COMMON OBSTACLES IN THE DL TEACHING OF BUSINESS WRITING AND TECHNICAL WRITING: A PRACTICAL GUIDE

A thesis submitted to the Kent State University Honors College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for General Honors

by
Jordan Canzonetta
May, 2012
Thesis written by

Jordan Canzonetta

Approved by

___________________________________________, Advisor

___________________________________________, Chair, Department of English

Accepted by

___________________________________________, Dean, Honors College
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...........................................................................................................v

PREFACE ...................................................................................................................................vi

CHAPTER

I. MISCONCEPTIONS, RESISTANCE, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD DL .............................1

II. COURSE DESIGN & QUALITY MATTERS .................................................................11

III. BUILDING INSTRUCTOR INVOLVEMENT IN A DL SETTING ...........................24

IV. DEVELOPING TONE, PERSONA, & PEDAGOGICAL STYLE .................................33

V. ASYNCHRONOUS COLLABORATION .......................................................................38

VI. GROUP STUDY ...............................................................................................................49

VII. PROBLEM-SOLVING: COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS ........................................66

VIII. THE FUTURE OF DISTANCE LEARNING AT KENT STATE UNIVERSITY ............73

IX. THE IMPACT OF DL FOR UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS ........................................82

WORKS CITED ......................................................................................................................87

APPENDIX

1. APPENDIX A—TEAM RESPONSIBILITIES REPORT .............................................90

2. APPENDIX B—WEB COURSE STUDENT PROTOCOLS ......................................93
3. APPENDIX C—GROUP AGREEMENT..................................................96
4. APPENDIX D—COURSE DESIGN....................................................98
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my thesis committee. I deeply respect and admire my committee members for their outstanding scholarship and devotion to their students. These rare qualities are why I carefully and deliberately sought out each member. To Dr. Harvey: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project at such an early stage of its development. I appreciate the encouragement and enthusiasm you have always shown me both in class and outside of it. To Dr. Newman: Thank you for your infallible support and kindness. Without your constant enthusiasm and confidence in me, I would not have pursued Rhetoric and Composition. Your passion for academia has inspired me to further my educational career, for which I am truly grateful. To Prof. Mechenbier: Your generosity and devotion to your students far exceeds my capacity to truly thank you for everything you have done for me. I will never be able to express my gratitude for the knowledge and wisdom you have shared with me. Thank you for being a friend, a mentor, and a true expert of DL. Last, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Dugas. Your confidence in me far exceeded my own understanding of my abilities. I am so grateful that you have pushed me to become a better writer, a better scholar, and a better student. Without your guidance, I would have never reached my full potential as an undergraduate. The person I have become today is a direct result of your mentorship over the past four years. Words cannot express my gratitude for the
time, encouragement, and care you have invested in me. Truly and sincerely, thank you.
Preface

The ever-increasing demand for online university courses has prompted institutions of higher learning to commit resources to determine the best ways to deliver content asynchronously. Kent State University’s Provost, Robert G. Frank, stresses students’ “growing appetite” for online courses: “Students increasingly are telling us that value to them is embodied in the flexibility and convenience offered by distance learning. This growing appetite has stimulated me to commission a rigorous systemwide analysis in preparation for crafting a university distance learning strategy” (Frank). Developing a sound pedagogical method for satisfying the demand for distance learning (DL henceforth) courses is essential to the success of KSU and its students.

According to KSU administration, “Distance learning is growing at an annual rate of 25 percent at U.S. colleges and universities. About 500 institutions of higher education account for two-thirds of the distance learning volume, and public four-year colleges and universities are moving very aggressively” (Frank). Because the need for distribution of course content and legitimate pedagogy is rapidly expanding, Frank mandated Associate Provost for Extended Education, Richard Rubin, to assemble a cross-functioned team to study DL at KSU. That team has “surveyed peer institution activity to discern overall U.S. distance learning patterns. They created an economic model to help us determine where to make investments, considering graduate and undergraduate programs and individual courses. They are examining the impact and costs of technology, researching staffing models and investigating methods to ensure quality of
instruction. They are documenting best practices in building, developing and resourcing distance learning programs. The team's efforts are broad, involving participants at all levels in the university and all colleges.” Universities are investing in research efforts to ensure DL is both pedagogically sound and financially profitable.

Like any new educational-technological innovation, asynchronous teaching is attracting scrutiny from professors, students, and administrators. To better understand these concerns, I have focused my research on problems professors commonly encounter teaching DL courses, paying particular attention to ways experienced DL professors have overcome them. In Teaching Writing Online, Scott Warnock identifies three significant problems professors usually encounter when teaching DL courses: translating one’s teaching style into an effective online persona, communicating online (teacher-student and student-student), and developing appropriately detailed syllabi. What are some of the most effective ways to solve these problems?

My thesis seeks to provide solutions to those problems as they pertain to the DL teaching of Business Writing and Technical Writing. Even seasoned teachers who have proven their effectiveness in traditional classrooms have difficulty creating effective DL teaching personae. I am specifically interested in how this problem affects professors of Business Writing and Technical Writing because those courses—already regarded as cold and demanding in the classroom—seem especially challenging in the DL environment. There are many challenges associated with online communication. According to Mahli Xuan Mechenbier, a professor who teaches these courses at KSU’s Geauga Campus and
Regional Academic Center, not only are there complexities involving professor-student communication, but there are also problems that occur when students are required to use message boards to communicate and collaborate with their colleagues. Collaborative writing, already problematic in traditional classes, becomes a significant challenge in DL classes because students usually (and incorrectly) assume work in DL courses consists of individual papers, and that they will not have to communicate (let alone collaborate) with their colleagues.

Student-professor communication is also challenged when students fail to properly assess and follow the directions on a syllabus. As Mechenbier has experienced, students often misread detailed syllabi, which ultimately leads to confusion and inaccuracy on assignments. Often, these communication barriers frustrate students and professors, which consequently hinder academic progress. In order to fully understand the communication in DL, I enrolled in two asynchronous courses: Professional Business Writing and Technical Writing. My thesis includes my personal experience in each class setting and explains my methods for eliminating problems that occurred.

The process of researching and writing this thesis has given me a firm grounding in the pedagogical struggles professors encounter when developing, teaching, and assessing DL courses. Through careful observation, research, and practice, I have acquired the skills that will hopefully enable me, an aspirant professor, to succeed in the DL environment. To maximize students’ learning experience, professors must be aware of the practical problems that exist with DL education in order to develop solutions that
will best serve students. My passion for teaching has prompted me to write this thesis so I can teach DL effectively to students. DL is the future of higher education. Through this experience, I have enhanced my own skills as a teacher-scholar, which I hope will aid me in fostering the best educational experience for my future students. My desire for this guide is that it will offer practical assistance to those endeavoring to teach asynchronously.
I. Misconceptions, Resistance, and Attitudes toward DL

Misconceptions about DL stem from it being a relatively new method of pedagogical delivery. Before instructing a DL course, an inexperienced asynchronous instructor needs to understand current attitudes about this new pedagogical innovation. Professors should know that students, administrators, and faculty alike are scrutinizing DL. Some doubt the pedagogical legitimacy of DL. Others criticize universities that adopt this method of education solely for profit. These examples are only two of many criticisms DL has been subjected to across the spectrum. As an introduction to this thesis, this chapter will discuss student, administrative, and faculty attitudes toward DL.

During my first semester as a student in DL course, many of my own misconceptions about the practice were disproved. Prior to beginning my final two years at KSU, I believed most of the students enrolled in DL courses were graduate students who were aiming to earn their master’s degrees. After DL began to gain more popularity at KSU, I noticed several of my undergraduate peers enrolling in DL courses. When I joined my peers, I realized most of the people in my DL classes were all working toward earning their undergraduate degrees. Even more shocking to me was the realization that many DL students have full-time jobs, families, and other obligations.

Since I became involved in DL, the marketing techniques have changed to target a variety of demographics. Many commercials advertising DL depict it as a “convenient” and “easy” way for students to obtain degrees at their own paces. Such ads promote the commonly held fallacy about DL: that DL classes are easier than face-to-face (f2f
henceforth) courses. A recently aired commercial for <educationconnection.com> features a young woman lying on her bed wearing pajamas typing away on her laptop, deciding the best method of earning a college degree. In order to effectively appeal to a younger demographic (for whom “best” means “easiest” and/or “most comfortable”) the actress says, “I love learning new things in my pajamas . . . and I’m not the only one!” The same company produces another commercial with another young woman, also in pajamas, who informs the audience “Thousands of people go to college in their pajamas every day! Using your computer to get an online degree is really smart and easy!” (<educationconnection.com>).

Although few people would accept the claims such ads make, the nonchalant way companies depict online classes contributes to the popular misconception of DL. Companies underscoring accessibility produce commercials that send an “it’s casual and easy” message to the audience. For instance, the targeted audience (the students) could interpret “easy” as describing the course work instead of addressing the convenience of the delivery. Despite the non-traditional environment of DL, classes are still taught by college professors according to university standards.

Media is not the only influential force forming and altering perceptions of online classes. Peer influence often affects the way students perceive the courses they take. I have relied on the opinions and experiences of upperclassmen to guide my choices in taking live classes throughout my undergraduate career. In fall of 2011, an academic English Club I belonged to hosted a forum in which students could attend the regular scheduled meeting to discuss professors and classes. Many upperclassmen offered
insights that influenced the first year students’ decisions about which classes to take. At the meeting, many freshmen expressed curiosity about enrolling in online courses. Unlike f2f classes, the upperclassmen who had taken online courses had strongly opposing opinions about whether underclassmen should take such classes.

One student, who was a member of the KSU Honors College, preferred online classes because they enabled her to maintain her afternoon job. She explained that she thrived in the online environment because she worked independently and preferred to learn on her own rather than in a traditional lecture setting.

Another student who had also taken the same online course the prior semester strongly disagreed. He claimed that online courses were more difficult for less independent students. He disliked online courses because he felt they required much more reading, time, and effort than f2f classes did.

Although these students had varying opinions, many of the students who were DL curious were influenced by the opinions of the upperclassmen. Because the first student used words like “independent” and “convenient,” she appealed to students who were curious about the class. The second student did not appeal to the underclassmen because, although he was honest, many younger students disliked thinking of themselves as “dependent” learners.

As freshmen with recently discovered freedom, new college students often rebel against anything that implies they are not wholly independent. Because the first student was more independent and positive about DL, students listened to her advice. However, one senior Honors student’s perception of DL (i.e. “online classes are easy”) does not
make the coursework any less difficult for new students who are unfamiliar with expectations of professors. Although freshmen may adjust to the requirements of their professors, academic independence may not develop until later in their collegiate careers.

As well, most students do not realize the same amount of work and participation is required to achieve a high grade in a DL class as in its f2f counterpart. Essentially, a professor is adapting her lectures, assignments, syllabus, and exams to accommodate an asynchronous delivery platform. The material remains as challenging as it would be in a live environment; the way the content is distributed is the only difference.

Students do not always recognize the difficulty associated with understanding material distributed through the internet. If a particular assignment is challenging, students cannot instantly raise a hand to ask the professor to clarify its requirements. Without meeting live for 150 minutes a week, students are not reminded to turn in assignments or check the syllabus. If students are not independently motivated to check the course site on a daily basis, they often neglect assignments or ignore group work that is crucial to their success in the class. If students wait until the last minute to start assignments, they deprive themselves of many opportunities to ask the professor for help with the assignment if they do not understand something that is unclear. The standard of the f2f university class still exists, especially with a course or instructor (each is certified separately) that has been certified by Quality Matters.

Despite the flexibility enabled by asynchronous distribution, students are still required to participate in the designated amount of class time (450 minutes per week) for which they are registered. Even if a student is not exclusively enrolled in online classes,
she could be taking a full course load of fifteen hours, working a full-time job, and taking three hours of online classwork. In a situation like this (common for many DL students), the student fails to realize how online class requires just as much time as a f2f class that is credited to her schedule (Mehcenbier “Student Behavior”). Often, students enroll in DL courses in order to graduate on time. For instance, one of my writing students (who was receiving tutoring at KSU’s Academic Success Center) enrolled in an online course to avoid taking another semester to complete his degree. He admitted to me several times he could not learn anything valuable in class because the way he learned was not compatible with online pedagogy. Because of his dyslexia, he preferred one-on-one communication and interaction with his professors. In his DL class, he was required to watch videos each week and submit an assignment that was assigned from a PowerPoint presentation his professor uploaded. Each week I worked with him, we spent the first half hour just reading the course material together. Because he was not a self-motivated learner, I had to explain each assignment to him in detail and clarify ambiguities in the PowerPoint. This student had questions about every assignment, but he did not feel comfortable asking his professor for help because she was “unreachable.” Because he was registered with Student Accessibility Services, he was granted extra time to submit assignments. However, because he had an assignment due every week (not to mention readings, PowerPoints, and quizzes that were due on Vista), he fell behind and became overwhelmed.

Had he been in a typical live class, he would have spent 75 minutes of class time taking quizzes, reading PowerPoints, and asking his professor and peers about his
assignments. Because he had no interaction with other students (his professor did not require student-to-student communication), and because his professor was “inattentive,” he did not have the advantage of instant synchronous interaction to propel him forward. These factors, combined with his dependence on the teacher and his lack of self-motivation, made him incompatible with DL. His organizational skills were inadequate, and because he learned best through discussion, he struggled in the DL environment.

Although he was an average student in his live classes, he had to struggle to pass in DL. DL was not a sound delivery system for this student, but he felt as though he had no other option because he wanted to graduate on time (additionally, this student was working a part-time job and taking eighteen credit hours of class to finish his degree).

Another student misconception about DL stems from student perceptions regarding how much time should be invested in DL classes. Some students, though independently motivated, take full course loads of online class to speed graduation. Imagine a student enrolled in only online classes who is working a full-time job. If she were taking fifteen hours of live coursework, and each class met for an hour and fifteen minutes twice a week, she would be physically present in class for eleven and a half hours weekly. Further, for every hour of “in-class” time, a student is expected to study preparatory material for at least two hours. If she were unable to dedicate that much time to her computer every week, she should not enroll in a full course load of online classes.

Not only does a student enrolled in DL have to be conscious of time, but she also has to understand the workload expectations of a DL course. Without having the instant communication with a professor during class, students have to read DL syllabi more
carefully than they do f2f syllabi. DL classes are time consuming—a fact that seems to elude many prospective DL students.

Another misconception about DL courses is that they do not require collaborative work. In my Business Writing class, there was a great deal of group work that I did not expect to have in an online class, which accounted for 56 percent of my total grade (Mechenbier “Syllabus”). Because all of my group members were older adults, they all had families, jobs, and other classes to attend. These restrictions meant the only time my group was able to get together for a Wimba chat session was every Monday at 8pm.

We spent a great deal of time discussing other projects and difficulties we were facing in class. Because we did not have actual class time together, we had to fit a substantial amount of information into chat sessions. These meetings lasted much longer than group meetings for live classes because there was almost no student-to-student interaction during the week. Group work in DL is more difficult than in live classes because of the communication barriers imposed by the delivery method and type of students who take DL classes. At that time, I did not realize group work was essential to teaching a successful Business Writing or Technical Writing class. Over the course of the semester, I understood that asynchronous group work in these classes was preparing me to work with a diverse group of people that I might encounter in the workforce one day. For example, in corporate America, an employee will be expected to collaborate with a colleague based at an overseas office. The diversity of DL benefits students by introducing them non-traditional colleagues, which is a more accurate representation of future workforce environments.
Having reviewed some of the misconceptions students have when enrolling in DL, I will now explain why faulty and administration also have preconceived notions and sour attitudes about DL. Jane Blakelock surveyed professors across the nation about their feelings on DL and about their thoughts concerning administrative attitudes toward DL pedagogy. Blakelock concludes that

The resistance to online learning seems to be lessening, under certain circumstances. ‘Five years ago, my university decided not to get into the business of offering courses online. About three years ago, administrators did an about-face. I think they became aware that quality online courses could be developed, and could prove financially as well as pedagogically viable.’  (143)

Despite initial apprehension, most of Blakelock’s research shows that administrations are accepting DL more and more. Hesitation to participate in DL stemmed from misconceptions about poor quality of educational distribution. However, as DL (what Blakelock refers to as “DE”) grows, administrators are beginning to realize it is not merely an educational fad, but a long-term pedagogical tool:

A recent study commissioned by the Sloan Consortium cited the following results: When administrators in higher education were presented with the statement, ‘Online education is critical to long-term strategy,’ 66.8% were in agreement; 12.7% were neutral; and 19.5% disagreed. When these same administrators were asked to compare quality between online and f2f
courses, 12.3% felt it to be superior; 44.9% found it the same; and 42.8% perceived it to be inferior. (Allen & Seaman, 2003)

Despite increased acceptance of DL among administrators, Blakelock posits that quality is still an “area of skepticism” (143).

According to Blakelock, six percent of professors encountered “extreme opposition” from administration. These rare cases involved administrators who refused to even look at the faculty members’ course designs. However, DL is gaining acceptance as administrators realize its importance for future higher education: “One notable area of change seems to be the recognition that online learning is not a trend and is certain to be an integral part of higher education for years to come. Several faculty report that administrators who previously ignored DL are now giving it their attention and support” (Blakelock 144).

Like administrators, faculty members are gradually accepting DL because they recognize its potential longevity in higher education. Professors share many of the common misconceptions students do. One of Blakelock’s interviewees stated that certain faculty members at his university view DL as a means of escaping pedagogical responsibility. Other concerns faculty members have posited include technological difficulties, course quality, students perceiving class as an “easy A,” and general anxieties about opposition within departments (Blakelock 143).

Educating instructors about DL will do much to eliminate apprehensions about quality, pedagogy, and effectiveness of online education:
With the exception of the additional work involved for an online course, much of the resistance to online learning seemed to be rooted in misconception and lack of knowledge about DL. As with administrators, when faculty began to familiarize themselves with online courses, their resistance began to break down. (Blakelock 144)

As departments provide more statistical evidence for DL’s effectiveness, faculty members’ anxiety dwindles.

Because DL delivery is relatively new, a certain trepidation accompanies it. However, I hope to provide a useful instructional guide that will benefit and educate aspirant DL instructors. As new information is provided for educators, misconceptions about DL can be eliminated, and the pedagogy can become accepted as a valuable means of instruction.
II. Course Design & Quality Matters

As mentioned previously, more and more professors are accepting DL, even though more faculty members are hesitant to actually teach DL courses (Blakelock 144). Blakelock’s research offers an explanation to this anomaly:

Stagnated growth of online learning seemed to be a common theme among our respondents. Many of them cited situations where colleagues are supportive of the online teaching in their departments, but have no desire to engage in it themselves. ‘The number of faculty going online seems to have stalled. The amount of work these classes require for both development and delivery may be why.’ (144)

To put the matter baldly, many professors do not want to teach DL courses because of the heavy workload doing so requires.

Regarding professors’ apprehensions, I need to address concerns regarding actual course design and delivery. Blakelock’s survey shows that many professors are hesitant to participate in DL courses because of the technological complexities of design (154). If a professor feels uncomfortable with delivering a course entirely asynchronously, there is the hybrid option. According to Warnock, hybrid courses are defined as courses that “are taught half f2f and half online, although other proportions exist; in a hybrid course, you might meet your students for ninety minutes on Tuesday, and then on Thursday they would work in an online environment” (207). Essentially, this type of course allows a professor to lecture live and submit all course materials through the course management
system (CMS). Such a course can be a useful stepping stone to help professors ease into completely asynchronous courses. In a hybrid course, a professor can familiarize herself with the technology of the CMS as she works to gradually adapt her live persona into a successful online personality.

The demands of teaching an entirely DL course are greater than teaching a hybrid course because the former demands content delivery through the actual website. After spending three semesters researching and observing DL courses, I believe the most effective way to handle the technological component of DL is by following this rule: keep it simple. Warnock states it best when he writes, “Don’t be any more complicated technologically than you have to be. The foundation of your class, even in the most high-tech environment, is still your own personal teaching ability and imagination. Build from that as you investigate the many tools that can help you teach online” (19).

Both Warnock and Mechenbier agree that the simplest way of controlling technology in an online system is by learning and operating within the university’s CMS. Bringing in too early (if ever) other tools such as Wiki, Skype, or web chat can unnecessarily complicate things.

There are real advantages to managing content solely through the campus’s CMS system that are not provided by outside sources. First, a university’s CMS system keeps all of the course content in one place. At KSU, the CMS is Blackboard VISTA. This platform enables professors to limit classroom conversation to message boards, emails, Wimba, and chat, all of which is monitored through a central site. Instead of leaving a webpage to various links or wiki pages, all the course content is available to students via
the CMS. In an online setting where students do not have the luxury of a live professor, this technique helps eliminate confusion and does not overwhelm the student with too many options, tools, and browsers.

Perhaps the most advantageous feature of Blackboard VISTA is its documentation capabilities. In DL, students often misinterpret each other’s tone, which inevitably leads to “he said, she said” debates that professors then have to resolve. Similarly, students also misinterpret a professor’s tone. If a professor limits student communication to the CMS, every student interaction is recorded. Limiting communication to the CMS ensures both students and instructors are protected by FERPA—an advantage Googledocs, Skype, and IM cannot provide. The professor has access to student emails, message boards, and group discussion. Should an argument arise, there can be no disputing who said what because the professor has complete access to every documented student communication.

Last, the CMS familiarizes professors with online classrooms. If a professor consistently uses the CMS, she will gain a familiarity with the programs and become more comfortable with the technology available. The more experience she has with the system, the more accurately she will be able to determine the best pedagogical methods of teaching her students through DL.

Used correctly, technology in a DL setting can be a professor’s most helpful pedagogical tool; it should not present a threat or create insecurities because technological tools can be safeguards that eliminate asynchronous tension in the classroom. CMS systems offer real-time tools such as Wimba and VISTA chat that allow professors to interact with students synchronously in an asynchronous setting. For first-
time DL professors, these tools can alleviate pedagogical anxieties as they assist the instructor in supervising student communication.

Even more critical to success is the correct management of course content and design. First-time DL teachers should not underestimate the importance of clarity and structural organization. Warnock’s first guideline stresses this:

Don’t underestimate the importance of being organized in the online teaching environment. Before you teach online for the first time, make sure your files and folder systems reflect the kind of structure you want for the class and allow you to use student texts to good advantage throughout the course. (51)

In an online course, the professor sets the standard for student’s writing, tone, and behavior (Mechenbier “Student Behavior”). If a professor is disorganized and unclear, her students will follow her example. Disorganization simply equals chaos; DL is entirely unforgiving of vagueness and mess.

One of my major interests in researching DL was effective organizational techniques. Because the entirety of DL course content is distributed through the CMS, how can a professor distribute the material while avoiding inundating students with information? As a student, I would not want to receive an entire semester’s worth of lectures and notes on the first day of class; I would not know what to do with it. Warnock and Mechenbier both offer an organizational technique that breaks down content distribution into weekly increments. Warnock explains, “A simple organization plan for students, such as a Weekly Plan, can go a long way toward helping them stay on track in
the course” (55). In an online setting, certain students would be tempted to begin working on several projects simultaneously if the professor does not moderate the pace. Throwing too much material at students can overwhelm them, which decreases the pedagogical effectiveness of the course. Students will not learn well if they are overwhelmed or are simply aiming to complete projects without understanding the purpose of the assignment.

Too little information similarly impedes student learning if a professor does not permit students enough time to complete projects. Many students fail to check the site regularly owing to full-time jobs, families, etc. These students may require more time to complete projects than traditional students: here, a well-developed syllabus is necessary. If a professor plans assignments in advance and shares due dates, students can plan to devote sufficient time to an assignment. Typically, posting the handout for the assignment a week in advance provides students with ample time to complete projects. A professor must use her discretion based on the nature of the assignment (*i.e.*, do not give students one week to work on a Formal Report worth 50% of their grades).

I found the weekly method of organization most beneficial in the online courses I took: the syllabus indicated due dates, but it did not overwhelm me with too much information. Mechenbier successfully employed this technique in her Business Writing and Technical Writing classes. She gave students extra time with bigger projects, and they always knew what to expect on a weekly basis. This method is beneficial for the professor, too, because it keeps her connected with the material she distributes to her students.
Warnock’s guidelines are helpful because most are based on his considerable personal experience as a DL professor. His research is beneficial to first-time DL professors because he explains basic steps to avoid DL blunders. For more seasoned professors, there is another source, Quality Matters (QM), that provides detailed outlines that guarantee quality assurance concerning DL course design.

**Quality Matters Standards**

What is Quality Matters and why should a professor participate in its workshops? In the spring of 2011, I attended a day-long Quality Matters seminar in order to receive my QM Level 1 certification (Applying the Quality Matters Rubric). Quality Matters (QM) is one of America’s leaders in quality assurance for online education that is the DL quality standard here at KSU. This program accredits (and thus ensures the quality of) DL courses based on a system of peer review. Peer reviewers strictly evaluate course design according to the nationally recognized QM Rubric.

According to qualitymatters.org, the QM mission is:

- To promote and improve the quality of online education and student learning through:
  1. Development of research-supported, best practice-based quality standards and appropriate evaluation tools and procedures.
  2. Recognition as experts in online education quality assurance and evaluation.
  3. Fostering institutional acceptance and integration of QM standards and processes into organizational improvement efforts focused on improving the quality of online education.
4. Provision of faculty development training in the use of QM rubric(s) and other quality practices to improve the quality of online/hybrid courses.

5. Provision of quality assurance through the recognition of quality in online education.

Thus, QM’s ideals and goals are to determine the effectiveness of a course design through peer-editing, extensive research, and standards that align with the QM Rubric.

QM was developed to be “a replicable pathway for inter-institutional quality assurance and course improvements in online learning” for the state of Maryland (Green). Although QM’s initial three-year FIPSE grant ended in 2006, the program has generated sufficient revenue since to become self-sustaining through subscriptions and service fees for over “120 subscribers across 30+ states” (Green). Over the last four years, QM has become a national force at the forefront of certifying and accrediting excellent quality in course design.

The QM Rubric is one of the most valuable assets the program possesses because it establishes the criteria for accreditation and certification. It is based on “National standards of best practice, research literature and instructional design principles” (Green). Serving as a key component of the program’s success, its adaptability changes with the demands of DL course design. As the program states, “The QM Rubric is a dynamic document that changes as our collective understanding of online learning grows, and as the research literature provides new information on the factors that impact online learning” (Green). Because the rubric evolves to suit the needs of DL course design, it
has led to the success and legitimization of QM as a nationally accepted and respected certification program.

QM is concerned exclusively with course design and layout. In order to earn QM approval, a course must first be subjected to peer-reviewing under the qualifications and requirements of the rubric. QM peer-reviewers are required to be experienced asynchronous instructors. After an instructor has been certified with QM Level 1 (APPQMR) training and has taught one DL course, she can opt to obtain QM Level 2 (PRC) certification, which qualifies her as a Peer Reviewer.

In QM’s formal review process, three reviewers analyze course design with a course developer (Green). In the grading process, courses must align with “17 essential standards and receive a total score of at least 72 points” to qualify for QM accreditation. If the course under review does not receive 72 points, the reviewers will not accredit the course. Therefore, all of the three-point essential standards must be met. In applying the rubric, the “essential” standards must be met incontrovertibly: one reason why QM is nationally recognized. When a course is being reviewed, the “essential standards” are “all or nothing.” The rubric allows no middleground when scoring—the component of the course being reviewed is either awarded three points or zero points. There is absolutely no flexibility when determining if the “essential standards” have been met because they are critical to successful course design—partial credit (in the form of one or two points) cannot be awarded. Examples of these standards include critical foundational requirements of running on online course successfully. Here are some sample “essential standards”: 
1.1 “Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components” (2).

2.1 “The course learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable” (4).

3.1 “The types of assessments selected measure the stated learning objectives and are consistent with course activities and resources” (6).

Although example 1.1 seems rudimentary for DL success, not all instructors have a clear indication of where beginning materials are located on the site. Examples 2.1 and 3.1 are unique in that they specifically refer to alignment. Learning objectives must align or match measurable outcomes. In example 3.1, the course “assessments” must align or match the learning objectives and assignments.

As mentioned, reviewers must have QM Level 2 (PRC) certification to peer-review a course. Reviews are impartial and analyze a course’s design solely in accordance with the QM Rubric, not with personal standards. QM has developed an effective peer-reviewing system that guarantees objectivity and quality assessment of asynchronous course design.

Embracing the QM Rubric and distributing it to DL instructors provides an educational opportunity to decrease instructors’ anxieties about course design. Although the QM program does not address the efficacy or quality of course content, it provides a means of assessing and improving the functionality of the course as a whole. In turn, this improves instructor organization and distribution of course content, thereby making a DL classroom more conducive to student-focused successful learning. If universities actively collaborate to improve online courses, a new standard could be formed to which all
asynchronous classes would be held. Having a course peer evaluated by QM reviewers bolsters the perceived validity of online classes.

If a course meets “general standards,” QM accredits it as a quality class. Key elements of the QM rubric that peer editors use to decide the quality of each course designs include the following eight requirements:

1. *The overall design of the course is made clear to the student at the beginning of the course* (QM Rubric 2). This standard concerns overall clarity in DL courses. Is the purpose of the course clear to the student? Is class etiquette established? Does the professor clearly state what she expects her student to do and learn? Are the introductory materials easily identified? Has an appropriate place for introduction of both students and professor been established?

2. *Learning objectives are clearly stated and explained. They assist students in focusing their effort in the course* (QM Rubric 4). The learning objectives section focuses on the alignment of learning objectives that “are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives” (QM Rubric 6). Questions peer-editors pose about learning objectives are whether these are easily understood from the “student perspective,” and if expectations are suitable for the course. Learning objectives should be constructed to reflect student outcomes by using active verbs such as: “recognize,” “demonstrate,” “formulate,” “conclude,” etc. This language helps students comprehend what is expected of them, as well as focus on the skills they should be strengthening through the coursework.
3. **Assessment strategies use established ways to measure effective learning, evaluate student progress by reference to stated learning objectives, and are designed to be integral to the learning process** (QM Rubric 6). This standard asks peer reviewers to establish whether the “assessments selected measure the stated learning objectives and are consistent with course activities and resources” (QM Rubric 6). Do the assignments allow students to demonstrate the learning objectives of the course? For instance, if the objective of Technical Writing is to learn to write concisely, an assignment asking students to write a creative writing piece does not allow them to demonstrate their knowledge of the subject material.

4. **Instructional materials are sufficiently comprehensive to achieve stated course objectives and learning outcomes and are prepared by qualified persons competent in their fields.** This “general standard” asks reviewers to consider if the resources and materials are appropriately aligned. Are the assignments and projects correlated with the professor’s instructions? Is the language clear about how each activity relates to its learning objectives?

5. **Meaningful interaction between the instructor and students, among students, and between students and course materials is employed to motivate students and foster intellectual commitment and personal development** (QM Rubric 10). This standard concerns how the course allows students to interact with other students and the instructor. Are the means of communication and interaction conducive to student learning? Does the professor clearly state her policy on participation (e.g.,
mandatory or voluntary)? Does the professor set “clear standards for instructor responsiveness and availability (turn-around time for email, grade posting, etc.).”

6. Course navigation and the technology employed in the course foster student engagement and ensure access to instructional materials and resources (QM Rubric 12). This standard concerns whether a course is effectively using the available technological tools to align with the learning objectives of class. Are message boards being properly used to demonstrate “active student learning”? Is navigating the course’s site “logical, consistent, and efficient”? Are the instructions on accessing the technology needed for class clear and understandable?

7. The course facilitates student access to institutional services essential to student success (QM Rubric 14). The learner support standard asks reviewers to consider whether instructions are clearly explained for technical support. How will the student benefit from the university’s student services? Does the instructor provide “basic questions related to research, writing, technology, etc., or link to tutorials or other resources that provide the information?”

8. The face-to-face and online course components are accessible to all students. Last, the accessibility standard evaluates whether the content is easily accessed visually and audibly for students. Are there clear alternatives for students with special needs?

Why should an instructor become QM certified? Being accredited boosts both a professor’s credibility as well as the credibility of her university. Aspirant DL instructors
can learn valuable information about course design, which benefits both their
departments and students. As I mentioned, the increasing demand for DL is raising
concerns from professors, students, and administrators regarding sound pedagogy.
Accreditation such as that offered by QM assuages these concerns. With demand
increasing for legitimate asynchronous courses, universities must embrace methods of
designing quality online classes for students. Quality Matters offers one solution
regarding respectable and sound certification that deems web design valid based on its
qualifications and standards that align with the Quality Matters Rubric. A professional
who integrates these standards into her DL course design will significantly enhance the
soundness of her course, thereby improving the outcomes for her students.

The Design

QM organizes the course so that the learning objectives align with assignments
and so that students have consistency within each learning module week by week. QM
strives to ensure each course is interactive and engaging. Quality courses can dispel
misconceptions about DL being based solely on “traditional correspondence.” This kind
of misconception stems from the belief that DL courses require no group work or
discussion because they are perceived as “traditional correspondence courses.” What this
myth means is that DL is comprised of a perfunctory “send material, do assignment,
repeat” process. Students in this type of setting do not retain the material they learn (or do
not learn). QM aims to encourage activity and interaction within the course to provide
sound pedagogy for asynchronous environments.
III. Building Instructor Involvement in a DL Setting

Achieving the appropriate level of instructor engagement is critical to running a pedagogically sound DL course. Because an instructor cannot interact with her students in real time, she must compensate for the lack of f2f interaction by participating in group discussion boards, workshopping sessions, and individual student consultations. Many students perceive DL courses as disengaged and impersonal because the courses are asynchronous. DL instructors can dispel this perception by overseeing, interacting with, and engaging in every aspect of student communication and participation in the classroom.

How can an online instructor avoid being too lax or too meddlesome? What is the appropriate level of instructor involvement in DL courses? First, the instructor must understand that the importance of her presence in the course as an asynchronous entity is vital to the course’s success (Mechenbier “Professor Involvement”). DL professors must accept that online learning requires a different skill set and pedagogy than traditional f2f courses. Vanessa Dennen stresses the importance of adapting live pedagogical skills for DL pedagogy: “All aspects of class discussion—initiation, facilitation, conclusion, and feedback—require different approaches when an asynchronous medium is used. Instructors must account for the fact that they are not in the presence of live students, able to gauge reactions, and make small adjustments on the spot on an as-needed basis” (128). DL is not synchronous; therefore, a professor must actively make her presence known throughout the entirety of the course by “initiation, facilitation, conclusion, and
feedback.” Because she is not physically standing in front of her students, she must consistently adhere to personal guidelines and adjust to the needs of students as problems arise if she is hoping for success in DL.

In the fall of 2011, I observed Mechenbier’s Business Writing class. There, I noticed several successful techniques she used to maintain an appropriate level of professor engagement with students. I recommend these because they allow students to function independently as they provide additional support for those who require more attention.

The first technique I noticed was the “in class” schedule Mechenbier made for herself. In the “Introductory Materials” folder Mechenbier created, she uploaded a document that stated she would be online twice daily: once at 9:00am, and once at 8:00pm. Essentially, this replaced f2f office hours. This promise told students that if they had questions that needed to be answered prior to the due date of an assignment, there were designated times she would be online to answer questions or emails. Mechenbier’s strict policy and consistent following of it reassured students they could always rely on her “presence” two times a day. This method is simple and efficient because it reassures students a professor is available and engaged, but also is not overbearing and disruptive to student progress. It also avoids questions such as “where is she?” because students of the texting generation often expect an immediate response.

Another learning object (a phrase Warnock introduces to describe “A set of rules that a CMS uses to packages learning materials in a way that allows them to be transferred”) Mechenbier employs to improve asynchronous communication is her use of
several real-time applications offered by VISTA (209). Mechenbier is on the website twice daily; however, the asynchronous qualities of this method are more impersonal than real-time communication. If I submitted a question to her at 11:00pm—according to the standards of her “in class” schedule—I typically received a response the following morning at 9:00am. Although this method of communication is acceptable, students do not actually receive immediate responses from Mechenbier.

In f2f classes, student questions often trigger responses and discussions from other students as well as from the professor. Pedagogically, students and the professor benefit because of the immediate interaction and discussion that can lead to a deeper understanding of the material. Because student-professor communication is primarily executed through messages in DL courses, the verbal stimulation and engagement that prompts learning in f2f classes is lost through messaging that is not in real-time. However, there is a solution that diminishes the asynchronous barrier: real-time conferences between student and professor via technology provided through VISTA. Mechenbier uses VISTA programs like Wimba Conference Chat, Wimba Video Chat, and Vista Chat to hold real-time meetings with her students in her Business Writing and Technical Writing courses. This enables students to ask her questions to which they receive immediate responses.

Despite students’ inability to experience the professor’s body language first-hand, hearing the professor’s voice or observing her facial expressions provides a sense of physicality and realness that discussion boards cannot supply (Mehenbier “Physicality and Facial Expression”). This was beneficial because students were able to immediately
eliminate most confusion about assignments or course protocol because the professor was as close to “being there” as is possible in a DL context.

Although real-time meetings are beneficial for students who need conversational interaction with an instructor, other students enroll in DL courses because their schedules limit them to asynchronous communication. For independent students who have general concerns and prefer minimal interaction with the professor, Mechenbier employs discussion boards to answer frequently asked questions (FAQs). In both her Business Writing and Technical Writing courses, Mechenbier labels a discussion board as “Questions for Prof. M,” that is visible to the entire class. This is helpful for students who, for whatever reason, do not set up a real-time meetings with their instructor. In both f2f and DL classes, several students will ask the same question during class. Students do not have the opportunity to listen to discussion in a DL course, but they can read other students’ questions to the professor on the discussion board. As Dennen states, “If an instructor were to post a question with one clear, expected answer on a discussion board, there would be little use for multiple students to reply once the correct answer was given” (129). This decreases the need to email the professor, and it presents an opportunity for students to build a sense of community in the classroom through discussion.

Open discussion boards encourage students to participate and interact with each other, but few students are likely to participate in discussion if such work is not required. In Mechenbier’s Fall 2011 Business Writing class, over 3,087 messages were posted on the class site for group projects, workshopping, etc., in the first twelve weeks, but there were only 23 messages in the folder labeled “Questions for Prof. M.” In the folder
labeled “Questions for Classmates,” there were zero messages posted. In a three-week intersession Technical Writing class, out of 551 total messages, the “Questions for Prof. M” folder only contained 31 messages, while the “Questions for Classmates” contained only two. Clearly, the majority of posts and conversations were occurring within group discussions and workshopping boards. In these DL settings, students simply did not do work that was not required for point value toward their final grades.

Workshopping is the last and most effective instructor involvement technique Mechenbier uses in her online writing courses. Workshopping is a DL professor’s most reliable and consistent method of communicating with her students. If discussion boards go well, they encourage students to interact and develop a sense of classroom. As Dennen observes, “If a discussion question allowed for multiple perspectives to be presented, supported, and argued, there is greater opportunity for students to engage in the activity” (129). Workshopping encourages involvement by requiring students to edit one another’s papers. It also presents an instructor with an opportunity to directly give her students feedback. Because Mechenbier’s grading rubric requires students to workshop in order to earn a high letter grade, students participated far more frequently on the workshopping discussion boards. This interaction substitutes for one-on-one conferences a professor must have with her student because it enables her to make corrections and offer suggestions.

Workshopping allows Mechenbier to join discussions between students and to edit each student’s assignment. Because Mechenbier requires this form of communication, each student is compelled to interact with her for every assignment. This
keeps Mechenbier engaged in each student’s progress and helps her tailor her pedagogy to every student’s needs.

As important as teacher-student interaction is, instructors must avoid becoming overbearing and omnipresent. Although overengagement is less common than underengagement, it is still a salient pedagogical concern. This is a common obstacle in DL; professors are more likely to adopt pedagogical extremes in DL classes than in f2f courses because student interaction is limited to messaging. The key to running a successful DL course is consistent instructor involvement that is balanced, non-threatening, and supportive.

In a f2f class, students are constantly aware of the professor’s presence because she is physically present. Two or three times a week, students interact with their professor by asking questions, listening to lectures, and taking quizzes. If a student in a live class misses a due date, he can refer to his printed syllabus, ask his classmates, or ask his professor about the assignment. My experiences as a student and as an observer of DL courses indicates that many students struggle to even sign on to the site on a daily or weekly basis. Because students spend so little time on the site, and because the professor’s presence is confined exclusively to the site, some students view the instructor as a computer or mechanized tool whose sole function is to grade papers and post assignments.

Underengaged professors elicit underengaged student participation (Warnock 5). If an instructor fails to assert her authority and presence at the class’s inception, students will typically disregard later attempts to encourage participation. Warnock refers to this
negligence as a “voice” that he labels as the “apathetic drone” (5). He writes, “Although they don’t need your constant presence to have good conversations . . . if you are clearly detached, their posts and class writing will reflect that” (5).

Although I agree with Warnock, he fails to stress the way the “apathetic drone” can impede learning. Mechenbier taught me that course management systems (CMSs) like VISTA offer a SCORM (Sharable Content Object Reference Model) feature (refer to Appendix D for visual representation). This tool enables a professor to “copy and paste” previous online courses she has taught with current rosters (“Professor Involvement”). To be clear, Warnock defines this tool as “A set of rules that a CMS uses to packages learning materials in a way that allows them to be transferred” (209). This means if Mechenbier were to opt to construct a section of Business Writing in fall of 2012, she would have the option to upload—in its entirety—every document she created for Business Writing in fall of 2011. In cases of instructor laziness, this feature would enable professor underinvolvement in class. In our interview, Mechenbier explained the dangers of instructor disengagement:

If you upload the same course without checking your documents, you’re going to submit something with a wrong date. Not only does this weaken your credibility with your students, but you’re in danger of becoming complacent and disengaged with your class. After the first five weeks, the course is capable of running itself, so it is tempting to be less involved. I like to submit my assignments weekly so I am updated on what my students are doing. (“Professor Involvement”)
If a professor is not updating assignments weekly, she not only loses connection to the material she distributes her students, but also creates an apathetic persona that detracts from student success. Because everything in a DL course is documented in writing, instructor typos or errors are detrimental because they are verbally equivalent to a solecism like “I seen you down at the store.” If the instructor expects students to be attentive to submission guidelines and due dates, she is also held to the same standard.

The f2f equivalent of the “apathetic drone” in a live instructor is hard to imagine. This would be comparable to a live professor who attended only the first day of class and distributed the entire contents of the course. She would not lecture, proctor exams, or lead class discussions. Rather, she would attend class only on days assignments were due, and then only to grade the papers. Would this professor be an adequate educator? Such behavior would be considered unacceptable in synchronous courses, and those standards should also apply to DL courses.

The solution to this problem is not, as Warnock suggests, to maintain a presence in every aspect of student participation. Omnipresent instructors are also problematic. In one of Mechenbier’s 15-week Business Writing classes, students and instructor posted over 3,600 messages by the eleventh week. Students had not yet started on the Formal Report, which was the assignment that required the most communication between the groups and the professor. As mentioned above, during an intersession course for Technical Writing that only lasted three weeks, there was a combined total of 551 messages. These numbers for both courses do not include emails, group meetings, and chat sessions. In addition to reading a high volume of messages, the professor has the
ability to monitor every action, login, and post of each student, which is tedious and time consuming. If the instructor intervenes in this way, she becomes officious and intrusive, which both disturbs students and inhibits their success. Being overly involved is detrimental and stressful for the professor and students alike (Mechenbier “Professor Involvement”).

However, just as in a live class, there are certain situations that demand professor involvement. When students get hostile on the discussion board, the professor should post a response to “step in” and maintain class control as she would in a f2f when two students in the back of the classroom are talking. If she does not take immediate action, the situation can easily escalate in the public forum of the CMS, which could result in an aggressive or uncomfortable environment for the remainder of the semester.

Instructors maximize student learning by striking the right “presence” balance. In a DL environment, a professor must adjust to the needs of the students by mandating a limited number of required exchanges. If a student is anxious about DL, real-time meetings through the CMS can eliminate uncertainty and alleviate stress. Students who require one-on-one interaction through Wimba and/or VISTA Chat can have real-time communication and discussion. To meet the needs of her independent students, the instructor can participate through workshopping and discussion boards without losing touch. Finding equilibrium of involvement is relative to a professor’s unique style of teaching. Once an instructor realizes the needs of her students, she can incorporate an appropriate level of involvement in her classroom. After she is confident in her balance, she can incorporate her level of engagement with her teaching style and online persona.
IV. Developing Tone, Persona, & Pedagogical Style

The successful personae professors develop for their f2f classrooms may not work in the asynchronous environment. Because online educators are not live, displaying tonality and body language is virtually impossible. How should a DL professor compensate for the lack of one-on-one student interaction? The solution is simple: develop and employ specific tones, establish boundaries, and actively participate in student interactions.

Describing his initial experience teaching a DL course, Warnock noted his anxiety about his online persona: “My main worry was how I would conduct myself ‘in front’ of the online students. Those first few message posts, that initial homepage announcement, the introductory email—I realized that the text of those messages created a personality, and I felt great pressure to craft that persona the right way” (1). As Warnock observes, every post a professor submits to her online classroom contributes to the creation of her online personality. Every interaction a professor initiates with a student is monitored and scrutinized by every member of the class because students demonstrate class participation by engaging in discussion boards.

This “fishbowl” effect is remarkably powerful. Not only do the students observe interactions between peers, but they also witness all the professor’s exchanges with all their classmates. Therefore, the professor largely creates her online persona through the textual posts on the course’s pages. Although students’ and professor’s privacy is limited in such a public setting, the professor’s ability to engage students en masse magnifies and accelerates the creation of the professor’s persona.
Instead of students and professor communicating through private email, the professor establishes the tone of the entire class by posting to a discussion board. If a student makes an error, the professor should correct it with the appropriate tone, thus decreasing the probability that another student will commit the same error. In Mechenbier’s Business Writing course, she requires students to directly address each other in postings. When students fail to comply with this policy, Mechenbier posts messages on threads, discussion boards, and announcements, reminding students to do so. At the beginning of the course, students failed to directly address other students almost daily. However, as the course progressed, students began reading posts directed to them and to the other students. Although the problem was never completely eliminated, the majority of the students adjusted to meet Mechenbier’s requirements.

Employing the right tone is crucial for establishing a healthy class atmosphere, but Warnock suggests professors may easily fall victim to tonal extremes in DL classes. The challenging aspect of developing a tone is not to try too hard. Clearly, when adopting a tone (or “voice” as Warnock calls it), professors must not only resist the temptation to assume one singular tone, but must also be aware of the dangers of relying too heavily on it to convey personality. The negative effects of using tone incorrectly can sour the mood of the class.

Warnock identifies five negative “voices” that his research indicates degrade the classroom environment. Students are afraid of the “unapproachable sage” because they are intimidated at the prospect of “saying something worthwhile to the mighty genius running their class” (4). Professors possessing PhDs could intimidate a recently graduated
high school senior. If that professor also seems arrogant or inaccessible, the online atmosphere might well be uncomfortable and daunting to students.

Warnock also warns readers of the “apathetic drone” voice I referenced. In an asynchronous course, both students and professors are in danger of succumbing to classroom detachedness. If a professor presents a disinterested tone, students follow suit and individual participation on discussion boards decreases (5).

Warnock’s third voice, the “chum,” describes professors who succumb to the allure of internet lingo and informality when communicating with students: “Before you know it, students are calling you ‘dude’ in their email greetings. They are cursing each other out on the message boards . . . be careful of letting too much informality creep into written conversations” (5). Although the professor may attempt to establish informal relationships with her students by using emoticons and internet-based acronyms, she should resist adopting a communicative style that causes students to lose respect for her as an authority figure. Further, these symbols can distort the meaning of the professor’s remark because students may perceive them as “sarcastic” or “humorous” if interpreted incorrectly (Walther and D’Addario 326—329). If the professor uses the same jargon students use to communicate with one another, the students assume informality is an acceptable form of classroom communication. This is especially counterproductive in Business Writing and Technical Writing courses, which by their very nature stress formality and professional communication standards. Because there is no opportunity to correct informality f2f, the professor cannot establish boundaries concerning formality in a live, traditional manner. Instead, she establishes limits by using a professional and
cordial tone when electronically communicating with students privately and publically.

Consistency is essential to effective asynchronous communication: a professor must always employ a professional tone that commands student respect.

Warnock’s penultimate voice, the “fool,” describes professors who frequently neglect to proofread course content and minor posts (6). Warnock claims he writes roughly 30,000 words per semester in one online class (6). Because communication is restricted to the written word as the main source of instruction, grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors are unavoidable for professors and students alike. Mistakes are more common in DL than in traditional classrooms because all course content is distributed in written form. Although errors are inevitable, students may hold a professor accountable for grammatical discrepancies if she later grades papers harshly. Proofreading and editing messages—no matter how insignificant the post—increases the likelihood that students will follow suit and adhere to the formal requirements of the work and class. Problems arise, however, when students “fight” on public discussion boards. Because they are doing so in a public forum, the atmosphere and professional tone will deteriorate faster than it would in an f2f class because the professor may not immediately be able to settle dispute. If students are heatedly debating, grammar is often disregarded and a “texting” tone starts to spread throughout discussion posts. Although stern interruption might be tempting, a professor should avoid being overly harsh in these situations because it only further aggravates the situation.

This leads me to Warnock’s last voice, which he describes as the “harsh critic”: “Much of your communication will be on semipublic spaces in the classroom. You
should take the role of teacher to guide and sometimes correct them, but if you slam them, especially in front of the others, you could create a negative environment” (6). A professor should never humiliate a student in a public setting. Negativity and ridicule sometimes lead to conflict from other students, tense environmental stress, and even administrative intervention. If a DL professor is dealing with a problematic student, she should privately address the situation via VISTA email so the encounter is both private and documented. This way, the student is not embarrassed and other students will remain confident in the professor’s ability to maintain order and decorum.

What should a professor do to avoid using one of Warnock’s voices in a detrimental way? In order to successfully run a DL course, a professor must establish a personal tone that is neither too lax, nor too impersonal. Once this professional tone is created, the professor must use it consistently with each student both publically (on discussion boards) and privately (in email and one-on-one interaction with the student). Students respect the consistent professor and accept her authority. Further, a professor should establish a set of boundaries students will not violate. Boundaries, however, are “absolute” and may be perceived as “mean” by online students. If policies are not strictly enforced in a DL classroom, the structure will start to collapse and the professor will lose control of her students. However, if boundaries, professionalism, and balance are correctly maintained, these pedagogical techniques will produce successful personae.
V. Asynchronous Collaboration

Assigning, managing, and grading collaborative writing assignments in the DL environment is complex and problematic, but it can be done successfully. Students in f2f classes already find collaborative projects challenging because of clashing personalities, uneven distribution of work, and scheduling conflicts. These problems remain significant barriers to group success in online classes, but there are also additional difficulties unique to groups in the Business Writing and Technical Writing DL environment. In asynchronous collaboration, students are challenged to work with classmates without real-time feedback, without a strong sense of community, and without the supervision of an instructor. These challenges are more problematic because of the heavy work load in a writing-intensive course.

Clashing personalities often arise in a group setting. In a f2f literature course I took in fall of 2011, I was assigned to work with a group of peers to perform a scene from a play. The age range of this group of five members was 21—30 years old. As we began working together, it became apparent that two members of the group were going to have a tense relationship. During one of our early meetings, one of these students made a passive-aggressive remark, which caused the tension to escalate in a way that started inhibiting progress for the project. In order to alleviate the contention between the two discordant members, one member suggested we meet in an informal setting to drink, eat, and discuss the project in a casual, friendly manner. After we met in a setting that was not “strictly business,” the tension dissipated and we started working well together.
Interacting with each other in a setting where laughing, facial expressions, and body language were visible helped our group develop a sense of camaraderie. After the initial struggle between the two group members ended, our group cooperated consistently throughout the remainder of the course and we received an “A” on our final project. Because we resolved the conflict, we did not have to involve the professor, and the group attitude remained positive for the remainder of the semester.

Similar personality clashes in an online course might not be resolved so positively. Students would have to deal not only with the same set of problems as students in f2f classes, but they would also have to do so within the restrictions imposed by the DL setting. The most basic forms of communication (smiling, joking) are non-existent in, or altered by, a DL environment. For instance, if a student were to attempt alleviating an awkward situation in DL, she might try to do so by using emoticons to convey facial expression or emotion. In live communication, facial expressions occur naturally, but emoticons are intentionally placed because a student must consciously decide to include one in the text. This may indicate a student is attempting to be approachable and responsive. As Walther and D’Addario studied, this method of communication is “more deliberate and voluntary. One may unconsciously smile FtF, but it is hard to imagine someone typing a :-) with less awareness than of the words he or she is selecting” (326). However, if the emoticon is misconstrued or interpreted as sarcastic or ironic, it may deteriorate group conditions. If a group member were to make a passive-aggressive remark to a colleague, the consequence would probably have a more
damaging and long-lasting effect than in a f2f class because tone is so essential to successful group work online.

Online tone plays a considerable role in student interaction and group dynamic. If the tone is soured between group members, the DL environment makes clearing the air very difficult. Whether students realize it, typed words and tone are the only means of conveying personality in the asynchronous medium. Body language, facial expression, and light banter are absent in the DL context. Therefore, if a negative tone is adopted in a particular group, it can quickly sour the environment and make student interaction more stressful and unproductive. This slows—even undoes—progress because students spend their time attempting to resolve interpersonal issues, not completing the assignment. From a purely practical standpoint, such arguments last much longer than f2f disputes because students do not receive each other’s messages immediately, or if they are typing in a chatroom, this communication still consumes more time than physically speaking to one another.

Another issue unique to DL is outrageous behavior and communication from students. Students are often bolder and more aggressive in a DL setting. After all, they literally never have to face their classmates or professor (Mechenbier “Student Behavior”). Students are more inclined to exhibit confrontational and abrasive behavior when conflicts arise because they feel insecure and affronted while simultaneously feeling anonymous and invisible. This type of behavior and negative communication engenders an uncomfortable group tone that is not conducive to quality group productivity.
In these situations, improving a negative group attitude is difficult because joking and attempting to ease tension or show politeness are not easily conveyed in an online setting. In my f2f group, we resolved the “clashing personalities” conflict by joking, laughing, and working together outside of a classroom atmosphere together. In a DL setting, while this is possible, students are not as likely to meet each other because of geographical and scheduling constraints. In many online classes at KSU, students from all eight of the KSU campuses can register for the course, as well students studying abroad have the option to enroll in KSU DL courses. Further, many DL students take DL courses precisely because they have full-time jobs, families, or full-time class schedules. In DL, courses can be fit (even shoehorned) into very busy lives and schedules, so meeting classmates may not be feasible. This means students are limited to a professional classroom tonality and standard when they communicate with each other.

Although the language students use with one another may be different than the tone they use with their professor, every interaction is recorded to the CMS. This intimidates students when conflicts arise because they realize all of their interactions have been recorded and are visible to the professor. This strains communication because there is no room for informality, which makes forming a community more difficult. Without a strong sense of community, students do not strive to cooperate with other group members.

An additional difficulty relevant to both f2f and DL group work is uneven distribution of work. My undergraduate experiences with group work indicates there is usually a disparity in the amount of work certain group members will take on as there is
an obvious difference in the quality of work each member produces—a finding supported by research (Hammond 356). In live classes, some members of a group will step up and claim a leadership role. The leader of the group then assigns each member to a designated task for the project and discusses group objectives and goals with her teammates (Hammond 356-357). However, as one would expect, not all members fulfill their duties to the group. Some miss deadlines, some exhibit poor work ethic, and some create stress for the other members of the group. In my experience, group leaders (the more motivated students) usually compensate for the weakest members or redistribute that student’s task to other group members.

Although this method is unfair, productive students usually choose to do extra work rather than “snitch” on their classmates. Could this generosity be the product of students actually interacting with each other in a f2f environment? In DL classes, students do not have to worry about what their classmates think of them because they will never actually meet each other in person. This is why they are more inclined to report a dispute to the professor if one issue arises (Mechenbier “Student Behavior”). Indeed, DL students are much more likely to notify a professor about their dissatisfaction with a group member than students in f2f classes. However, this does not mean DL students frequently notify their professor about inactive group members; conflicts will usually be brought to a professor’s attention first because of the explicit arguing in a public forum. A fellow classmate of mine from Business Writing explained to me she was experiencing difficulties with a member in her group. Although her group was actively participating and communicating on the message board in class, one of her group members did not join
the group discussion or contribute to the project until two days before the assignment was due. This caused the other group members stress and anxiety when they had to “pull his weight.” This group member claimed he was unaware a project was “due so soon,” and that he had no idea the group had advanced so far in discussion (Group 1, Business Writing).

Despite the instructions about group communication on the syllabus and through the message boards, this student failed to contact his group until after the project was completed. Attempting to save his grade, he apologized to the group and asked if there was any way he would be permitted to submit his name on the project. Because the professor can and should not be involved in every aspect of student interaction, the responsibility of alerting her of group member inactivity lay with the students. In f2f classes, students are accountable only to each other unless they have written documentation expressing their individual roles. Although a professor can introduce guidelines and class rules, what is said amongst group members is not documented; the professor must rely on students’ honesty when discussing the distribution of work on a project. This is where online group work has an advantage over live collaboration: because all student interactions are documented, students can hold each other accountable to the site.

Despite complete and incontrovertible documentation, distribution of group work in a DL writing-intensive course can be difficult to assess (Wolfe 32). DL group work is unique in this way because DL students are required to function independently while maintaining a group presence. As DL itself requires students to devote a great deal of
time and effort to learning material, it also requires adapting to working independently within a group. What does this mean for writing? Because Business Writing and Technical Writing are writing-intensive courses, each student is required to demonstrate her ability to write professionally as a part of the course requirement. The struggle with DL collaborative writing lies in creating a consistent professional tone with multiple writers despite the actual lack of f2f interaction.

In a live course that requires collaborative writing, students are able to brainstorm together in class, meet outside of class, and write reports as a group. Each member offers input and the report slowly forms as a collection of ideas. In an online course, each group member is required to write her portion of the report separately, and then a master editor combines the material together. This was the aspect of group work that I found was most challenging in the class I took and observed. The instructor made it clear that each group member was to participate in writing, regardless of her work with graphics, charts, etc. because the course was writing-intensive. Because I was the master editor of all of the materials submitted by my group members, I had to edit the work in a way that it would not sound like my work alone. The challenging aspect of this task was forming a consistent tone from multiple authors, which required me to spend extra time putting together everyone’s separate pieces of work.

How is this relevant to distribution of group work? Because students are working individually, they do not always realize how much work each member is putting into a project. Such ignorance can foster feelings of resentment and contention. In Business Writing, one of our final assignments was a formal report. We were required to collate
several projects, graphics, research, abstracts, appendices, and writings into one cohesive report. By the end of the semester, tensions were running high because each member was anxious about the final group project. Although I had volunteered to do a significant portion of the writing, Mechenbier contacted me and urged me to distribute the work more evenly. Because the course was writing-intensive, she wanted every member of my group to demonstrate his/her professional writing abilities. As the group leader, I redistributed the assignments based on the specific skills of each group member. After I changed the assignment, one of my group members completed all of the group work for one of our future assignments. As well, she also assumed tasks of all group members. She panicked in the middle of the semester and began working ahead without notifying other group members. After this happened, she implied in a Wimba chat that she was carrying the brunt of the work load. As the semester ended, her assumption of the role of one-person group created a disparity in the distribution of our group’s work. Despite the other group members’ complacency with her work, I insisted that each member submit his/her designated section of the presentation.

The last difficulty associated with group work in both f2f and DL courses is scheduling. Although scheduling is perceived as a minor issue, it plays a major role in achieving success in a DL setting. In a typical live class, students work with peers in their age range. Many students in these groups will live on or near campus, which facilitates meetings. As I mentioned, when I was in a group for my f2f class, our ages ranged from 21 to 30 years old. I have participated in five other classes that required group work (excluding Business Writing) during my undergraduate career in which group work was
comprised entirely of traditional students with a narrower range of 19 to 22 years old. In these groups, meeting with my peers to discuss and work on projects was easy.

Not so in DL courses. When I participated in group work in Mechenbier’s Business Writing, the students in my group ranged from 21 to 51 years of age. According to Palloff and Pratt, many DL students are older than traditional undergraduates in live classes (5). As the youngest member of my group, I faced challenges working with older group members—challenges I will describe in greater depth below. However, a major obstacle we faced was timing, both for meeting and for submitting group materials. The oldest member of my group was working a full-time job, taking classes part-time through a partnership with KSU and a local community college, and caring for her grandchildren. The second oldest member also had a full-time job and was taking classes at Kent. The last group member had a full-time job in construction and was frequently absent from the VISTA site because of his schedule. At this time, I was a senior at KSU, and this was the first time I experienced working with non-traditional students. This meant I had to adapt my schedule to accommodate their needs. My group members had enrolled in this DL course because it was convenient and fit into their busy, non-school schedules. Because my group wanted to have real-time chat sessions, we had to meet at a time that fit four very different schedules. Although we held a weekly meeting, a significant portion of our work was posted to our group discussion board. This presented me with a challenge I did not foresee when I began working with a group: last-minute workers and procrastinators who stressed the group dynamic and thwarted the group schedule. Prior to this experience, I was functioning well in a DL setting because I am a fairly independent
student. As I adjusted to working within a DL group, I realized my biggest frustration would be waiting for the other members to submit their material so I could finish mine. On our first group writing assignment, I was designated to write the conclusion. In order to finish my assignment, I had to wait for two members to submit their material before I could start my draft. This was not easy to adjust to, but my teammates were fairly on time with their projects when we started working together.

The asynchronous nature of the DL experience requires DL students to be more patient than their f2f counterparts. Live groups have the ability to meet and to form all pieces of a project together. Because “identification and group membership are the driving forces of online attraction,” students must be willing to devote more time to strengthening relationships within their groups to promote successful collaboration (Wang, Walther, and Hancock 60). To do so, students must strive to make CMS tools effective for meetings because members of an asynchronous group can hail from various campuses, and some have enrolled because the “meeting” time accommodates inflexible schedules. Although real-time meetings are possible through Wimba and chat, students must prepare materials (read PowerPoints, form project ideas, prepare topics) prior to meetings to ensure maximum group efficiency and productivity. If DL collaborators spend more than one group session assigning tasks, setting deadlines, and discussing ideas, they risk becoming overwhelmed toward the end of the semester. The immediate gratification of yielding a cohesive project from live group interaction is not possible through DL. What this means is that despite group collaboration, DL students have to complete assignments independently in order to earn a high grade on group projects.
To fully understand this concept, I utilized my time in Business Writing in fall of 2011 to assemble a study of group interaction. In this study, I assessed the inner interactions of three types of groups on discussion boards. The next chapter of this thesis provides detailed information about the research I collected during my observation.
VI. Group Study

Before I enrolled in a DL course, Mechenbier explained that there are typically three types of groups in DL writing courses: highly productive and functional groups, average groups that are productive and moderately cooperative, and groups that demonstrate poor productivity and organization. After this semester-long study, I realized Mechnebier’s analyses were absolutely accurate; each group I studied belonged to one of the three categories and exhibited characteristics according to each type. In the following chapter, I will explain my research and findings, with particular emphasis on my own group, Group 2.

Before I offer my analysis of the groups, I need to explain the assignments and requirements students had to meet to earn a high grade in the course. In order to succeed in Business Writing, students had to actively participate and contribute to group work throughout the course:

You are expected to participate in this course regularly and substantively. You can participate by asking questions, discussing reading assignments, by being interactive in group assignments, and by completing peer workshopping and editing. Your final grade will be positively affected if you actively participate in discussion, keep up with the reading, and are insightful in discussion. Workshopping with your peers is designed to give help and receive ideas from others and is a vital
part of the class; you are expected to participate. All project critiquing will be done with respect and dignity.” (Mechenbier “Syllabus”)

In order to demonstrate collaborative abilities, groups were required to complete five assignments by strict deadlines: Schedule of Responsibilities, Proposal, Progress Report, Formal Report, and Project Presentation. Mechenbier is explicit in her syllabus that group work is a significant portion of the course. Under the “Required” section on the first page, she notes that students must possess “familiarity with VISTA prior to entering the course,” “the ability to work in collaborative groups,” and “attention to deadlines.” If students read Mechenbier’s course material and syllabus, they are well-informed prior to beginning the course that group work is going to account for 56 percent of their overall grades. Students who do not function well in group settings should have reconsidered enrolling in the class. However, some students disregarded the professor’s protocol about DL and remained in the course regardless of their best interest. Cooperating in a DL group is one of the most challenging aspects of asynchronous learning; even in a highly functional group, members can still experience issues with member participation, as was seen with Group 6.

Group 6 was a highly functional and productive group that produced excellent quality of work throughout the course. With five members, this group’s age range spanned from 21 to 54 years of age. Over the course of the semester, this group exchanged 717 messages on the discussion board and held weekly Wimba Chat meetings. As the semester began, the members of this group introduced themselves and initiated conversation on the group discussion board. They promptly elected a group leader within
the first thread of correspondence, and all but one member of the group participated in the
team’s initial conversations. This group’s leader was highly involved in the group’s progress and set clear deadlines for specific tasks.

At the beginning of the semester, this team participated and interacted well with continuous posts on the message board about brain-storming, topic development, and project goals. The members even posted “transcripts” of their Wimba Chat sessions to the discussion board. These students were highly organized, prepared, and competent.

However, one of the reasons Group 6 was highly successful was because they were trying to adapt to an unresponsive group member. The active members corresponded with the professor about the inactive member and continued to produce quality work in spite of his disappearance from the discussion board. As a student in DL, this is very challenging because groups are held to tight schedules; any failure or inadequacy from a group member can sink the entire project. Group 6, unlike many other groups, dealt with the absent student by alerting the professor. In this scenario, Mechenbier assured the active members of Group 6 that their grades would not suffer as a result of the inactive student’s truancy.

“Truant” DL students share several traits. On September 12, 2011, members of Group 6 began interacting with each other and discussing possible ideas for the final project. It was not until September 18 that the inactive student signed on to VISTA for the first time. His initial post apologized for his absence when he wrote, “Sorry that I have not been in contact here. I have taken many online courses and none have interacted so much through Vista. I will be sure to come and check more frequently” (“Team 6 –
Group Meeting” Sept 18 2011). According to Mechenbier, this type of excuse (i.e., blaming jobs or family responsibilities for neglecting class responsibility) is commonly offered by students who are more likely to be inactive in a DL course. This excuse is not unique to a DL student because nearly every student has a job (“Student Behavior”).

As the semester progressed, this student participated in fewer discussions as the group was delving into the bulk of the course work. Prior to November 22, this student had participated in discussion boards and Wimba chats regularly. Although his frequency was not as consistent as his four other group members, he was still participating. However, November 22 was his last, brief post. From November 22 to December 6, Group 6 posted 120 messages to the discussion board. Of those 120 messages, the inactive student replied to but one message on November 22 in response to his teammate. After that, I could not determine whether he participated in Wimba chats. His team did not mention his absenteeism publically on the discussion board, but one member did privately contact Mechenbier. There were several posts that were simply titled with the student’s name, followed by a question mark. Clearly, this was a direct violation of Mechenbier’s absence policy, which states, “While this course does not meet in real time, you are responsible for checking VISTA on a daily basis and informing me promptly and professionally of any difficulty that you are experiencing. Chatroom participation is mandatory and will be arranged if and when I deem it necessary” (“Syllabus”). Despite the asynchronous nature of the course, students can still be “absent” if they fail to comply with the participation policy implemented by the professor. In Group 6’s case, the situation was handled properly and maturely by the students participating in the group;
the group grade reflected their excellent work as a team, not the absence of their colleague.

Now that Group 6 has been established as a highly productive and organized group, I will examine the properties of Group 12 at the opposite end of the spectrum. Group 12 consisted of four students ranging from the ages of 24 to 41. Over the course of a semester, these students posted 58 total messages to their group’s discussion board, and about $1/7$ of the messages were devoted to introductions. Many of the messages from this group addressed concerns about beginning the project. However, the members never took the initiative to do anything but talk about starting the project. One student wrote, “So do we know what we are doing? I can't keep waiting around to turn in homework and stuff. I don't have the time or ability to be able to. I'm trying to get my grades up and take care of three month old twins, so its not easy and I don't have a lot of time to do stuff last minute. So I think we should just start working on it” (“Hello?” 25 Sept). Many of the messages posted were of a similar nature, which was a clear, early indication that this group was going to struggle with forming a product for class. This is a common problem in DL: students writing to one another about starting projects instead of actually brainstorming and starting them. Passive students wait for a leader to step up, and they then rely on her to assume responsibility for the entire group. DL is not an environment conducive to success for passive students.

Another problem with this group was its members’ failure to adhere to several of Mechenbier’s policies. None of the students in this group consistently addressed each other. They did not check the site frequently. They did not adopt a professional tone
when communicating with each other. Although this group was quick to pick a leader, the members did not interact, establish a topic, set a meeting time, or do anything productive until one day before the assignment was due. Two of the group members completed the Schedule of Responsibilities without informing the rest of the group. This led me to believe those two group members were communicating off site, which would be a direct violation of Mechenbier’s class policy. Later, the group leader encouraged his teammates to text him if they had any questions, which was yet another violation of course policy.

Shortly after the first assignment was due, a missing group member appeared on site to explain her absence. This late-comer’s message to her group perfectly illustrates Group 12’s lack of professionalism:

Hi you guys sorry about not being able to getting to the discussion earlier. Its fine no credit was given for this first part to me. by number is [redacted] if any of you ever need me then feel free to call or text me if necessary. I looked over the schedule and it looks fine to me. If we are meeting to chat around 9pm on Monday that works for me any time at night i am available. Once again i apologize for not being able to participate in the first part but i do plan on being an active member of the group. I just had a few personal things going on and was not able to join in. My apologies. Just let me know if i am reading the schedule correctly. Are we chatting on-line on Monday at 9pm?

But hello my name is [redacted] i am a Business Management major at the main campus. (“Schedule” 26 Sept)
Group 12 had particular difficulty communicating; the members could not even manage connecting through Chat when they were all on the computer at the same time. One group member expressed her frustration by posting a question about the meeting that was supposed to have begun 50 minutes earlier: “Weren't we suppose to get online today and talk at 9 PM? I've been on for almost an hour and nobody has gotten online. Did the day get changed and nobody got ahold of me? Well someone let me know what's going on. Thanks” (“Chat” 3 Oct). The group leader replied with, “we're on the chat board there is a chat function listed below ‘assignments’ that opens up chat rooms for each group. and I got some material rolling. She is going to write up a memo of what we discussed and post it as soon as she can. Your input is welcome. If you need help figuring out the chat function, text me and I can help you. We plan on meeting Wednesday at 9 PM also” (“Chat” 3 Oct). The original member who posted her question about the meeting time never responded. However, the last member also failed to establish a connection with her group members and claimed, “i have been trying to open the chat and i don't see anyone on here. I was taking a test and i don't see a memo either. Am i in the right place” (“Chat” 3 Oct). This member did not post her comment for nearly two hours after the original chat session was scheduled to begin.

Lack of communicational and organizational skills were detrimental to this group’s success. Not only did its members’ last-minute mindset play a role in the poor quality of work they produced, but this group also failed to use the workshopping tools that were available through the site. Out of five group projects, Group 12 posted only its Proposal and Progress Report to the workshopping board. In the Proposal alone,
Mechenbier pointed out that the group’s formatting was incorrect, the document had not been proofread, and the graphics were substandard. After Group 12 uploaded its Progress Report, Mechenbier pointed out several errors and asked the group leader to re-submit the report when the group members had corrected it. None of the group members re-uploaded an updated Progress Report; I doubt whether any of the members other than the team leader even realized there was a workshopping board. Workshopping is crucial for groups to receive full participation points. This part of online participation is pedagogically designed to keep students in contact with the professor to improve their work and interact with classmates. Group 12 failed to upload the most important group project to the workshopping board: the Formal Report which accounted for 27 percent of the group’s grade. Needless to say, Group 12 also failed to upload the Project Presentation assignment to the board. As I stated before, this group only posted 58 messages to their group discussion board. The last message posted was on November 22. This date was prior to the due date of the Formal Report, meaning Group 12 either failed submit the assignment, or the group members only communicated through means that were not viewable to the public.

According to Mechenbier, groups like Group 12 typically earn grades in the C- to F range. These groups are incapable of producing quality work because they spend too much time insisting they should start brainstorming instead of actually brainstorming. Groups that are passive or indecisive cannot function well in the DL environment, which requires independent activity. DL is best suited for the most motivated and active students, and yet it is marketed to appeal to the least motivated and passive students
because of the convenient delivery method (free from temporal restrictions). In a live class, these students would have been able to ask the professor about the assignment in class and receive help organizing the group structure. With passive group members in a DL setting, the group will struggle and students’ individual grades will suffer. As DeMarco and Lister observe, group success “is seldom due to technical issues. . . . If the project goes down the tubes it will be non-technical, human interaction problems that do it in. The team will fail to bind, or the developers will fail to gain rapport with the users, or people will fight interminably over meaningless methodological issues” (88).

Because I observed Group 6’s and 12’s work from the limited perspective of a fellow classmate, I was not privy to interactions these groups had with Mechenbier, nor was I present for their group meetings. Everything I observed occurred in the public forum. However, with my group, Group 2, I studied student interaction by participating and attempting to successfully manage an online group. Actually participating in this group gave me the most hands-on experience I have had with DL since I began researching it. In this group, I analyzed the effects tone has on group dynamic, clashing personalities, inactivity, and student insecurity; additionally, I experienced the significant barrier age disparity presents in a DL setting.

Group 2 was what Mechenbier considered the middle ground between 6 and 12. My teammates were interactive, fairly responsive to deadlines, and willing to participate in group meetings. There were four people in my group, with ages ranging from 21 to 53. Over the course of the semester, my group submitted 280 messages to our discussion board and held weekly Wimba meetings. Although 280 messages pales in comparison to
Group 6’s 717 messages, my group was efficient in completing tasks by group deadlines; a substantial portion of our communication occurred in the Wimba sessions we held. As the group leader, I was responsible for organizing meetings, establishing group deadlines, and keeping everyone on task. The other members of my group were much older than I was, and they all had different skill-sets than I did. Essentially, one member was in charge of graphics, one was in charge of research, and one was in charge of using Excel for graphs.

At the beginning of the semester, we functioned very well as a team. Because I am a worrier, I was nervous about the quality of work my groupmates were submitting. As a result, I took on more responsibility than I needed to. I worked closely with the oldest member of my group to ensure the Schedule of Responsibilities was ready for submission. Because the two of us were over-involved with the first project, I wanted to give the other two members a chance to demonstrate their abilities. The project we submitted next was a group Proposal for our final project. When we had our initial Wimba chats, the members of my group agreed that I should be the master editor, and that I could change whatever I felt necessary to ensure the best group grade possible. Everyone agreed to this, and it did not become an issue until later in the semester when tensions began to run high. As the projects began to require more attention, the members of my group (myself included) started to stress out over minute details.

During the week of Thanksgiving break, tensions began to escalate in my group. Over the break, I asked each group member to submit individual tasks to the discussion board so I could start editing the final Formal Report. After I posted the first draft of the
Formal Report, I began noticing some passive-aggressive remarks from two of my teammates directed toward me. The first remark came from the oldest member of the group who wrote, “let’s show Jordan how hard we’ve been working over break!” At first, I thought I was misreading her tone, however, she followed up her remark by asserting that she was “really hurt that you [Jordan] didn’t sign on over break. It really frustrated me because I needed your input.” This member was frustrated because our group was not receiving the grades she had hoped for on our previous projects. Because she was an adult learner, I should have responded by adopting a “neighborly” approach to alleviate her anxiety. Blair and Hoy’s research into adult learner needs reveals that “[t]he success of our online interaction depends on our recognition of the ‘neighborly’ relationships among students and between students and instructors, recognizing that among our adult learner populations there might be students who thrive as well in private space as they do in public space” (45-46). In the case of the senior member of my group, she may have responded well if I would have constantly responded to and edited her posts; this member was not comfortable with the “private space” because she was insecure about her work.

Because I was the group leader, she expected me to respond to every single post she submitted to the board. When I did not, she was offended. I tried to adopt a professionally polite tone to indicate to this member that I signed on to the site every day but November 26 over the holiday, and that she could see that because I had indeed responded to every post she submitted. However, as I was doing so, another member, the only male in the group, chimed in to tell me that “just because we are on break it doesn’t mean you get to do nothing.” At this point, I was extremely frustrated with my group
because, like them, I had been working hard on our project, and I felt underappreciated and slighted. I replied to the male member that he had not signed on the site once since November 23, which only aggravated the situation. I was then accused by the third member of our group of significantly altering the abstract she wrote for our formal report. She was unhappy with the changes I made because we both used the same word in the introduction and conclusion. She then asserted that I was plagiarizing her work, and that I had changed it to make it seem like I wrote it. This member repeatedly asserted that I “dumbed down” her work and “took out all of the good words.” As I had not plagiarized her work, I was offended by her accusation. I tried to explain to her that the writing in a collaborative project needs to be consistent, and similar words were present throughout the entire report to make it one cohesive project.

Because I had previous experience with DL and understood the importance of tone, I adopted a professional tone that Mechenbier instructed me to use in these situations. I responded to the group by saying, “I am sorry that you feel that way. If you have concerns like these in the future, please do not hesitate to email me, as I did not know you were experiencing any anxiety. I know everyone is tense, but we need to continue with our meeting so we can make progress on our assignment.” After I said this, the male member of the group replied that he was unhappy about me “wasting his time,” but the group proceeded forward.

Following this unpleasant exchange, two of my group members expressed to Mechenbier their dissatisfaction with the situation. Mechenbier contacted me and we discussed the situation at length. After reviewing the Wimba Chat exchange,
Mechenbier’s assessment was that I was a victim of age discrimination in a DL setting. When we formed our group in September, the oldest member of the group offered to take the position of group leader if I was not interested. However, she conceded that role to me because I had prior DL experience. Throughout the course, however, this senior member uploaded copious material to the course site and constantly assumed tasks that were not designated for her. During this time, she was undermining my role as master editor, and she was ignoring my posts to the site. This was frustrating because she had agreed that I should lead the group. After the Wimba Chat went awry, this member took it upon herself to complete the entire Project Presentation on her own before we even discussed it as a group. This unsettled me because the other members did not object to using her format. This means that none of the group members but the senior member would have been able to claim they contributed to the Project Presentation.

Despite our soured tone, we worked together to compile our individual contributions to the Project Presentation. After the project was completed, I attempted to ease the tension between the two of us by sending her a private email:

I also wanted to apologize to you about my involvement over break. I'm sorry that you felt I wasn't online for ‘4 days’ as you said, but I just wanted you to know I logged on every single day but the 26th. I even posted material on the board. I only replied to what I thought needed my immediate attention. I did everything I had to to make sure my part and assigned role was completed (I edited that monster at least 5 times, haha). I am told that I am overbearing in group projects sometimes, so I was
trying to let everyone work on their own. But that isn't your style, so I have been trying to be super attentive this time around. I'm always willing to help and do extra if needs be. I would also like to point out that I was not the group member MIA for 4 days, haha. Prof. M can track our activity, too. But, I am past it and I hope we can remain friends/group members. We have worked really well together so far and I don't want that to be tainted by one extremely stressful week!

She responded:

I agree this has been a most stressful week! A lot of battered ego's! Not only are we dealing with the stressor of working with people we have never met and have no understanding of their personalities, work ethic and family/school obligations we are also working across age differences. I think that once the course is over we will look back over the experience with positive feelings. We have really learned a lot in this course, not only the subject matter and also working in a group. People say hurtful things during times of stress and fear. I am sorry if I hurt your feelings with my "4-day" statement. It was not my intent to hurt you in any way. It is my own fear and insecurity in this class that was speaking. I totally looked to you for approval of our FR feeling you were the expert in this topic. That was unfair of me. Though I still consider you an expert in this forum, it was unfair to put undo pressure on you for the success of the project. I do work better in a group with a more dynamic interaction. All said, we are
accountable for our own contribution and motivation. I will say that I can be viewed as being overbearing as a leader. That is what inspired all those project pushy emails over the holidays to the group.

This correspondence was not sent until after our projects had been submitted. I regret not sending it sooner because the group dynamic felt very awkward and forced after our group situation deteriorated. The other members were clearly affected by the harsh interaction the senior member and I had on Wimba. After that situation, I had minimal communication with the other members of the group, and I was extremely careful of what I wrote because I did not want to worsen matters. Because I felt that every member of my group was upset with me, I felt alienated. It seemed that they were the “in-group” and I was the only member on the outside, which significantly altered my future communication in the group—a reaction that is not uncommon to responding to specific group types in developing personal online identity (Zuoming, Walther, and Hancock 59-61). However, in this scenario, the senior group member and I realized we both handled the situation incorrectly and we were able to reconcile.

Although this group experience was challenging, I experienced first-hand four of the most important factors that play a role in group work online. In live classes, students take for granted the social interaction and body language they can exhibit with peers in their groups. Michael Hammond’s research on online forums and group study shows that groups can be socially functional if students are willing to take “risks”:

Forum members perceived on-line forums as appropriate environments to introduce themselves and at times share personal news with each other; in
more academic contexts, members could see how forums lent themselves to sharing course information and structured writing. But, it is suggested that the medium can afford another type of communication, a communicative approach which is personal, dialogic, and open minded as to sources of knowledge. However, such a use of the medium is not obvious to everyone taking part and the development of a communicative approach would require support and a willingness on the part of the learner to take risks. (261)

Although this type of online forum and collaboration is possible, students must discover their own asynchronous identities and communicational style within a group—a task both intimidating and challenging because of the diversity of DL students. Without facial expression, the only way a student can display informality is through written text and Wimba Conference Calls; this is a significant reason why my group struggled in the latter portion of the semester (Mechenbier “Physicality and Facial Expression”). In a DL group setting, a single remark can negatively affect group mentality. Whether the group has established a positive rapport or has limited communication, tone is essential to the way a group functions. In my group, my personality clashed with the senior member of the group, which ultimately created a tense group atmosphere. As the senior member stated in her email, she was very hands-on and insecure about taking a DL course. My tendency as a leader is to let group members function independently unless I deem my intervention necessary. In that situation, I should have been more responsive to the needs of my colleague because her insecurity and my inattentiveness led to tension that negatively
affected our whole group. Because the senior student was anxious about starting school again and working while taking class, she presented a set of different learning needs that I, the twenty-one-year-old undergraduate, did not anticipate.

Regardless of Group 2’s level of cooperation, the DL setting opens a brave new world of dysfunction for all group types. Highly functional groups like Group 6 are still susceptible to problems. No matter how organized or well-led a team is, certain elements of DL can become barriers to group success. Group 6’s barrier was a truant member. In a live class, if a student stops coming to class, a professor would be more likely to notice the student’s absence and contact her group members immediately. This eliminates anxiety from the start because a professor is directly overseeing and involved with the group’s progress. For adequately functional groups like Group 2, tone played an instrumental part in constructing the group’s dynamic. One misunderstanding changed the entire group attitude and made collaboration stressful for the group’s remaining projects. Groups like Group 12 that have poor leadership and are lacking communication are unable or unwilling to follow directions and will struggle because the context requires independence and dedicated collaborative activity.
VII. Problem-solving: Collaborative Solutions

Having considered some of the problems associated with asynchronous collaboration, I would like to discuss possible solutions to a few of them. Specifically, I would like to address how attention to accountability, task management, and protocol may be useful in resolving problems associated with DL group work.

As previously mentioned, in fall of 2011, a fellow classmate of mine from Business Writing explained to me she was experiencing difficulties with a member in her group. Although her group was actively participating and communicating on the message board in class, one of her group members did not join the group discussion or contribute to the project until two days before the assignment was due. This group member claimed he was unaware a project was due “so soon,” and that he had no idea the group had advanced so far in its discussions. Despite the professor’s clear instructions about group communication on her syllabus and the message boards, this student failed to contact his group until after the project was completed. Attempting to save his grade, he apologized to the group and asked if there was any way he would be permitted to submit his name on the project. My classmate felt that this was unfair because her group had to compensate for his inactivity. In short, he wanted credit for work his team-mates had done. Instead of contacting Mechenbier, the group chose to hold this member accountable by highlighting his inactivity on a group document.

In order to ensure her students carry their own weight, Mechenbier requires them to complete a Team Responsibilities Report (TRR) with every assignment. This TRR is a
collaborative tool that enables a professor to fairly assess each student’s individual contribution in a group project. As Mechenbier’s document states, “Each team member is responsible for collaborative writing for all group assignments. (Capitalize on identified individual strengths, i.e., who is good at organizing information; at spelling, grammar, and punctuation; at editing; at proofreading. However, no one person is responsible for all the writing; write collaboratively. Any member of the team who has not contributed fairly--the team may decide this by not signing off on the report--will receive no credit: not partial credit, but NO credit)” (“TRR”).

By implementing the TRR as a significant portion of each student’s individual grade on assignments, Mechenbier accurately and objectively assigns an individual grade to students who fail to contribute their fair shares. In the case of my peer’s troublesome group member, she filled out the TRR to reflect her experience with her group. One member did not fully participate in the project, and Mechenbier had written documentation in the TRR (supplemented by the number of discussion posts) that supported the group’s assertion that he had not contributed to the assignment. The TRR provided the documentation necessary for Mechenbier to deduct points from the negligent group member without penalizing the other members of his group. Because DL professors are not typically involved in monitoring every group interaction, a sound means of measuring individual contribution is to require each student to report each member’s progress by using a TRR or an equivalent instrument that allows the professor to hold each student accountable for participation.
Another way to hold students accountable is through documentation. As I mentioned earlier, a professor is privy to every single log in, interaction, and posting each student creates. In order for this method of accountability to succeed, a member of a group would have to claim that particular group members were causing problems. After one student notifies the professor, she can decide whether the claim is legitimate based on what she sees on the CMS. For instance, in the Group Study chapter, I mentioned a dispute between the senior member of my group and me. The senior member claimed that I had “not logged on to the site for four days.” In order to support that I was falsely accused, I informed said member that both she and Mechenbier were able to view my activity on the site. Not only had I logged on to the site consistently, but I had also responded to her posts and attached files to our discussion board multiple times during the week, each instance of which was precisely and publically logged. In this case, Mechenbier was able to see that I had posted regularly, and thus that the senior member’s claim was false.

Although DL students are more apt to relay a conflict to their professor than are their f2f counterparts, they may not do so until the conflict escalates. Instead of preemptively attempting to prevent the conflict, they wait until the professor’s intervention becomes absolutely necessary. Referring back to my classmate from Business Writing, I asked her why she did not inform Mechenbier about the uneven distribution of work in her group. She replied by saying she did not want to be the person responsible for her teammate receiving a “bad grade.” She also did not want her fellow group members to think she was a “tattletale.” She continued to feel that she was exerting
more effort throughout the semester, but she refused to report it to Mechenbier until the last assignment. When I talked to Mechenbier about the situation, she explained that she would have taken action had the student privately emailed her about her group’s situation. The overwhelmed student would have been less anxious about her grade and participation if she would have contacted Mechenbier earlier in the semester.

How can a professor encourage her students to contact her if a problem arises with another group member? This dilemma is particularly difficult to address because this also remains a problem in live classes. In live classes, professors are more apt to notice a group member’s absence from class. This is a good indicator that a particular student may not be contributing her share in a group project. In a DL course, participation and group involvement can only be judged by the student’s group members. In order to stress the importance of communication between student and professor concerning group work, a professor could institute a protocol to accompany course materials that refers to ways students should handle difficult group situations.

Mechenbier’s TRR (Appendix A) allows students to both assess each other’s work and to indicate if any problems arose during the project’s completion. Each group member signs the TRR if he or she agrees that her colleagues completed the work that is documented on the form. As a student who has previously used a TRR, I know this method is highly effective and valuable for the instructor if a discrepancy occurs between students. On that same note, however, I suggest that the TRR should be offered to students privately, and each individual should sign her own report. This allows students to be truthful about their teammates’ work without fearing repercussions of souring tone
for the remainder of the semester. Further, it allows the professor to objectively observe each student’s response to see if their designated assignments all align with each member’s task.

As you can see in Appendix C, a group agreement/protocol document is useful in several ways when encountering tense group situations. This document should contain instructions and procedures about situations in which students are not participatory, not respectful, or not producing quality work. (Please refer to Appendix C for a sample document.) If a professor predicts certain groups may experience turbulence, she can refer the group to the protocol document to ensure they proceed without making matters worse. This would eliminate student anxiety about privately emailing the instructor; as well, the professor could hold students accountable to the protocol for the class. In Mechenbier’s Business and Technical writing courses, she constructed a protocol to inform students about the demands of a DL course (see Appendix B). If students were unable to meet the requirements of the protocol, she advised them that DL might not best suited to their educational needs.

Although a group protocol document serves a different purpose, it can be equally effective. In this protocol, a professor should stress the importance of group collaboration. Joanna Wolfe identifies the two most important reasons collaborative work is essential to quality pedagogy:

1. To prepare students for the workplace by providing opportunities to learn the social and organizational skills necessary for productive teamwork.
Employers in many fields want to hire graduates who already have experience working collaboratively.

2. To improve the educational experience through collaboration with fellow students. Educational research suggests that people learn the most when working with peers toward a common goal. When students discuss problems with an instructor or someone else who is considered an expert, they tend to automatically defer to the expert’s viewpoint. However, when students discuss problems with peers, they are freer to debate and think through the problem and all the issues involved. (5)

If students realize the collaborative writing they do in the virtual classroom is building the foundation for the group behavior the exhibit in the workforce, they may strive to learn from their experiences interacting with another.

A protocol can serve many purposes that are helpful to both professors and students alike. This document can function as a set of technical instructions that students could follow to assess whether they can resolve issues within their group or whether they need to involve the instructor. This concept implies that all students would be both accountable and responsible for handling group conflicts in accordance with the professor’s guidelines.

Another useful method of decreasing group problems is having a predetermined model each group will follow. Mechenbier utilized this method in Business Writing by encouraging each group to elect a leader who would assign tasks to other group members based on their strengths. Wolfe, too, emphasizes the importance of having a “project
manager” to keep team members on task: “The project manager’s primary responsibility is to track the status of the project and to ensure that all team members know what they should be doing at any moment” (13). After a responsible leader is elected, the group can then “divide and layer” tasks into sections to evenly distribute the workload according to individual strengths. This method is most useful in DL groups when members begin working together for the first time.

Because individual work is due prior to group formation, students are able to ease into group work by sharing their own products. After the group members learn one another’s styles and strengths, they are ready to begin “layering” the work to form a cohesive whole. Wolfe describes “layering” as each team-member being assigned one or more specific roles. Each person works on the document in turn, adding his or her own expertise to the product. The document slowly accumulates in layers as each team member revises and improves upon what already exists” (6). This step has the potential to produce the most cohesive, professional product from a group. However, this method may prove difficult for DL groups because of time constraints. One student being able to build off of another’s work requires almost daily submissions and constant editing from other group members. Group 6 successfully employed this technique. However, groups with poor communication skills like those possessed by Group 12 are unlikely to benefit from this method.
VIII. The Future of Distance Learning at Kent State University

When I began writing this thesis in 2011, I knew DL had considerably increased in popularity since I started at KSU in 2008. My initial perceptions about DL changed dramatically over time. In my freshman and sophomore years, I viewed DL as a means for graduate students to work on their Masters’ degrees from home. I thought the only people who registered for DL were those who had full-time jobs and families. At that time, I did not realize the majority of students who enrolled in DL were undergraduates. When one of my peers suggested I take a Classical Mythology class online, I began to understand that DL was not as limited as I had originally thought. After my sophomore year, I started noticing that KSU’s administration was increasingly promoting online classes. There was abundant advertising across the university, as well as television commercials and billboards promoting online courses. Since then, the “push” to go online has been increasingly noticeable at Kent.

Writing in the *DKS*, Suzi Starheim published a chart in 2010 from the provost’s office highlighting student enrollment in DL courses across the university from 2008-2009. In spring of 2008, enrollment consisted of 873 students in 41 sections. The following spring, enrollment in DL courses had increased by 70%, with 1489 students in 60 sections. In summer of 2008 alone, 584 students enrolled in 36 DL sections. The next summer session, enrollment increased by 160%, with 1322 students in 79 sections; a larger enrollment than in the spring of 2008. Although these numbers show a steady increase in DL enrollment at KSU, the most impressive statistics are those for fall of
2008 and 2009. In fall of 2008, 415 students were taught in 22 sections. The following fall, enrollment in DL jumped by 300%, with 1245 students being taught in 55 sections (1). With a 300% increase in fall enrollment from 2008-2009, DL is receiving attention from university administrators, who in turn promote it. Provost Frank explains the increase in enrollment as the result of DL’s convenience: “Online course enrollment has increased at Kent State in response to the university working to make these courses more readily available for students . . . online courses and the flexibility the offer contribute to the increase in enrollment” (Starheim 6).

As enrollment grew, administrators are trying to publically legitimize DL as a pedagogically sound method of delivery. Frank told Starheim that DL has technical tools that force student participation in a way live classrooms cannot: “If you mix and match them [DL teaching tools], you can get students engaged and they can’t hide in the corners or sit in the back (of a classroom). They have to be paying attention, and you can really pull a student into the here and now of a class very effectively online in ways you can’t do in big lecture courses.” Frank acknowledges that students expect online classes to be easier than f2f classes, but he asserts that DL courses “are more time-demanding and if students don’t budget their time well, they get themselves in a crunch for time and don’t do well in the course” (Starheim 6). Frank’s belief in DL has prompted the provost’s office to encourage faculty to develop new programs for online courses. As Starheim writes, “faculty were chosen to receive grants to help develop new online courses. The grants were $6,000 more than their salary” (6). These grants and new research opportunities are laying the foundation for DL’s future at KSU.
Recent statements from Frank indicate that KSU is late in adopting DL. Because Frank is accepting a new job as the President of the University of New Mexico, he has been particularly vocal about the next provost. Frank has assured students that one of the university’s main priorities will be establishing itself as a legitimate provider of quality DL courses. He stresses that the next provost must have a solid foundation in DL in order to develop and achieve university goals: “We are late to the distance learning game. A lot of other universities got in it more quickly than we did with more emphasis. If we are going to really have effective programs, we need to make sure that we don’t waste much more time in that area.” Franks says the new person will have to have experience with DL because it “will be one of the big issues this new person will have to advance” (Starheim 1).

In June of 2011, Frank contacted KSU faculty to update them on the growth of DL: “Distance learning is growing at an annual rate of 25 percent at U.S. colleges and universities. About 500 institutions of higher education account for two-thirds of the distance learning volume, and public four-year colleges and universities are moving very aggressively” (“Distance Learning Opportunities Assessed”). This prompted Frank to commission “a rigorous systemwide assessment of distance learning opportunities in preparation for crafting a university distance learning strategy” (“Provost’s Update November 2011”). The team’s findings showed the following: “Nationally, there are about 19 million DL students in higher education, with Kent State possessing a 0.2-percent market share at present. Of the 3,750 institutions of higher education, 500 account for 67 percent of DL. Enrollment is growing 20 percent annually, with 30 percent
of students taking at least one DL class. About half of present DL volume may simply be students who would otherwise be taking face-to-face courses” (Frank). Associate Provost for Extended Education (Rubin) and his collaborators decided the best plan of action to improve DL at KSU is to follow four guidelines:

1) “We should spend academic resources based upon a systemwide perspective and strategy.”

2) “We should provide high-quality online education that meets or exceeds national standards, such as those established by the Quality Matters program.”

3) “We should produce significant incremental demand and income with our DL courses and programs, not simply shift existing students to online studies.”

4) “We should provide instructor support and create an effective course development and refinement process.” (Frank)

The email goes on to explain that Lefton and Frank examined the team’s research and deemed it a “sound template for Kent State's DL strategy.” Lefton and Frank aim to “propel Kent State to the forefront of Ohio providers of high-quality DL education” (Frank).

What does this mean for KSU? In February of 2011, Lefton sent out a university-wide email highlighting his goals for the beginning of KSU’s DL initiative: “As the world gets smaller and social media continue to blur national and cultural boundaries, Kent State is moving forward with a multifaceted approach to meeting the needs of our richly diverse student body. Two of the most critical of these initiatives reflect the realities that the world has become our constituency and that we must serve students in
ways and at times that are convenient for them: our expansion of distance-learning classes and programs and our growing efforts to reach out to prospective students in new corners of the globe” (“In A Flash-Weekly Message from President Lefton”). This email was one of Lefton’s first emails to the student body that signaled KSU’s DL expansion initiative. This expansion of DL allows KSU to reach students who would otherwise never take courses here.

Deborah Huntsman, a member of the team Frank commissioned to execute a university-wide analysis of DL, told the DKS that KSU’s goal to provide quality DL courses will not be limited to students enrolled at KSU: “We want students coming from a number of states other than Ohio, and that will also offer options to students studying abroad or to international students to keep their program of study on track” (Starheim 6). KSU’s expansion initiative seeks to make KSU a “premier provider for transfer courses online in the State of Ohio” (Mechenbier “DL”). As a marketing strategy, this means Lefton is encouraging DL committee members to design core courses that will be transferable to any Ohio university. Lefton has released the “President’s Strategic Initiative for Distance Learning” in which KSU would be one of the first universities in Ohio to transform Kent Core Courses to DL courses that would be considered “statewide transfer modules” (Mechenbier “DL”). This is what the Provost’s most recent email to faculty explained about transfer modules:

Of each program under consideration [DL transfer module], we should ask the following questions:

· *Is there national workforce demand for the major or profession?*
Does the program have significant growth potential?

Are there large numbers of prospective students throughout the nation?

The answers have led us to the following conclusions. We should develop and refine 50 to 75 online Kent Core courses that represent our highest enrollment, are part of the transfer module and have faculty interested in participating. In addition, we should develop 10 to 12 online graduate programs. With present online courses that fall into one of those two categories, we should enhance those courses to meet national standards similar to the Quality Matters program. We should robustly market the courses and programs to claim a leadership position as a high-quality DL institution. This is the path we plan to follow. (Frank)

The third question Frank addressed was concern about the volume of possible students who would be enrolling in these courses throughout the nation. Although this university-wide project is being geared toward transfer modules that are acceptable within Ohio, the administration believes these courses have the potential to become a nationally accepted standard in higher education.

The increase in DL enrollment at KSU has prompted action from administrators to cater to student needs. However, KSU is not the only university experiencing rapidly increasing demand for DL courses. In a study based on responses from over 2,500 universities over a period of five years, research shows that online enrollment has been increasing “substantially faster” than total higher education enrollment (1).

Allen and Seaman’s study observed the DL enrollment rate in 2,500 universities over a span of five years. Their results are striking:
The number of students taking at least one online course continues to expand at a rate far in excess of the growth of overall higher education enrollments. The most recent estimate, for fall 2006, places this number at 3.48 million online students, an increase of 9.7 percent over the previous year. The number of online students has more than doubled in the four years since the first Sloan survey on online learning. The growth from 1.6 million students taking at least one online course in fall 2002 to the 3.48 million for fall 2006 represents a compound annual growth rate of 21.5 percent. The size of the entire higher education student body has grown at an annual rate of around 1.5 percent during this same period (from 16.6 million in fall 2002 to 17.6 million for fall 2006 - Projections of Education Statistics to 2015, National Center for Education Statistics). . . . Students taking at least one online course now represent almost 20 percent of total enrollments in higher education. (5)

Clearly, the growth period of DL enrollment has been increasing at a substantial rate since DL’s inception. Allen and Seaman project the enrollment increase will level off as new universities participate in DL: “Online enrollments have grown at an unprecedented rate over the five-year period examined by the Sloan online learning reports. The number of students taking at least one online course has more than doubled during the study period. Such a high level of growth will not be sustainable forever. The number of potential online students is finite, and at some point the ability of colleges and universities to add and expand online courses and programs will be reached” (15). Allen
and Seaman posit market saturation will be brought about by all universities participating in DL in the future. In their report, they show:

The extraordinary growth in online enrollments has been fueled by two factors: New institutions entering the field by introducing their first online offerings; Institutions with existing online offerings introducing new online courses and programs and growing their existing online courses and programs. Examining these factors in turn, the results for the past year show that the number of institutions providing online offerings has remained relatively stable. There has been a small increase in the proportion of institutions with online offerings, but this growth is quite modest. The rapid increase in the number of institutions entering the field is nearing the end of its natural progression. (15)

Although saying “growth in DL enrollment is leveling off” sounds negative, it means that new universities will not be adding to the statistics that are already considered in the study because most universities will have already adopted DL. This number does not solely reflect student enrollment in DL, but it accounts for the percentage of universities who are participating in the pedagogy. Further, this means that the percentage of student enrollment in DL will remain stable, and DL will become a commonly accepted form of instructional delivery in higher education.

Both the statistics from this study and the evidence from KSU’s new initiative indicate that DL course offerings and online course delivery will significantly shape the way online course delivery in the future. The importance of developing sound pedagogy
for DL is critical to successfully teaching students at a university level. DL’s future in higher education is secure. With an increasing demand from students and university administrators, the pedagogical and financial impact of DL cannot be ignored.
IX. The Impact of DL on University Professors

How will DL change the way instructors teach? How will it affect higher education?

Consider the effect DL has on instructors currently teaching at a college level. First, think about the need for professors who can teach DL. Currently, if an instructor is DL-capable with at least a QM Level 1 (APPQMR) certification, she increases her marketability and chances of being hired by a university that offers courses in DL. QM is a nationally recognized program. At KSU, not all professors who teach DL are QM certified; the demand for these instructors is so great that certification is not yet a requirement. Professors may realize DL is time consuming because “tracking” students consumes a lot of time for the instructor; to resolve “fights,” she has to sort through posts, dates, and emails. In addition to temporal concerns, senior faculty members may not be comfortable with the technological aspect of DL. When universities hire new instructors, schools are more likely to hire someone who is already equipped (or willing) to teach classes through a CMS. For aspiring instructors, this means teaching demonstrations may require two components: live and asynchronous performance. Instructors will have to demonstrate that they can adapt a f2f course to meet online requirements. This progressive approach to online teaching will impress prospective employers and set a higher standard for DL pedagogy by making it common practice for technologically capable instructors. If a professor is able to show her future employers a previously constructed course site, she can prove her pedagogy is compatible with their needs. If she is prepared to demonstrate
her abilities in DL, she is more marketable and hirable than someone who is hesitant to teach online.

Second, consider the way the technological aspects of DL affect those who are already experienced with asynchronous delivery. Because DL is inherently online, it changes as new technology develops. Apple will always have a new iPhone, the Kindle will keep updating, and tablets will continue to evolve. No matter how experienced a DL professor is, she is always going to constantly adapt to new technology. Recent technological innovations that have been made accessible to the public are now infiltrating DL in higher education. Tools like Skype, IM, and blogging have all translated onto CMS systems as Wimba, Blackboard Chat, and message boards. Although VISTA is a reliable platform for delivery, it changes periodically. How should a professor react to continuous technological innovations? As I said earlier, do not overcomplicate things. If a professor has developed an exceptional method of teaching through using a specific VISTA tool, she does not have to change it just because a new technological innovation has been developed. Universities will continually purchase software and delivery systems, but not all technological fads maintain a presence online.

However, I recommend staying up to date with current technology in a way that benefits both professor and students. If a professor experiments with a PC Tablet and her students respond well to it, she could consider integrating it into her pedagogy. Unless a university specifically demands that new technology needs to be included in a course, I suggest continuing with what is comfortable and can be effectively delivered, but experiment with and pilot new technology. Online pedagogy changes much more rapidly
than f2f classrooms; the standards for online instructors are ephemeral. The instructor must familiarize herself with CMS updates to ensure the delivery method she is using is effective and meets learning objectives. Being aware of online teaching trends is absolutely necessary; a professor can stay current with trends by attending conferences and participating in continuing education.

The latest trend at KSU initiated by President Lefton at KSU is the shell course. A shell course is a template designed by an instructor who has been hired by the Office of Continuing Studies (led by Provost Rubin) to construct a course prototype that can be distributed throughout the university. These shells will theoretically allow for transfer modules to count for credit at every university in Ohio. This potentially lucrative venture raises issues that could be detrimental to sound teaching pedagogy because it limits instructor individuality and specialization, thus theoretically tainting the reputation of DL.

How will experienced professors maintain individuality in a pedagogical environment that is already perceived as isolated and disengaged? Predesigned shells impose serious restrictions on the development and conveyance of a professor’s DL persona. This method puts instructors in danger of becoming Warnock’s “drone” because they will be out of touch with their material and design.

What does a shell mean for the professors constructing it, as well as the professors who are teaching in one of these templates? It means the university will own the course and all teaching materials within it. The university owns the intellectual property rights of
a constructed shell. How can one put a price on someone’s teaching materials? How can the quality of material be fairly assessed?

The next issue that is currently developing in DL is the diversity of the students enrolled in the classes. My perceptions of the students enrolled in DL courses were completely altered from when I first began college. Having studied the pedagogy, I have come to realize that DL is accessible to many people who may have missed opportunities to experience higher education. Professors in DL are going to encounter more non-traditional students. A professor’s ability to teach-and-reach a wide population must adapt and expand with her demographic within the course site. Some students may have graduated from high school 15 years ago. This student will have a difficult time with deadlines if she is unaccustomed to the demands of a DL course. Although KSU already has a number of such students (especially through partnerships with community colleges, study abroad programs, and ESL programs), there are also adult learners, military students, and prisoners who take online classes. This easy accessibility to higher education opens the doors for a wide spectrum of diversity in a DL classroom. Students can be halfway across the world while still enrolled in a Business Writing course at KSU. This level of student accessibility will present professors with a unique set of challenges in the classroom, but it will also open doors in terms of being globally connected to students who can offer diverse perspectives in class discussion.

The last challenge I see DL facing in the future is the standard and quality of teaching distributed through DL. As DL evolves, CMS systems will only improve. My only critique is that DL is not meant for every type of student, and I have seen that many
students enroll in a DL course without realizing the amount of work necessary for success in it. This is happening more frequently as DL is marketed as a delivery platform that allows students to multitask (i.e., “get your degree while you’re working!”) ads. If students enroll in these courses without being properly prepared, teachers may begin to lower grading standards to match student quality, thus decreasing academic rigor and the value of the B.A. If this happens on a wide scale, the results could be disastrous for higher education. Hopefully, universities will require that all DL classes and DL instructors receive QM accreditation, as well as develop their own system that accredits a courses on the basis of content.

The DL questions and problems I intend to research and solve in graduate school pertain to many of these issues. However, I plan to focus on studying the effectiveness of the shell course at KSU to determine whether this model of delivery is pedagogically sound. If it is not, I will seek to provide solutions to reestablish the soundness of DL courses so that instructors can develop their own presence and personae which is central to the success of a DL course.

In reading this thesis, I hope you have gained a deeper insight to the challenges presented with this method of teaching. As well, I hope it will help you if you ever think about teaching online. This 18-month project has helped me gain understanding, wisdom, and knowledge that I sincerely hope will be helpful to future asynchronous educators. Whether you’re a seasoned DL instructor, a newcomer, or a student writing an Honors Thesis, I hope this practical guide offers insight that will grant you confidence in understanding DL.
Works Cited


<Educationconnection.com>.

Frank, Robert G. “Distance Learning Opportunities Assessed.” Message to faculty. 7 June 2011. E-mail.

---. “Provost’s Update November 2011.” Message to faculty. 10 Nov. 2011. E-mail.


Mechenbier, Mahli Xuan. “DL.” Message to Dr. Dugas and Jordan Canzonetta. 20 Jan 2011. E-mail.

---. “Professor Involvement.” Personal Interview. 10 Sept. 2011.


Group Interactions Logs:


APPENDIX A

Team Responsibilities Report

Instructions: Each team member will fill out the report individually (it will help if you keep a list of things you have done as you are working on the report so that when it comes time to fill out the team responsibilities report, you can submit an accurate accounting). Then send the report to the designated project manager who will compile the individual reports into one document. The project manager will then send the completed report back to each team member for the electronic signature (type your name at the bottom of the report). Sign the completed document only if you agree to the final reporting of fulfilled responsibilities each member has reported. The project manager will upload the completed and signed report to me along with the team’s assignment.

Each team member is responsible for collaborative writing for all group assignments.

(Capitalize on identified individual strengths, i.e., who is good at organizing information; at spelling, grammar, and punctuation; at editing; at proofreading. However, no one person is responsible for all the writing; write collaboratively. Any member of the team who has not contributed fairly—the team may decide this by not signing off on the report—will receive no credit: not partial credit, but NO credit).

List the meetings/chats you have attended and note your absences if you have missed any scheduled meetings/chats.

Note: before your team turns in this report, it must be sent to each team member for final approval. That way no one can say he or she contributed something when in fact it may not have been done.

Team #: 

Team Project Name: 

Team Members:
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 

Research Articles (if relevant):

Team Member (name):

Name of article and bibliographical information: 
cite bibliographical information using correct MLA formatting)
Brief but informative summary of the article and its usefulness for the project:

List of Accomplished Tasks

Team Member #1 (name):
(list of accomplished tasks for the project; there may be more than five tasks or less—add or delete numbers where appropriate)

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

Team Member #2 (name):
(list of accomplished tasks for the project; there may be more than five tasks or less—add or delete numbers where appropriate)

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

Team Member #3 (name):
(list of satisfactorily accomplished tasks for the project; there may be more than five tasks or less—add or delete numbers where appropriate)

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 

Team Member #4 (name):
(list of satisfactorily accomplished tasks for the project; there may be more than five tasks or less—add or delete numbers where appropriate)

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5.
I agree that all tasks that are listed with each team member's satisfactorily accomplished tasks are accurate. I agree that each person has done his or her share of the workload, including research, planning, collaborative writing, revising, and editing. I am satisfied that the work was distributed fairly.

Electronic Signature of each team member (type your name):

1.
2.
3.
4.
APPENDIX B

Web Course Student Protocols

Taking a web-based course, although similar in goals and outcomes to a classroom course, is different in delivery. Although web-based courses sound easy, they are not. They are more demanding, and are therefore not for everyone. Web-based courses require certain expectations that you should know about before committing yourself.

If you

• are an independent learner and can commit yourself to independent study;
• are able to follow written directions, guidelines, and assignments from your professor;
• are able to discipline yourself to adhere to the written guidelines, instructions, due dates, and other demands that require maturity and self-responsibility;
• can communicate effectively with others through the discussion forum and e-mail;
• can communicate effectively through your written assignments (research papers);
• are able to develop a satisfying distance relationship between yourself and your professor, between yourself and your fellow students;
• have strong writing skills (you will be asked to write a lot and to write correctly to avoid misunderstandings and/or garbled communication);
• possess strong reading and reading comprehension skills (you will be asked to do a lot of reading);
• believe that you are responsible for yourself and your work;

then a web-based course may be for you.

If you

• prefer regular face-to-face student/teacher contact;
• like sitting in a classroom in which you can develop a working relationship with other students;
• work best within the structured environment of the classroom;
• need extra explanation about readings, assignments, and your written work;
• have shaky writing and/or communication skills;
• have trouble meeting deadlines or committing yourself to other responsibilities the course may demand of you;

then a classroom course may be best for you.

What your web-based professor expects from you:

• know how to operate your computer and software;
• contact the University before class begins to ensure your computer can handle Web Vista;
• understand and follow written, i.e., posted instructions;
• post online discussions in a friendly, yet scholarly manner;
• post online discussions that are free of grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors;
• post at least the minimum discussion requirements in a regular, substantive manner that are outlined in the syllabus;
• read assigned novels, articles, short stories; posted guidelines, e-mails, discussions, paper comments, etc.;
• turn in work on time (late assignments are accepted according to syllabus policy only);
• respect your professor as a professional who is able to assess your work better than your mother, your father, your co-workers, etc.;
• follow directions and fulfill the requirements of the course;
• stay in contact with your professor regarding your work, expectations, and/or problems that may arise as they are occurring—not at the end of the course;
• If you e-mail your professor, be realistic and expect an answer between 24-48 hours (not right away);
• accept your grades with grace.

Bear in mind that English courses requires strong writing, reading, and communication skills, and you will be graded according to the standards of correct English usage. I comment extensively on each paper, and I expect you to read them and put them to use. Do not make the same errors over and over; you can thus expect to be graded accordingly.

What your web-based professor will not tolerate:
• absence from the course—read the expected “attendance” policy and follow them;
• impolite or even polite e-mails arguing your grades (my mother, my father, my co-workers, etc. read my paper and they think it’s a good paper);
• plagiarized work, which will earn an automatic F and an official report to the Department;
• flaming any person on the discussion page or in e-mails;
• disrespectful or hurtful behavior to either your professor or to other students.

These are my responsibilities to you:
• I am present during the days I indicate on the syllabus.
• I stay in regular contact through e-mails, announcements, discussions, etc.
• I give out several phone numbers if you need to speak with me (I do not mind these calls, so do not worry about calling me).
• I am willing to explain any assignment, reading, and/or due date if you believe my instructions are not clear.
• I will not argue, negotiate, or change a grade. I spend approximately one hour on each paper that I read and grade. Once I assign a grade, accept it gracefully.
• If you are a student with a disability, you must contact the Geauga Campus in order to receive accommodations. This course originates at Geauga, and even though you may have registered at Kent or any other campus, you must also register at Geauga.
• I offer you a course in which you will receive the expected goals and expectations as set forth by the University and the Department of English. Your learning experience will be intense but satisfying. However, the level of satisfaction depends upon a symbiotic relationship. This course can only be as good as I offer, and it can only be as satisfying as your level of commitment.

I have been teaching web-based courses for several years, and the reason I use this format is because I believe in it as an effective teaching and learning tool, it is satisfying to me as a scholar, and my students have reported a good learning experience. The learning is deeper; the participation informs the course (the more you participate, the more you will learn), and the reading, writing, and communication skills are constantly in demand and therefore continually improving.

A university education is not for everyone. However, I do believe strongly that for those students who desire such an education and are willing to work smart and commit to their studies, that Kent State University should offer that opportunity. Web-based courses are the golden opportunity for students who
are place bound, work bound, or are otherwise unable to attend school in the classroom. If you are such a student, then web-based courses are a good choice to assist you in earning your degree.

I look forward to working with you.

Mahli Xuan Mechenbier

Prof. Mahli Xuan Mechenbier
Kent State University
APPENDIX C

GROUP AGREEMENT

Dear Student:

In the event that a dispute should occur between you and one of your colleagues, I urge you to follow the procedures specified in this document to resolve conflict. In a professional environment, you will work with diverse groups of people. If a problem arises, you and your colleagues should attempt to resolve the conflict before alerting higher management. This is why group work in Business Professional Writing is essential to your development as a professional: it prepares you for challenges you may face in future collaboration with colleagues. Before you begin working with your group, you are to sign this document and submit it to the dropbox. You will be denied access to your group discussion board until this document is submitted. Signing this document is an acknowledgement and written agreement that you will follow professional procedures and protocol when working with your classmates.

- Remember: Because this course is asynchronous, documenting your interactions is essential to resolving conflict.
I, ____________________________ agree to follow the procedures set forth by the Group Agreement. I consent that failure to comply with this document may result in grade penalization if a group dispute is handled improperly or not in accordance with this protocol.
APPENDIX D

Course Design

Figure A illustrates the instructor’s view of a VISTA site that has yet to be constructed. This is the basic skeleton of every DL course on Blackboard. An instructor can choose to upload assignments and design course content according to her preferences. She may also view the course as a student would see it; this allows her to design the structure in a way that is user-friendly for her students.
Figure B represents the SCORM option on vista, which allows an instructor to upload a previous course in its entirety.
Figure C shows the “Course Content” module, which allows the instructor to create files and design the course homepage. Uploading files and creating the homepage is one of the fundamental steps of designing a course.
Figure D illustrates Mechenbier’s course site for Business and Professional Writing. This is an example of a successful and uniquely designed course. With a colorful background and well-organized distribution of material, Mechenbier enhances the visual appeal of the site and establishes her individual persona.