the online educator as a facilitator is to build a sense of community in the course. Palloff and Pratt explain that the instructor in the online course “is responsible for facilitating and making room for the personal and social aspects of an online community so social presence can emerge and make the class a successful learning experience” (Building Online 112-113). Building a community in an online course is similar to a face-to-face course in which introductory activities and class discussions are prominent strategies instructors employ. However, in the online course, the instructors’ role as community-builder requires an active presence. Karen Ouzts outlines in her study, “Sense of Community in Online Courses,” perceptions of community that are dependent on the role of the educator in an online course. In courses with a “low sense of community,” the students characterized the instructor in “very
negative terms. The teacher was either disengaged, unavailable, or students felt like they were in ‘no man’s land.’ They did not get feedback on assignments, did not understand expectations, or did not seem to have any way to connect to the instructor” (Ouzts 291). In courses with a “high sense of community,” students characterized the instructor as “a positive force in the class: interactive, present, guided instruction, spent time, open, honest, and human” (Ouzts 291). In my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, I built a sense of community through ten discussion board forums: Frequently Asked Questions, Introductions, Skill Assessment, Critical Biography, Goals Statement, Midterm Research Progress Report, Resume, Course Credit Proposal, Virtual Power Point Presentations, and Midterm Course Assessment. The details of these forums will be discussed in the *Fostering Discussions* section, later in this chapter. While I posted responses to students, the most successful way a sense of community developed was through students helping each other. Below are Susan’s comments to another student about a draft in which she used Microsoft Word’s track changes feature:

**Susan’s first post:** I made some suggestions for changes in wording and spelling. I think you are on the right track and have made some good choices in your life. The suggestions are made using "track changes" in the TOOLS options in word. If you have any questions let me know.

**Susan’s response to the writer’s reply to the above post:** I think you need to save the attachment on your computer. It is in Word. Under the VIEW menu you want to make sure you have the reviewing tool bar. There are icons in the bar that allow you to accept the changes or refuse them. If you still have problems, you can e-mail or call me at my office [. . .]. Or if you are on campus you can stop by my office. [. . .] Good Luck!

My comment to Susan illustrates my active presence as an instructor and my role as a community builder by acknowledging her contribution to the students’ learning environment:
Cheryl: Susan, your goals statement reads well. I really like your introductory definition paragraph! I have only a few minor revision suggestions, for this otherwise, well-written and succinct draft. For revision, I would center the title of Goals Statement; add in an Academic section emphasizing course work you've taken, are taking, and will take; and correct the misuse of "it" when you mean "is" in the Personal section. By the way, I wanted to commend you on using technology for peer reviews! Your actions prompted the other students to learn something new! That shows good leadership qualities on your part! When is a good time to have a virtual conference? It must be scheduled sometime between 10/20/03 and 10/24/03.

Susan: Cheryl, thank you for your kind words. I will make the revisions on the goal statement and am working on revisions in the biography. I would like to schedule the virtual conference for any day but Wednesday, October 22 or Friday if possible. I could do it anytime between 8:00 am - 5:00 pm. Early morning or late afternoon would work best or at noon during lunchtime. My chair is very flexible about my time and I would rather do it at work with a faster computer. Let me know what works for you. Thanks.

While seemingly unnoticed by Susan, her initiative to use a Microsoft Word feature to comment on her peers’ drafts, provided a stimulus for several other students to ask her how to use that software feature so they, too, could comment electronically on their peers’ drafts.

As an evaluator of the students, instructors have another role that involves assessing student participation. The instructor as assessor goes beyond grading the students’ writing. Participation, which in the face-to-face course is usually measured through attendance and activity in class, is recorded in the online course in multiple ways, such as through discussion board postings and in course statistics that are available only to the instructor through the course
management system. Bill Anderson and Mary Simpson in “Ethical Issues in Online Education,” argue that instructors’ surveillance of student participation is an ethical issue. Anderson and Simpson assert, “We are able to track our students’ participation, what they read, when they read it and the number of responses they post. We have a permanent record: students’ postings are there for us to peruse and to print off. Such records are used to give us information about a student’s performance” (134). The ethical issue arises when the idea that this surveillance is “hidden, and concern and action on the part of those being watched is driven by uncertainty” (Anderson and Simpson 134).

While student participation may not appear to be an issue in the instructor role category at first, it becomes an issue when the instructor can influence the participation. As the assessor, instructors play a role in student participation through feedback given to students about their participation. While I assessed students’ performance on their writing and portfolios, I observed their activity in discussion board posts and in peer reviews of their fellow online classmates drafts. I often sent class emails to keep students actively participating; the following emails of mine are examples that illustrate my influence on student participation:

**At 2 weeks:** I haven't seen any posts from you to the discussion boards. Are you having difficulty accessing MYBGSU or the course? Are you having any difficulties posting? We have already posted our VARK scores and discussed skills assessments. Now we are working on the Critical Biographies. If you need assistance, let me know.

**At 4 weeks:** I've noticed that you have not participated in responding to the other class members' critical biographies. Please read them and post some replies today. If you are unsure about what to say, reread my announcement from two weeks ago about things to look for in the bios. Give your first impression of the
bio and then offer some constructive suggestions for revisions. Let me know if you are having any difficulties.

My intention with these emails was to offer what Palloff and Pratt call a “gentle guidance;” nevertheless, they are an instructional form of “influence,” and can be viewed as a form of “surveillance” as described by Anderson and Simpson. In addition, assessment of student participation for the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course is based on attendance and participation, which in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course is measured by students logging in, posting, and providing peer feedback. The “surveillance” of student participation, as Anderson and Simpson describe it, in this case, is not truly “hidden” because the assessment was not based on course statistics that log the days and times that students are online in the course or the hours and minutes spent in the course. Assessment, instead, was based on the completion of peer feedback activities and postings.

One task that is noticeably absent in most discussions of instructor roles in online learning is that of writing coach. Joan E. Sieber, in “Misconceptions and Realities about Teaching Online” testifies that students who “cannot write understandable papers and cannot think analytically” create a labor-intensive job for the instructor (338). Sieber contends that online writing resources are “only useful to those students who already know something about writing and who are motivated to improve” (338). She asserts that an online educator spends a considerable amount of time trying to persuade poor writers to use understandable sentence structure, to proofread, and—most importantly—to start papers early and work through various drafts. Ultimately, some of these students improve. Others realize that they are not ready to write papers that have an acceptable level of organization and depth, and drop the course.” (Sieber 388)
Writing skills development is essential in the online writing course, and often the instructor must work closely and individually with students and their writing. This instructional role closely resembles that of a writing center tutor.

Michelle’s experiences with her online English 207 Intermediate Writing course demonstrate this instructional role. Perhaps because of a lack of prior online experiences, Michelle had relatively few articulated expectations of her role in online learning, as she discloses, “Online English 207 lived up to my expectations. I expected that it would be a lot like tutoring writing.” Thus, Michelle saw her instructional role as one closely resembling that of a writing tutor. Tutoring writing online can involve dialogue between the tutor and the student; however, student-to-student interaction and learning is absent. The dilemma with tutoring writing as a dominant instructional method in an online writing course is that while it helps students learn on an individual basis, it usually involves only a student-tutor relationship, which is not reflective of a collaborative learning environment or a learner-centered course approach. Even though Michelle’s perception of her role as instructor may have been a reflection of her role as a writing tutor, she still held instructional roles as facilitator and assessor. Concurring with Michelle’s experiences, I, too, often worked with students through email or in office conferences individually on their writing and drafts. However, my intention was to provide feedback and guidance only after the student had revised their writing based on the peer feedback given early in the online course discussion forum. Nevertheless, I met individually with several students on a frequent and consistent basis throughout the semester. Because of my previous experience as a writing center tutor, I, like Michelle, felt comfortable in this instructor role, and because of the small class size, this did not increase my workload significantly.

*Administrative Roles in Online Learning*

Similar to instructors, administrators have many roles. Palloff and Pratt assert that the “instructor in an online course is also the course administrator, who posts a syllabus for the
course, including assignments and some initial guidelines for the group to discuss and adopt or adapt” (*Building Online* 115). Another level is the program administrator who, according to Ouzts, needs to measure students’ “readiness to learn online,” orient students to “typical course expectations,” and assess students’ “technology skills,” as well as “measure a sense of community as students progress through a program” (293). Other levels are at the university or institutional level. Sieber describes some of the myths that some university administrators hold concerning online courses. Sieber exclaims that those “who decide to provide web-course resources have been dazzled by these technologies, [. . .] are excited about enabling their faculty to provide online instruction to students who cannot attend class on campus due to distance and scheduling constraints,” and are enticed by “the illusion that a single teacher can reach vast numbers of students” (337). If the myths that Sieber describes are part of a university’s understanding of what online courses can be, program and course administrators will have a daunting task in trying to meet these expectations. While institutional roles can also be administrative roles in the areas of online programs and online course availability and cost, the focus of this section is on the interactions between instructors and program administrators as that relationship has the most significance to this dissertation.

In the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, the idea of the instructor as course administrator differs slightly from Palloff and Pratt’s description. While Michelle and I were the instructors for the course, Blair along with Lewis were the program administrators. Blair and Lewis, however, have different administrative roles. Blair reworked the face-to-face English 207 Intermediate Writing course and developed the current online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. Initially, Blair was the instructor for the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. However, as explained in Blair and Hoy’s article, “Paying Attention to Adult Learners Online: The Pedagogy and Politics of Community,”
Because Blair was a faculty member in A&S and because the course typically enrolls fewer students due to the heavy writing load and necessary personal attention, the College office decided it was too expensive to employ a tenure-line faculty member to teach a course with such a consistently small class size. Consequently, to keep the course on the schedule, we arrived at a compromise—a graduate student would be selected to teach the course and would be supervised jointly by Blair and by Lewis. (Blair and Hoy 36-37).

In 2003, I became the first graduate student to teach the online course and Michelle taught the course the following year. Blair and Lewis served as my “co-curricular developers” (Blair and Lewis 8). Specifically, Blair was my immediate supervisory administrator with whom I would discuss course matters and concerns, and Lewis was the program administrator with whom I would discuss matters relating to students and their portfolios. A few other administrative responsibilities of Blair and Lewis differed. “Because Blair developed the course in its current format, Hoy’s online English 207 course used the same format with the same visible activities, writing assignments, and discussion board prompts that led to the final portfolio” (Blair and Hoy 37), and Blair would address concerns I had with any assignments. In “Prior Learning Assessment: A Web-Based Model for Adult Learners,” Lewis and Blair explain Lewis’ responsibilities:

The program is administered by the Director of Adult Learner Services (Stan Lewis) who screens candidates for the program through a comprehensive interview process that allows students to identify the knowledge and skill sets they have that may make them eligible to earn credit and which allows the Director to make an informed decision regarding a prospective student’s viability. If a student is a viable candidate for the portfolio process, the Director of Adult
Learner Services will enroll the student in a mandatory portfolio preparation class.

(Blair and Lewis 2)

Before the semester began, Lewis talked with, either in person or through telephone conversations, and selected the students who would be enrolled in my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. During the semester, Lewis met the students in my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course on the first day of class in a face-to-face orientation, in which he answered questions concerning the portfolio-for-credit process and concerning any issues with technology required for the course. Those students who could not attend the first class because of issues of distance or work commitments, called Lewis to discuss any concerns or to ask questions about the portfolio process or about the technology needed for the online course. At the end of the semester and after I assessed each student’s portfolio for the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, Lewis reviewed the portfolios and met with the students to discuss the process for seeking college credit for other courses in various disciplines based on their documented experiences in the portfolio.

The most significant administrative issue that I experienced while teaching the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course involved the visibility of student and instructor interaction. The visibility, or the lack thereof, of these interactions is discussed in “Paying Attention to Adult Learners Online: The Pedagogy and Politics of Community.” Blair and Hoy explain, “though teaching and learning in both Blair’s and Hoy’s online English 207 course were taking place in the public space of the Blackboard site, visible to other faculty and administrators, teaching and learning were also hidden and taking place in private spaces of emails, telephone calls, and face-to-face meetings” (37). Because the administrators did not observe the emails, telephone calls, and face-to-face meetings, Lewis grew concerned and emailed me about the progress of the students and the course. As noted by Blair and Hoy, private interactions in courses that meet face-to-face such as email, telephone calls, and face-to-
face meetings are also not visible to administrators (37); however, the idea of visibility becomes an issue in the online course because of the virtual nature of the learning environment.

Instructor Expectations of Adult Learners

With an understanding of the complexities of instructor roles, the focus for instructors centers on teaching adult learners and the online environment. When examining expectations of students, comparisons usually are made based on age or maturity levels. Sieber claims, “It is widely agreed that many immature learners a lack the life experience, self-directedness and persistence, as well as writing skills and analytical ability, required for successful online learning” (331). By implication, then, this means that adult learners have life experience, self-directedness, and persistence that enable their success in online learning. During my research for this dissertation, I asked Lewis about his perception of adult learners as students, and he replied, “I have found that, for the most part, adult learners seem to be more highly motivated than their traditional age counterparts. They really care about the work they do (class work). I believe that their more varied experiences also make for more interesting writing and class discussions.”

Having experiences with adult learners, Michelle and I had shared some of the same expectations of the adult learners in our courses as described by Lewis. We both thought that adult learners were going to be more motivated and dedicated to the course. I thought that because the course was relevant to their academic paths and, for most, to their jobs, the adult learners would finish assignments in a timely manner. I thought that some of the adult learners would want to work ahead and complete assignments and tasks early, while others, for various external reasons, would take longer to complete the assignments. My main concern was keeping all of the adult learners involved in the collaborative activities, such as discussions and peer reviews. Additionally, I was concerned about the adult learners’ knowledge of and comfort with the technology used in the course. Because of this concern, during my research I asked Lewis for his perception of the impact of technology on the adult learner. Lewis stated that he “thought
they would produce great work and they generally do. After looking at some of the ways they are incorporating pictures and data into their writing, I have decided that they might be, in general, more comfortable with the technology that I first imagined.” Another prominent concern of mine involved the influence of external factors that could interfere with the adult learners’ time. My concerns were validated when comparing them to the experiences of the previous year’s online English 207 Intermediate Writing course taught by Blair. During Blair’s 2002 courses, the adult learners were “hard-working, with incredibly strong work ethics;” however, this “led to some pedagogical problems” (Blair and Lewis 5):

Specifically, some students were much more interested in being a part of an online community, sharing drafts, exchanging life experiences, than others who preferred to work independently. While in most cases this did not create a gap in responsibilities in that students completed most work on time, the level of interaction with several students was low. Part of this was due to in part to heavy work responsibilities. (Blair and Lewis 5)

Because adult learners have different life experiences, reasons for taking the course, and external influences, course dynamics can vary throughout the semester. When I asked Lewis about the expectations of adult learners in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, he responded, “I believed that these students like most of our adults would be challenged to find time for the course. That has been confirmed to some degree. Assignments sometimes run a bit late, but for the most part these students are quite responsible.” While Blair and my experiences teaching the adult learners in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course have supported Lewis’ statement, Michelle had a different experience.

Michelle’s impression was that fewer students met her expectations as she discloses, “My primary concern prior to teaching the course was whether students would be prepared for the online environment. I was hoping that students would not expect the course to be ‘easy’ simply
because it was offered online.” In addition, because of her previous experience with teaching adult learners in other face-to-face courses, Michelle clearly expressed her other expectations for adult learners in the online course:

Prior to teaching online English 207, I expected adult learners to be motivated self-starters. I also expected that not all would be comfortable with the online environment. While my expectations of learner discomfort with the online environment proved to be true, my other expectations of adult learners were somewhat false. For example, several learners were not motivated to be successful in the course, nor were they self-starters; in fact, a few students required frequent reminders in order to submit their work on time. (Michelle).

Because no adult learners from Michelle’s course participated in my research study, it is difficult to determine why she thought motivation was lower than in Blair’s or my courses or why she held that perspective after the course ended. In Blair’s 2002 course, Michelle’s 2004 course, and my 2003 course, the selection process for student enrollment, course assignments, and discussion forums remained the same, which lessens the number of variables. However, one variable is the external influences and experiences of the adult learners. In our online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses, both Blair and I noted the influence of external pressures on the adult learners that affected the timely completion of some participatory activities and caused some to experience delays in their course work. On speculation, one reason for Michelle’s perception of the lack of motivation of her students may be rooted in external factors.

Pedagogical Aspects

Course Design

Arguably, the most significant pedagogical aspect in teaching an online course is its design. A quality online course design enhances the online learning environment, instructor workload, and student success and retention. Numerous resources are available for online course
design, and I recommend researching these texts to any instructor or program administrator who wishes to design an online course in their subject area. My recommendations for course design will be discussed in a later chapter of this dissertation; however, a brief look at the hallmarks of a quality online course design as assessed by student satisfaction levels are summed up by Ouzts. Ouzts explains the characteristics of effective course design:

Students described social constructivist learning activities such as threaded discussions, debates, group projects, and problem solving activities in courses high in community. Results indicate that student satisfaction with online learning classes tend to be low when instructors simply post lecture notes, make individual assignments, and ask students to work in isolation without any interaction with other students or with the instructor. (Ouzts 293)

Low student satisfaction with a course decreases learning and retention in the online environment. Poor course design happens, as Ouzt states, when instructors “new to teaching online typically try to emulate their on-campus courses in the new environment by simply uploading and using already developed lecture notes and PowerPoint slides” (293). Poorly designed online courses create issues for the instructor.

While an examination of these issues is important, the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course design already existed prior to my role as its instructor in 2003, so a discussion of the issues surrounding teaching an established online course will be the focus of this section. In Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching,” Palloff and Pratt state that some universities “hire faculty as content experts specifically to design—but not deliver—online courses,” purchase or license pre-packaged online courses from external organizations, or contract organizations to use the faculty’s materials and develop an online course that is then “installed on that company’s server” and “used by other instructors from the academic institution” (93-94). Some faculty, according to Palloff and Pratt, decide to use e-
textbooks and the publishers’ websites for their course, and some faculty are asked to develop and teach an online course but then leave the institution and another faculty member teaches the course (Lessons 93-94). The flaws in courses designed by others, particularly by outside organizations, include the focus “on content rather than on pedagogical process” (Palloff and Pratt Lessons 94). The issues for instructors who teach online courses developed by other faculty include as Palloff and Pratt assert, “how to build community into the process as well as how to add material that they deem to be important and work with material they consider unimportant” (Lessons 94). The instructor teaching the existing course must examine the online course design and, if possible, make changes that will enhance learning.

Course design for the online English 207 Intermediate Writing stemmed from Blair’s experiences with teaching the course in a face-to-face format. Blair and Hoy state,

Blair, as a computers and writing specialist, saw enormous potential to meet adult learner needs and still maintain the integrity of the 207 curriculum. Indeed, there seemed little doubt that an online writing course for adult learners would be a success precisely because of the ability to use digital tools, such as discussion forums, chat rooms, and other forms of public space, including individual homepage functions and group collaboration tools available in course management systems such as WebCT or Blackboard. (Blair and Hoy 36)

As noted from Blair and Hoy’s description of the viability on an online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, the integrity of the course remained when reworked for an online learning environment. For the first online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, Blair worked on its course site design within the Blackboard course management system and added pages and documents as necessary as she taught the 2001 and 2002 online sections of English 207 Intermediate Writing. The documents and assignments posted in the Blackboard site exhibited pedagogically sound concepts, and the element of online learning that is a collaborative and
community, learning environment was designed into the discussion forums for each assignment. Thus, Blair, because of her understanding and application of electronic pedagogy, created an effective course design for online English 207 Intermediate Writing.

Although availability of the number and type of links and pages within the course can be added, changed, or deleted by the instructor, Blair’s initial course design was the same design of my and Michelle’s online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses. Within the online English 207 Intermediate Writing Blackboard course, the contents were clearly organized into seven sections: Announcements, Course Information, Staff Information, Course Documents, Books, Communications, and External Links. The Announcements page is the home page for the course. The Course Information page contains five links to individual documents on course goals, portfolio elements, reading and writing deadlines, student responsibilities, and grading criteria. The Staff Information page contains the instructor’s name, email address, telephone number, office hours, and office location. The Course Documents page contains folders for each document that must be completed and put into the end-of-term portfolio: Critical Biography, Goals Statement, Resume, Progress Report, Course Proposal, and PowerPoint. In each of these folders are links to two or three student samples for current students to read and review. The Books page contains a list of the textbooks and supplies needed for the course. The Communication page contains a link back to the Announcements page and a link to a Collaboration page where students can join a virtual classroom or chat with the instructor in a virtual office hours. On the Communications page, there is a link to the Discussion Board that contains ten forums, each of which will be discussed in the Fostering Discussions section of this chapter, and a link to a Group page, in which students may be assigned to work within a small group. Within this Group page and according to the instructor’s set up of this page, students have access to a group discussion forum, file sharing, and email exchange. Besides these links, in the Communications page, there are internal links for messages and emails addresses of the
instructor and all students enrolled in the current course. The last page, External Links, contains links to internet documents and websites such as to the BGSU Library and Writing Lab, PowerPoint Viewer download sites for both PC and Macintosh, VARK Learning Styles Inventory site, and an Illinois Online Network article titled, “Pedagogy & Learning: What Makes a Successful Online Student?” Because of Blair’s success with this arrangement in the Blackboard course site for the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, this became the course design for future sections of the online course.

As the first instructor to teach the course as a graduate student after Blair, I initially considered the possibilities for community development and instructional strategies. Because I already had Blackboard course sites for each of my face-to-face English 111 Introductory Writing and English 112 Varieties of Writing courses, I compared the English 207 Intermediate Writing Blackboard site to those. In my other English courses’ Blackboard sites, I had more pages and links and I considered adding some of my documents to the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course site. In particular, I considered adding documents on specific writing strategies such as writing introductory and concluding paragraphs, the use of transitions, and documenting sources. However, as an intermediate writing course, I presumed a certain level of writing ability of my online English 207 Intermediate Writing adult learners, and I decided not to add more pages or documents to the Blackboard course site. Furthermore, I thought the clear layout of the contents and the ease of navigation was effective and not overwhelming for any adult learner who might be new to online learning.

Because online English 207 Intermediate Writing was developed and revised before graduate students became the primary instructors for the course, concerns about the course design were not significant for Michelle before teaching the course. Michelle comments, “I felt that the course load and materials were both appropriate and well-paced and I had no concerns with them.” However, after the teaching the course, some concerns arose. Michelle conveys,
“My only concern came with a lack of responsibility exhibited by some learners in the course. This concern led me to wonder whether some type of pre-assessment into learner preparedness for the online environment could be developed in order to better screen future students who enroll in the course.” Thus, for Michelle, her perception of a lack of student self-accountability lies with the course design.

However, the adult learners in each section of online English 207 Intermediate Writing course do undergo a pre-assessment. This assessment begins “comprehensive interview” with the Director of Adult Learning Services, Stan Lewis, “who screens candidates for the program” (Blair and Lewis 2). Then, the adult learners enroll in the course based on their “viability” (Blair and Lewis 2). Once the semester begins, the adult learners tackle their first assignment, which is to take the VARK: A Guide to Learning Styles inventory assessment, to reflect on their results, and discuss them with the course in the discussion board forum. The VARK (an acronym for visual, aural, read/write, and kinesthetic) inventory assessment is summarized on the Frequently Asked Questions page on its website that states, “VARK is a questionnaire that provides users with a profile of their learning preferences. These preferences are about the ways that they want to take-in and give-out information” (Fleming). After answering sixteen multiple choice questions, adult learners and instructors receive their results stating which combination of visual, aural, read/write, or kinesthetic learning styles reflects their approach to learning (Fleming). In addition to the initial interview and the VARK survey, an external link to an Illinois Online Network article titled, “Pedagogy & Learning: What Makes a Successful Online Student?,” provides adult learners with descriptions of ten qualities that online students “should possess” and six expectations for online students (Illinois Online Network). The specific strategies for success in online learning suggested by the Illinois Online Network will be discussed in a later chapter. Because of the pre-assessment of the adult learners already established for the course and because of a lack of research study participants from Michelle’s course, it cannot be
determined if the adult learners had any significant difficulties with the course design that led to Michelle’s perception of a “lack of responsibility.”

*Fostering Discussions*

While in any course, communication is a key to student success, in online courses, “communication is paramount” (36), as Barbara A. DuCharme-Hansen and Pamela A. Dupin-Bryant declare in “Distance Education Plans: Course Planning for Online Adult Learners.” Besides fulfilling the need for transferring information in an online learning environment, communication establishes a sense of community. DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant maintain that “Strong communication is essential for successful learning and strong communication pathways are essential for successful web-based learning” (36). In the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, communication pathways include email exchanges and discussion forums. In the course design for the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, Blair created ten discussion board forums: Frequently Asked Questions, Introductions, Skill Assessment, Critical Biography, Goals Statement, Midterm Research Progress Report, Resume, Course Credit Proposal, Virtual Power Point Presentations, and Midterm Course Assessment. These forums were community spaces in which the instructor and adult learners introduced themselves and welcomed other students to the class, discussed possible topics and development of the portfolio documents, read each other’s drafts and made revision suggestions, and asked questions.

While Blackboard’s discussion board forums provide pathways for communication as they are a space for class discussions based on instructor prompts or student-initiated threads that initially tend to mimic discussions in face-to-face courses, they can only create a sense of community if all students remain active participants. Blair and Lewis describe the effects of a lack of participation by a few students on the community of learners in Blair’s first fully online English 207 Intermediate Writing course:
Perhaps the largest problem with the course involved differences in motivation levels among students, reducing participation among some and discouraging those who were assigned to exchange documents for peer review. In a face-to-face course with a larger number of students, motivation issues are expected and can be alleviated through group re-assignments, and more increased opportunity to dialogue with students about their individual learning styles and study habits. In an online course with a smaller number of students such as this one, however, the “absence” of even two students can diminish the opportunities for community and collaborative knowledge making that the course is meant to promote. (Blair and Lewis 4)

In Blair’s second online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, “some students were much more interested in being a part of an online community, sharing drafts, exchanging life experiences, than others who preferred to work independently” (Blair and Lewis 5). In my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, participation also varied because some students were ahead of others in the assignments. One student, Susan posted a draft of the first portfolio document a week before the due date and had not received any peer feedback. Thus, she posted another message in the discussion forum directly asking for peer reviews: “Hey folks, I need feedback on my bio, so I can determine which direction to take with it. Thanks.” In this case, the sense of community was delayed because Susan was further along in the course and had to wait for peer feedback on her drafts; however, she was the first to comment on the other students’ drafts as they posted them, which fostered a sense of community for others.

A sense of community was furthered in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course because of the types of self-disclosure asked for in the first three assignments for the portfolio. The first assignment asked the adult learners to write a critical biography in which they narrated and analyzed how their life experiences in educational, familial, social, and
professional areas shaped who they are today, specifically, their individual and social selves. The second assignment asked the adult learners to describe their academic and professional goals and their plans for achieving those goals. The third assignment was a creating a current resume. Because of the personal nature of these documents, students develop a strong sense of self and appreciation and sharing of experiences with others; this, too, encourages community and personalizes the course and learning experience. In my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, however, because of the personal nature of the first three documents, the adult learners had a sensitivity to the narrated life experiences of others and thus were reluctant to offer suggestions for revision. When posting her critical biography, Susan commented: “How humbling to see that one's life can be summed up in 10 pages or less.” Susan’s brief aside in her post shows her ability to step back from her own narrative and form an observation about it. After peer reviewing a draft of a classmate’s critical biography, Susan also exhibits a sense of community and personal sharing through her commentary in the post to this student:

> Sorry to hear the troubles you have been having. My philosophy is that God only gives us what we can handle and to take things one day at a time. Although, sometimes I wish he wouldn't trust me with the situations we go through as much as he does. Anyway, to your bio, I went through and used the track changes option on the tools bar of your bio. I have made some grammar suggestions. It is great that you are trying to tie events in history to your life and experiences, just sometimes I didn't understand what you were feeling or what you were going through when your paragraphs relating to history are printed. What did you feel when man landed on the moon....how did it influence you? just an example.

> If you have any questions let me know. (Susan)

Susan’s comment shows elements of caring as she acknowledges the difficulties this adult learner has experienced. Then, she attempts to connect with the student by offering her personal
thoughts. Next, she brings the comment around to addressing writing issues using direct statements. She concludes with a focus on development of ideas and seeks to stimulate further thought by asking questions related to topics discussed in the students draft. As the facilitator the discussion forum, I created the space for community building, but the students built the community with their willingness to be open and honest in their posts to each other.

In Michelle’s online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, the space for community building was created through the discussion forums, but as a facilitator, she needed to help students overcome their fears about revealing who they are to each other. Michelle reports on a weakness in the discussion forums in her course:

[S]ome learners were not initially comfortable discussing their past experiences, especially if they felt their own experiences were somehow inadequate when compared to those of the other learners in the course. However, once trust was established among the learners and between each individual learner and the instructor, this discomfort seemed to decrease. (Michelle)

In the beginning of the course, the adult learners needed to acquire an acceptance of who they were, and once they achieved that acceptance, they built a sense of community. Thus, the online class discussions improved throughout the semester. Michelle articulates the pedagogical effectiveness of discussion boards after the course ended:

The strengths of the discussion modules are that they help learners focus on the experiences that they have had. Many of these learners have never reflected upon the importance of their past experiences as learning opportunities. Therefore, these discussion modules spark peer interaction that helped to increase and validate these prior learning experiences. (Michelle)

The sense of community built through self-reflection and sharing with others in the discussion forums within online English 207 Intermediate Writing course established a “humanizing”
learning experience. DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant define “humanizing” as “the action of creating a situation or environment that is people-focused” (36). “The common denominator in successful web-based courses is the people, not the technology,” continues DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant, who further state, “humanized environments give learners something to hold on to when they feel isolated or discouraged” (36).

In addition to building community through discussion board forums, instructors build a sense of community through timely feedback and acknowledgement of students. DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant contend, “Professor immediacy behaviors such as recognition and feedback are a fundamental means of humanizing the web-based distance education experience” (36). In my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, student to student, student to instructor, and instructor to student interactions began through the Blackboard discussion boards; however, the interactions between the student and instructor often extended into emails, telephone calls, and face-to-face office conferences with the instructor. While I met with each student at the end of the semester to review their portfolios, I also met with several students on a frequent basis to review course documents before the final drafts were due. In addition, I had frequent telephone conferences with two students throughout the semester brainstorming ideas and developing their documents. I received and responded to numerous emails throughout the course from all students concerning all aspects of the course, and near the end about the types of written, visual, and support documentation that they should include in their portfolios. Retelling her experiences, Michelle also highlights this humanizing process:

Prior to teaching the course, I planned on using peer interaction in the form of discussion board postings and my own individual responses to students. Both of these activities indeed materialized as consistent practices within the course. Another practice that I did not anticipate, however, was that a few students really
wanted face-to-face meetings with me; therefore, this practice also became routine. (Michelle)

Like Michelle’s students, many of my students wanted face-to-face meetings with me, especially one student who had difficulty understanding the PowerPoint software program. We met in my office and in a campus computer lab to work on and upload her presentation. While the humanizing experiences fostered through the discussion board postings, emails, telephone calls, and face-to-face meetings are important for the students in the online course, I assert that they are just as important for the instructors.

Time Commitments

One overlooked aspect of teaching online is the additional time instructors spend on managing the online site beyond the time spent on the other tasks inherent in teaching writing. When comparing online teaching to face-to-face teaching, Clift exclaims, “I devoted at least three times as many hours and triple the energy to online teaching than was necessary for traditional courses.” Clift continues and says, “I never had a day off. [. . .] I just couldn’t keep up with the all the posts, replies, planning, announcements, tracking, grading, and so on unless I visited the increasingly dreaded Blackboard almost every day.” More specifically, Sieber in analyzing the results of a 2002 study relays that “faculty reported spending about 18 hours per week on teaching and managing their online class. Their average time to answer students’ questions was about 24 hours” (336). Class size has a significant impact on the educator’s time and effort. Seiber, again relaying study findings, says that the faculty “described the optimal class size as 20 students, and considered more than 20 students difficult to manage. In other contexts, faculty have recommended that online teachers begin with no more than 12 students and permit class size to increase as they gain mastery of this new medium” (336). The time and effort needed for teaching an online course varies according to class size, which represents one factor in discussions of faculty workload in online courses.
Another factor in discussions of the time and effort involved in teaching online courses is the type of course and student. Seemingly, in contrast to other researchers, Gregory W. Hislop and Heidi J.C. Ellis in their research study, “A Study of Faculty Effort in Online Teaching,” conclude “while teaching online may not take more time, it may actually take more effort. […] [The] more continual attention required by an online class may increase the instructors’ perception of effort much more than the actual time expended” (29). The participants in Hislop and Ellis’ study were students enrolled in a Master of Science in Information Systems degree program, whose average age was 37, who were “full-time working professionals who pursued their degree part time,” and who were “relatively technically savvy” (21-22). The total time spent by the instructors per section shows that more hours were spent in the traditional sections than in online classes, and when “class size is taken into account, the average time spent per student was nearly equivalent for online and traditional sections of the same course” (Hislop and Ellis 25-26). While Hislop and Ellis’s study includes adult learner participants and their relevant student characteristics, it does not involve a writing course. However, another study conducted by David A. Reinheimer provides an analysis of the time and effort of instructors in online writing courses with students who were “anxious about their academic writing skills […] about their computer skills and learning in an online environment” (467). Reinheimer concludes, “teaching composition online takes about 85% more time than teaching the same course in a traditional classroom” (468). Reinheimer asserts, a “certain amount of time is required for the mechanical tasks of reading essays and bulletin boards, writing feedback, and other tasks necessary for administration and assessment” (486). More specifically, “typing a response into a bulletin board takes more time than simply saying the words, […] and the] minimum student contact time in an online course will always be greater than the minimum time required to teach a F2F composition course” (Reinheimer 486). The combination of the results of these two studies, the adult learners in Hislop and Ellis’s study and the type of course in Reinheimer’s
study, still is insufficient at assessing the time involved for instructors teaching adult learners in the online writing course.

While a quantitative data set of the time spent is not a feature of this dissertation, instructor workload is still an issue. When developing the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, Blair and Lewis noted,

> Because of the amount of work required of the students in completing the portfolio, the course has been deliberately kept small to allow for more individualized consultation as well as to allow a more reasonable workload for the instructor in reviewing documents several times before they are actually part of the finished portfolio. Furthermore, the increased email and online commentary required in a fully online course necessitates a smaller class size. (Blair and Lewis 7)

The smaller class size allowed me to give each student individualized attention. I was able to provide more feedback on all student writing and review multiple drafts of each assignment. However, if the class had the same number of students as my face-to-face courses, I would not have had the same amount of time to devote to each student.

During my research, I asked Lewis about the average time instructors spent on the course, and he replied, “although the instructor is not committed to a three hour block of class time per week, she probably spends much more than that reading posts, responding to them and facilitating discussions. You also have the added element of sometimes giving technical assistance. Teaching online is a demanding role.” Indeed, I spent many hours helping adult learners work through some technical problems. I even held additional face-to-face workshops with some students to show them how to create PowerPoint presentations. Moreover, I devoted much time to reading and responding to posts and emails from my students, and like Reinheimer notes, typing responses in a discussion board and to emails take much longer than a face-to-face
dialogue with students. Feeling prepared for her online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, Michelle declared,

Because of my theoretical grounding and research in online learning I was well prepared for the time investment inherent in teaching online. However, my expectations did not make the workload any less; rather, the time investment of teaching the course was significant and I felt lucky to have been mentally prepared for it. (Michelle)

When asked how many hours per week she spent, Michelle replies, “I easily spent between 12-15 hours per week managing the course and interacting with the learners and their assignments.”

The workload and time commitment for teaching the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course is manageable because of the small class size. The adult learners, while motivated and willing to learn, had different comfort levels with the technology and different strengths and weaknesses in their writing. Instructors must be flexible with their time, as some technical problems and writing weaknesses take longer to resolve than others and some adult learners learn more quickly.

Retention

Retention of adult learners in online courses poses challenges for instructors and program administrators. Ji-Hye Park and Hee Jun Choi’s study, “Factors Influencing Adult Learners’ Decision to Drop Out or Persist in Online Learning,” compares the characteristics of adult learners who finished an online course and those who dropped the online course. Based on a sample of 147 non-traditional adult learner participants in three online courses at a large Midwestern university between the fall of 2005 and the summer of 2007, 66.7 % finished the course and 33.3% dropped the course (Park and Choi 210). The high dropout rate may be attributed to the fact that adult learners have external responsibilities, including job and family obligations, and limited time and financial resources. Park and Choi’s study confirms this as
they report, “dropouts were significantly different from persistent learners in external factors” (215). Individual characteristics, such as the “learners’ age, gender, and educational level did not have a significant and direct effect on the dropout decision” (Park and Choi 215). However, satisfaction and relevance does have “a significant and direct effect,” and as Park and Choi state, “learners are less likely to drop when they are satisfied with the courses, and when the courses are relevant to their own lives” (215). To counter these reasons for dropping a course and to increase retention, Park and Choi recommend that courses be designed to “stimulate [adult learners’] active participation and interaction and meet their expectations” (215). Instructors can also increase retention by recognizing when “learners are not receiving enough support from their family and organization” and “help learners stay in the course by paying extra attention, using appropriate motivational strategies, and providing additional internal support” (Park and Choi 215). A united effort from administrators and instructors reduces the dropout rate and increases retention of adult learners.

Because of the pre-screening process by the Director of Adult Learner Services, students enroll in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course based on their capabilities. Thus, class sizes are small, students receive substantial attention by the instructor, and retention had not become an issue. When English 207 Intermediate Writing went from a face-to-face course to an online course in 2001, the instructor, Blair had eight students, all of whom finished the class (Blair and Lewis 4). In 2002, and with Blair as the instructor, ten students took the course (Blair and Lewis 5), and in my 2003 course, four students began and completed the course. In 2004, however, Michelle describes a problem with retention in her course that began, as she indicates, with the lack of participation in the online class discussions. She states, “The only problem that arose was that a couple students did not adequately participate in discussion board activities. One student disappeared all together despite my repeated attempts to contact him; a second student ultimately dropped the course.” Retaining adult learners in English 207 Intermediate
Writing, despite the pre-screening process by the director of Adult Learning Services, learning style assessment, tips for successful online learning, and smaller class size requires effort by all involved. The small class size, the pre-screening of students by the program administrator, and the increased attention given to each student by the instructor does encourage retention of adult learners in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course.

**Conclusion**

Palloff and Pratt note, “learning through the use of technology takes more than a mastery of a software program or comfort with the hardware being used. It takes an awareness of the impact that this form of learning has on the learning process itself” (*Building Online* 118). Based on my experiences and analysis of these issues that educators must tackle, there is a need for improved professional development for online learning. Such development needs to include examining the current technology and online pedagogy, providing educators with experience in the online environment, and assisting educators in understanding their role in an online learning environment and the need to develop effective teaching strategies that build community and collaborative learning. On reflection of my online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, I assert that my prior educational and teaching experiences along with the effective course design, small class size, and my understanding of online instructional strategies contributed to the success of the adult learners in the English 207 Intermediate Writing online learning environment. After teaching online English 207 Intermediate Writing, Michelle verbalizes her thoughts on the future considerations for instructors:

Based on all of my experiences I see online courses as having their place in academe. However, the online environment is not appropriate for all teachers or all learners. What the online environment does give us is another pedagogical option for meeting the diverse needs of students. In other words, the online environment should be viewed as one instructional method among many that can
and should be made available to those learners who are prepared for it and who will benefit from it. Nevertheless, online instruction should not be considered appropriate for all learners at all times. (Michelle)

Because technology will continue to develop and change the way educators teach and students learn, future issues in online learning will continue to challenge instructors and administrators.

The next chapter will examine the issues that challenge adult learners in the online environment. The issues addressed in this chapter focus on adult learners in my and past online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses and the adult learners’ past educational experiences, technical savvy, expectations for the course, ability to complete the course, interactions with the instructor, involvement in a community of learners, and ideas about the future of online learning. A profile of the adult learner in the online writing course will be established in order to examine strategies needed for a successful online experience for instructors and adult learners in the online writing course.
CHAPTER IV: ISSUES FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Introduction

Chapter 3 examined the issues and concerns of instructors who teach online and, more specifically, who teach online writing courses for adult learners. The implications of these instructional issues and concerns affect adult learners differently than traditionally aged learners. Carol Kasworm in “Setting the Stage: Adults in Higher Education” asserts, “Adult students’ needs and goals are equally important but somewhat different from their younger colleagues’ because they are in a different place in life and view the world and their future differently” (9). These differences influence the reasons adults enroll or re-enroll in college courses. Kasworm argues that not all adult learners attend college solely for employment related reasons, but they also attend college because of “life-context motivators,” such as “internal life developmental changes” and “external planning to create a different future life in their adult world” (6). Thus, both external and internal reasons for adults to attend college affect their expectations of their learning experience. In the foundational text on adult learning, The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development, Malcolm S. Knowles, Elwood F. Holton III, and Richard Swanson discuss the expectations of adults: adults need to know why they need to learn something; adults maintain the concept of responsibility for their own decisions, their own lives; adults enter the educational activity with a greater volume and more varied experiences than do children; adults have a readiness to learn those things that they need to know in order to cope effectively with real-life situations; adults are life-centered in their orientation to learning; and, adults are more responsive to internal motivators than external motivators. (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 72)

Even though not all adult learners have all of these expectations as stated by Knowles, Holton, and Swanson and even though not all traditionally aged learners lack these same expectations, in
general, these expectations have been confirmed in much research on adult learners and they affect the learning environment. Park and Choi conclude from their research study, “Adult learners tend to prefer learning that has a practical purpose to learning for academic purposes only” (216). Because of the differences between adult learners and traditionally aged learners, examining adult learners’ perceptions of their experiences in online collegiate writing courses is important to the study of composition and online learning.

This chapter examines the effects of development and delivery of online writing courses for adult learners. Because my adult learner participant group is small, generalizations about adult learners in online learning is not possible; however, an understanding of the online learning environment, online writing pedagogy, peer interaction, and adult learner student motivation, needs, and preferences is possible to develop. Even though there are only six participants in this research study, this number is representative of the adult learners in the online English 207 course, as the 2003 course had four students, the 2002 course had ten students (Blair and Lewis 5), and the 2001 course had eight students (Blair and Lewis 4). In total, twenty-two students could have participated in this research study from these three online English 207 Intermediate Writing sections. Because six students did participate, the analysis of this research is based on almost one-third of the total number of possible participants. The data set for this chapter includes adult learner responses to a 49-question, post-course survey (see Appendix E) and 20-question, post-course interview (see Appendix D). Six students, two from my 2003 section and four from the previous two sections taught by Kristine Blair, participated in the post-course survey. Three students, Susan from my 2003 section and Jim and Jennifer from the earlier sections, participated in the adult learner survey and in the post-course interview. The survey responses provide an overview of the English 207 Intermediate Writing adult learner experience, and the interviews provide specific supporting reasons for their choices on the survey. Collectively, this research study’s adult learner survey responses and interviews create a profile
of the adult learner in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course based on the participants’ collective assessments of online learning in the course.

*Prior Educational and Technological Experience*

One category of questions on the survey focused on the previous collegiate educational experiences of the adult learners in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. Knowing the prior learning experiences helps educators understand the adult learners’ perceptions of their online writing course because as Palloff and Pratt state, “the online classroom is not a place where teachers teach in the traditional sense and learners learn in the same traditional way. Instead, virtual students are required to work in a less structured environment” (*The Virtual Student* 68), and “[s]tudents who are taking online courses for the first time often have no idea about the demands of online learning” (*The Virtual Student* 11). Knowing the number and type of prior educational experiences of the online students allows educators to better assess their instructional strategies for the course. A compilation of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing adult learner participants’ prior collegiate educational experiences are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online English 207 Adult Learners’ Prior College Courses</th>
<th># of times:</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How many online college courses have you taken, not including online English 207?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many college courses have you taken where the instructors and students met face-to-face in a classroom?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many writing (composition, creative, science, technical) courses have you taken prior to online English 207?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many college independent studies have you taken? <em>one student provided no answer</em></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: This table presents survey results from six adult learners from the 2001, 2002, and 2003 sections of online English 207 about the learning environments of college courses taken before the online English 207 course. The adult learners were asked to rank their answer on a scale from none to nine or more times.

The number and type of courses taken before the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course influences the adult learners’ online learning experience. The results of the first
question that asked how many online courses were taken prior to the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course show that all but one of the six adult learner participants had prior online education experiences, although not a significant number of experiences with only two adult learners having four prior online courses. On the other hand, all of the adult learners had learning experiences in face-to-face environments, with five of the six having nine or more courses. The significance of the type of learning environment lies in the type of pedagogy that is used to meet the needs of the learners in the face-to-face course and the online course. As Sieber comments in reference to those instructors new to teaching online that they need “to transition from their old role as subject matter expert and talking head, to that of a facilitator who structures a learning environment in which students contribute to the actual content of the course topics, as well as the analysis” (330). In a similar sense, independent studies offer a mix of instructional strategies that can have elements of both teacher-centered and learner-centered focuses, along with structure and flexibility. Out of the five adult learners who answered this question, two did not have any previous independent studies, two had two or fewer, and one had five previous independent studies. The reason for the large number of independent studies taken by one of the adult learners is unknown; however, it may have been because the mix of instructional strategies offered in that type of learning environment best met that student’s needs. Although these questions deal with the type of learning environment, the question about prior writing courses does not make a distinction about the type of learning environment. Of the six adult learners, one had no writing courses before taking online English 207 Intermediate Writing course and five others had between one and five previous writing courses. Knowing the number of prior writing courses taken by the adult learners helps educators prepare writing activities to address any weaknesses in the writing abilities of the adult learners.

In the adult participant interviews, the three adult learners’ assessment of their prior educational experiences covers two main areas, the types of face-to-face courses they had and
their familiarity with technology in general. Jim took two sequential freshman-writing courses, Composition I and II, and a lab report-writing course, all face-to-face courses, ten years before taking this online English 207 Intermediate Writing course and he does not “remember any of the technologies used” in those courses. However, Jim did have some previous online educational experiences, as he relays that he took “[m]anufacturing courses such as QS 426 and QS 427.” The technology he used in these courses was a course management system, Blackboard, with the online chat room feature often used. After two weeks using Blackboard in that course, Jim states, “I was very comfortable with it.” Similarly, Susan took a first-year freshman-writing course, Composition I, at a local community college twenty-five years before taking English 207 Intermediate Writing, her first online course, and she does not “remember a whole lot about it.” In contrast, Jennifer had not taken any face-to-face courses, but she did have a level of familiarity with technology and software programs as she states, “I am the main computer person in our office so I have a lot of experience regarding different programs.” These adult learners had a level of familiarity with learning in higher education or with technology.

After observing the first four sections of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, the Director of the Adult Learning Services program, Stan Lewis, describes the students and the need for the online section. Lewis states, “I have acted as the administrator for the Eng 207 course in the face-to-face format. The students who were enrolled were working adult, part-time students who most often attended in the evenings. There were some exceptions, of course, but this was the rule.” Lewis continues, “I am finding that access to learning may be the biggest concern to adults, and online courses really alleviate that concern. I’m certain that as the portfolio program administrator, I will support the 207 course as an online course.” The online English 207 Intermediate Writing course meets the needs of adult learners in that it is accessible, uses a course management system, and requires only a few software programs, a word-processing program and PowerPoint, which many students are familiar with or learn easily.
Instructional Strategies

Course Design

Course design can be guided by the course management system, such as Blackboard, used for the online learning environment. At the most basic level, the online learning environment is a virtual classroom where adult learners navigate through a website developed specifically for the course that contains the materials necessary for completing the learning tasks. “E-learning environments are made up of two components: individual pages, and the overall organization and relationship of these pages” (205), says Bijan B. Gillani in Learning Theories and the Design of E-Learning Environments. An important aspect of the online course is the design of the learning environment because it can contribute to the success or failure of student learning. Gillani cautions, “students must be able to navigate throughout an e-learning site with ease, and they must retain the information that is presented to them” or they will “get lost or frustrated because they do not know where they are or where they are going” (214). In addition, Gillani maintains, “[s]tudents do not like to scroll down a window to read a long passage with an introduction, body, and conclusion. Instead, readers would like to see discrete topics where they can jump from one short topic to another” (215). Adult learners new to the online learning environment and other adult learners new to the type of online environment specific to the course need clarity in the contents and page layout of the course and an easy-to-use course design. Palloff and Pratt “believe that keeping it simple is the best way to convey the material being studied and that maximizing the use of the discussion board and community building will yield the most satisfying outcomes” (The Virtual Student 10). Keeping it “simple” can be accomplished by organizing “material into manageable content” and providing “appropriate links” to the material (215), explains Gillani. Keeping it “simple” with “manageable content” means, as Sieber advises, organizing “course materials under just one or two categories where everybody can find them without much searching” (338). However, even after the online course
is designed, a review of its effectiveness as a learning environment is a necessity. Errol Craig Sull in “The Online Instructor’s Hidden Assistant: The Online Student” warns, “No course management system or course structure is perfect” and course designers and instructors should “be aware of problem areas that students encounter in navigating the course site” (7).

As examined in the previous chapter, the Blackboard sites for each of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses are the same with seven main modules: Announcements, Course Information, Staff Information, Course Documents, Books, Communications, and External Links. Links to these seven modules are on each page along the left margin in the Blackboard site, and students can access each at any time regardless of what module or page they are on in the Blackboard site. These modules and links within the modules open within the main frame and students can navigate back to the module or to any other module by clicking on the appropriate links along the left margin or by clicking on their internet browser’s back button. The Announcements module is the starting page for the course where students begin their journey through the learning environment. The Announcements, Staff Information, and Books modules have their information posted within their main frame of the page. The Course Information module contains five separate links to html documents on course goals, portfolio elements, reading and writing deadlines, student responsibilities, and grading criteria, all opening to view within the module’s main frame. The Course Documents page contains folders containing pdf file documents of student samples, which can be saved or printed, that also open in the main frame of the page. The Communication module contains additional links to the Announcements module, Collaboration module for virtual chats, Discussion Board module, Groups module, and message and email links, and again, each opens within the main frame of the Blackboard site. The External Links module has links to internet documents and websites that open in a new browser window, and even though this requires the learner to close the window when finished reviewing the document or website, it does not change the module or
page the learner was on nor does it affect the navigation of in the Blackboard site. The significance for the organization of the course material in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course is that it promotes learning through its relationship of contents within each module and between the modules and is easy to navigate.

In this research study’s adult learner survey, eight questions focus on the ease of use of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing learning environment, which is the Blackboard course management system, and four interview questions delve further into the issue of technology. Table 2 presents the results of the adult learners’ perceptions of the ease of navigation in the Blackboard site, of the organization of the materials needed to complete learning tasks, and of the ease in using the technology necessary for completing each learning task and assignment. Following the survey results is a discussion of the three adult learners’ interview responses to the issues surrounding the technology used in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course and the organization of the course contents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online English 207 Adult Learners’ Perceptions of Course Website Design and Ease of Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course website was organized effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was easy to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>navigate the website.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>locate the assignments at the beginning of the course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>locate the appropriate discussion board for the week’s discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use the website, overall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>find and retrieve the assignment sheets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use the discussion boards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>upload and download rough and final drafts or writing assignments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: This table presents survey results from six adult learners from the 2001, 2002, and 2003 sections of online English 207 about the design and ease in using the online course Blackboard site. The adult learners were asked to rank their answer on a six-point scale in a range from Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, to Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.
The overall assessment of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course organization is positive with five adult learners agreeing and one adult learner strongly agreeing that the Blackboard site was effectively organized. The navigation of the Blackboard site also received favorable assessments with four adult learners agreeing, one strongly agreeing, and one somewhat agreeing that it was easy to navigate the Blackboard site and that the assignments were easy to locate. In addition, locating the discussion board forums for each week’s discussion and the overall use of the Blackboard site received positive responses with five adult learners marking agree and one marking strongly agree. Similarly, all six adult learners agreed that finding and retrieving the assignment sheets were easy on the Blackboard site. Although the adult learners had positive assessments of the organization of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course Blackboard site, which contributes to a favorable learning environment, there were some issues for a few adult learners in the actual use of the technology needed to complete some learning tasks. One of the six adult learners indicated that using the discussion board or uploading or downloading drafts, as used for online peer reviews in the course, was difficult.

Even though the reasons for this adult learner’s response are not known, one speculation is that the learner may have been unfamiliar with the Blackboard discussion board forum and the process for attaching files to a message. In the Discussion Board forums for the online English 207 course, the students click on the appropriate discussion forum title, which takes the student into the discussion forum. Next, students must create their own thread or reply to another’s thread. To create a thread, students need to click on “Thread,” write a message in the message box, which appears similar to an email message box, and click on “Attach a file.” Then, students must click on “Browse,” locate the document that has either been saved as a file on the computer or on a storage device, and click on “Submit” to upload the document to the discussion forum. To download a document, often a draft posted by another student, the adult learner must click on
the student’s thread title to open the thread, locate the document, which appears as a file name with the word processing extension, and click on it to open the document. If the adult learner comments on the draft, he or she must resave the document to his or her own computer and then follow the steps to upload the document in a reply to that student’s thread. Adult learners experience difficulties in this process if the steps are not followed in the order stated above or if the student clicks on “Save” instead of “Submit.” Moreover, adult learners may have problems locating the documents to be opened because the paperclip icon in the students’ post is not a link to the document as it is in an email message.

Similar to the adult learners’ survey results, the three adult learners responded favorably to the online English 207 Intermediate Writing Blackboard course design. Jim relays that he had “just above basic computer skills,” meaning that he was “using a computer a couple of times a day.” He says, “[m]y basic experiences I had before taking English 207 helped out immensely.” Furthermore, he “was familiar with blackboard” and “thought it was used fairly well for this course.” When asked about the ease of locating assignments and reading and posting to the discussion board, Jim replies, “I did not have any problems with blackboard.” One problem that Jim did note concerned the live chat feature found in the Collaboration link in the Communications module. Jim reports that the instructor “could not get the live chat to run on their computer at [the] scheduled review time,” so Jim “ended up talking with the instructor over the telephone.” As Sull cautioned earlier, course designs are not perfect and instructors need to have alternative methods available as evident in Jim’s situation.

Like Jim, Jennifer also retells her positive perceptions of the course design. Jennifer states that before the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, she “had a lot of experience with all of these programs” such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and chat room features. Looking more closely at the organization of the course contents in Blackboard and the ease of navigation, Jennifer continues, “I had never used Blackboard prior to this class. I thought
Concerning the discussion board forums, Jennifer says, “I could easily respond and post documents,” and in general, Jennifer announces, “My positive experiences in English 207 is what prompted me to take more web courses.” Comparing her online English 207 Intermediate Writing experience with her other experiences, Jennifer says, “I didn’t have any problems with this class but I have had minor problems with other classes and I have contacted the instructor to assist me.” Jennifer’s experiences in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course prompted her to continue taking online courses even though she experiences a few “minor problems” in other courses.

Similar to Jennifer’s knowledge of some software programs because of her job, Susan also has previous working experience with software programs and Blackboard. Susan explains, “As part of my job, I live on the computer and use it extensively. I use the Microsoft suite everyday. I did some powerpoint, but this class forced me to experiment even more with it.” Susan continues, “I used blackboard for registering for my parking pass for campus and helping the instructors in my department figure out how to email their classes.” In the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, Susan asserts, “I used Blackboard to manage my whole class for ENG 207. I learned how to post documents, reply to the discussion board, [and] use the virtual chat with my instructor.” Generally, Susan has a positive perception of course design and the navigation of the course, as she notes, “I really didn’t experience any problems with blackboard during my English 207 class,” and “I found blackboard as a whole very easy to use.” However, Susan does contend, “One of the negatives is that [it] is not the easiest to follow the posting on the discussion board when people just replied to the original posting and did not give it a new title to their posting.” Following the multiple threads in each Discussion Board forum, each with its own collection of posts and replies is challenging for adult learners in the online Blackboard learning environment, especially for learners new to the online learning environment such as Susan. Although the course management system does have the font of the titles of
unread posts bolded, following the various dialogs can be difficult and often students must sift through the threads to find the conversation in which they wish to join. Confusion about how to locate current threads is one of the problems in the course design that Sull implies instructors to be “aware of” and to resolve before the course begins.

**Pedagogy**

Intertwined with course design are the instructional methods used for the online learning environment. Online pedagogy differs from face-to-face pedagogy as Hiltz and Turoff claim pedagogy changes when moving from “face-to-face courses using objectivist, teacher-centered pedagogy” and to “online and hybrid courses using digital technologies to support constructivist, collaborative, student-centered pedagogy” (60). Even if instructors know the distinct issues with online pedagogy, students may be unaware of the differences of online and face-to-face pedagogies. Palloff and Pratt examine the online student perspective:

> Students are, for the most part, unaware of the demands that online learning will place on them as learners. They generally enter an online class with traditional learning expectations—that is, that the instructor will teach and they will learn from the material the instructor provides. They do not know that the instructor is less visible in the learning process and that the instructor role is one of facilitator rather than of traditional teacher or lecturer. They also have not been told that the online learning process is less structured and demands significantly more input from them as learners to make it successful. (Palloff and Pratt “Beyond” 380)

Although students in online courses need to acknowledge the different learning environment, they do not need to understand the theory behind the pedagogy to succeed. “By providing opportunities to apply newly acquired knowledge into real situations, learners can feel that the skills and knowledge obtained from the course are useful and satisfactory and thus they can be motivated to persist in the course” (215), claim Park and Choi. Park and Choi further contend,
“Relevance can be achieved by designing a course that contains learning materials and cases closely related to learners’ interests, experiences, goals, and so forth” (215). Thus, online pedagogy is effective when it is student-centered.

The types of assignments in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course and the end-of-term portfolio are “closely related” to the adult learners’ experiences and goals, and the process for writing these assignments is student-centered. Blair and Lewis explain, “The primary goal of the program is to offer potential college credit to adult students for documented college-level learning that they may have acquired through their significant volunteer activities, work related training, and employment experiences” (1). The adult learners document these activities and experiences, creating a portfolio that “allows students to demonstrate through focused, descriptive writing and through selected supporting documentation the knowledge and skills they already possess” (Blair and Lewis 1). The assignments in the course are relevant to the adult learners and, as such, motivate them to “persist in the course” as described by Park and Choi (215). Concerning the effectiveness of the assignment modules, Jennifer replies, “I found the assignments very effective in helping me collate my skills in a way that would make them presentable.” Jim exclaims, “I would not change anything,” and reiterating Jim’s statement, Susan says, “I thought overall the assignment modules were effective and I am not sure I would change anything about the course.”

More specifically, of the three adult learners interviewed in this research study, two had favorite assignments. Jim comments that even though he thought, “the progress report was not needed,” the Critical Biography was his favorite assignment. Jim says, “Writing the critical biography was enjoyable because I got the opportunity to look over my life.” Likewise, Susan’s favorite assignment was also the Critical Biography. Susan relays, “I enjoyed the critical biography the most and the least. I enjoyed it the most because it made me reflect on my reasons for returning to college as an Adult Learner and see where the paths in my life had taken me.”
Susan continues, “I also enjoyed it the least because it was hard to summarize everything that happened in my life in less than ten pages [...] it was hard to determine what was important to keep and what to leave out.” Susan’s description of the Critical Biography assignment clearly demonstrates an effective online pedagogy in which the student takes responsibility for learning. Palloff and Pratt assert, “[o]ne of the hallmarks of the online classroom, and one that differentiates it from face-to-face learning, is the need for students to take responsibility for their learning process” (Lessons 113). In addition, Palloff and Pratt acknowledge that “by creating assignments that allow and encourage students to bring in their own personal experience, we not only assist in the community-building process but also assist with knowledge retention through direct application of concepts” (The Virtual Student 10). Susan’s comments illustrate the direct application of writing pedagogy concepts. Susan discusses the writing process in which she needed to decide what material to keep and what material to discard for her critical biography, and she discusses her reflective practice of reviewing her reasons for continuing her education.

Along with the assignments in an online course, the pedagogy needs to encourage interaction and community building. After comparing the objectivist and constructivist perspectives of pedagogy in light of adult learning theory, Mona Engvig in Online Learning: All You Need to Know to Facilitate and Administer Online Courses concludes, “Anecdotal evidence indicates that the most helpful online material is engaging and context-based, with ample opportunities for interaction” (24). Interaction within the online learning environment builds a community of learners and keeps students and instructors connected with each other and the material instead of with the technology. “A carefully constructed learning environment will give the learner a sense of self, give everyone an accurate sense of others in the group and exemplify feelings of genuine caring on the part of the professor,” declares DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant (“Distance” 36). In the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, an instructional
method for promoting community is to provide a space for discussion. Lewis details his initial concerns with the online discussion board forum:

I was fearful when we piloted the course that discussion would be non-existent and that many of our students would have difficulty with the Blackboard platform, [and] that they wouldn’t be technology “savvy” enough to enjoy and excel in the class. My experience with the course has both confirmed and challenged my assumptions. I have found that some adult learners are not very comfortable with the online format, but I have also found that most are. I think that my solution is that it is easier (and better in the long run for the student) to give special attention to those who are not so attuned to an electronic environment to help them adapt, than it would be to hold the course face-to-face to accommodate those who are not at all fearful of using Blackboard. (Lewis)

After observing the adult learners actively participate in the discussion boards, Lewis recognized the positive contributions online discussions made to the online learning experience for the online English 207 course, which supports Engvig’s statement that “the most helpful online material is engaging and context-based, with ample opportunities for interaction” (24).

Lewis further reflecting on the online discussion board forums as an instructional method in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course says, “One thing I noticed as an observer is that the strong students tend to become very engaged by the electronic postings. Maybe it is because they have a little more time to compose and answer [the] next question when online than when thinking on their feet in a face to face class.” However, a possible dilemma with the online discussion format, according to Lewis is that “weaker students may be intimidated even more by the need for written response than they might be in a face to face class.” Gaining the perspective from adult learners about the online discussion board forums is necessary for assessing the effectiveness of this instructional strategy. In Table 3, six adult learners who participated in this
research study ranked their perceptions of the effectiveness of the discussion board format, and following the discussion of these rankings, responses from Jim, Jennifer, and Susan provide more insight into the effectiveness of this instructional strategy. In Table 3, the questions about the effectiveness of the discussion board forums in the online English 207 course are divided into two main categories. The first focuses on the effectiveness of the discussion board format as a method for improving writing skills. The second category focuses on the use of the discussion board forums as a place for online peer reviews of drafts in which students read and provide feedback on other students’ drafts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online English 207 Adult Learners’ Perceptions of Pedagogy</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The written discussion format helped improve my writing skills.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The written discussion format helped me communicate my ideas and thoughts more effectively.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The discussion postings provided a useful forum for feedback from my fellow online students.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feedback and responses from my fellow online students on my rough drafts were helpful and useful.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned new ways to revise and edit my writing from the discussion board responses of my fellow online students.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I gave more helpful and useful responses to my fellow online students’ writing and drafts than I received from them.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: This table presents survey results from six adult learners from the 2001, 2002, and 2003 sections of online English 207 about the instructional strategies used in the online English 207 course. The adult learners were asked to rank their answer on a six-point scale in a range from Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, to Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

The online discussion board forum provides a space for communication and community building through an exchange and sharing of ideas. In addition, in the online learning environment, the written format for discussions replaces the face-to-face verbal exchanges, offering more opportunities to develop effective writing strategies. In the survey, two questions focus on the aspect of improving written communication. Three adult learners agreed that the
written discussion format improved their writing skills, one other strongly agreed, and two others somewhat agreed with this statement. When asked if the written discussion format helped them to communicate their ideas and thoughts more effectively, four agreed, one other strongly agreed and another somewhat agreed with this statement. Four adult learners agreed and two adult learners somewhat agreed that the discussion board forums provided a useful space for online peer reviews of their drafts, and five adult learners agreed and one adult learner somewhat agreed that the comments on those drafts were helpful. Although these survey questions show some uniformity in the adult learners’ perceptions, the next two show inconsistencies. When asked if the peer review comments on their drafts encouraged them to learn new revision strategies, one adult learner somewhat disagreed, three others agreed, and two others somewhat agreed.

Because further information about the substance and number of peer review comments is unavailable, it is difficult to determine the reason the one learner did not agree. In speculation, the learner may have either already knew areas that needed revision or the comments did not provide enough constructive help. Further disparity in the responses is evident concerning the adult learners’ perceptions about the amount of help they gave and received on drafts. One adult learner agreed and one somewhat agreed that they gave more helpful and useful commentary on other students’ writing, but two somewhat disagreed and two disagreed. Because the writings and peer review commentary of all six adult learner participants are not part of the data for this dissertation, the ability to analyze the reasons for this disparity cannot be determined. However, on speculation, the differences in writing abilities and the adult learners’ previous experiences with peer review could explain the differences in the type and usefulness of peer comments.

Jim provides some insight into the adult learners’ perceptions of the effectiveness of peer review commentary on drafts as he recounts, “[t]he other students helped me reword many things in my Critical Bio. When someone else reads your work it may sound different than when I read it.” The assignment in which he thought he did not receive sufficient help during peer review
was the Course Credit Proposal. Jim reasons that the “other students did not [know] the details I was writing about.” Providing a general response about the discussion board forum, Susan comments, “I like to hear feedback from others in the class via the discussion board to see if I am on the same page and learning the same things.” When describing her first posting to the discussion boards for peer reviews, Susan says, “I was so nervous when I placed my first posting for ENG 207 as it was my first online and first college class that I had taken in over 25 years. I wasn’t sure that I could do it, but when I read the other student’s postings, I realized that I was capable of doing well in college.” Susan’s anxiety about her first post reflects the nervousness many students and adult learners experience concerning their own writing abilities whether online or in a face-to-face environment. Once Susan read the other adult learners’ posts, she became acclimated to the learning environment and gained confidence in her own ability to succeed as an online adult learner in English 207.

Although Jennifer could not remember the details of the peer review comments on her drafts, when reflecting on the usefulness of the discussion boards as related to her writing process for each assignment, Jennifer comments, “I wrote then rewrote and then I submitted them for the class critique.” Noting a strength of the discussion board, Jennifer adds, “I like that students were required to be involved in the discussion board because they gave more input [than] most likely would have occurred in a regular classroom setting.” In his role as program administrator observing the online course, Lewis expands on the positive aspects of online discussions when he says, “I initially believed that discussion would be very limited. I have seen in the online renditions of the course, however, that this need not be the case.” Lewis continues to explain, “If the instructor is an engaging one, in the online environment, just like in a face to face class, she is able to stimulate the students’ thinking by probing one student’s answer to produce another question. I have seen some really engaging exchanges of postings in the course.” On the other hand, Jennifer also highlights Lewis’ concern about students feeling
intimidated by the online discussion format when she says, “I could go online and do the
assignments at my own pace. However, not having face to face contact with the instructor and
students made me a little more hesitant to ask questions because I didn’t want to seem stupid.”

Jennifer’s hesitancy to ask questions reveals some anxiety concerning online communication. In
his research study, Michalinos Zembylas in “Adult Learners’ Emotions in Online Learning,”
examines the “emotional implications of learning how to communicate by written discourse”
(82), in a yearlong online course. Similar to Jennifer’s comment, one participant stated that she
“thought her ideas ‘would look stupid’” because of the newness of online communication for her
(Zembylas 79). Fear and feelings of inadequacy can be alleviated with encouragement from the
instructor, if the instructor is aware of the emotional aspects of adult learning.

*Student Interactivity*

Even though the discussion board is one avenue for communication in the online learning
environment, most students use additional means of communication such as email, telephone
calls, and face-to-face meetings. Although the private communication of emails, telephone calls,
and face-to-face meetings are not commonly associated with learning, especially online learning,
this is often an overlook aspect of the learning process. Blair and Hoy assert, “traditional
interpersonal email communication between instructor and student and among peers has been
among the most powerful tools in teaching and learning” (33). Zembylas, describing the adult
learners in his study, asserts, “the level of anxiety related to the online methodology of learning
was high at the beginning of the course, but then gradually decreased, especially when the
learners became more familiar with online communication and began to develop a stronger sense
of emotional kinship among themselves through multiple means of communication” (82). These
“multiple means of communication” include “emails, phone calls, and asynchronous
discussions” as well as “face-to-face meetings that changed the dynamics of the overall online
experience” (Zembylas 82). Face-to-face meetings can change the dynamics of online learning
because they humanize the learning experience as DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant explain, “humanized environments give learners something to hold on to when they feel isolated or discouraged” (“Distance” 36). Even as the face-to-face meetings can influence the online environment, the online discussion environment can influence the face-to-face environment. According to Palloff and Pratt, “interactive skills learned in the online environment can be carried over to the face-to-face setting. In other words, once students are acknowledged for their contributions to the class, their thinking skills, and their ability to interact, they gain confidence in their ability and tend to use these newly discovered skills in other settings” (Lessons 110). In Table 4, six adult learners noted the number of times they met face-to-face with the instructor, with other online English 207 Intermediate Writing learners, and with the Director of Adult Learner Services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online English 207 Adult Learners’ Frequency of Face-to-Face Interactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of times:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times did you meet in person, face-to-face, with your instructor during this course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times did you meet in person, face-to-face, with other online English 207 students during this course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times did you meet in person, face-to-face, with the Director of Adult Learner Services during this course?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: This table presents survey results from six adult learners from the 2001, 2002, and 2003 sections of online English 207 about the number of face-to-face meetings they had with their English 207 course instructor, others in the course, and the Director of Adult Learner Services. The adult learners were asked to rank their answer on a scale from none to nine or more times.

During their online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, all of the six adult learners met with the instructor during the course, with five meeting twice and one meeting once. Four adult learners met once and one learner met twice with other online English 207 Intermediate Writing students; however, one adult learner did not meet the other learners in a face-to-face setting. All but one adult learner met with the Director of Adult Learner Services, with three having one face-to-face meeting, one having two face-to-face meetings, and one having three
face-to-face meetings. The most likely reason that face-to-face meetings were possible is because many of the adult learners lived near campus or within the driving distance of the main campus. Even though the adult learners did not need to be on or near campus to take the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, many could come to campus if they needed to for face-to-face meetings. However, in her 2002 course Blair notes, “a student took the course from Texas, based on an unexpected job-related move” (Blair and Lewis 5). Although each reason for face-to-face meetings cannot be explained based on this table, some of the face-to-face meetings resulted from the first day orientation for the online course. In the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, the first class meets in a face-to-face environment where the adult learners meet each other, the instructor, and Lewis, the Director of Adult Learner Services. In this face-to-face session, the adult learners access the online course, hear about the policies of the program and the portfolio process, and become familiar with the technology used in the online course. After the first day orientation, the adult learners are not required to meet face-to-face for the remainder of the online course. Any additional face-to-face interactions with the instructor, other adult learners in the course, and Lewis are the result of student-initiated meetings. Some students may meet with the instructor when turning in their completed portfolio, although a face-to-face meeting is not required. After the course ends, the adult learners may meet with Lewis to review their portfolios and the procedures for obtaining additional college credit for their documented learning experiences. These face-to-face meetings may constitute some of the numbers listed in the table.

Although the reasons for some face-to-face meetings are unknown, examining the number of times adult learners, individually and collectively, use alternate means of communication including face-to-face meetings is important in understanding the adult learners’ needs. Participants in Ouzts’ research study on the sense of community in online learning environments who did not have a strong sense of community, “did not interact on assignments,
in discussion threads, or form relationships” (291) and “rarely, if ever, heard from the instructor or interacted with other students” (292). However, those participants who did have a strong sense of community “related how a connection to both the teacher and to each other led to an enjoyable, meaningful, and perceived higher level of learning,” and as Ouzts reports, “some of them continued to contact each other even after the class was over” (292). Zembylas’ discussion of “emotional kinship” supports Ouzts’ study of the levels of satisfaction in online learning. However, students generally do not intentionally contact instructors or others in the online course to create emotional connections even though that may be the result of the interactions.

Understanding the reasons for emails, telephone calls, and face-to-face meetings, helps create a profile of the adult learners’ need for community in the online writing course. A reason adult learners contact the instructor and others outside of the online course may be because of the distance inherent in the online environment. Lewis reflects, “As the administrator who necessarily introduced the students to the course, I wondered if adult learners, some of whom had been away from school for quite a long time, might feel uncomfortable dealing with a faculty member from afar, with someone they never see.” Lewis reasons, “Adults sometimes need significant encouragement when returning to school, and I was afraid that the perceived impersonal nature of the distance format might pose a problem.” Although distance is one reason for additional communication for online learners, anxiety over their perceptions of their skill level is another reason. In his research study comparing face-to-face and online composition courses, Reinheimer notes, “students in all sections were anxious about their academic writing skills; they also demonstrated an anxiety about their computer skills and learning in an online environment through many emails” (467). In the online English 207 course, students had reasons similar to those mentioned by Reinheimer for contacting their instructor and others in the course. Yet, another reason students contact the instructor is because of an email or telephone call from the instructor who, as discussed in Chapter 3, perceives the
student as needing encouragement to continue with the tasks and the course. Table 5 presents the adult learners’ responses concerning their reasons for contacting the instructor and others outside of the online learning environment, and following the survey results are the three adult learners’ interview responses.

### Online English 207 Adult Learners’ Student-Instructor Interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for contacting an instructor or others</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I met face-to-face with my instructor in an office visit or called my instructor on the telephone for help with:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one or more of my rough drafts.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one or more of my final drafts.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizing one or more portfolio sections.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one or more of the assignment sheets.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one or more peer revision or instructor responses to my drafts.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technical, computer, or software issues.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sought help or assistance with the writing assignments from people other than my instructor and fellow classmates.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: This table presents survey results from six adult learners from the 2001, 2002, and 2003 sections of online English 207 about the reasons for face-to-face meetings with their online English 207 course instructor and others. The adult learners were asked to rank their answer on a six-point scale in a range from Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, to Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

Reasons for contacting an instructor of the online English 207 course or others include issues with the technology needed for the assignments or for the online environment, clarification of the materials or content of the course, and explanation of instructor or peer feedback on assignments or drafts. Face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, and private email exchanges are the preferred communication methods outside of the online learning environment.

The survey results indicate that few students needed additional assistance with rough drafts, final drafts, assignment sheets, and technology-related issues. For additional help with rough and final drafts and clarification of an assignment sheet, one adult learner contacted the instructor and five adult learners did not. However, two adult learners contacted the instructor concerning either instructor or peer feedback given during peer review of drafts, and four did not. No adult
learners contacted the instructor with issues related to the technology used in the online environment or for the assignments. Four adult learners contacted the instructor for help with organizing the contents of their portfolios, and two did not. Three adult learners sought help or assistance with the writing assignments from people other than the instructor and other learners in the course, and three did not. In sum, the most prevalent reason in the online English 207 course to seek assistance from the instructor or others was not because of technology issues or revising issues but because of issues related to writing and organizing the portfolio.

Supporting the low number of face-to-face meetings or telephone calls to the instructors and others, Jim relays, “I anticipated 3 times a week communication” with the instructor; however, as the course progressed he did not need as much communication as he initially thought. With the use of discussion boards and other means of communication as needed, Jennifer comments, “I assumed that I would be in contact with the instructor or other students on a daily/weekly basis and my assumptions were correct.” Communication beyond the online learning environment, while available, is not often used because as Susan explains, “We met as a class at the beginning of the semester so the instructor laid out the plan for the course very thoroughly. I enjoyed being able to communicate with her via email and virtual chat when I needed to.” Susan’s assessment of her need to communicate beyond the online learning environment illustrates DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant’s argument that having a “variety of communication pathways provides individual learners with the flexibility to receive information in a way that suites their desired learning needs” (“Distance” 36-37). As illustrated by Susan, the online English 207 course has a “variety of communication pathways” for adult learners to use based on “their desired learning needs,” thus supporting this course as learner-centered instead of teacher-centered.

Although the infrequency of face-to-face meetings and telephone calls with the group of participants in this research study cannot confirm the need for face-to-face and verbal exchanges,
the sense of community put forth by Ouzts can be supported. Most of the time Susan spent communicating through the discussion board forums as she states, “Depending on the assignments, I spend about an hour or so a week interacting with the other students. It was fun to see what they wrote and make suggestions for them to help improve their writing.” Susan continues, “It was also nice to get feedback on my writing samples. I really only interacted with my instructor through email and the discussion board and as long as I was completing my assignments there was not much need to interact with her.” The interaction described by Susan illustrates Ouzts’ concept of learners with a “high sense of community.” Ouzts maintains, “[c]ourses designed to maximize the social aspects of learning can promote community online” (286). Because communication takes place in the discussion board forums and because the adult learners had opportunities to actively use a “variety of communication pathways,” their perceived need for a sense of community seemingly was met.

*Time Commitments*

Participating in discussion boards can be time consuming, and often, online students underestimate the amount of time online learning requires such as for reading, writing, and critical thinking. Palloff and Pratt generalize that “students who are taking courses face-to-face gauge their time based on when classes meet. They may wait to complete their reading until the day before class or the day of class. The same may be true for completing assignments” (*The Virtual Student* 68). However, they continue, “the pacing of an online course is different. Because class never officially ‘meets’ and is ongoing throughout the week, students need to find new ways to pace themselves in order to keep up with reading, posting to the discussion, and completing assignments” (Palloff and Pratt *The Virtual Student* 68). Finding “new ways to pace themselves” has multiple implications for the adult learner. Adult learners have multiple roles and responsibilities such as a full-time or part-time worker, spouse, parent, caregiver of older parents and siblings, volunteer, local community member, citizen, and student that require time,
and the stresses of these multiple responsibilities increase the need for the adult learner to have
time for himself or herself. In light of online learning, “pacing themselves” means managing
time to be an online student in addition to these other roles. Most adults view time as a juggling
act among their different roles. However, in How to Be a Successful Online Student, Sara
Dulaney Gilbert claims, “Time management is not really effective when it’s no more than
juggling a lot of miscellaneous tasks. Rather it takes being goal-directed” (198). Having a time
management plan helps online learners succeed in obtaining their educational goals.

Two types of time management include the path for achieving the end goal of the online
educational experience and the plan for succeeding within each course. Having a plan that
details the courses and length of time needed for completing the degree, certificate, or other
educational goal is one type of time management. For the second type, Gilbert advises online
learners to assess their current daily personal and professional schedules for a week and review
the predictability of their schedule and the amount of time left in a week that could be devoted to
online learning (198-199). Specifically, Gilbert suggests online learners make their “own time-
flow scheme by calculating how much time” they “spend working, commuting, doing domestic
chores, traveling, attending to personal matters, sleeping, exercising, [and] doing recreational
activities” (200) as these are often overlooked areas in adults’ assessment of their time. Next,
adult learners need to allow sufficient time for learning with the typical online course requiring
approximately the same amount of time as a traditional face-to-face course, which is twelve
hours total, three hours in class and nine hours outside of class, contends Gilbert (199). Finally,
based on the available time left for online learning in their schedules, adult learners need to
determine how many courses they can take in a semester. Gilbert argues, “Since problems with
self-organization are among the leading causes (along with technical difficulties or
disappointment with content) for dropping or even failing online courses, they need to be
addressed and corrected before the whole effort becomes a waste of time and money” (197). In
Table 6, time management in the online English 207 course is assessed from the adult learners’ perspective in regards to completion of reading, writing, and discussion board tasks.

| Online English 207 Adult Learners’ Perceptions of Timeliness of Task Completion |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| I finished each week’s reading before the due date.         | Strongly Agree    | Agree             | Somewhat Agree    | Somewhat Disagree | Disagree          | Strongly Disagree |
|                                                             | 0                 | 3                 | 0                 | 2                 | 1                 | 0                 |
| I finished each writing assignment before its due date.     | 0                 | 3                 | 3                 | 0                 | 0                 | 0                 |
| I finished each writing assignment at least one week earlier than the due date. | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 0 |
| I consistently worked ahead on the reading and writing assignments listed on the syllabus. | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| I often fell behind the due dates for reading and posting my response to other students’ rough drafts. | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 |
| I often fell behind the due dates for reading assignments. | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| I often fell behind the due dates for writing assignments. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 1 |
| I often fell behind in posting to the discussion boards.    | 0                 | 1                 | 0                 | 1                 | 3                 | 1                 |

Table 6: This table presents survey results from six adult learners from the 2001, 2002, and 2003 sections of online English 207 about the timeliness of their task completions in their online English 207 course. The adult learners were asked to rank their answer on a six-point scale in a range from Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, to Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

The survey responses of the six adult learners show that most completed writing assignments on time, but a few were late in reading assignments and one with discussion board posts. When asked if they finished reading assignments before the due date, three adult learners agreed, two somewhat disagreed, and one disagreed. Confirming the timeliness of the completion of reading tasks, when asked if they often fell behind in the assigned reading, two adult learners agreed, one somewhat agreed, two disagreed, and one strongly disagreed. When asked if they finished writing assignments before the due date, three somewhat agreed and the remaining three agreed. Supporting this assessment, when asked if they often fell behind in the assigned writing, one adult learner somewhat disagreed, four disagreed, and one strongly disagreed. Even though the adult learners did not fall behind with the writing assignments, they
did not work ahead on them either. Only one adult learner somewhat agreed that he or she finished writing assignments a week earlier than their due dates, but one somewhat disagreed and four disagreed with this statement. Consistently working ahead on the reading and writing assignments split the adult learners’ responses, with two agreeing, one somewhat agreeing, one somewhat disagreeing, one disagreeing, and one strongly disagreeing. Corresponding answers appear concerning posts to the discussion board. When asked if they often fell behind in posting to the discussion boards, three adult learners disagreed, one strongly disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, and one agreed. When asked if they often fell behind the due dates for reading and posting responses to other students’ rough drafts, three adult learners somewhat disagreed, one disagreed, one strongly disagreed, and one somewhat agreed. Although most of the adult learners perceived that they met writing task deadlines, they did not perceive that they consistently met the reading and discussion board tasks deadlines. One adult learner appears to have been ahead in all tasks based on this survey.

As noted in this set of survey questions, each week had reading and writing tasks assigned. The schedule of due dates for the online English 207 course (see Appendix H) began with discussion board posts of the adult learner introductions followed by a reading assignment. The VARK learning styles assessment was the next task the adult learners completed and afterwards, they discussed their results in a discussion board forum. Each week following these tasks, the adult learners had consistent weekly reading and writing tasks. Discussion board forums were set up for the adult learners to read and review the first version of each of the writing assignments specifically written for the portfolio and for the PowerPoint presentations. Similar to concerns about the accuracy and reliability of the perceptions of the online English 207 instructors presented in Chapter 3 are the concerns about the reliability of the adult learner response in Table 6. The adult learner participants may not have accurately remembered or reported their timeliness in completing each reading, writing task, and each discussion board
post. Because of the adult learners’ general perceptions of their timeliness in completing reading, writing, and discussion board tasks over the course of the semester, knowing their preferences for deadlines for these tasks helps determine the effectiveness of the online English 207 course schedule. Table 7 presents the adult learners’ preferences for reading, writing, and discussion board due dates in the online English 207 course. Following the discussion of these survey results are the responses from the three interviewed adult learners about the amount of time spent completing different tasks in the online English 207 course and their overall assessment of the adult learners’ experience of the tasks in the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online English 207 Adult Learners’ Preferences of Task Due Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer less time between due dates for reading assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer less time between due dates for posting to the discussion boards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer less time between due dates for writing assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The time between due dates for all assignments was workable for me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: This table presents survey results from six adult learners from the 2001, 2002, and 2003 sections of online English 207 about the preferences for task due dates in their online English 207 course. The adult learners were asked to rank their answer on a six-point scale in a range from Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, to Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

Even though some adult learners thought that they fell behind in the reading and discussion board tasks, all six adult learners surveyed agreed that the time between due dates for all assignments was workable. Specifically, two somewhat disagreed, three disagreed, and one strongly disagreed with the preference for less time between due dates for writing assignments. Three somewhat disagreed, two disagreed, and one strongly disagreed with the preference for less time between due dates for reading assignments. Although one adult learner agreed with the preference for less time between due dates for posting to the discussion boards, two somewhat disagreed, two disagreed, and one strongly disagreed with that preference. One explanation for
these preferences lies in the knowledge these adult learners had about the deadlines at the beginning of the course, as the deadlines were available to them on the first day of the semester.

Further supporting the effectiveness of the schedule for the online English 207 course, Jim, Jennifer, and Susan reflect on their initial expectations for the course and their actual time spent on tasks. Jim states, “I expected [. . .] three [to] five hours of work a week and it came in just about right.” Jim approximates that he spent about one hour each week interacting with the other adult learners in the class, most commonly in the discussion boards. In addition, Jim emphasizes that “There was plenty of time to do the assignments,” and he “would not change anything” with the assignments. Similar to Jim’s expectation of spending three to five hours working on tasks, Jennifer “expected to spend 6-9 hours working on assignments” and in reflection, she says, “I spent approximately that much time each week on [miscellaneous] things.” Jennifer also spent “about 1-2 hours reading and replying” in the discussion boards each week. However, Jennifer noted some initial concerns with the course as she comments, “I was concerned that I would not be able to keep up but I kept in contact with the instructor to make sure I was getting things completed by the necessary deadline.” Susan, likewise, had initial concerns, stating, “I was concerned that I could keep up with the assignments as I work 45-50 hours a week, have a family, and volunteer for several things in my community.” Validating Susan’s concerns is Park and Choi’s study result that shows that because of their multiple roles and responsibilities, these “external factors” are “crucial obstacles to adults’ participation in learning” (215). However, the schedule helped Susan stay on track with the assignments as she remarks, “I liked the fact that we had a deadline for assignments with ample time to complete them so I could balance my personal schedule to complete the assignments.” On reflection of the time spent on the assignments, Susan notes, “I anticipated approximately one to two hours a week on the course. There were certain weeks that I spent closer to ten hours a week.” Knowing
the schedule of deadlines at the beginning of the course and their awareness of their roles and responsibilities in the courses contributed to the success of Jim, Jennifer, and Susan.

In addition to having a schedule of assignment deadlines at the beginning of the course, the adult learners a document available in the Course Information section of the Blackboard site (see Appendix I) explaining how to be a successful online student. This document, titled “Student Roles and Responsibilities,” describes the students’ roles and responsibilities for the course and contains six guidelines for the adult learners in the online English 207 course to read and apply as learning strategies in the online learning environment. These guidelines continue to be useful as they are shared with the “faculty in both in our literary studies and creative writing programmes,” notes Blair in “Delivering Literary Studies in the Twenty-first Century: The Relevance of Online Pedagogies” (71). Blair explains that these “student success guidelines” are intended to help “both student and faculty adjustment” to the online learning environment (Blair 71). In the online English 207, the document helped to increase the adult learners’ awareness of the strategies needed to have successful online learning experiences. The guidelines include regularly logging into the Blackboard site for the course and expecting to spend six to eight hours each week working on tasks related to the assignments. In addition, the guidelines suggest dedicating a specific time on a calendar and schedule to work on the course tasks and staying active in the course. More guidelines tell the adult learners to know their preferred learning style and seek methods that assist with learning; participate in community building within the course; and “[a]void having the course become a mere ‘email correspondence course” (Blair 71).

“When students know what to expect in terms of time commitments and are able to develop good time management skills, the likelihood that they will succeed in the course increases,” confirms Palloff and Pratt (The Virtual Student 11). The successful combination of a practical schedule of deadlines, knowledge of responsibilities in the course, and the ability of these adult learners to manage their time effectively is evident in these responses.
Reflection of Online Learning

Previous educational and technological experiences, course design, pedagogy, interactivity experiences, and time commitments are parts of the total online learning experience for adult learners in the online English 207 course. Confirming these areas as important in learner-centered assessment, Palloff and Pratt emphasize that in online learning, “it is important to look at a number of issues, including course design, the technology in use, and whether a learning community formed to support learning” (The Virtual Student 97). In addition to the assignments that foster reflective practice in the online course, adult learners participating in this research study had the opportunity to reflect on the online English 207 course and on online learning in general. This reflection process is necessary to gain the adult learners’ assessment of the value of the online English 207 course as it met their needs. Sull contends, “When students are asked to help out, either directly or indirectly, a course can become more efficient and will run more smoothly” (6). Sull emphasizes the need for student input because “by seeking this information” course designers and instructors “can learn much to refine the course,” “direct the course more toward student needs,” and “improve upon future courses” (6). Table 8 summarizes the adult learners’ responses to whether the online English 207 courses and online writing courses in general meet their needs as writers and as adult learners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online English 207 Adult Learners’ Perceptions of Met Needs</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall, the online English 207 course met my needs as a writer.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, the online English 207 course met my needs as an adult learner.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online college courses, in general, meet my needs as an adult learner.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online writing courses, in general, meet my needs as an adult learner.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: This table presents survey results from six adult learners from the 2001, 2002, and 2003 sections of online English 207 about their perceptions of whether their needs were met in their online English 207 course. The adult learners were asked to rank their answer on a six-point scale in a range from Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, to Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.
The adult learner survey results in Table 8 are generally positive. Five adult learners agreed and one strongly agreed that the online English 207 course met their needs as writers, and three agreed and three strongly agreed that the online English 207 course met their needs as adult learners. Although still positive, the adult learners’ responses concerning online courses in general meeting their needs as adult learners were not as strong as they were for the online English 207 course. Two adult learners somewhat agreed, one agreed, and three strongly agreed that online courses in general met their needs as adult learners. When asked if online writing courses met their needs as adult learners, one somewhat agreed, three agreed, and two strongly agreed. The significance of these responses lies in the consistency of the adult learners saying that the online English 207 course met their needs as writers and as adult learners after a period of time in which they could reflect about their online learning experience.

In addition to the reflective responses to the adult learners’ perceptions of the online English 207 and other online courses meeting their needs as adult learners, Jim, Jennifer, and Susan reflected on their experience in the online English 207 course. Jennifer notes, “I expected to complete a portfolio which could be used for other portfolios” and that she had no problems in the course. Jim reports, “I anticipated being a little rusty since I had not taking a writing course for a while but the instructor and the [P]enguin handbook helped me out.” Reflecting on his writing process in the online English 207 course, Jim wrote a rough draft, uploaded it on the discussion board, received responses from other students during peer review and from the instructor, revised and resubmitted it for a final review by the instructor, and then resubmitted it as a final draft. The most notable aspect of the online English 207 course for Jim was being “able to respond to other students and get responses back from them,” and concerning the online English 207 course in general, Jim asserts, “I thought it was better suited for me, but I also think it was easier [than] a general writing course.” The type of writing assigned in the online English course, which is of a narrative and descriptive nature, may explain Jim’s comment that the online
English 207 course was easier than a general writing course. Composition courses and lab report writing, which Jim had acknowledged taking before taking the online English 207 course, have different modes of writing including analysis, argumentation, and research writing. In addition, because Jim had these courses before taking the online English 207 course, he may have had more advanced writing skills than he had initially thought.

Reflecting on her experiences in the online English 207 course, Susan says, “I was not sure of what to expect from the ENG 207 course as it was my first online course. Yes, I did expect it to be a writing course as Stan Lewis in Continuing Education shared some portfolios of other students with me.” Susan continues, “I was not sure if my level of writing was high enough for the class. I didn’t experience any problems to speak of during the class, but was disappointed a few times when I thought I submitted something really good and was told to fine tune it even more or that I was on the wrong track.” Nevertheless, Susan explains, “I wrote the assignments and posted them on the board. After receiving clarification or direction from the instructor and other students, I would revise my submissions. I also had friends and family read my assignments before the final postings looking for grammatical, spelling errors, and formatting.” In the end, Susan “thought overall the assignment modules were effective and I am not sure I would change anything about the course” and “ENG 207 helped me to boost my confidence in my writing styles and abilities.” “Some of the strengths” of the online English 207 course Susan, states, “were that it was a course that was set up for me to do the work at my own pace. It helped me to develop my writing skills further and allowed me to re-start my college career on a positive note. I really can’t state any weaknesses.” Susan’s description of her learning experience in the online English 207 course highlights a learner-centered course. Palloff and Pratt assert, “by focusing on inclusion, collaboration, flexibility, good communication, and interaction [. . .] the virtual student is sure to benefit from the experience. This is what it means to be truly learner-centered” (133).
Reflecting on the viability of other writing courses in online learning environments as an observer of the course, Lewis comments:

Based on what I have observed of the Eng 207 class, I think that it, and perhaps some other writing courses can be done very well on line. The format allows for easy peer review, for easy sharing of manuscripts. I think that some writing classes may not work well on line. For example, any course that had a major component requiring extemporaneous writing would be at a handicap. All students would need to be available at the same time, and this would negate one of the major advantages of the asynchronous class. (Lewis)

As Lewis suggests, not all writing courses may be conducive to the online learning environment; however, writing courses similar to the online English 207 course could be strong candidates. Further research into the adult learners’ preferences for online, face-to-face, and independent study writing courses helps to discern which writing courses are best suited to each learning environment. Table 9 compares the adult learners perceptions of online writing courses with other writing courses held in face-to-face learning environments or in independent studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online English 207 Adult Learners’ Assessment of Online Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Based on my experiences in online English 207, I would take another online writing course.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I would prefer to take a traditional writing course held in a classroom on or off campus.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I would prefer to take an independent study instead of an online writing course.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing courses are well suited for the online environment.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Based on my experiences in online English 207, I would take any another online course.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: This table presents survey results from six adult learners from the 2001, 2002, and 2003 sections of online English 207 about their assessment of online learning. The adult learners were asked to rank their answer on a six-point scale in a range from Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, to Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.
Most adult learners prefer online writing courses to face-to-face courses or independent studies. When asked based on their experiences in the online English 207 course if they would take another online writing course, two adult learners strongly agreed, two agreed, one somewhat agreed, and one somewhat disagreed. When asked based on their experiences in the online English 207 course if they would take another online course, two adult learners strongly agreed, two agreed, and two somewhat agreed. The responses to these two questions show the effectiveness of the online English 207 course as a satisfactory online learning experience, influencing the possibility of the adult learner taking future online courses. When asked if they would prefer taking a traditional writing course held in a classroom, three adult learners disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, one somewhat agreed, and one agreed. When asked if writing courses were suited to the online environment, three adult learners somewhat agreed, one agreed, one strongly agreed, and one somewhat disagreed. The responses to these questions show that both face-to-face writing courses and online courses are viable options for adult learners with the online writing course as slightly more preferred. When asked if they would prefer to take an independent study instead of an online writing course, four adult learners disagreed, one somewhat disagreed, and one agreed. The responses to this question indicate the preference of a community or collaborative type of online learning over the one-to-one learning environment of an independent study. Although these collective responses represent the six adult learners who participated in the survey, one adult learner explained his responses further.

One adult learner added comments to three of the survey prompts in this category. For the first prompt, he marked “agree” to “Based on my experiences, I would take another online writing course,” and he added, “but only if it were the only option available to me.” On the next prompt that asked if he would prefer to take a traditional writing course held in a classroom on or off campus, he marked “agree” and added, “because I think in such courses where the work is of such a personal nature, that face-to-face contact is very important.” In response to the prompt
that asked if he would prefer to take an independent study instead of an online course, he marked “agree” and exclaimed, “The best of all possible worlds!” Although further explanation was not available from this adult learner to clarify these responses, speculation into the possible causes of his additional comments involve the type of learning environment in general and the type of writing assigned in the courses versus the written method of communication between the students and between the student and instructor in an online writing course.

Because the learning environments of online courses, traditional courses, and independent studies vary considerably, this adult learner’s comments may have resulted from his previous face-to-face experiences in comparison with his recent experience in the online English 207 course. Palloff and Pratt explain, “Although the successful virtual student is seen as a fairly independent learner with few needs to be met by the instructor or institution, not all virtual students operate this way” (The Virtual Student 59). This adult learner may have had a need for non-verbal cues from the instructor that may not have been completely met in the online environment, but were met, instead, in a face-to-face environment. “In the face-to-face classroom, these students can see the nod of a head or the smile on an instructor’s face when they make contributions to the discussion. Because this is absent online, their anxiety about whether they are performing well may increase,” explain Palloff and Pratt (The Virtual Student 59). In addition to the lack of non-verbal cues, the online writing course may lack sufficient verbal interactions. The online writing course as Warnock asserts, “forces an environment that is not just writing intensive, but also often writing exclusive” (xi). Unless the students and instructor meet face-to-face or talk on the telephone, the primary method of communicating is through writing in emails, discussion board posts, or in virtual chats.

Another possible explanation for this adult learner’s comments is that the type of writing in the online English 207 course is of a personal nature. The adult learner may have thought that the Critical Biography, Goals statements, and Resume assignments were of a private nature and
sharing this information with others may have been a concern for him. The Critical Biography asks students to narrate and analyze their life experiences and explain how those experiences have made them who they are today. The Goals statements ask students to examine their educational and professional goals and describe their plan for achieving those goals. The Resume details their past educational and working experiences, and the remaining assignments, although more objective, still have subjective elements. Adult learners in the online English 207 course read each other’s documents during online peer review workshops, and a level of trust among the adult learners in the course needs to be established to foster their comfort with sharing their personal narratives. Thus, having the face-to-face interaction with an instructor for the purpose of reading and reviewing his written work, instead of his peers, may be the reason this adult learner stated that an independent study is the “best of all possible worlds.”

**Conclusion**

Creating a profile of an adult learner in the online writing course involves understanding previous educational experiences, technological skills, writing ability, and needs. Developing the profile further requires understanding the effectiveness of course design, pedagogy, and interactions. Moreover, the profile needs to recognize the impact of the adult learners’ roles and responsibilities and acknowledge their preferences as discovered through their reflections of themselves and of the online learning experience. Mona Engvig and Mary-Clare White, in “The Student Perspective” examine the recent research into the students’ experiences in the online learning environment. Engvig and White found that “[t]here are surprisingly few studies that focus primarily on the online student’s perception of his or her learning experience. Most of the findings on students’ views are reported in studies that focus on many different aspects of online learning, and therefore go into very little detail on student perceptions” (Engvig 38). The profile of the online English 207 adult learner is one in which the learner has numerous previous face-to-face college courses and a few online learning experiences, and the learner has some technical
knowledge and skills to access and participate in the online course. Moreover, the learners need an organized and easy to navigate course design, community-building interactions, multiple paths of communication to each other and to the instructor, clear expectations and goals for assignments and for the course, reasonable deadlines for tasks, and a sense of satisfaction with themselves as online learners, with the instructor, and with the online learning experience. Through the reflections of the adult learners who participated in this research study, this chapter of my dissertation adds to the research on student perceptions of online learning but more specifically to the adult learners’ experiences in an online intermediate writing course.

A final question asked of the three adult learners who participated in interviews focuses on their perceptions of the future of online learning for adult learners. Jennifer exclaims, “I think they are the wave of the future and most classes will soon be offered this way.” Jim comments, “They will grow in popularity.” Susan provides further explanation:

I think that online courses in general will do nothing but benefit the adult learning process. There are a lot of people in this world that are like me that took classes in college a long time ago and for some reason or another didn’t finish our degrees. Now with the economy the way it is and [because] a college degree carries so much more weight than in the past as far as employment is concerned, it makes sense to accommodate the adult learners with online courses that allow us to finish our degrees and still maintain our other busy lives. (Susan)

Because the number of adults in online writing courses continues to increase, understanding the practical aspects of course design and instructional methods is important. The final chapter of this dissertation presents conclusions and implications of this research study and recommendations for best practices for online writing courses in light of the issues instructors and adult learners confront in the online learning environment.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The main question guiding this research study asked to what extent do the existing e-learning environment or course management system, online course format, and instructional delivery help or hinder adult learners in the online writing classroom, and what online strategies may better serve adult learners in online writing classroom. This dissertation answers this question based on the findings of a research study on the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. The existing online learning environment as accessed in the Blackboard course management system with an online course format containing discussion board forums and instructional delivery benefited adult learners in this online intermediate writing course. Adult learners in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course expressed satisfaction with the organization of the course design, with the ease of navigation, and with the schedule of reading and discussion tasks and writing assignments. They also expressed satisfaction with the pedagogy that included a written discussion format, feedback from peers on their writing, and feedback from the instructor. In reflection, the adult learners in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course affirmed that the course met their needs as writers and as adult learners.

Since this research study, the format for the prior learning assessment program for adult learners has changed. The online English 207 Intermediate Writing course has been replaced with an individualized portfolio preparation process between the adult learner and Stan Lewis, currently the director of Nontraditional Student Services. College credit for the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course is no longer given to adult learners because there no longer is a portfolio preparatory course. However, the portfolio still serves the purpose of obtaining college credit for other courses within appropriate disciplines. The adult learners continue to meet with Lewis who evaluates their “experiences for college-level learning and decide if portfolio
assessment is an appropriate program” for them (Bowling Green State University Nontraditional Student Services). Next, the adult learners develop their portfolio with the guidance of Lewis and with additional assistance from the BGSU Writing Center as needed. While some of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing instructor pedagogy as indicated in these research findings includes one-to-one, instructor-student, writing center-based instructional strategies, most of the pedagogy had a learner-centered, community-based focus. The significance of the redesigned prior learning assessment lies in the continued strength of the portfolio as a learning tool that meets many of the needs of adult learners as discussed in the implications section. However, the weakness of the redesigned process is its lack of ability to build a community of learners and to allow adult learners to experience success in a collegiate online learning environment prior to enrolling in other collegiate courses. The implications of online learning for adult learners in a writing course highlight the instructor issues and adult learners’ needs, and these implications lead to recommendations for online writing courses.

Implications

Instructor Issues

The issues confronting instructors of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation represent general issues most instructors face when teaching in online writing courses. One aspect of online learning that presents issues for instructors is their past teaching experiences. Most instructors have experience in teaching writing in face-to-face classrooms where student writing, responses to questions, and nonverbal expressions help an instructor determine if students understand assignments and tasks. Much instruction in face-to-face writing courses has a sense of immediacy in that instructors provide feedback as the students ask questions. Likewise, instructors develop a teaching style conducive for face-to-face learning environments. When instructors begin teaching online courses, the changes in the learning environment require changes in their teaching approach, as there is a lack
of immediacy behaviors and a lack of verbal statements and nonverbal cues signaling student understanding. Most instructors new to teaching online have little to no training in the online environment or in online pedagogy. “In training and working with so many teachers, I began to realize that although resources for teaching online are plentiful, materials specifically designed for teaching writing online and the teaching philosophy that accompanies online composition instruction are scarce,” asserts Warnock (x). In addition to new resources offering instructional guides for online learning such as Warnock’s *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why* and although more colleges are providing training for online course management systems, fewer are providing professional development in the instructional methods most effective in the online learning environment. Some professional organizations such as Computers and Writing and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) are addressing the need for professional development with workshops, seminars, and conference sessions on online composition pedagogies. However, often absent from much of the professional development is the focus on adult learners as the “online student” is still a generic student who does not have all of the same issues as adult learners.

Another set of issues confronting instructors teaching online courses concerns their roles and responsibilities in the online learning environment. Blair in “Delivering Literary Studies in the Twenty-first Century: The Relevance of Online Pedagogies” contends “faculty often fail to grasp their role in making online teaching successful and their resulting need to move beyond an ‘add technology and stir’ model of instruction, or one that presumes that their own pedagogical approaches shouldn’t change in an online setting” (72). “The role of the instructor,” asserts Palloff and Pratt, “either in a traditional face-to-face or online setting, is to establish his or her presence by ensuring that some type of educational process occurs among the learners involved” (*Building* 110). “Ensuring that some type of educational process occurs” in an online course means instructors have multiple roles. Instructor roles in the online course include one as a
course administrator who may design and develop the course and its materials, who maintains
the course online by managing the uploading of course documents, who may be a technological
trouble-shooter for students, and who assesses the effectiveness of the course for online learning.
Another role is one as a facilitator who guides students through the learning process of the course
with a schedule of tasks, who fosters a sense of community through communication strategies
and through interactive assignments between the students, who encourages and motivates
students to begin, continue, and finish the course, and who assesses student progress and
assignments.

Lastly, another set of issues for instructors in online learning environments involve the
type of students in the online learning course and the pedagogy needed to foster learning. Online
learners choose the online course for a variety of reasons, and often instructors have different
expectations for online learners. Some instructors may expect online learners to have more of a
sense of responsibility for learning in the online course than, perhaps, they may have of students
in face-to-face courses, and some instructors expect the online learning environment to be merely
an online version of a face-to-face course. In contrast, other instructors expect that their teaching
style in an online learning environment must be radically different from their teaching style in a
face-to-face environment. In reality, “online writing instruction provides the opportunity for not
just a different approach, but a progressive approach to the way teachers teach writing—an
evolution of sorts in writing instruction” (italics, his), claims Warnock (x-xi). However, this
progressive approach does not necessarily mean learning a new and unfamiliar pedagogy.
Warnock explains, “Many teachers can become rapidly acclimated to the online environment if
they think about migrating their long developed skills, instead of thinking an [online writing]
course requires a brand-new teaching approach” (xv-xvi). Online pedagogy does benefit from a
different teaching approach but one that helps to develop effective course designs and fosters a
community of learners through well-designed discussions. Other issues instructors must
confront include factors beyond and within their abilities to manage. Specifically, online instructors need to be aware of external influences on adult learners in the online environment that instructors and adult learners cannot control including time constraints imposed on adult learners by their various roles and responsibilities. Additionally, online instructors need to be aware of internal influences that can aid in student retention such as timeliness of deadlines.

Adult Learner Issues

Even as instructors confront issues in the online writing environment, adult learners confront issues resulting from their previous educational and technological experiences and issues resulting from the effects of course design, pedagogy, student-to-student and student-instructor interactions, time commitments, and the online learning environment. The implications for development and delivery of online writing courses are derived from the issues of online learning that challenge the instructors in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing courses and from the adult learner participants’ perceptions discussed in this study. Adult learners have needs that many traditionally aged students do not. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson examine the adult learners’ needs and expectations as learners in *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*. Adult learners bring prior learning and life experiences and a readiness to learn to the educational environment and have a need for self-responsibility, internal motivation, and relevance to current and future life situations. These six expectations, as listed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, become the basis for the implications of the development and delivery of online writing courses for adult learners.

Online writing courses need to address the adult learners’ need to know why the course material is important and at the same time their need to know how it relates to their experiences. Instructors and course designers need to allow spaces for self-discovery of the usefulness of the course and provide course objectives that outline the importance of the course material. “At the
very least,” Knowles, Holton, and Swanson contend, “facilitators can make an intellectual case for the value of the learning in improving the effectiveness of the learners’ performance or the quality of their lives” (65). Knowles, Holton, and Swanson continue, “Even more potent [. . .] learners [need to] discover for themselves the gaps between where they are now and where they want to be” (65). The purpose of the course needs relevance to the adult learners’ lives; for example, the purpose of the English 207 Intermediate Writing course was to develop a portfolio for college credit for one or more other college courses. Self-reflection activities, similar to the English 207 Intermediate Writing Critical Biography and Goals Statement, before, during, and after an online course can help to illuminate the importance of course material and the connection between the material and the adult learners’ collective experiences. Because adult learners have varied and more life-experience, online writing courses that allow for knowledge making based on experiences help fulfill their sense of self. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson claim, “to adults, their experience is who they are. The implication of this fact for adult education is that in any situation in which the participants’ experiences are ignored or devalued, adults will perceive this as rejecting not only their experience, but rejecting themselves as persons” (66-67). Online writing courses seem ideally capable of including experiences of the adult learners and their discovery of the value of the learning experience, not only through writing assignments but also through discussion board forums that provide a space for such conversations among the online adult learner students.

Closely related to the adult learners’ sense of self as derived from their life experiences is the adult learners’ self-concept, which online writing course development and delivery needs to address. “Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept they develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction,” explain Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (65). Because online learning environments require students to take
responsibility for participating in the learning environment, online learning seems poised to fulfill this need. However, some adult learners may not have a strong self-concept and may need instructors of online writing courses to, as Knowles, Holton, and Swanson attest, “create learning experiences in which adults are helped to make the transition from dependent to self-directing learners” (65). In the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, the Portfolio assignment sheet provided the tasks for each section and most of the documents that needed to be in the portfolio. (See Appendix F). The adult learners in the course followed the guidelines for the various written documents, but each, independently, had to decide what information to put into each document and what information to leave out. In addition, the last section of the portfolio, the appendices, allowed the adult learners to determine what documentation to include as relevant to the courses for which they were seeking credit. Online writing courses need to have some tasks in which the adult learners follow a set of guidelines that have explicit links to the learning outcomes of the course and some tasks in which they can determine the direction of and contents for, as relevant to the learning outcomes.

The remaining three aspects of adult learning as described by Knowles, Holton, and Swanson include the adult learners’ readiness to learn, orientation to learn, and motivation. These three aspects have additional implications to the development and delivery of online writing courses. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson state, “Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations” (67). In essence, “adults are life-centered (or task-centered or problem centered) in their orientation to learning” (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 67). Often, adult learners are in the online writing course because of their need to gain or complete a college degree or program in order to obtain employment, advance from their current position, or seek a new career path. Most of the students in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course had a “readiness to learn” because of their desired career paths, and the course objectives and types of assignments
were applicable to their goals in life. Online writing courses need objectives that are relevant to
the goals of the adult learners. Additionally, “[w]hile adults are responsive to some external
motivators (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries, and the like), the most potent motivators are
internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, and the
like),” explain Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (68). In the online English 207 Intermediate
Writing course, the objective of developing a portfolio for additional college credit so adult
learners could continue toward a degree or completion of a program addresses the external
motivating factor described by Knowles, Holton, and Swanson. The writing for each document
was of a personal nature that helped the adult learners discover the significance of their life
experiences and their connections to their goals; the effect of these assignments addresses the
internal motivating factors Knowles, Holton, and Swanson discuss. Online writing courses not
only need to address the practicality of these external factors in the adult learners’ motivation,
but also address the internal factors that foster a sense of significance and meaning of the course
in the adult learners.

Recommendations for Online Writing Courses

The analysis of the challenges of the online writing environment for instructors and adult
learners uncovers the implications for the development and delivery of the online writing course
for adult learners. This section offers recommendations for the course design, pedagogy, and
professional development for instructors of online writing courses. Guiding these
recommendations is the CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing
Writing in Digital Environments for course design and pedagogy. Additionally, this section
recommends online course administrators and educators approach online learning for adults with
the intention of developing and delivering an online writing course of high quality for effective
learning and using a process of peer review and revision of the course as exemplified through the
standards set forth in the Quality Matters program.
Online writing courses may be assessed in a variety of ways such as with students’ course evaluations, with instructors’ reflective practices about the effectiveness of course design, contents, and student participation, success, and retention, and with program or institutional practices. However, another form of assessment involves a peer review process that evaluates the online writing course based on its design and delivery in relation to student-learning outcomes. Concerned about the quality of online programs and seeking to promote excellence in online learning, MarylandOnline, Inc. in 2003 sponsored a quality process project for online learning called “Quality Matters (QM),” which has “received national recognition for its peer-based approach to quality assurance and continuous improvement in online education” (Quality Matters). Currently as a “self-supporting organization,” Quality Matters is “a faculty-centered, peer review process designed to certify the quality of online courses and online components” (Quality Matters). Bowling Green State University is involved with the Quality Matters reviewer training and peer review process in online education. According to the BGSU Center for Online and Blended Learning website, “The Center for Online and Blended Learning has established BGSU as a founding partner of a state wide consortium of 35 institutions including the Ohio Learning Network, who are implementing Quality Matters for the state of Ohio. BGSU is a peer reviewer training site and hosted the first Ohio Quality Matters training session.”

The Quality Matters process assesses online learning courses based on four underlying principles and a criteria-based rubric. The first underlying principle is that the process is a “continuous quality improvement process” in which all “reviewed courses will eventually meet expectations” (Quality Matters). The second principle is that it is centered on research, student learning, and quality (Quality Matters). The third principle is that it is part of a “faculty-driven, peer review process” that is “diagnostic and collegial” (Quality Matters). The fourth principle is that it is a collaborative review that is flexible in the way courses meet standards, that uses
“collaboratively identified evidence found in the course,” and that has a team that “consists of three experienced online instructors as reviewers along with the course faculty developer” (Quality Matters). The reviewers, following these underlying principles, apply a rubric in the evaluation of online courses. The rubric used for the review has “forty specific elements” under eight different categories (Quality Matters). “Quality Matters: Inter-Institutional Quality Assurance in Online Learning” website lists the eight main categories as learning objectives, assessment and measurement, resources and materials, learner engagement, course technology, learner support, and accessibility. Five of those categories considered “critical course components” need to align; these include learning objectives, assessment and measurement, resources and materials, learner engagement, and course technology. These critical course components “work together to ensure that students achieve the desired learning outcomes. When aligned, each of these course components is directly tied to and supports the learning objectives” (Quality Matters).

Because of my role in this research study, I gained perspectives as an instructor and as an observer of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. Based on my knowledge of the eight categories and five “critical course components,” I suggest that the tenets of the Quality Matters program are applicable to online writing courses. Although the Quality Matters review process charges a range of fee-based services, some universities and colleges have become subscribers, allowing for a limited number of course reviews (Quality Matters). The process for achieving Quality Matters recognition for a course is to request a review of an existing course, have the course peer reviewed, receive feedback about the areas that did or did not meet the criteria as given on the rubric, and continue to revise the course until it meets the quality expectations (Quality Matters). Recognition of quality for an online writing course would help to reassure adult learners of the credibility of the online writing environment and value of the educational experience.
Course Design

Online courses design involves filling a “container” with course contents. Blair notes, “there are a plethora of digital tools that exist with a Web 2.0 era” and “faculty should question [. . .] how these tools may allow students to access and respond to course material and ultimately enrich the experience of both students and faculty” (73). Although some online writing courses have websites and other types of online components, this section will focus on online writing courses that use a course management system such as Blackboard for its online learning environment. A review of the underlying assumptions for online writing environments is needed before addressing the specifics of a practical design for an online course. According to the CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments, the underlying assumptions for courses in “digital environments” is that they should “introduce students to the epistemic (knowledge-constructing) characteristics of information technology” and “provide students with opportunities to apply digital technologies to solve substantial problems.” Other assumptions are that digital environments should “include much hands-on use of technologies,” “engage students in the critical evaluation of information,” and, “prepare students to be reflective practitioners” (CCCC). The online learning environment such as in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course lends itself to fulfilling these statements given by the CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments because it allows students to participate in online learning through technologies offered in course management software and internet websites to create and foster knowledge. Online writing courses can be designed to guide students through the processes of evaluating online and print texts as well as student writing, and online writing courses can have self-reflective spaces within discussion board forums and writing assignments.

The findings of this research study suggest that course design for online writing courses needs to have organized content and navigational ease. Using an organizational plan to group
items perhaps on separate pages or in separate modules within the course site is recommended for ease of use by adult learners. Online writing course designers and instructors should create pages or upload documents specifically developed for ease of reading online such as documents having a readable and standard font size and style, contrasting background and font color, and little to no scrolling in order to read the entire document. Some of the most important documents include the course goals, learning outcomes, and expected student competences. Pages or documents containing course texts, readings, syllabi, grading standards, and schedule of due dates could be grouped together within the same module. One module or page of the online writing course could contain the instructor’s office hours whether virtual or within a physical space, the instructor’s contact information and available times for telephone calls or virtual chats, a statement concerning the frequency of email replies, and any biographical information that the instructor wishes to share. Additionally, the course designer needs to provide a space for student-to-student interactions and student-instructor interactions. Having separate discussion boards for each lesson or topic will help to clarify conversation threads. Having separate discussion board threads for peer reviews for each writing assignment builds a sense of community and strengthens student-to-student interactions as Warnock states, “Peer review is a standard FYW practice that can operate in an enhanced way using the technologies of the [online writing] course” (109). In addition, having an additional discussion board for reflection on some or all aspects of the online writing course in which students can create threads to start discussions promotes reflective practice. For more communication pathways, links to student and instructor email addresses increases adult learners’ access to the instructor and alleviates concerns about isolation. Another module or page within the online writing course site can contain links for supplementary readings or projects, for software needed for the course, for technical assistance with the course management system and with hardware and software issues, and for writing help such as online writing centers, documentation style guides, and grammar guides.
Pedagogy

Although some instructors may have designed their online writing courses, some have not; however, all instructors need to learn effective instructional strategies for adult learners in the online learning environment. Warnock explains a perspective online instructors should consider:

I believe that you can approach teaching online more confidently if you view it as not being that different from teaching onsite. I say this not just because I think that people who perceive online instruction as totally alien to their normal, tried-and-true teaching practices are often scared off from teaching online, but because teaching online, like teaching onsite, is about recognizing your teaching talent zones or areas and finding ways to translate those talents to the teaching environment in which you are working. (Warnock xiv)

Developing best practices for writing courses whether online or face-to-face is an important goal for any writing instructor. Writing courses whether online or face-to-face use discussions, writing assignments, feedback, peer reviews, and research strategies, so the student competencies, course goals, and learning objectives should be the same. The difference in the online environment is the lack of immediacy, verbal exchanges, and non-verbal cues. On the other hand, in online learning environments students write substantially more than in face-to-face courses. The numerous opportunities to write includes much “informal and developmental” writing, and because interactions are written, “students are faced with a unique educational challenge/pressure to write to communicate almost everything in the course” (xi), says Warnock. Because writing is a significant feature in online courses, pedagogy for an online writing course needs to focus not only on student writing but also on the development of a community of learners through written exchanges.
The CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments uses Chickering and Ehrmann’s seven principles for teaching and learning. These principles provide an entry point into the recommendations for online writing pedagogy. CCCC Position Statement on Teaching, Learning, and Assessing Writing in Digital Environments advises instructors to “incorporate principles of best practices in teaching and learning,” such as encouraging “contacts between student and faculty,” developing “reciprocity and cooperation among students,” using “active learning techniques,” giving “prompt feedback,” emphasizing “time on task,” communicating “high expectations,” and respecting “diverse talents and ways of learning.” Implementing the first three principles, encouraging contact, developing cooperation, and using active learning techniques, into the online writing course can be achieved when instructors develop instructional methods that build a sense community among the learners. Community building strategies include online student introductions, online discussions, online collaborative group work and peer review, and writing assignments using narrative or descriptive modes. The next principle, feedback, can be achieved through timely instructor responses to questions and concerns in discussion board posts and through email and telephone contact, through commentary on student writing, and through peer reviews of drafts. The next two principles, tasks and expectations, can be implemented into the online writing course through documents explaining the course objectives, schedule of tasks, expected student competencies, and learning outcomes. Warnock explains that instructors should “[c]reate a structure of deadlines and predictable elements [. . .] so that students become comfortable with the course schedule” (143). The last principle, respecting different talents and ways of learning, can be implemented with a learning styles assessment for students to take before the course begins or as the first task. DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant in Web-Based Distance Education for Adults, state, “typical web-based learning will fit with print-oriented learners who learn best through reading and writing. Individuals who are interactive-oriented learn best through
verbalization and may be at a disadvantage in traditionally print-based online courses. [...] small group discussions through chat lines” or “online phone discussions” help “aural and interactive learners thrive” (32). Furthermore, thoughtful and diverse communication methods and use of strategies that address various learning styles, such as audio and video elements in addition to written text is an instructional strategy that will show respect for different learning styles. Using a variety of instructional methods for online writing courses helps to retain students and to foster an effective learning environment for adult learners.

**Professional Development**

Another recommendation to foster better development of online writing environments for adult learners is to integrate professional development sessions into graduate level programs in composition and to provide opportunities for professional development in online learning for adult learners at the institutional level. One aspect of educational preparation for online writing instruction needs to focus on the technologies of the online learning environment. Palloff and Pratt in “Beyond the Looking Glass: What Faculty and Students Need to Be Successful Online” contend, “When training is delivered online, using the course management system in which they will be teaching, faculty have the opportunity to experience the online environment as both student and an instructor, serving to increase their effectiveness” (375). In online English 207 Intermediate Writing, the Blackboard course management system was the online learning environment, and BGSU does offer training in this system through its Center for Online and Blended Learning. Instructors interested in or assigned to teach online writing courses should seek training in the technological systems used for the online courses at their college or university.

In addition, the Center for Online and Blended Learning program at BGSU offers an online educators training course that highlights different instructional methods that can be used
within this course management system, which is the other aspect of online preparation for educators. Palloff and Pratt describe training that integrates instructional strategies:

In an online training course, the best practices involved in online teaching can be demonstrated. The best practices relate to the activities of teaching and learning and not to the technology itself. The course should be long enough so that faculty can be encouraged to develop a skeleton of a course or even one lesson that other participants can critique. The facilitator of the training should model good techniques for building a learning community with the course and for empowering the participating faculty to explore both the medium and the material. (Palloff and Pratt Beyond 375)

Palloff and Pratt’s description of an ideal training course for educators is viable; however, it lacks the element of composition and possibly adult learning. This recommendation for the educational preparation of instructors for online writing courses for adult learners builds on Palloff and Pratt’s training design. Composition programs and professional organizations need to create development sessions using this description for the design of training courses and add in current composition theory and best practices for adult learning. Much progress in this area has been made with conference sessions on possible uses of various technological and online tools such as blogs and wikis, but more is needed.

Limitations of Research Design

One limitation in this research study is the sample size. Although all six participants in the survey and the three participants in the interview were adult learners, the small number of adult learners participating in this study does not present a representative sampling of adult learners in collegiate online writing and learning environments. The limited number of collective responses to the survey and interview questions limits the findings concerning the issues confronting adult learners such as their previous educational experiences and
technological skill levels and their perceptions of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course design, pedagogy, student interactions, and time commitments. Additionally, the limited number of collective adult learners’ responses limits the findings concerning their reflections of online learning in general and in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course. Although generalizations about adult learners in online writing courses cannot be made, a profile of the adult learner in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course as developed in this dissertation can further the understanding of adult learners in other college online writing courses.

Another limitation is the length of time that had passed between the time of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course each participant was in and the time of my research study. Because the surveys and interviews of the participating adult learners took place approximately one month after my 2003 online English 207 Intermediate Writing course ended and because of the inclusion of adult learners from the previous two years of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, all three interview participants could not provide answers to a few questions. In response to the interview questions asking which assignment she received the most helpful and useful responses to from the other online English 207 Intermediate Writing students and which assignment did she receive the least helpful and useful responses to from the other online English 207 Intermediate Writing students, Susan could not remember. Similarly, Jennifer said that the class was too long ago so she also could not provide an answer to those two interview questions as well as to the question that asked which assignment she enjoyed the most and the least. Jim, on the other hand, provided answers to all of the interview questions, but he could not remember any specific technologies used in his previous face-to-face writing courses. (To read the interview questions in their original context, see Appendix D.) Likewise, one adult learner participating in the survey wrote on his survey that because the online English 207
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Intermediate Writing course he took was two years prior to my research study, he could not remember specifically if he turned in assignments on time, early, or late.

The course management system used for the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course and course design as developed by another instructor is another limitation. As an instructor with experience in teaching in face-to-face writing courses enhanced by technology, specifically with Blackboard sites for those courses, I was comfortable with most of the technological aspects of teaching the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course “as is.” Palloff and Pratt contend, “for some instructors entering the online arena for the first time it can be a relief to receive a course that is already developed. Even when they are given the ability to customize, some will teach the course as received at least the first time through” (Lessons 102). As the first graduate student instructor to teach the course under the supervision of Kristine Blair, who developed the online version and with whom I have a working relationship, I did not add or remove any of the Blackboard modules, assignments, tasks, links, or discussion board forums. In addition, I followed the same schedule of tasks as given in previous courses. Even though the lack of changes to the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course provides consistency in the research of the course design and instructional methods from course to course, they do not allow for an analysis of the effectiveness of possible changes I would have made to the course.

In addition to using a pre-existing online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, my role as a participant-observer and teacher-researcher represents another limitation. My previous educational experiences as an adult learner, my observations of the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course and perceptions of the course design and instructional methods, and my knowledge of the adult learners’ writing progress throughout the semester and grades could reflect my subjectivity in this research study. In addition, the adult learner participants from my 2003 online English 207 Intermediate Writing course could have been influenced by their familiarity with me as their instructor and as a researcher. Future research into the online
English 207 Intermediate Writing course could focus on a more objective position for data collection and analysis such as including observations from researchers not familiar with the course or the adult learners.

*Changes in Research Design*

The most significant aspect of my research design that I would change would be some of the interview and survey questions. The wording in a few of the interview and survey questions may have left a gap in the findings because the various types of communication paths were grouped together instead of addressed separately, and email, arguably one of the most prevalent forms of communication in online courses, was left out of the questions concerning interactions with the instructor. One specific interview question asked how many hours did the adult learners spend interacting with other adult learner students in the course through email, chats, and discussion board posts. However, the follow up question asked how many hours did the adult learners spend interacting with the instructor in face-to-face meetings or on the telephone. Email as a type of interaction between the adult learner and instructor was absent from the follow up question. Likewise, six survey questions asked if the adult learners met face-to-face with their instructor in an office visit or called their instructor on the telephone for help with rough drafts, final drafts, portfolio sections, assignment sheets, peer reviewer or instructor feedback on drafts, and technical, computer, or software issues. None of these survey questions included email as optional path of communication with the instructor. (To read the survey questions in their original context, see Appendix E.)

Although email could be added to the interview and survey questions noted above, in reflection, a preferred change would be to rewrite each question so it only lists one communication path and add subsequent questions that list only one of the other options for communication. For example, three new questions would replace the interview question that asked how many hours did the adult learners spend interacting with the instructor in face-to-face
meetings or on the telephone. Each new question would address one communication path. For example, the first question would ask how many hours did the adult learners spend interacting with the instructor in face-to-face meetings. The second question would ask how many hours did the adult learners spend interacting with the instructor on the telephone. The third question would ask how many hours did the adult learners spend interacting with the instructor through email. These three new questions would have a preceding question worded the same except for the phrase “how many hours” would be replaced with “how many times.” For example, before the question asking how many hours did the adult learners spend interacting with the instructor through email, a question would be added that asked how many times did the adult learner email the instructor.

Likewise, the six survey questions that asked if the adult learners met face-to-face with their instructor in an office visit or called their instructor on the telephone for help with rough drafts, final drafts, portfolio sections, assignment sheets, peer reviewer or instructor feedback on drafts, and technical, computer, or software issues would be rewritten to address one communication path. For example, the survey question that asked if the adult learners met face-to-face with their instructor in an office visit or called their instructor on the telephone for help with rough drafts would be replaced with three separate questions. The first question would ask if the adult learners met face-to-face with their instructor in an office visit for help with rough drafts. The second question would ask if the adult learners called their instructor on the telephone for help with rough drafts. The third question would ask if the adult learners emailed their instructor for help with rough drafts. The three new questions each would have a subsequent question worded the same except for the phrase “if they met with (or called or emailed)” would be replaced with “how many times did they meet (or call or email)” their instructor for help. For example, after the question asking if the adult learners emailed their instructor for help with rough drafts, another question would ask how many times did they email
their instructor for help with their rough drafts. By separating the different paths of communication and adding in questions asking the number of times they used that particular method of communication, more details could be collected about the use of the different communication paths by adult learners and their preferred communication pathway. The addition of these details to the findings in this research study would enhance the profile of the adult learner in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course.

**Future Research**

Even though much past and current research and literature covers aspects of effective online pedagogy, course design, communication, and assessment, and many research studies and literature discuss adult learners’ needs, roles, responsibilities, and issues in distance education, gaps still remain. Filling some gaps, recent research on online adult learners’ satisfaction, communication practices, and emotional challenges as they contribute to their performance or success in the online learning environment is adding to the current literature on adult and online learning. Although some literature discusses aspects of online learning in composition studies and some literature discusses the adult learner in developmental and first-year composition, relatively few resources focus on the adult learner in the online writing course and particularly in an online intermediate writing course. Educators need research studies on the adult learner in the online writing environment, and this dissertation contributes to the scholarly knowledge in this area and becomes a basis for further studies. Additional studies of the adult learner in other intermediate writing courses that are longitudinal in nature and that collect substantial quantitative data would be an area for further research for refining the mainly qualitative empirical findings in this research study.

Although this research study focused on a pre-existing online intermediate writing course within a course management system, on instructional issues, and on adult learners in the online English 207 Intermediate Writing course, a future direction for more research could focus on
adult learners in online writing courses that use other course management systems. Further studies could address the role of other online technological tools such as websites, wiki pages, blogs, and social networking sites in the online learning environment. Even though literature exists on how to integrate these technologies into face-to-face and online courses, assessing the effects of these technologies on adult learning would help to fill in a gap in the current literature concerning effective instructional strategies for adult learners in online writing environments.

A possible future extension of this dissertation could involve the study and analysis of the effects of the online environment on the adult learners’ approaches to writing and if the online learning environment changes their writing processes. Because several adult learners consented to allow me to review their final portfolios, another direction for future study would be to analyze their writing and revision processes made to their portfolios for the purpose of receiving additional college credit in various fields and disciplines throughout the University. In addition, another extension of this dissertation would be to compare the online learning environment of the English 207 Intermediate Writing course and the newly revised adult learning pre-assessment program in which the adult learners complete their portfolios independently but with the assistance of Stan Lewis and the BGSU Writing Center.

Final Thoughts

Best practice for online writing courses for adult learners needs to include student assessment of their learning styles, preferences, and needs. Specifically, instructors can create opportunities for adult learners to discuss learning styles and needs within the course to begin to build an online learning community for the course. Moreover, reflective practices focusing on their external and internal influences for taking the online writing course would help adult learners understand their motivations and challenges. One strategy to promote reflective learning is for instructors to create discussion board forums or writing assignments that relate the adult learners’ experiences to the course objectives. Along with clearly stated course objectives,
assignments, and learning outcomes, instructors can integrate assignments and tasks that allow for exploration, problem solving, and self-directed learning into the course to address the adult learners need for independent learning. Finally, as is the intention of this dissertation, instructors can add to the literature on best practices for the adult learner in the online writing course address the issues surrounding course design and pedagogy.

Many resources are available to aid in the development of effective online learning environments. As noted earlier in this chapter, Scott Warnock’s *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why* provides course administrators and instructors with practical advice for developing and delivering an online writing course. Warnock’s approach to teaching writing online outlines specific curriculum, strategies, and samples for creating successful learning experiences. Similarly, a resource with more analysis of adult learners, learning styles, instructional design and development, online tools, and community and collaborative roles is Robin Neidorf’s *Teach Beyond Your Reach*. Neidorf includes worksheets and several appendices including sample lectures, introductory materials, resources, and readings. She classifies online tools into three levels from the least complex, midrange, and more complex tools, and she describes the best practices for each level (Neidorf 17-46).

Some recommended texts focusing on specific instructional strategies include Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch’s *Virtual Peer Review: Teaching and Learning about Writing in Online Environments*. Breuch argues for moving the face-to-face practice of peer review of student writing into the online learning environment. Breuch states, “virtual peer review encourages writers to take deliberate control of technologies and to think strategically, not just as writers, but as technology users” (5). The wiki online tool is the subject of Robert E. Cummings’ text, *Lazy Virtues: Teaching Writing in the Age of Wikipedia* in which Cummings asserts that including wiki writing in the composition classroom actualizes the concept of audience for the students. Cummings states, “Each Wikipedia entry forms its own knowledge community. On Wikipedia,
writers are motivated to represent the state of knowledge on that topic in a uniformly readable way, and their passion for that task can often create an amazing marriage between expert knowledge and coherent communication” (8). Further discussion of collaborative learning and the concept of building community in online learning environments is Robert E. Cummings and Matt Barton’s edited text *Wiki Writing: Collaborative Learning in the College Classroom* in which they analyze the practical use of one online tool, the wiki, for online writing spaces. Cummings and Barton contend, “it is the underlying commonality of that shared site space, the wiki itself, that moves users from complete divergence of opinion toward often greater understanding through dialogue” (vii). These resources are only a few of the articles and texts that offer online educators a variety of instructional approaches and strategies. With the strategies provided in these sources and with an understanding of adult learning, online writing instructors can create successful and effective online writing courses for adults.
NOTE

1. This email exchange derived from my research study was previously published in Kristine Blair and Cheryl Hoy’s article, "Paying Attention to Adult Learners Online: The Pedagogy and Politics of Community” in *Computers & Composition* 23.1 (2006), and it exemplifies external influences on student success and the instructor’s role in encouraging students to complete the course.
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My name is Cheryl Hoy, and I am a third year graduate student in the English Department working on a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Writing at Bowling Green State University. I am currently working on my dissertation, which deals with creating effective online writing environments for adult learners. Since fully online writing courses for adult learners are relatively new to the English Department and to most university English departments, I am hoping that my research will allow me to offer more suggestions in the forms of current research methodology, resources, and pedagogy for instructors, administrators, and adult learners, thereby providing more effective online environments for future online writing courses for adult learners.

You are invited to participate in this research because you were or are an administrator or instructor of the online English 207 course offered through Bowling Green State University’s Continuing Education Department.

I will be looking at the 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004 online English 207 courses in Blackboard. I will be asking for participation in a post-course questionnaire survey and in email interviews, and for use of writing and posts within the course modules, discussion boards, emails, and assignment modules including rough drafts, revised drafts, and the final written product of the course.


You will not need any special software or hardware for participation in this research other than Internet access and a BGNet email account or other email address.

During the fall semester, I anticipate you spending approximately 30-35 minutes while participating in an interview. I would not expect you to exceed more than 2 hours for the fall semester; however, depending on the time you take to answer the interview questions, you may take longer than I anticipated.

You will be asked for permission for me to look at your postings in all of the modules in the Blackboard course shell, such as discussion board posts, virtual classroom chat posts, PowerPoint presentations responses, rough draft responses, revision responses, and final draft response and finished portfolio responses. You will be asked to participate in an email interview. If you and your adult learning students have exchanged emails and both of you agree that they would be beneficial to my study, you can forward them to me through email; however, you will not be asked for private emails exchanged between you and your students.

I plan to refer to the instructors by name, unless one or all wish to have an alias. I plan to give each adult learner participant in this research study an alias. Since the data is within Blackboard, there is a level of confidentiality already as Blackboard is password protected and can only be accessed by those in the course and the administrators of Blackboard. Surveys will be administered through email to participants in previous courses and through the Blackboard site to the participants in the fall 2004 online English 207 course. For those in the fall 2004 online English 207 course, the software will register who has and hasn't taken the survey but the results will not indicate who has said what. The Blackboard analysis for these surveys will only
show statistical information. For emails, and for the surveys and interviews I collect via email, I will block out the header and give each participant an alias and a file folder, which will be locked in my filing cabinet. Only my dissertation director and I will have access to them.

Your participation is completely voluntary. Your relationship to BGSU will NOT be affected in any way by your decision to participate or not participate. Replying to this informed consent email will indicate that you are willing to participate. You have the right to NOT participate at anytime during this research.

I will use the information from this research to write my dissertation, which will fulfill my requirements for graduation. I also intend to use this research in future conference proposals and presentations, and in possible publications. I will share the results of this research with interested faculty and participants. If you are interested in this research, you may contact me after my dissertation is completed.

Please place an “X” next to each level of this research in which you are willing to participate:

___________ Email interview
If you agree to this section of the research study, I will email interview questions to you during the fall 2004 semester.

___________ English 207 course shell and online postings
If you agree to this section of the research study, I will ask you to place my name on either your class roster or list me as an instructor for your Blackboard course website.

Please place an “X” next to the statement that describes how you would like to be identified for this research.

___________ I give my permission to use my name

___________ I would prefer to have an alias for identification purposes.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you may contact: Cheryl Hoy, Researcher, (419) 372-6864 or choy@bgnet.bgsu.edu
Kristine Blair, Dissertation Director, (419) 372-8033 or kblair@bgnet.bgsu.edu

For questions regarding the conduct of the study or your rights as a research participant, please contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 or (hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

Thank you for your time,

Cheryl Hoy
My name is Cheryl Hoy, and I am a third year graduate student in the English Department working on a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Writing at Bowling Green State University. I am currently working on my dissertation, which deals with creating effective online writing environments for adult learners. Since fully online writing courses for adult learners are relatively new to the English Department and to most university English departments, I am hoping that my research will allow me to offer more suggestions in the forms of current research methodology, resources, and pedagogy for instructors, administrators, and adult learners, thereby providing more effective online environments for future online writing courses for adult learners.

You are invited to participate in this research because you were or are enrolled as a student in the online English 207 course offered through Bowling Green State University's Continuing Education Department.

I will be looking at the 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004 online English 207 courses in Blackboard. I will be asking for participation in a post-course questionnaire survey and in email interviews, and for use of writing and posts within the course modules, discussion boards, emails, and assignment modules including rough drafts, revised drafts, and the final written product of the course.


You will not need any special software or hardware for participation in this research other than Internet access and a BGNet email Account or other email address. During the fall semester, I anticipate you spending approximately 15-20 minutes while participating in the survey and approximately 20-25 minutes while participating in an interview. I would not expect you to exceed more than 2 hours for the fall semester; however, depending on the time you take to answer the survey and interview questions, you may take longer than I anticipated.

You will be asked for permission for me to look at your postings in all of the modules in the Blackboard course shell, such as discussion board posts, virtual classroom chat posts, PowerPoint presentations, rough drafts, revisions, and final drafts and your finished portfolio. You will be asked to complete and return, by email or by a Blackboard post, a post-course questionnaire survey. You will be asked to participate in an email interview. If you and your instructor have exchanged emails and both of you agree that they would be beneficial to my study, you can forward them to me through email; however, you will not be asked for private emails exchanged between you and your instructor.

I plan to give each adult learner participant in this research study an alias. Since the data is within Blackboard, there is a level of confidentiality already as Blackboard is password protected and can only be accessed by those in the course and the administrators of Blackboard. Surveys will be administered through email to participants in previous courses and through the Blackboard site to the participants in the fall 2004 online English 207 course. For those in the fall 2004 online English 207 course, the software will register who has and hasn't taken the survey but the results will not indicate who has said what. The Blackboard analysis for these surveys will only show statistical information. For emails, and for the surveys and interviews I
collect via email, I will block out the header and give each participant an alias and a file folder, which will be locked in my filing cabinet. Only my dissertation director and I will have access to them.

Your participation is completely voluntary. Your grade, class standing, or relationship to BGSU will NOT be affected in any way by your decision to participate or not participate. Replying to this informed consent email will indicate that you are willing to participate. You have the right to NOT participate at anytime during this research.

I will use the information from this research to write my dissertation, which will fulfill my requirements for graduation. I also intend to use this research in future conference proposals and presentations, and in possible publications. I will share the results of this research with interested faculty and participants. If you are interested in this research, you may contact me after my dissertation is completed.

Please place an “X” next to each level of this research in which you are willing to participate:

___________ Post-course questionnaire survey
If you agree to this section of the research study, this survey will be posted in Blackboard if you are in the fall semester 2004 English 207 and emailed to you if you were in the 2001, 2002, and 2003 English 207 classes.

___________ Email interview
If you agree to this section of the research study, I will email interview questions to you during the fall 2004 semester.

___________ Online postings
If you agree to this section of the research study, no further participation is required for this section after you reply to this emailed informed consent letter.

___________ Writing samples
If you agree to this section of the research study, I will ask to see your final portfolio.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you may contact:
Cheryl Hoy, Researcher, (419) 372-6864 or choy@bgnet.bgsu.edu
Kristine Blair, Dissertation Director, (419) 372-8033 or kblair@bgnet.bgsu.edu
For questions regarding the conduct of the study or your rights as a research participant, please contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University’s Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 or (hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

Thank you for your time,

Cheryl Hoy
APPENDIX C: ENGLISH 207 INSTRUCTOR INTERVIEW

To: Online English 207 Instructors
From: Cheryl Hoy, English Dept. Graduate Student
Re: Research Study Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in this email interview for instructors of online English 207. Based on my research of online writing environments for adult learners, I am hoping to offer more suggestions in the forms of current research methodology, resources, and pedagogy for instructors, administrators, and adult learners, thereby providing more effective online environments for future online writing courses for adult learners. Please feel free to respond in depth and to contact me if you have any questions.

1. What is your teaching background? How long have you been teaching writing? What types of courses have you taught in face-to-face classrooms, through independent studies, in computer classrooms, and/or online? Which type of environment do you prefer and why?

2. What writing courses, with the possible exception of English 207, have you taught in face-to-face classrooms? Describe any technologies you used in these writing courses.

3. What were your formal training or professional development experiences prior to teaching writing online? Did this training and development lead to your interests in teaching writing online or did your interest in teaching online writing lead to your formal training or professional development? Also, how has this training and development affected your course experiences?

4. What types of training and/or professional development, specifically for online courses, are you currently participating in? How do you perceive it affecting your current or future teaching of online writing courses?

5. What, if any, formal training and/or professional development experiences did you have prior to teaching adult learners? How has this training and development or the lack of such training and development affected your teaching experiences? Also how has this training, or the lack thereof, led to or affected your interests in teaching adult learners?

6. What types of training and/or professional development, specifically for adult learning, are you currently participating in? How do you perceive it affecting your current or future teaching of online writing courses?

7. Have you taught English 207, Intermediate Writing at BGSU in a face-to-face classroom? What types of students were enrolled? What were the objectives and the assignments? Did you use any technologies in this course? Please describe your experiences.

8. What prompted you to develop and/or teach an online English 207 course? Please describe your involvement, roles, and responsibilities in the online English 207 course.

9. What were your expectations for the online English 207 course prior to teaching it? How have your experiences teaching online English 207 confirmed or challenged your expectations of online English 207 and of online writing courses in general?
10. What were your expectations for the adult learners in your course prior to teaching them? How have your experiences teaching online English 207 confirmed or challenged your expectations of adult learners?

11. What types of concerns did you have about the course in general, the course load, the adult learners as students, the assignments, and you as the instructor prior to teaching online English 207? How did your experiences teaching online English 207 address, or fail to address, those concerns?

12. What types of concerns did you think that the adult learners would have about the course in general, course load, adult learners as students, assignments, and you as the instructor prior to teaching online English 207? In your opinion, how were these concerns addressed?

13. What types of problems did you anticipate with the online English 207 or adult learners as students prior to teaching this course? What, if any, problems arose for you or the adult learners in this course? How did these problems affect the course, learning, assignment completion, participation, and final results?

14. What types and level of interactions did you anticipate with the adult learners as students and between the adult learners themselves prior to teaching this course? How did these interactions affect the course, learning, assignment completion, participation, and final results?

15. Prior to teaching online English 207, how much time did you anticipate spending per week on course preparation, course delivery, reading posts, conferencing online, conferencing on the telephone, conferencing in face-to-face meetings, facilitating discussions, grading and assessing student work, and giving technical assistance? How did your experiences teaching online English 207 meet, or fail to meet, your expectations?

16. Approximately, how many hours per week did you spend interacting with adult learner students in your English 207 course online through emails, chats, and discussion board postings? How many hours per week did you spend interacting with adult learner students in face-to-face meetings or on the telephone?

17. What were your thoughts about the pre-set curriculum of online English 207 prior to teaching the course? How have those thoughts been confirmed, challenged, or changed after teaching online English 207?

18. How effective or ineffective were the assignment modules for the adult learners in your course? What would you change or do differently if you taught another online English 207 course?

19. What are the strengths and weaknesses with the online English 207 course discussion modules for the adult learners in your course?

20. Based on all of your teaching experiences, what do you anticipate the future will hold for online writing courses and for adult learning?
APPENDIX D: ADULT LEARNER STUDENT INTERVIEW

To: Online English 207 Adult Learners  
From: Cheryl Hoy, English Dept. Graduate Student  
Re: Research Study Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in this email interview for adult learners of online English 207. Based on my research of online writing environments for adult learners, I am hoping to offer more suggestions in the forms of current research methodology, resources, and pedagogy for instructors, administrators, and adult learners, thereby providing more effective online environments for future online writing courses for adult learners. Please feel free to respond in depth and to email me if you have any questions.

1. What writing courses have you taken in traditional, face-to-face classrooms? Describe any technologies you used in these writing courses.

2. What online courses, in general, have you taken before you enrolled in the online English 207 course? Were any of these courses writing courses? What technology or computer software did you use and were you comfortable with using it?

3. What was your computer and software training experiences prior to taking English 207 online? How often did you use a computer, use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and chat room features prior to taking online English 207? Also how have these experiences affected your course experiences?

4. How familiar were you with the Blackboard technology used in this course prior to taking online English 207? What were your experiences using Blackboard for online English 207?

5. What, if any, problems with technology used for online English 207, such as Blackboard, computer hardware, or software did you have and how did you resolve these problems? Whom did you contact? What did you do to fix the problem?

6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the organization of the course contents in Blackboard? Were the assignments, discussion postings, writing samples, instructor information, and links easy to find and easy to read? Were you able to easily read and respond to discussion postings? Were you able to easily attach and post documents?

7. What were your expectations for the online English 207 course prior to taking it? Did you expect it to be a writing course? How have your experiences in online English 207 confirmed or challenged your expectations of online English 207 and of online writing courses in general?

8. What types of concerns did you have about: the course in general, the course load, you as an adult learner and student, the assignments, and the instructor prior to taking the online English 207 course? How did your experiences taking online English 207 address, or fail to address, those concerns?

9. What types of writing problems did you anticipate with the online English 207 course prior to taking this course? What, if any, problems did you have in this course? How did these problems affect the course, learning, assignment completion, participation, and final results?
10. What types and level of interactions did you anticipate with the instructor and with the adult learners prior to taking this course? How did these interactions affect the course, your learning, assignment completion, participation, and final results?

11. Prior to taking online English 207, how much time did you anticipate spending per week on reading postings, conferencing with the instructor online, conferencing with the instructor on the telephone, conferencing with the instructor in face-to-face meetings, facilitating discussions, responding to student work, and completing assignments? How did your experiences taking online English 207 meet, or fail to meet, your expectations?

12. Approximately, how much time per week did you spend interacting with the other adult learner students in the English 207 course online through emails, chats, and discussion board postings? How much time per week did you spend interacting with the instructor in face-to-face meetings or on the telephone?

13. How effective or ineffective were the assignment modules for you as an adult learner in the online English 207 course? What would you change or do differently if you took another online writing course?

14. Which assignments did you enjoy the most and the least? Why?

15. Which assignment did you receive the most helpful and useful responses to from the other online English 207 students? What, in particular, was helpful or useful? Why?

16. Which assignment did you receive the least helpful and useful responses to from the other online English 207 students? What, in particular, was not helpful or useful? Why?

17. What was your writing and revision process for your assignments? Did you seek outside help for others not in the course? If so, who and what was the advice or suggestion?

18. What was your revision process for the essays in the online English 207 course? Did you revise essays based off of the peer responses posted in Blackboard, the instructor responses, or both?

19. What were the strengths and weaknesses with the online English 207 course discussion modules for you as an adult learner?

20. Based on all of your experiences, what do you anticipate the future will hold for online writing courses and for adult learning?
APPENDIX E: ADULT LEARNER STUDENT SURVEY

To: Online English 207 Adult Learners
From: Cheryl Hoy, English Dept. Graduate Student
Re: Research Study Questionnaire Survey

Thank you for participating in this questionnaire survey for adult learners of online English 207. Based on my research of online writing environments for adult learners, I am hoping to offer more suggestions in the forms of current research methodology, resources, and pedagogy for instructors, administrators, and adult learners, thereby providing more effective online environments for future online writing courses for adult learners. Please underline or bold your answer and save your responses before emailing this questionnaire survey or posting it in Blackboard.

1. How many online college courses have you taken, not including online English 207?
   None 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 or more

2. How many college courses have you taken where the instructors and students meet face-to-face in a classroom?
   None 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 or more

3. How many writing (composition, creative, science, technical) courses have you taken prior to online English 207?
   None 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 or more

4. How many college independent studies have you taken?
   None 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 or more

5. How many times did you meet in person, face-to-face, with other online English 207 students during this course?
   None 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 or more

6. How many times did you meet in person, face-to-face, with your instructor during this course?
   None 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 or more

7. How many times did you meet in person, face-to-face, with the Director of Adult Learner Services during this course?
   None 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 or more
8. The course website was organized effectively.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

9. It was easy to navigate the website.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

10. It was easy to locate the assignments at the beginning of the course.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

11. It was easy to locate the appropriate discussion board for the week’s discussion.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

12. It was easy to use the website, overall.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

13. It was easy to find and retrieve the assignment sheets.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

14. It was easy to use the discussion boards.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

15. It was easy to upload and download rough and final drafts of writing assignments.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

16. The written discussion format helped improve my writing skills.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

17. The written discussion format helped me communicate my ideas and thoughts more effectively.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

18. The discussion postings provided a useful forum for feedback from my fellow online English 207 students.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

19. The feedback and responses from my fellow online English 207 students to my rough drafts were helpful and useful.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Somewhat Agree   Somewhat Disagree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree
20. I learned new ways to revise and edit my writing from the discussion board responses of my fellow online English 207 students.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

21. I gave more helpful and useful responses to my fellow online English 207 students’ writing and drafts than I received from them.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

22. I sought help or assistance with the writing assignments from people other than my instructor and fellow classmates.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

23. I met face-to-face with my instructor in an office visit or called my instructor on the telephone for help with one or more of my rough drafts.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

24. I met face-to-face with my instructor in an office visit or called my instructor on the telephone for help with one or more of my final drafts.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

25. I met face-to-face with my instructor in an office visit or called my instructor on the telephone for help with organizing one or more portfolio sections.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

26. I met face-to-face with my instructor in an office visit or called my instructor on the telephone for help with one or more of the assignment sheets.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

27. I met face-to-face with my instructor in an office visit or called my instructor on the telephone for help with one or more peer revisions or instructor responses to my drafts.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

28. I met face-to-face with my instructor in an office visit or called my instructor on the telephone for help with technical, computer, or software issues.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

29. I finished each week’s reading before the due date.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
30. I finished each writing assignment before its due date.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

31. I finished each writing assignment at least one week earlier than the due date.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

32. I consistently worked ahead on the reading and writing assignments listed on the syllabus.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

33. I often fell behind the due dates for reading and posting my response to other students’ rough drafts.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

34. I often fell behind the due dates for reading assignments.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

35. I often fell behind the due dates for writing assignments.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

36. I often fell behind in posting to the discussion boards.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

37. I prefer less time between due dates for reading assignments.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

38. I prefer less time between due dates for posting to the discussion boards.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

39. I prefer less time between due dates for writing assignments.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

40. The time between due dates for all assignments was workable for me.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

41. Based on my experiences in online English 207, I would take another online writing course.

Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
42. I would prefer to take a traditional writing course held in a classroom on or off campus.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

43. I would prefer to take an independent study instead of an online writing course.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

44. Writing courses are well suited for the online environment.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

45. Based on my experiences in online English 207, I would take any another online course.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

46. Overall, the online English 207 course met my needs as a writer.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

47. Overall, the online English 207 course met my needs as an adult learner.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

48. Online college courses, in general, meet my needs as an adult learner.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree

49. Online writing courses, in general, meet my needs as an adult learner.
   Strongly Agree  Agree  Somewhat Agree  Somewhat Disagree  Disagree  Strongly Disagree
APPENDIX F: ENGLISH 207 ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Portfolio

Within the academy and the workplace, portfolio assessment is a common way in which to demonstrate professional skills and competencies and show growth as an individual. In the context of this course, your portfolio not only will demonstrate how your personal and professional life experience meet the goals for an academic course but also will demonstrate how your writing process has developed and improved through the completion of a series of required sections, assignments, and activities over the semester. Thus, your portfolios, though each developed for a different course and different instructor, will contain the following elements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portfolio Introduction and Section Formatting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cover Page for Portfolio Binder:</strong> What is the title of your portfolio?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cover Letter:</strong> What is in the portfolio, and how does it demonstrate you have the requisite experience to receive academic credit for the proposed course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title Page and Table of Contents:</strong> What is the title of your portfolio? How is it organized?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Portfolio Section Dividers and Tabs:</strong> How does your portfolio conform to the table of contents? Each section should have its own cover page and tabs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Section 1: Life Experiences and Goals**
  - **Critical Biography:** How have your life experiences—educational, familial, social, and professional, shaped who you are today? This document is meant to be both narrative and analysis, not merely describing your life experience but theorizing what it means in light of your own individuality and social role
  - **Educational/Professional Goals Statement:** What type of academic and professional goals do you currently have? What efforts are you making, or what different directions are you taking to achieve these goals?
  - **Resume:** What skills and abilities, work and educational experience do you have that are most appropriate for a professional resume?

- **Section 2: Course Goals Research and Course Credit Proposal**
  - **Research Progress Report:** How have you gathered information about the course for which you are attempting to receive credit? Research options include interviews, course syllabi and catalog descriptions, course observations, as well as library searches relating to the proposed course of study.
  - **Course Credit Proposal:** How does your life and professional experience meet the goals of the course? This is an extended proposal addressed to the instructor that specifically connects your personal and professional activities to the course content and assignment contexts in order to demonstrate you have indeed met the overall course requirements.
  - **Final Oral/Presentation:** What do you know about the course in question, and how does your portfolio connect to the course? For our final class meeting, you will be asked to develop and deliver a PowerPoint presentation of no more than twenty minutes that overviews and outlines the highlights of your research and development of your portfolio for your 207 colleagues.

- **Section 3: Appendices and Documentation:** What documentation can you provide that adds detail to your portfolio overall? This final section contains any relevant artifacts
that might serve as documentation of your skills, abilities, and experiences that warrant your receiving academic credit. Such artifacts might include the following:

- **Written documents**: Brochures, newsletters, reports, letters, and other professional and academic texts
- **Support from colleagues and employers**: Letters of reference, performance evaluations
- **Visual Documents**: Photographs, certificates, PowerPoint presentations, graphs, tables
Grading Criteria

Final grades in English 207 are primarily based on the completion of ALL aspects of the portfolio process within the required timeframe (see weekly deadlines) and the extent to which you have revised your documents to reflect the standards of university-level writing. As part of this process, you are expected to revise based on peer and instructor feedback. Such a process is vital for your success in 207 as well as for your success in requesting academic credit. Failure to participate in this way, in fact, limits the participation and success of others in this online writing community.

Because of this emphasis on participation and revision, you are expected to log in regularly and to post several times per week. In addition, the following weightings for attendance, participation, and written work will apply:

- General Attendance and Participation: **20% of course grade**
- Completion of First Versions for Peer Review: **20% of course grade**
- Final Portfolio: **60 % of course grade**

Assignments will be initially responded to on a holistic basis with the opportunity for you to revise, and the following evaluation criteria will apply: purpose and focus, audience awareness, development, organization, style and grammar, and visual design.

Because these features manifest themselves differently in various genres, we will openly discuss standards and work together as a class to establish a group understanding of such criteria. For instance, how does "organization" change in a resume as opposed to a cover letter? How do proposals rely on headings and sub-headings? How does a PowerPoint presentation call for different forms of style (bulleted phrases as opposed to sentences, etc.)?

A final portfolio grade will be given at the end of the semester, and a course grade will be calculated that is based on class participation (regular virtual attendance, response to others, completion of assignments), growth in written work (see criteria above), and final product quality.

Note also that in addition to the required portfolio documents, there will often be additional in-class writings and exercises designed to help in portfolio preparation and writing improvement. And while this is not a course intended to review grammatical conventions, in the event there is a concept in need of review by the whole class, I may request your review of an url or a section of your own handbook. Otherwise, I shall handle such issues on an individual, as-needed basis and through such technological options as the highlighting feature in Microsoft Word so that you may see problems where they are actually occurring.

Ultimately, I hope we can have an interactive, collaborative learning environment that enables you to achieve both your personal and professional goals.
APPENDIX H: ENGLISH 207 WRITING AND READING DEADLINES

08/26/03  (T) Course Overview Intros/Frequently Asked Questions

09/03/03  (W) Lamdin: Chapters 1 & 2

   Take VARK Learning Styles Inventory

09/10/03  (W) Lamdin: Chapter 3, Appendix C;

   PH, Chap. 3, Drafting, pp. 52-59;

   Review Critical Biography Samples

   Skills Assessment List

09/17/03  (W) Peer Review of Critical Biography;

   PH, Chap. 5, Revision, pp. 85-100.

   1st Version Critical Biography

09/24/03  (W) Review Goals Statement Samples;

   PH, Chap. 4, Paragraphs, pp. 60-84.

   Revision of Critical Biography

10/01/03  (W) Peer Review of Goals Statements;

   PH, Transitions, pp. 74-75, 77-79, 576.

   1st Version of Goals Statements

10/08/03  (W) Lamdin: Chapters 5 & 7

   Assemble Documentation Reminder

   Research Progress Reports

10/15/03  (W) Review Resume Samples;

   Lamdin: Appendices F & G

   Revision of Goals Statements

10/20/03-10/24/03 Virtual Conferences with Cheryl about Progress;
10/22/02  (W) Peer Review of Resume;
    PH, Chap. 10, Design Basics, pp. 188-201; Resumes, pp. 181-185
    1st Version of Resume

10/29/03  (W) Review Course Proposal Request Samples;
    PH, Chap. 9, Writing to Persuade, pp. 162-180
    Revision of Resume

11/05/03  (W) Peer Review of Course Proposal Requests
    1st Version of Course Proposal

11/17/03  (M) Assemble Documentation Reminder;
    Lamdin, Appendix H
    Revision of Course Proposal

12/01-05  (M-F) Arrange F2F or Virtual Conferences with Cheryl
    Prepare PP Presentations;
    1st Version of Portfolio in HC

12/10/03  (W) Virtual Chat: 7-8 p.m.
    Virtual PowerPoint Presentations of Process

12/15/03  (M) **PORTFOLIOS DUE**
    Congratulations and Happy Holidays!
How to Participate in English 207P: Intermediate Writing

Student Roles and Responsibilities

Being an online student requires as much motivation and dedication as being a traditional face-to-face student. The following guidelines are meant to help you succeed in this online version of English 207P:

- Regularly login to the course several times per week and check for announcements, assignment postings, and ongoing bulletin board discussions.

- Expect to spend at least six to eight hours per week on the course. This includes online discussions about documents and topics related to career goals, course objectives, and writing strategies; drafting and mandatory revision of course documents; the reading and research about career paths and the course for which you are attempting to seek credit; and the interactive peer review of work with colleagues and your instructor.

- Devote specific periods of time to the course and block out your calendar for this purpose. Although we do not meet face to face, research has shown that those students who schedule in this way are more consistent in participation and ultimately more successful in an online course. This is true for teachers as well; thus, you can expect to receive responses to email and phone inquiries within almost any 12-24 hour period (and likely sooner), with the exception of weekends and holidays, and other times as announced.

- Don't just disappear. Failure to complete assignments by the deadline, participate in online discussions and virtual/faceto-face conferences with the instructor will negatively impact your success in 207. Life gets in the way for all of us; if you have a personal or professional conflict, communicate with the instructor as soon as possible via private email.

- Determine how you learn best. Some of us learn more effectively through visual aids, or through hands-on training and other forms of applied learning. Others need to listen and hear lectures and discussions, synthesizing ideas in order to apply them. If you are having difficulty with some aspect of the course, the instructor is available via telephone, face-to-face office hours on Wednesdays from 6-9 p.m., or by appointment. Always feel free to ask for help or clarification of assignments, deadlines, and portfolio submission procedures.

- View the class as a writing community of coaches and facilitators. The instructor is a guide, a source of expert information on writing for diverse academic and professional audiences and the use of technology in that process. Others, including you, will also have experiences and have ideas that are useful to the group. Feel free to share, to exchange email and ideas. Your participation is vital to the success of everyone in the course.