

THE NEW NORMAL: CARRYING LESSONS FROM WRITING INSTRUCTION  
DURING COVID-19 FORWARD

by

Kaitlyn Marie Benacquisto

HONORS THESIS

Submitted to Texas State University  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
graduation in the Honors College  
May 2021

Thesis Supervisor:

Ron Haas

Second Reader:

Sara Ramírez

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to all the teachers I have had who pushed me to be my best and inspired a love for writing in me. I aspire to do the same for my own students.

I would like to thank all of the instructors who gave me the opportunity to interview them. Their insight and time were invaluable to this project, and I cannot thank them enough for being willing to share both with me during such a chaotic time. I would also like to thank Ron's Wednesday Night Writes crew for participating in my focus group. I couldn't have asked for a more thoughtful group of students. Finally, a big thank you to my second reader Dr. Sara Ramírez, who I asked to be a part of this project because of her own dedication to thoughtful writing instruction within her classes. Thank you for your meaningful feedback and for pushing me to explore more perspectives within this research. Of course, the biggest thank you of all goes to Dr. Ron Haas, my supervisor and partner in crime. I cannot thank you enough for the time and support you have given me throughout this process.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	i
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.   TECHNOLOGY AND TOOLS.....	8
III.  INCLUSIVITY.....	25
IV.  COMMUNICATION.....	39
V.   RELATIONSHIPS.....	48
VI.  CONCLUSION.....	62
VII.  HELPFUL RESOURCES.....	67
REFERENCES.....	70

## **ABSTRACT**

This research looks at the successes and failures of instruction and facilitation of instruction in writing-intensive classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is evidence-based research with best practices for online writing instructors, this research focuses primarily on the experiences of professors who had little or no prior experience with online teaching before the pandemic. As part of my research, I interviewed professors who teach writing-intensive classes across the College of Liberal Arts as well as an expert in writing enriched curriculums (WEC). I also conducted a student focus group and gathered additional research for synthesis centered around best practices for online writing instruction and writing across curriculums (WAC). This research provides insights into the successes and failures of writing instruction in regard to the four main areas of technology, inclusivity, communication, and professor-student relationships during the past year of online instruction. Eventually most professors and students will return to face-to-face, but it is widely acknowledged that the return to face-to-face will look different than it did prior to the pandemic. This research aims to synthesize what we already know from best practices with the experiences of those teaching and learning during COVID-19 in order to make broad suggestions for teaching writing in the new normal.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### **A Silver Lining to the Pandemic**

In March of 2020, Texas State University, like many other universities across the country, released students for an early spring break from which they did not return for the rest of the semester. Face-to-face learning effectively ended, and all faculty became online instructors. As I write this, it has been just over a year since COVID-19 shut down Texas State; we have almost made it out the other side of the pandemic and are now in a position to reflect on the past year of online writing instruction. Writing instruction across curriculums has much room to improve. We did not need a pandemic to prove this, but we got one to prove it anyways. Although the disruptions to education have been dramatic, we can look at the pandemic in terms of the silver lining to writing instruction: it presents a unique opportunity for change in the return to the “new normal” of face-to-face classes.

I have worked closely with student writing from the start of my undergraduate career. I was a peer writing mentor with Dr. Ron Haas; I am a writing tutor for the Student Learning Assistance Center on campus; and I am one of the managing editors for *TXSTUR*, the *Texas State Undergraduate Research Journal*. As much as I enjoy and value the opportunity to work with student writing in so many facets, the quality of student writing has been overwhelmingly underwhelming. The writing skills of many students are simply not where they need to be. I spoke to several instructors in preparation to write this, and they agreed. However, it is important to stress that this is not a new problem. Writing instruction has been failing students for decades (Russel,

1991). The difference now is that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a unique chance to capitalize on opportunities to improve problems that pre-date the pandemic.

For this project, I wanted to look at writing-intensive course instruction specifically because the instructors of these courses are typically not explicitly trained in how to teach writing and yet the responsibility of improving student writing lies on their shoulders. It is widely acknowledged by literacy scholars that a first-year composition course is not enough instruction for our students to become effective writers—further instruction and discipline specific instruction must continue to happen beyond freshman year (Palmquist et al., 2020). Many universities have begun to create programs and centers specifically designated to writing across the curriculums (WAC), ranging from big state schools like University of Oklahoma, private universities like Grinnell College, and community colleges like LaGuardia Community College. All WAC programs were not created equally, and each program looks different. Some are independent centers that are meant to support faculty of writing enriched or intensive classes, while other programs require writing seminars spanning all four years of a student’s undergraduate career.

While we do not have any kind of formal WAC program at Texas State, there is the expectation that writing instruction continues throughout undergrad. The university requires that undergraduate students must have nine semester credit hours of writing intensive courses taken through the university to graduate. Writing intensive courses are defined by Texas State as “undergraduate courses for which at least 65 percent of the grade must be based on written exams or assignments, and at least one writing assignment must be 500 words or more in length” (“Degree and Graduation Policies,”

2020-2021). Beyond this, the intention of writing intensive courses at Texas State becomes muddled. I assume the intention of these courses is to further improve and expand upon students' writing skills, but such an intention is not explicitly stated anywhere on the Texas State website nor is it explicitly told to instructors of such courses. To my knowledge, and as explained to me by instructors, there is no auditing from the university to follow up on whether instructors of writing intensive courses are actually meeting the meager guidelines outlined in the undergraduate catalog. While the lack of follow-up from the university is a problem in and of itself, it is even more problematic to consider that instructors of writing intensive courses do not have any clear instruction on what their course is supposed to be doing for student writing. Maybe they are supposed to be improving students' grammar, or maybe they are intended to encourage students to think critically through writing, or maybe they are supposed to be teaching discipline-specific writing conventions. The problem here is that those are all maybes. Without clear guidelines, instructors are left to make their own assumptions about how they are supposed to be facilitating writing instruction in their courses.

I chose to direct this research towards instructors of writing intensive courses because of the ambiguity of their responsibilities. Students are coming to college with drastically different skill sets, which means that more times than not, time in composition courses is spent learning the basic building blocks of writing. For some students, the composition course is redundant, and for others it is still not enough. Nonetheless, we cannot place the responsibility of teaching writing solely on composition instructors. Writing does not occur in a vacuum, nor should we expect it to do so. It needs to be taught and improved upon in every course that a student takes involving writing, and so

far, we have failed at this. Writing holds tremendous power as a tool for advocacy, for social mobility, and for self-efficacy. We owe it to students to give them adequate writing instruction, and while this starts in the composition classroom, it should not end there.

It is particularly important to emphasize writing instruction at Texas State given that our student body is composed of students already at a disadvantage when it comes to writing. In Fall 2020, the student body was 43 percent White, 39 percent Hispanic, 11 percent Black, six percent other/unknown, and one percent international. The gender make-up was 60 percent female and 40 percent male. From Fall 2019 to Fall 2020, enrollment dropped just under one percent. The most recent information for faculty demographics is from Fall 2019: 72 percent White, 10 percent Hispanic, three percent Black, 10 percent Asian, and five percent other/unknown (“Student and Faculty Demographics,” 2020). This is significant for a few reasons. Primarily, studies show that minorities, specifically Hispanics, have the highest proportion of first-generation college students. On that same note, first-generation college students rate themselves to have worse abilities in math and writing than their peers (Saenz et al., 2007). With the considerable number of minority students that Texas State serves, students struggle even more with writing when compared to universities with primarily White student populations. It is also notable that while Texas State has a diverse student population, the faculty is overwhelmingly White. A study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research proves that students benefit from same-race teachers, and it can affect everything from test scores to attendance to expectations in educational settings (Gershenson et al., 2021). The study was focused on students in K-12, but it could be assumed that the effects do not stop there. I think that the lack of same-race teachers is



particularly significant for writing instruction, which can be an emotional and vulnerable subject.

### **Notes on My Methodology**

I started this project by researching literature on best practices for online writing instruction, for which there is abundant existing research dating back to the 1990s. These best practices were helpful because I am looking primarily at writing instruction online due to COVID-19, but I had to shift some of my understandings of these practices to focus on instructors across disciplines instead of the writing composition instructors that these practices were intended for. Nonetheless, these practices helped me to formulate my interview questions and organize my research. I additionally did research on writing across curriculums (WAC), primarily using WAC Clearinghouse, a collection of open-access books and journals meant to support scholarly exchange across disciplines. Research surrounding WAC helped me to formulate my interview questions for instructors. It also helped me in suggesting practices in areas that were not covered in my interviews. Additionally, I used websites such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* for timely surveys, data about higher education during COVID-19, and op-eds from instructors to supplement areas that my interviews did not cover.

After gathering research, I conducted interviews with Texas State faculty and students in order to see what their experiences teaching and learning writing online during COVID-19 might add to our understanding of existing best practices. I interviewed instructors of writing-intensive courses in the College of Liberal Arts because it is instructors in these departments that are teaching the bulk of writing-intensive courses. In total, I conducted eight interviews with instructors from the

following departments: Philosophy, English, World Languages and Literatures, Anthropology, History, Political Science, and two in Psychology. The instructors have the following academic ranks, listed in no particular order: two lecturers, three senior lecturers, two associate professors, and one professor. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to all of my interviewees by the title of “instructor.” Two of the instructors I interviewed had prior experience teaching in the online format. All of the instructors taught the same writing-intensive course before and sometime during COVID-19 and were thus better able to compare their experiences in face-to-face and online.

In addition to interviews, I conducted a student focus group. The focus group took place at Wednesday Night Writes (WNW), a writing group organized by Dr. Ron Haas. The group consisted of six peer writing mentors who host WNW and three of the regular attendees of WNW. The nine students represent different academic backgrounds and grade classifications. While this particular group of students may not be representative of the “average” student in some ways, I decided on this group of students because they are passionate about writing and likely to reflect more critically on writing instruction.

Finally, I conducted an interview with Dr. Robert Scafe, Writing Enriched Curriculum (WEC) director at University of Oklahoma. The purpose of WEC at OU is to help “departments integrate writing instruction throughout the major” (“Our Team,” n.d.). I further corresponded with Dr. Scafe throughout the semester as a resource to guide me through the literature of WEC/WAC.

After synthesizing my research, interviews, and personal experience, I broke my research down into four main themes in order to derive suggestions for moving forward: technology and tools, inclusivity, communication, and relationships. I begin with

technology and tools because it is the biggest change we have had as a result of COVID-19 and the one that most people have been concerned with. Following this, I transition into inclusivity, another area that has been heavily influenced by COVID-19. Much of the conversation around inclusivity plays into the larger conversation about technology. Following inclusivity, I discuss communication. Communication has changed in ways that are not as obvious but that still require attention. Finally, I end by discussing relationships in writing. I think that this is an important note to end on because relationships between students and instructors are the core of writing instruction. After discussing the four main themes, I offer broad suggestions to carry forward into the new normal and additional resources to expand on the ideas discussed in this thesis.

## II. TECHNOLOGY AND TOOLS

Technology and tools are at the crux of online learning, and thus a perfect starting point. The days of turning hard copies of papers into instructors are in the past, and I would expect that even once the pandemic subsides and we return to classrooms there will be a heavier reliance on technology than before. The role of technology in education is growing significantly over the past decade or so, but it was viewed by most instructors as an optional way of improving aspects of their classes. There had been “techno-fads” in the past—overhead projectors, PowerPoint slides, clickers, and educational tapes—that vowed to transform the classroom and fell short (Mintz, 2017). It is safe to assume that educators were jaded by the empty promises of technology of the past and assumed the same for emerging technology of recent years. However, COVID-19 accelerated the implementation of technology in education, whether instructors or students like it or not.

With all of the technology available at instructors’ fingertips and the pressure to keep students engaged and learning, the possibilities are overwhelming. Each software and system beckons with promises to make an instructor’s job easier or to engage students more effectively. However, the alluring potential of various technology and tools must be approached with caution. Scott Warnock (2009), author of *Teaching Writing Online: How and Why*, advises that instructors follow this guideline when using technology:

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. (p. 19)

While technology can be helpful in myriad ways, an educator's first priority should be their teaching. From there, an instructor can find tools that supplement their lessons in a positive way without taking away from the actual content. Warnock (2009) suggests looking at pedagogical need, technology for that pedagogical need, availability, and the training and learning curve when deciding what technology to implement in a class (p. 20-21). Using this framework can help instructors implement technology in a useful way that does not overload their students and distract from the material.

The golden rule of technology in online learning is to keep it simple. With this in mind, in the following subsections I will explore the tools that were most frequently adopted by Texas State instructors with varying degrees of success, multimodal assignments, and issues that can arise from technology.

### **Feedback tools**

Warnock (2015) writes that "technologies exist to make written response to student writing more efficient *and* effective" (p. 166). Most of the instructors I interviewed spoke to this idea, saying that they feel they are able to give feedback more effectively in the online format due to tools like SpeedGrader and Annotate PRO that speed up the feedback process.

### ***Rubrics***

Rubrics are a tool that were used in many classrooms before COVID-19 and were easily translated into the online format. SpeedGrader in Canvas allows for instructors to use a rubric and will automatically add up the student's score after the instructor assigns

the student a score in each section; while this is a minor benefit, it nonetheless makes the job of the instructor easier. There are many benefits to using a rubric when teaching an online class, as outlined by Stevens and Levi (2013) in their book *Introduction to Rubrics*: they encourage timely feedback, familiarize students with the highest possible level of achievement, encourage critical thinking, facilitate communication between the instructor and student about the assessment, and help refine teaching skills. A rubric can serve to further communication, and thus, the relationship and comfort, between the instructor and a student in a setting in which relationships and communication do not come easy nor naturally.

Moreover, students actually want to see rubrics. With frustration, students in my focus group expressed, “I can’t remember the last time I saw a rubric,” and, “I miss rubrics so much” (Focus group, March 3, 2021). Without a rubric or another form of adequate feedback, students are left wondering why they received the grade they did. As one student in my focus group noted, “I hate feeling like [my grade is] arbitrary. I kind of like to know if they gave me a grade why that grade was chosen” (Focus group, March 3, 2021). I personally could count on one hand the number of instructors I’ve had in college who used a rubric to grade writing. Of the eight instructors I interviewed, four instructors reported using a rubric. All four of these instructors teach a core curriculum class, as well as upper-division courses.

It is easy to understand students’ frustration with the lack of a rubric. In the absence of a rubric, students are left guessing both what their instructor expects from them and what they got points off for. It is also easy to see why an instructor would be hesitant to use a rubric. A student in the focus group said that his professors avoid using

rubrics so that they don't "limit creativity," which is a concern similar to one I heard from an instructor I interviewed who said that they worry their thorough instructions are limiting creativity (Focus group, March 3, 2021; Anonymous interview #3, Feb. 9, 2021). I think it is possible to adjust the language in a rubric so that a student can clearly understand what is expected of them without restricting the student to a narrow interpretation of the assignment. For example, the Association of American Colleges & Universities collaborated nationally with faculty and expert teams to create VALUE, or Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education, which is a set of 16 rubrics that can be used to assess a variety of factors or assignments ("AAC&U Value Rubrics," n.d.). Furthermore, these rubrics are readily available for free online and currently being used by over 2000 institutions. The adaption of such a rubric could help provide uniformity from instructors and clear expectations for students. This is, however, a band-aid as opposed to a genuine solution. Later in the relationships section I discuss the practice of minimal grading as a way to move away from the traditional grading system, and eliminate some of the need for detailed rubrics. Students can communicate more creatively and thoughtfully through their writing without the restrictions that grades and rubrics create.

### ***SpeedGrader***

SpeedGrader is the built-in software on Canvas that allows for instructors to "view and grade student assignment submissions in on place using a simple point scale or complex rubric" as well as a space for instructors to provide feedback to students directly on the document or through text or media comments ("What is SpeedGrader?" n.d.). Two of the instructors I interviewed reported using SpeedGrader to implement rubrics and

give feedback to their students. Of the students in the focus group, all said they had an instructor who used SpeedGrader to give feedback. Unlike other feedback tools, SpeedGrader does not have preloaded comments. Additionally, it is unique in that you are able to use video or audio commentary for the student on the paper (“What is SpeedGrader?” n.d.). A feature like this could be beneficial in fostering a more personable relationship between instructor and student.

### ***Annotate PRO***

Annotate PRO is an add-on for the Chrome browser and Microsoft Word that hosts a library of general and reusable comments on a variety of systems including Google Docs, Canvas, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Microsoft Word, Blackboard, Slack, and others. It holds the potential to expedite the feedback process in a positive way that would give instructors more time to look critically at each of their student’s papers as well as give students feedback that is easy to digest and improve upon. One instructor mentioned this tool, but they do not actually use it because they teach in another language and Annotate PRO is only available in English. However, the instructor created a glossary of comments in OneNote similar to those in Annotate PRO and mimics the software that way. These comments not only include feedback, but also give students resources or examples of how to fix the problem. It is important to note that while such generalized comments can be a good starting point, they are just that—a starting point. Comments must be personalized to the student and the topic they are writing for in order for them to be effective (Sommers, 1982). Nonetheless, feedback with the inclusion of resources can be incredibly helpful for students who never got a



good grip on key concepts in writing and are relying on writing intensive courses for further writing instruction.

### ***Microsoft Word Track Changes***

Microsoft Word's "Track Changes" feature is a function that allows for someone to review a paper while tracking edits that they make as well as adding comments. Only one instructor explicitly mentioned using this feature, but I think it is still worth noting because it is a tool that a large population of students and instructors are comfortable and familiar with. While most instructors may use SpeedGrader because it is available to them on Canvas, Track Changes is the preferred option of most who do not have access to SpeedGrader. For example, at the writing section of the Student Learning Assistance Center, we have an online writing lab in which students can submit their papers to be reviewed; the tutors use Track Changes to suggest revisions to the students. We have students from all disciplines and skill levels that utilize the online writing lab, and we have never had a problem with them understanding comments left on Track Changes. For this reason, I think Microsoft Word's Track Changes feature is a feedback tool that is accessible to everyone, despite skill level or familiarity.

### **Video conferencing tools**

In an unforeseen turn of events, video conferencing became the new brick-and-mortar classroom. While Zoom seems to be the name of the game currently, other video conferencing tools like Microsoft Teams and Google Meet seem to be used for extracurriculars only. For example, I have used Teams for meetings with the General Education Council and I have spoken to other students who use Teams for meetings with various clubs. I also have one professor who uses Teams for office hours. However,

because our university has purchased a package with Zoom in which all instructors and students have free accounts and can host large meetings, Zoom is the primary video conferencing tool used for classes. Of the eight instructors I interviewed, four use Zoom to host class synchronously, one hosts an in-person class once a week and a Zoom meeting once a week, and the other three use asynchronous models. Most instructors have agonized over whether or not to host class synchronously or asynchronously, and those who ultimately chose the synchronous format continue to agonize over how much is reasonable to expect of students—should having the camera on be a requirement? What level of engagement can be expected? How much leniency should be given in regard to attendance? All of the instructors I spoke to had to ask themselves those questions and more when deciding how to structure their class, and they continue to grapple with what they should be expecting. In the relationships section I will discuss instructor expectations and empathy with their students further; in this section, I will examine what Zoom and its various tools look like when employed in the virtual classroom and the benefits and downfalls of such tools.

### *Chat*

The chat feature in Zoom allows for real-time engagement with the class. While it would be ideal if students had their video on and asked questions over their mic, that simply isn't happening in many classes according to my personal experience, the focus group, and my interviews with instructors. Instructors are often lecturing to a screen full of black boxes with names. Even in classes that have cameras as mandatory, by the second or third week, half the class no longer turns their camera on. This leaves the instructor in a peculiar place of trying to engage in discussion with a class full of students

that are boxes in the void. It is often awkward to speak on Zoom without the non-verbal cues that we so heavily rely on in the real world—two students often speak at the same time on top of each other, or no one speaks at all. In my experience, after you do speak at the same time as someone, it is awkward and discouraging to try to speak again. Different instructors have had different experiences with engagement; some say that students that they had in the past who were engaged in the classroom are disengaged on Zoom while those who were disengaged in the classroom feel more comfortable engaging on Zoom. Some said that those who were previously engaged continue to be engaged on Zoom while those who weren't continue not to be.

With that being said, the chat feature is the space for those hesitant students to still be engaged without turning their cameras or mics on. In real-time, students can ask questions or for clarification in the chat without interrupting the instructor or discussion. In my classes, I've observed instructors seamlessly addressing questions or concerns in the chat without straying from their talking points. I would imagine that most instructors who allow the chat feature to remain open have experienced an influx of engagement, but only one instructor explicitly mentioned it in our interview. The instructor who mentioned engagement through the chat feature explained that they chose to leave it open for students partly due to their own experience of watching YouTube videos in which the streamer engages in real-time with their audience through the chat. The instructor said, "Their answers, their questions, their comments are posed in real-time in a way that you couldn't do [in a face-to-face classroom]—you'd have to wait and call on each person individually. Sometimes you really understand if the class is really misunderstanding something or wants to talk longer about something" (Anonymous interview #2, Feb. 9,

2021). In light of all the opportunities that students have to be disengaged in the online format, the chat feature could be critical in the online classroom for students who, for whatever reason, don't turn their camera on during class or don't seek out the instructor during their office hours.

### ***Video recording***

Zoom also allows for instructors to record their classes. This is a feature that many instructors have chosen not to utilize for various reasons. In my classes, instructors have cited privacy reasons as a main concern for not wanting to post recorded classes. There is also the concern that fewer students attending in real-time if class is recorded. During an interview, an instructor also enlightened me to the fact that if classes are recorded and therefore have an asynchronous option, students with a disability cannot receive captioning accommodations. I reached out to the Office of Disability Services and they confirmed, "We provide services for live classes. If some portion of the class is prerecorded, it is the professor's responsibility to have captions on that part" (ODS, personal correspondence, April 19, 2021). While these are all valid and understandable reasons for not recording and posting classes, students in my focus group expressed how much they appreciated the availability of recorded lectures. One student said that recorded lectures allowed for them to actually be present and engaged in asking questions during the live class so that they could go back and watch the recording later to take notes (Focus group, March 3, 2021). Whether this means that recorded lectures are more useful than solely in-person lectures is difficult to say; however, I do think that it means that students learn better when they can go at their own pace. It would be beneficial to address

such cases as they arise to allow students to get the help they need while also keeping attendance up for live class sessions.

What an instructor decides to do with chat, video streaming requirements, and video recording all boils down to what will work best for that course and its students. On the other hand, there are clearer guidelines for using discussion boards in the classroom that can be widely applied regardless of the specific course.

### **Discussion boards**

Discussion boards were around before the pandemic, but they are now a standard component of most syllabi. Usually, the instructor will post a question or prompt based on reading or other class materials and then students are expected to respond and comment on other students' responses. Discussion boards are typically facilitated through the university's learning management system (LMS), which is Canvas at Texas State. Only three instructors I interviewed use discussion boards in their classes; two of the instructors added discussion boards into their class due to the transition to online, while one of the instructors already had discussion boards as part of their classes pre-COVID.

The goal of discussion boards, from what I gather from my own experiences and conversations with instructors, is to mirror the classroom discussions that were previously happening face-to-face. While it seems easy enough, the impassioned responses in my student focus group suggest that it isn't. Most instructors use discussion boards in an attempt to emulate face-to-face discussions, but students often find these discussions painful and receive far less benefit than they did in the physical classroom. Let's compare a face-to-face and online classroom scene: you are in a face-to-face course and have been assigned reading that you will be discussing next class. You have time for about half the

reading, you are able to contribute to the beginning of the discussion, and you are still able to gain understanding and insightful ideas from the rest of the discussion. Perhaps most importantly, you are not penalized for the second half of the reading that you did not complete. Now, you are in an online course and have been assigned reading that you will be asked to make a discussion post over. The discussion post asks that you answer two questions about the reading which will require you to do the reading in its entirety. The reading takes a long time to complete, and even longer to comprehend, and now you must type up a 200-word response to the questions. By the time you finish your response, you are feeling the brain drain and do not have the energy to read through your classmates' posts or comment something insightful, so you stick with the classic, 'Wow, great point! I totally agree' on a post so that you can get your points. Both scenarios require approximately the same work, the bulk of which is the reading, but one allows for more leniency and leaves room for misunderstanding while the other requires the student to fully complete and understand the reading with much less wiggle room. Discussion boards are, unfortunately, the root of many students' pain with online learning because of the tediousness. One of the students in my focus group said, "I don't think that discussion posts manage to emulate that [class discussion] at all. I value them a lot because they're opportunities to continue this routine or this habit of writing regularly which is healthy and productive as a young scholar, but a person, it sucks, having to drag out your ideas in front of a bunch of people" (Focus group, March 3, 2021).

Discussion boards do not have to suck, though. Manager of instructional design and access at Wichita State University Carolyn Speer says that discussion boards often fail because instructors are asking for long, thoughtful responses that would be a better fit

for a blog format (as qtd. in Lieberman, 2019). Open-ended questions are more suitable for a discussion board and will be more successful in nurturing organic and authentic discussion. Instructors have also found success with two methods: cutting down the number of required posts and allowing students to respond creatively such as with a PowerPoint, video, concept map, or through other multimodal forms (Lieberman, 2019). I will expand upon the possibilities with multimodal assignments below, but those two suggestions would allow for discussion posts to feel less like a chore and more like an opportunity for students to engage with each other authentically.

### **Multimodal assignments and instruction**

Multimodal assignments and instruction favor more creativity and inclusivity in the classroom. Multimodal means to work with more than one medium, so a multimodal assignment could look like replacing a written response assignment with a video response in which students must argue their point orally and with visuals. As far as teaching goes, being online means most instructors are already instructing multimodally in a variety of ways, whether it be incorporating videos into their lectures or audio files into their assignment instructions. Christine Joy Edwards-Groves (2011), literacy educator, argues that students with experience in multimodal assignments and instruction “thrive on the utility of technology, creativity, social interaction and communication” (p. 52). Such assignments have the potential to engage students who have been disenfranchised from the writing process.

Writing is intimidating. In its creative forms it is associated with feelings of vulnerability, and with rigid rules and constrictions in its more academic forms. Students often are in the mindset that writing is like a scientific concept—you either get the hang

of it or you don't, and that is that. Writing skills and techniques, however, are honed gradually over a lifetime, and even that is not long enough. Nonetheless, the intimidation remains, but Dr. Scafe thinks multimodal writing assignments offer a solution:

I feel like the best thing we can do to help students who are not from families where everybody went to college-- where academic writing is part of the way you grew up--for those students not to feel intimidated by academic writing, doing things like a podcast, or oral stories, or personal narratives, [will help the student] realize that academic writing is really just another kind of story. It's got its own quirks and its own forms, but it's not that different from other forms that you might be used to. (R. Scafe, personal communication, Feb. 16, 2021).

The online format practically begs us to think outside of the box and utilize the tools at the tips of our fingers. Multimodal assignments have endless potential to appeal to students who don't love, or do well on, weekly writing assignments, to tap into the creativity and passion of students, and to make the grading process less boring for instructors, to make writing less intimidating.

For more specific ideas of multimodal assignments that can be implemented into a course, see the helpful resources list following the conclusion. The ideas are designed for first-year composition courses, but they can easily be manipulated to fit a specific course. The technology necessary for multimodal assignments is typically not anything more than what we are all already using in online learning: audio recording, video recording, screen sharing, and so on. Depending on the objective and complexity of the assignment, more advanced tools can be useful. For example, Dr. Scafe utilizes WordPress to host his music course's blog and display students' virtual museum projects at the end of the



semester. Dr. Scafe also utilizes Audacity, a free, open source, cross-platform audio software, to have his students create podcasts (R. Scafe, personal communication, March 17, 2021). Both of these examples could be used in multiple contexts at any university as these tools are free to use. Although multimodal assignments and other tools discussed in this section are rife with potential, the problems associated with such tools and technology in general have to be weighed alongside the possibilities.

### **Problems with tools**

Technology, with all of its perks, is not without problems. It is very problematic, in fact, as reflected in my interviews with instructors and my own experiences. One instructor commented that some days they feel more like tech support than a professor (Anonymous interview #3, Feb. 9, 2021). When the university had to make the abrupt transition to online learning in the spring of 2020, instructors reported varying levels of support depending on their department. After that initial semester, the university provided more adequate support during the summer. For Texas State specifically, the transition to online learning was made more difficult as we were simultaneously transitioning from Tracs to Canvas LMS between the spring and fall of 2020. ITAC offers virtual, asynchronous training modules over topics like Canvas, Zoom, working remotely, and cybersecurity. Since only one instructor explicitly mentioned these trainings, I would assume that they are not heavily utilized (Anonymous interview #3, Feb. 9, 2021).

One of the most important lessons to be learned from the experiences of instructors and students alike is that instructors need to demonstrate how to use the technology they are expecting students to use prior to expecting them to use it. In “Digital Biomes: Lessons from COVID-19 Remote Coursework Ecosystems and Interfaces,”

Mark Brand (2020) writes about his experience transitioning to remote learning and the importance of demonstrating how to use the tools you expect students to know how to use. In a survey, students reported liking his class because “you tell us *how* to do things, not just *what* to do” (Brand, 2020, p. 4). This is a crucial factor in ensuring that students are getting the most that they can out of a course. In my focus group, one student reported that they thought their instructor was not giving them feedback on any papers, but in reality, they were leaving comments; however, the instructor had never explained or demonstrated how the students could view the comments (Focus group, March 3, 2021). That student missed out on a huge opportunity for growth in writing because the feedback software had not been explained to them.

One of the newer problems we are encountering with technology is that, at this point, we are all weary of it. “Zoom fatigue” is a household phrase. Brand’s (2020) students described the “relentless face-to-face ‘engagement’ that felt invasive, awkward, and generally exhausting” (p. 4). Dr. Scafe of OU says that the bulk of his job involves meetings with various departments. In response to what obstacles the WEC/WAC field is facing right now, he said simply, Zoom: “Nobody wanted another long Zoom meeting in addition to all this time we’re spending on Zoom—to teach, and our department meetings are on Zoom now—there’s only so much you can do” (R. Scafe, personal communication, Feb. 16, 2021). The constant fatigue associated with online learning—and not only participating in classes online, but additionally work and various meetings for some people—begs the question of how sustainable learning online is.

Another problem, the one we all saw coming, is that our new complete reliance on technology is further exacerbating inequities. Accessibility was and continues to be a

hurdle that is blocking many students, disproportionately students from lower socio-economic status and students of color, from effectively learning online. A study done amongst college students in 2014-2015 found that one in five college students has difficulty consistently accessing technology (Gonzales et al., 2020). There is no question that not having reliable technology would negatively affect a student's academic performance and experience in school; unreliable technology was found to be directly associated with a lower academic performance and inequities in students' general experiences in school (Gonzales et al., 2020). The lack of reliable tech is now mediated somewhat by the fact that Texas State's campus is back open, and all students are able to check out a laptop from the library if necessary and go to the library or elsewhere on campus for (somewhat) reliable Wi-Fi. This still ignores students who are caring for or living with someone who is high-risk and therefore are not living in San Marcos or cannot come on campus. Accessibility and other inclusivity related issues will be explored in the next section.

Our current use and reliance on technology in the online classroom is not like the "techno-fads" of the past. Once face-to-face classes resume, instructors will surely ditch some of the tools they employed in the online classroom, but some will surely stay. For instance, studies have proven that giving feedback electronically is often more effective (Johnson et al., 2019). As a whole, the instructors I spoke to felt like they were able to give more efficient and effective feedback electronically. Additionally, multimodal assignments hold benefits for instructors and students and will hopefully remain a part of classes after returning to face-to-face.

With all of the promises that technology holds for the present and future of learning, it is important to remember that it is not the be-all and end-all. For now, while we cannot avoid our reliance on technology, instructors must think critically about the usefulness of the additional tools that they are using and about their students' knowledge of these tools. Not all students are as tech-savvy as instructors sometimes assume, and my conversations with both instructors and students have emphasized this point; I heard many stories of students missing a key part of the course due to not understanding an aspect of the tech they were being asked to use and of instructors realizing that not all students have a solid understanding of what they considered to be basic tools of their class. It is necessary for instructors to think critically about their use of technology going forward and for students to ask for help if they do not understand something. Most importantly, instructors must not get so caught up in technology that they lose sight of the importance of inclusivity, communication, and relationships.

### III. INCLUSIVITY

The online format has encouraged everyone to think more critically about equity and inclusivity in the classroom. Most of the issues I will address existed long before we had to make the sudden transition to online; this circumstance has merely exacerbated what already existed. Although much of the conversation to be had about inclusivity and equity has to happen at an institutional level, there are endless possibilities for what a single instructor can do to make their classroom as inclusive as possible for all students, including those who have a disability, are non-White, and/or have different learning preferences. In this section, I will examine the barriers to inclusivity, accessibility, and designing inclusive writing assignments.

#### **Barriers to inclusivity**

Online course instruction poses many obvious threats to inclusivity and equity. Computers, reliable internet, and quiet spaces to do class and coursework in are not free, and students often do not have the resources available to pay that price. The online format also threatens the ability to learn for people with different disabilities; some disabilities make accessibility more difficult, while other disabilities like mental illnesses, are made worse by the pandemic and virtual learning. The learning preferences and styles of some students don't pair well with online learning, either. Despite these sizable problems, many of which were huge hurdles that stopped many students from getting an adequate education, I think that many of these barriers are already being overcome. However, some, like the mental health crisis happening amongst college students, are less readily solvable.

#### ***Students with disabilities and disorders***

In the 2015-2016 school year, 19% of undergraduates reported having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). According to the Americans With Disabilities Act (1990), a disability is “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.” Almost one in five undergraduates at a post-secondary institution has a disability that likely makes not only their educational experience in general difficult but specifically their experience of writing for online courses. With such a significant portion of the student population having a disability, it is difficult to overstate how important it is to make appropriate accommodations.

One of the best preemptive steps that instructors can take is to design their course with inclusivity in mind. When I asked instructors what inclusivity and equity issues they encountered, they all prefaced their answers by saying that they designed their courses intentionally to be as inclusive as possible. Instructors can follow a framework called Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which is a way of centering equitable opportunities for all students when thinking about teaching and learning. It favors a flexible approach for the ways that students access and engage with materials (Morin, n.d.). At Texas State, instructors are utilizing flexible approaches as a way to combat the challenges of online learning. With online classes, the only way that a person with a hearing impairment can get a signer or transcriber is if the class is held synchronously. If only recordings of the lectures are available, then accommodations are not available. One instructor encountered this problem and accommodated the student by uploading their lectures to YouTube, which has its own closed captioning system (Anonymous interview

#5, March 2, 2021). A general lack of funding from departments means it can be difficult for instructors to make accommodations within their timeframe and budget. YouTube's closed captioning is a free option for instructors to utilize. Another feasible option for instructors to make their courses more accessible is to utilize books that come in physical, digital, and audio forms.

Inclusivity in course design is one thing, but it is also important for instructors to keep their student's mental health at the forefront. College students are uniquely susceptible to both everyday stress and severe mental illness, and psychiatric symptoms including stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and self-harm are all increasingly common amongst college students (Conrad, Rayala, Menon & Vora, 2020). Under the ADA, mental disorders that fall under the category of disability include bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, major depression, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and personality disorders. Students in the United States already grapple with mental health disorders at higher rates than the rest of the population; a study by Browning of 2500 students found that 85 percent of students experienced high to moderate levels of distress (Gupta 2021). One in four U.S. citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 considered suicide in the thirty days prior to when they completed a survey for the CDC in the summer of 2020; Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black respondents reported considering suicide at higher rates than any other race or ethnicity (Czeisler et al., 2020). Considered along with the emotional labor and vulnerability involved in the writing process, these statistics are daunting. Instructors must keep in mind the sheer number of their students who are struggling with their mental health so that assignments can be created appropriately. For example, if an instructor employs a tool such as a discussion

board, the prompts should be considered carefully, and the responses must be monitored closely in case a student uses it as an outlet to talk about their mental health or as a cry for help. While how a professor assigns and instructs writing can do little in and of itself to fix this problem, it can at the very least not make the problem worse. I discuss monitoring for triggers in discussion boards further in the relationships section.

To be inclusive of students with disabilities (SWD) means to have empathy and show flexibility. What was considered “fair” before does not necessarily translate to fairness in the world of COVID-19 and online learning that nobody signed up for. Granted, it is important to make the best of it and ensure opportunities for learning are not lost, but the same parameters of judgement that were used pre-COVID-19 are not applicable now. In my focus group, one student talked about how the empathy of their instructors during a period of extreme distress in their life allowed them to take care of themselves without dropping their classes (Focus group, March 3, 2021). Alternatively, the instructors I spoke to were already embracing empathy in their classrooms. They stressed the importance of flexibility during this time. In the relationships section, I further discuss the importance of empathy in writing classrooms. I would argue that an empathetic environment and relationship between instructor and student is a first step towards creating a more inclusive classroom. Of course, instructors will have to put in much more work beyond showing empathy to create a truly inclusive classroom and course, but I think that it would be difficult to create an inclusive environment without that groundwork of empathy.

### ***Accessibility***



The “digital divide,” or the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not, is an oft-discussed term that has been around since technology began to be widely introduced to the public. In the wake of Covid-19, the conversation surrounding the digital divide has been revived with a new sense of urgency. As of 2019, 13 percent of K-12 and college students lacked broadband internet at home. Students in rural, low-income, and Latino households are most notably affected (Gao & Hayes 2021). When asked about equity issues in the classroom, every instructor who teaches synchronously mentioned their students’ lack of reliable internet. Often, this forces students to not be able to attend class and effectively halts the learning process, especially in cases where there are no recordings of the lecture or way to make up for what was lost. Sometimes, it means that the instructor adapts; one instructor told me that they held class over the phone several times for some students who lacked reliable internet (Anonymous interview #3, Feb. 9, 2021).

However, now that we have been doing online learning for about a year and quarantine is not as strict, there has been time to adapt. I cannot speak to universities nationwide as there are no statistics available on how many are currently opened in some capacity, but at Texas State, technology accessibility issues are now being mediated by the fact that the university is open. Students who have returned to San Marcos have access to university Wi-Fi, computers, tutoring services, and quiet rooms in the library. The barriers posed by the digital divide can thus be overcome at an institutional level, but it is more difficult when an individual is left to their own resources such as when the pandemic began, and campus was closed. To overcome such barriers where they exist instructors should consider the tech that they are asking students to use. For example, it is

preferred by most instructors that students turn in papers that are on Microsoft Word; for students without a computer or with limited technology such as an iPad or iPhone, Microsoft Word might be impossible, but Google Docs is much more attainable. A student could type a whole paper on their phone using Google Docs. Of course, this would not be ideal for the student or instructor, but such accommodations can be considered in the instance that one does not have access to a computer.

Digital accessibility for SWD has been a monumental challenge since online learning began. According to digital accessibility software company AudioEye, in July and August of 2020, digital accessibility lawsuits increased by 17 times compared to the first half of the year (Weissman 2020). SWD can encounter challenges with anything from audio files without transcription, poor contrast between the text and background, lack of alt-text, the inability of a software used by a SWD to read certain files, blinking and unremovable advertisements on webpages, and so on and so forth. These barriers are by no means small when we are using webpages, videos, audio, and files for literally the entire educational experience. The Office of Disability Services (ODS) at Texas State offers trainings regularly over topics pertaining to accessibility as well as over understanding and allying with SWD. The average attendance of such trainings ranges anywhere from a few to a few dozen (ODS, personal communication, April 8, 2021). With the promise that some technology is here to stay, we should consider making such trainings mandatory. I would gauge instructors' understanding of accessibility issues and the role of ODS to be mixed at best. While this was more excusable when the pandemic initially catapulted us all into chaos, there is no reason we cannot be doing better by now. I think that having a more open line of communication between instructors and ODS and

making a required accessibility training would go a long way in preventing confusion and immediately making SWD feel more seen and cared for.

Accessibility that is inclusive and equitable has to be a top priority of instructors. If this was not on instructors' radars pre-pandemic, I would assume that it is now. Instructors who were not cognizant of accessibility issues before have most likely been slapped in the face with them now. It is necessary for the sake of equity that instructors be hyperaware of potential issues with their course design and address them when it all possible before it becomes a problem.

### ***Learning preferences and backgrounds***

When classes initially went entirely virtual, the initial excitement of freedom in one's schedule quickly withered away with no end in sight to long days on Zoom. I am not sure if anyone was made to sit on Zoom all day, but some students are better at adapting to it than others. In fact, six in 10 students said that they would prefer an online or hybrid option even without COVID-19; however, 29 percent of current students said that their ability to learn was "much worse" during online learning (Strada 2021). It is a significant problem that creates a significant opportunity to engage those students who don't see themselves reflected in writing instruction or assignments.

Fleming (2011) suggests that there are four learning preferences: visual, aural, read/write, and kinesthetic. The good news is that it is possible to cater to all of these learning styles, synchronously and asynchronously. Multimodal assignments, which I will discuss further in the next section, hold huge promise for including all learning preferences into an assignment. There is also opportunity for catering to students' learning preferences when giving feedback on writing. Some of the feedback tools I

discussed in the technology section offered the option of giving audio feedback, and it is also possible to link a video that explains the concept that is receiving feedback. Since online feedback has better proven results than handwritten feedback, this is a practice that can extend beyond the current online stint and continue in face-to-face classrooms.

Student's cultural backgrounds must also be considered. Texas State is an official Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), meaning that it is an institution with an enrollment of full-time undergraduate students that is at least 25% Hispanic students ("Hispanic-Serving Institutions," n.d.). In Fall 2020, Texas State had a student population that was 39 percent Hispanic ("Student and Faculty Demographics," 2020). HSIs were created under the Title V program, which was a part of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and amended in 2006. The Title V Program Statute (1998) lists some of Congress' findings and reasonings for the creation of HSIs: "Hispanic Americans are at high risk of not enrolling or graduations from institutions of higher education," "disparities between the enrollment of non-Hispanic white students and Hispanic students in postsecondary education are increasing [between 1973 to 1994]," and "relative to other institution [sic] of higher education, Hispanic-serving institutions are underfunded." While some of these disparities are beginning to close, a 2016 report from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, and the Office of the Under Secretary reveals not only that the gap between whites and Hispanics attaining a degree at a postsecondary level has doubled, but that the "participation of underrepresented students of color decreases at multiple points across the higher education pipeline including at application, admission, enrollment, persistence, and completion" (pp. 2-10). Having the designation as an HSI and knowing the historical data on students of color in

postsecondary institutions means that Texas State must do more to be inclusive and keep these students from getting lost along the “higher education pipeline.” One such way to do this in writing is by creating an inclusive and multicultural pedagogy, which allows for students to feel represented in the classroom. Since many students of color are first-generation students as well, it is important to address how this facet of a student’s identity plays into their identity as writers.

First-generation students not only struggle with feeling inferior to their peers in writing, but they also have a hard time developing an academic identity (Penrose, 2002). There are more Black and Hispanic students who are first-generation than continuing-generation students (Radwin et al., 2018). Such students are already coming to the metaphorical writing table inexperienced and unconfident. There are a few options to address this. One includes offering more resources to first-gen students or other students similarly uncomfortable with writing. Generally, most instructors at Texas State teaching writing-intensive courses include the Writing Center and the Student Learning Assistance Center as resources. For struggling students, it might be more effective to explicitly tell a student or leave them a note in their feedback to utilize one of these resources. Handouts and YouTube videos also offer another route to familiarize students with aspects of writing without dedicating class time to them. Another is multimodal assignments. Students feel comfortable with writing that feels less intimidating in comparison to the traditional academic essay. Additionally, instructors have the opportunity to “pull back the curtain” and show their students their own writing, as one instructor said in an interview (Anonymous interview #3, Feb. 9, 2021). Instructors have the opportunity to humanize both themselves and the writing process by showing students writing that they

are working on or pieces they've written in the past. This can demonstrate to students that writing is a messy process that not even their instructors have mastered.

These steps feel small and perhaps insignificant in the grander scheme of making higher education inclusive to students of color, first-generation students, and students of various learning backgrounds and preferences. Often, there is overlap between these groups, stacking up the barriers that students have to overcome to get the education that they deserve. However, I don't think that any step towards making writing instruction more inclusive should be discounted as insignificant if it has the potential to engage students who have been historically disenfranchised from education as a process and as an institution. I believe that being able to communicate effectively through writing is a powerful tool, and it is a tool that will help students of various learning backgrounds and preferences to attain their degree and be successful in life after college. Inclusive writing assignments are another way to work towards this goal for students of different learning backgrounds and preferences.

### **Inclusive assignments**

Online instruction lends itself to endless opportunities to rethink and redesign assignments. Assignments must be inclusive of all types of learners from all different identities and cultural backgrounds. The National Council of Teachers of English (2016) summed it up well in their position statement:

Writers start in different places. It makes a difference what kinds of language writers spoke while growing up and may speak at home now, and how those experiences relate to the kinds of language they are being asked to take when composing. It makes a difference, too, the culture a writer comes from, the ways

people use language in that culture and the degree to which that culture is privileged in the larger society. Important cultural differences are not only linguistic but also racial, economic, geographic, and ideological.

So much must be considered when thinking about how to design writing assignments that are practical and beneficial for students. Assignments must be practical in the sense that students can relate to and understand the material they are being asked to interact with. The assignment must also be beneficial in that a student's writing improves from it and they gain a sense of understanding about some part of the writing process and the material. Below I will outline some ideas for assignments inclusive of all students.

Inclusivity means that all students feel like their perspectives are valued, and that can mean that instructors have to adapt to and perceive students' skills and comfort levels. It is no secret that undergraduate writing is not proficient enough on the scale we would hope for; I see it in the students I tutor, and the instructors interviewed saw it in their students. This is not to demean or diminish any students, but rather to say that their past writing instruction has failed them in a fundamental way that must be remedied. For example, a survey conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2006 found that over half of high school teachers said they never required their students to write a paper more than five pages long, but in college they are quickly expected to write papers of that length regularly and often much longer (Sanoff, 2006). In order to help students become comfortable with academic writing, Dr. Scafe suggests incorporating other forms of writing into a course (R. Scafe, personal correspondence, February 16, 2021). If an instructor is able to help their students connect with less intimidating writing in the form of something like podcasts, blogs, discussion posts, or speeches, then the progression into

academic writing will be easier for the student. Neil Fleming, creator of VARK learning theory, and David Baume (2006), higher education researcher, observed, “Teaching often reflects the teacher’s preferred teaching style rather than the students’ preferred learning style” (p. 6). In writing, this means adapting assignments to students who are not necessarily comfortable with writing. With all of the tools available and the flexibility of the online format, incorporating other forms of writing is an easy way to address students’ lack of comfort with writing.

Multimodal writing assignments are an opportunity to be inclusive of students from all backgrounds of writing. Multimodal assignments are composed over multiple mediums instead of simply text. For example, a student could be required to write a script, prepare a visual of their data, and combine all of it into a video presentation. Such assignments “[require students] to break out of their default approach to writing assignments and make more deliberate, conscious rhetorical choices” (“Assigning and Assessing Multimodal Projects”). With the plethora of tools at the fingertips of students and instructors, multimodal writing assignments can be molded to fit the needs of any course and any student. Additionally, such assignments are more effective at preparing students for the “real-world.” I understand that some instructors may be reluctant to replace traditional essays with multimodal assignments because it may feel like students aren’t gaining the necessary writing skills. However, I am not suggesting that all essays be replaced, but rather that *some* essays be replaced with multimodal assignments. A multimodal assignment is not meant to “replace reading and writing; it enhances these skills through a combination of approaches” (Oldakowski, 2014, p. 71). Practically speaking, students are going to have to think critically and express their arguments



through more than one medium in life after college, such as a letter to an employer, as opposed to writing an essay. Depending on how an instructor wants to design the assignment, it is an option to give students the freedom to choose the modes they want to use for the assignment, thus placing accountability on them to explain their thinking, choices, and understanding (Oldakowski, 2014, p. 76). Giving students agency can make them more invested in the assignment. Moreover, these assignments are suitable for the online environment and face-to-face instruction.

Another significant opportunity for inclusion in assignments are culturally relevant writing prompts and assignment. This is proven to benefit students in that they received higher grades and felt more invested in the learning process (Murphy & Murphy, 2017). The historical disparities in the education system were intentional, so we must also be intentional with reinvolving students from these historically disenfranchised groups back into the education system by acknowledging the value of their voices and history. To do this, Latinx, Black, and indigenous voices have to be brought into the classroom. Furthermore, this has to be done in a way that “[prompts a] universal learning experience that [does] not solely concentrate on the victimized status of minorities” (Ruiz, 2016, p. 163). In 2017, researchers sought to discover to what extent reading culturally inclusive prompts could benefit essay writing for Latino students. Students read essays by Latino authors throughout the semester and were asked to complete four writing assignments based off the essays (Murphy & Murphy, 2017, p. 36). The result was that these students reported being more engaged with the culturally inclusive materials and the writing process and their essay grades improved (p. 49). Culturally

relevant writing prompts and assignments thus have potential to improve student writing as well as keep them engaged, an important aspect of student retention.

There is a lot of room for improvement in inclusivity in writing instruction, and the shift to the online environment brought ever-present inclusivity issues to the forefront while also introducing some new problems into the mix. Experiences from the transition to online learning prove that there are ways to overcome these challenges if instructors are thoughtful and intentional with their course design. As we begin to progress and find our footing with the new normal, there are many inclusivity lessons to be carried forward. Creating an inclusive classroom environment is not easy, but it is imperative if instructors want to ensure that *all* of their students thrive. Regardless of the barriers, Texas State students deserve an inclusive learning environment, instructor, and course.

#### IV. COMMUNICATION

Communication right now between instructors and students feels like the storyline of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*: instructors are testing the waters of what is too much or too little, ideally coming to a scenario in which communication is just right.

Unfortunately, students are the subjects of this real-time test. While we can never expect communication between instructors and students to be perfect due to differences in priorities, needs, and concerns, we can strive for as close to perfect as possible. Research shows that in times of anxiety such as now, students increasingly need transparency and guidance (Leonard and Howitt 2007). This should serve as the guiding principle for instructors when communicating with students. In this section, I will explore communication between students and instructors, responsiveness, and communicating through feedback.

##### **Communication between students and instructors**

Communicating about writing in this setting is especially difficult. Depending on the class format, instructors don't always have the opportunity to explain prompts and answer questions in real-time. Communication in everything from feedback to office hours is different than face-to-face and thus presents different challenges. In this section I will address situations in which instructors and students have overcommunicated and under-communicated while exploring the ideal balance between the two.

##### ***Overcommunication***

I recently listened to a podcast on the topic of leadership during disruption, and the host quoted Patrick Lencioni as saying, "No one has ever left a company because the leader overcommunicated or communicated too often." The podcast discussed the

importance of quick and transparent communication during a disruptive period in which there are many unknowns, such as now. I personally prefer overcommunication to the alternative, but when I presented this idea to my leadership team at SLAC, some of them disagreed. Of course, there *is* such thing as overcommunicating, and it can drive people to leave their jobs, drop their classes, or just feel generally overwhelmed and annoyed. It would not be such a big deal if one instructor were to communicate on the heavier side, but if a student were to have five instructors who overcommunicate, it would quickly become overwhelming. Overcommunication on Canvas or other LMS's is a problem, but it can be addressed by having clear expectations spelled out in the syllabus.

Overcommunication in online writing is common in instructions and prompts. There is less of an opportunity to dedicate class time to explaining assignments, so instructors feel forced to explain more than they normally would in instructions for assignments. One instructor described to me that they are more explicit and thorough than they would like to be in their instructions, but they feel like they have to be for students who are not able to attend class and hear the assignment explained. The instructor felt like this limited creativity, but also felt as if they had no other choice (Anonymous interview #3, Feb. 9, 2021). There is not yet research I can find that addresses this, but I think that the concern of limiting creativity is legitimate. To overcome this, instructors can be explicit about their technical instructions—word count, mechanics, format—but give open-ended prompts. Attaching audio or video instructions with the assignment instead of written ones is another way to avoid giving overly explicit written instructions. Giving instructions in this format can also help instructors connect with students as if they were speaking to them face-to-face.

### *Under communication*

On the other hand, under communicating is also an issue. Generally, it is much easier for students to not communicate in class. They can turn their cameras off and walk away, still securing attendance points while avoiding any of the work. The obvious solution would be to be stricter with students; however, this directly conflicts with another fundamental rule of online learning—flexibility. Ultimately, instructors have to do what is right for their specific course by considering the structure of their course, their planned activities, and the level of engagement they want from students. That being said, there has to be a way to get students to communicate in a course, whether it be during the synchronous session, through a discussion board, or in the chat feature.

Instructors frequently fail to effectively communicate about the tools that they expect students to use. It is easy to forget that everyone is at varying levels of digital literacy. To give an example, there was a student in my focus group who thought their instructor was not giving them feedback on any of their papers. It turns out that the instructor actually was giving feedback, but the student did not know how to view feedback in Canvas (Focus group, March 3, 2021). It was a small act of under communication on the part of the instructor, who did not explain how to view feedback on Canvas, and on the part of the student, who did not convey to the instructor that they were not receiving feedback on their paper. Nevertheless, such situations can be avoided by instructors demonstrating the tools that they expect students to use. Dr. Scafe told me that he creates videos of himself demonstrating how to use the technology that he expected his students to use (R. Scafe, personal correspondence, Feb. 16, 2021). It will take up more of instructors' already limited time, but it will pay off in the end when

students do not have to ask questions (or as many questions, at least) about how to use the technology.

### ***Genuine communication***

Genuine communication in the virtual world is difficult to generate.

Communicating genuinely involves treating students like adults who care about their education and have valuable insights to offer (even if that doesn't prove to be true for every student). Elliot Shapiro (2000) boils his relationship with students down to respect: "The way I talk to my students in class and in conferences, the kinds of things I say to them and write to them, and hopefully, the way I talk about them to others, is premised on the idea that they deserve my respect" (p. 4). Without an acknowledgment of the power differential between instructors and students and a conscious effort to subvert that, it is difficult to move into the realm of genuine, fruitful communication.

Many instructors attempt to generate genuine communication amongst students through discussion boards, but students complain of conversations feeling forced and unauthentic. I think that there are two main reasons for this: a high "literacy load" for students and instructors and ineffective discussion facilitation structure.

June Griffin and Debroah Minter (2013) coined the term literacy load, which refers to the cumulative amount of reading and writing a student must do in a course. They specifically noted that "online courses as they are often configured can overtax students, particularly academically underserved and ELL students" (Griffin and Miller 2013, p. 153). As many instructors have decided to opt-out of exams and instead give more reading and writing assignments, they too are facing a heavy literacy load when it comes to reading and responding to student writing. Instructors and students alike are

tired, and the resulting burnout leaves students unmotivated to write a compelling discussion post and instructors overextended.

In addition to a heavy literacy load, discussion boards can feel forced due to the structure of facilitation. It all starts with a good prompt and clear guidelines. Students need to feel like the discussion board is a safe space to hold conversation and debate. After guidelines are established, the fun begins. To create a stimulating discussion, *OWI Foundations Book* suggests that teachers “push students in ways they may not be comfortable doing in class” (Warnock, 2015, p. 183). If a student makes a questionable argument in a class discussion, it is uncomfortable and awkward for both the instructor and the student if the instructor pushes the student too hard to defend their position. Online, however, an instructor can push their students to clarify and refine their positions without fear of embarrassing the student; the online format and culture naturally lends itself to such pushing. Students “have the space and time to hunt and reflect” in the online format (Warnock, 2015, p. 183). If instructors properly poke and prod the conversation, then discussion boards can be transformed into an outlet for enriching conversation. With literacy load in mind, instructors should consider the amount of work that they are expecting students to put into their discussion posts and then decide how frequently they want to assign posts.

## **Feedback**

Electronic feedback has a lot of benefits when compared to its handwritten counterpart. Research proves that format matters: instructors make longer comments pertaining to content and mechanics rather than one or the other, and students’ second drafts improved more with electronic feedback than handwritten (Johnson et al., 2019).

During my interviews, instructors also seemed to like giving feedback electronically better and felt like they were able to give more effective feedback.

Electronic feedback does present the opportunity to overwhelm students with comments. Because it is easier and quicker to type out comments instead of writing them, instructors have to stop themselves from going overboard. One instructor described it to me like this:

“If you correct and grade everything, then people become overwhelmed and then they don’t know where to look. So, if you just give a little bit of feedback, they can go, ‘Oh, I see this, and I see this one thing two or three times in my essay, I can fix that thing.’ Then, they can improve. They learn how to see that mistake. If you correct everything, all they see is, ‘Everything is corrected, I’m useless’”

(Anonymous interview #3, Feb. 9, 2021).

It is important to protect the confidence of students to some extent so that they do not get to the point that they feel like they can do nothing right. While an entire page marked up with comments and revisions is discouraging for everyone, there is an opportunity to reframe the way we think about feedback so as to not make students feel pessimistic about their writing. Instructors can establish first and foremost that they like the piece of writing. Peter Elbow (1994), expert on feedback techniques, argues that “the way writers learn to like their writing is by the grace of having a reader or two who likes it—even though it’s not good” (p. 12). Students will learn to like their writing and have the desire to improve upon it only once they realize that their writing can be likeable. Once it is established that a piece of writing can be liked, it is easier for the instructor to critique it closely because they are invested and interested in its improvement, and the student will



be too. Feedback that would have felt harsh may feel differently to the student once it is established that the instructor is giving feedback because they *like* it rather than the opposite. Liking a student essay is also an opportunity to highlight what the student did well. Students in my focus group reiterated this: “Positive feedback, when it’s specific, is really welcome” (Focus group, March 3, 2021). Students can learn just as much from positive feedback as they can from what they did wrong.

For every instructor who is giving too much feedback, there is one who is not giving enough—or not enough of the right kind, at the very least. Students in my focus group complained of a lack of feedback from their instructors. They received grades on papers without any explanation, grammatical corrections without any interaction with the content of the paper, or generic comments that indicated the instructor was in a rush to get grades out. In the technology section, I considered tools like Annotate Pro and SpeedGrader that make the feedback process more efficient. Unfortunately, efficiency is meaningless if the feedback is not effective for the student. Nancy Sommers (1982), who wrote the book on responding to student writing—literally—notes that instructors are notorious for filling the margins of student papers with comments like “choose precise language” and “think more about your audience,” leaving students to follow vague commands with no suggested strategies (p. 153). If comments are not tailored to the student’s writing, then there is no point. Students are not dumb; the student in my focus group was receptive enough to know that the generic comments rubber-stamped on their paper meant that their instructor was in a rush to get grades out and that it was not a genuine interaction with their writing (Focus group, March 3, 2021). Some students are learning the basics of writing and their feedback must be personalized and focused so that

they can connect the dots; some students can connect the dots, but they still need that specific feedback in order to push them to grow as writers. This is where Elbow's concept of liking can come into play. If the feedback process starts on the basis of liking, then giving and receiving feedback will be a more fruitful process for both parties.

With feedback moving in the direction of an electronic format even after the pandemic, the issue of simply getting students to look at the feedback becomes more difficult. When students turn in hard copies of their papers, instructors hand them back in class and the student has no choice but to at least glance at the instructor's comments. With electronic feedback, the student drops their paper into a folder, sometimes getting a notification when the paper is returned. Depending on how the instructor returns the assignment, the student usually will have to go back into their assignments, find the version of their paper with feedback, open it, and then read it. The fact that there are more steps involved and that the feedback is less immediately prominent (opposed to when an instructor hands you back a paper marked up in red ink) means that students are less likely to look at their feedback. This means an instructor could be doing everything correctly—doing the work of “liking” the student's paper, giving the right amount of feedback and encouragement—and there is a solid chance that the student will never see it. Only one instructor explicitly told me that it was harder to get students to look at feedback, but I would guess other instructors are experiencing something similar, whether they know it or not (Anonymous interview #3, February 9, 2021). However, I think it will be easier to get students to look at electronic feedback when we return to face-to-face classes. Instructors can take a few minutes of class to ask students to pull up their returned assignments and then encourage students to ask any questions they might

have. While instructors can try to do something similar during a virtual class, silence always seems to be significantly more awkward over Zoom than it is in person, where students can comfortably talk amongst themselves or focus on their own assignment while the instructor walks around. Although students looking at feedback is a problem right now, I do not think that this is something that will be a problem going forward. In fact, the valuable lessons that we have learned about feedback and overall communication during the pandemic hold huge promise for changing the way instructors and students communicate with each other in the new normal.

Communication is complicated. It was complicated enough before the pandemic, but now it has even more power to make or break a course. The general takeaways from this section suggest that instructors need to: find a happy medium for communication, whatever that looks like for their course; be thoughtful and intentional about facilitating discussion; and give custom feedback that explains why the student received the grade that they did. Additionally, research suggests that electronic feedback should continue beyond the virtual classroom for the benefit of the instructor and the student (Johnson et al., 2019). Furthermore, the burden of communication does not fall on instructors alone (although most of it does). Students too need to communicate their needs to instructors so that instructors have the opportunity to be effective. I said it before, and I will say it again—communication is complicated, but we can make it easier on one another by following the guidelines laid out in this section.

## **V. RELATIONSHIPS**

Finding ways to cultivate meaningful relationships over the Internet is fundamental during COVID-19. Students in particular are not faring well during the pandemic, which makes it all the more important to make the classroom a safe space for everyone. In general, it is important to form good relationships with students in writing-intensive courses so that the student feels comfortable enough to be vulnerable and take risks in their writing. Additionally, an instructor needs a trusting relationship with their students, or else the student will not be receptive to the instructor's feedback and insight.

Right now, many students are missing out on basic human interaction. I have seen it countless times when instructors take the time to ask students about personal matters at the beginning of class or in club meetings when official business is over; without fail, students will take the space that they can to talk. I've noticed it in myself in meetings with instructors, blabbering on and on about things I wouldn't normally talk to my instructor about. Most people are desperate for basic human connection with others. Instructors have the opportunity to capitalize on this and create meaningful connections with their students. In this section, I will discuss empathy in relationships, how writing communities create meaningful relationships, and relationships across the university.

### **Empathy**

Out of all my conversations with students and instructors, empathy has consistently been a common theme. In this context, I would define empathy as a shared understanding and respect for the situation we are all in. Moreover, empathy in this situation also involves some kind of action, whether that entails decreasing the rigor of assignments, showing flexibility with due dates, or grading generously. Instructors are

empathetic to the situation that students are in and they are then acting on this to alleviate some of the stressors for students. Students overwhelmingly agreed that their instructors have been more empathetic during COVID-19 with things like grading, late work, and absences. One student told me that “the flexibility and empathy that I’ve seen people extend during this time has been profound to say the least” (Focus group, March 3, 2021). The empathy of some instructors has made the difference in a student’s ability to stay enrolled in the university in some cases; in other cases, it has helped students maintain their mental health throughout this turbulent period. Imagine how overwhelming it would be for a student if none of their instructors were willing to be empathetic of the various situations students have found themselves in. For example, an instructor told me a story about a student who had not come to class for a week or two. The instructor later found out that the student had been kicked out of their apartment and had been forced to work long hours all week to attempt to make enough money to get the down payment for a new living situation. As the instructor said, “You have to be hyperaware that people are suffering” (Anonymous interview #2, Feb. 9, 2021).

Of course, some instructors have been less than understanding. One student told a story about their laptop breaking the morning that they had a class that required webcams. The student emailed their instructor to let them know their situation and did not receive a response. When the student showed up for class, their instructor told them to leave since they did not have their camera on. Later, after the instructor presumed read the email from the student, the instructor invited the student to attend another section of their course; however, the student had another class at that time and was deducted attendance points for that session. It is understandable why instructors are reluctant to

give students grace; many students will take advantage of an instructor's empathy to get out of doing work. While it is difficult to not be of this mindset, I would encourage instructors to consider those students whose futures rely on that grace. In an interview, one instructor said, "You are going to accidentally set free some sharks when you set free the dolphins. But that is okay, as long as a lot of dolphins get the chance to get out of the net" (Anonymous interview #2, Feb. 9, 2021).

One of the biggest ways that instructors have demonstrated empathy during COVID-19 is through assignments and grading. Many of the instructors I talked to have created more low stakes writing assignments to take some pressure off of students and to give them an opportunity to boost their grade. Many instructors are just grading more gently in general. A survey of over 800 faculty members from over 600 different institutions completed by Bay View Analytics in April 2020 showed that two-thirds of professors changed the types of assignments and exams they assigned in online learning, while half of respondents reported lowering expectations for the amount of work they expected students to do (Flaherty, 2020). This survey was completed at the beginning of the transition to online learning, so it can be assumed that these numbers have changed at this point. While the instructors I spoke to have continued to craft assignments and grade with more empathy, I would guess that as some instructors got more of a handle on the online learning environment, they reverted back to their traditional assignments. However, low-stakes assignments and lenient grading hold potential as a practice in the new normal.

Just as we did not need a pandemic to prove that writing instruction needs improvement, we did not need one to prove that the grading system is broken—but here

we are. There has been a big push towards low stakes assignments and minimal grading during COVID-19, and this change begs the question of the overall usefulness and consequences of grading writing. During an interview, an instructor and I were discussing grading and the shortcomings of the current system: “Students are trying to get a grade, so some students don’t take any risk. So, their essays are boring, say nothing, and follow a formula. They aren’t really writing; they are just trying to accomplish the task and not fail” (Anonymous interview #3, Feb. 2, 2021). I will let my readers in on a secret, so you can all better understand this from the perspective of an undergraduate. At the beginning of the semester, I can usually figure out what my instructor prefers to see in papers, follow that formula, and receive a fail-proof A from thereon. I have a 4.0 and it is not because I am brilliant, or even a great writer—I have simply been paying attention for the past few years, so I know how to play the game. Sometimes I have to think critically about the work I’m engaging with and sometimes I don’t, but the formula never fails me. As that same instructor said, “The way the grading system is set up is not conducive to creativity and not conducive to exposing yourself and taking risks” (Anonymous interview #3, Feb. 2, 2021). Alfie Kohn (2006), someone who has made it his life mission to upend the grading system, reinforces this idea, claiming, “[Students] tend to think less deeply, avoid taking risks, and lose interest in the learning itself” when they are being graded.” Logically speaking, it is safer for students to follow the formula, just as I do, and get a guaranteed good grade instead of challenging themselves. It works great for students trying to make the Dean’s List, but learning does not occur in the confines of formulas; it occurs when students are given the space—away from grades and competition—to be challenged, take risks, and think creatively. If instructors want to

create a wholly empathetic environment, in which pressure for perfection on students is decreased and space for true learning is increased, then changing the grading game could be the answer.

When one considers the effects of the grading system on students' attitudes and intentions, it is easy to see how grading can translate to an act of empathy or a lack thereof. Elliot Shapiro (2000), director of Cornell University's Writing in the Majors program (a WAC-like program), argues against grading on the premise of respect:

At the core of my teaching is the belief that the most important thing I can offer a student is respect. I do not believe that all my students are equally gifted. I do not believe that all my students are capable of analysis or abstract thinking when they enter my class. I do not believe that all, or perhaps any, of my students will become great writers, in the course of a semester or in the course of their lives.

But I believe my students have ideas to communicate, ideas which are worthy of interest, ideas which may teach me something, ideas which they can probably communicate more effectively if they are encouraged to work at it. (p. 3-4)

It sounds like a radical idea; believing in students so much so that you can get rid of grading (or at least minimize it) and students will not just maintain their motivations—they'll be even *more* motivated to effectively communicate their ideas. We've been conditioned to think it's a radical idea, but I argue that it isn't. I have a friend who attends University of North Carolina for graduate school, where there are four possible grades she can receive for a course: high pass, pass, low pass, and fail. Most of her assignments are graded on a scale like this or something similar, some with more tiers of distinction and some with less. Nonetheless, I asked her the burning questions that we are all dying



to know: why do students still do the work when there's no possibility of the satisfaction of an A+? What's it like living in the fantasy world of un-grading? To answer why students are still motivated, she said, "There's still the pressure of your classmates seeing it—we do a lot of activities in class that involve sharing our writing—and the pressure of your professors seeing it and judging you." Even without the presence of grades, a student's fear that their instructor will be disappointed in them reigns supreme. She also added that she and her classmates seem to be—wait for it—encouraged to focus on genuinely learning the material and improving their writing rather than obsessing over the rubric (B. Gonzalez, personal communications, April 14, 2021). If instructors are committed to improving their writing instruction, then what better step could one take than this? I defined empathy to be a shared understanding and respect for the situation we are all in, but we could easily eliminate "for the situation we are all in" and simply have a shared understanding and respect for each other. That begins with a respect similar to what Shapiro chose to show his students and use as the basis for their relationship. More resources on how to move away from the traditional grading system can be found below the conclusion.

Empathy between students and instructors is a prerequisite to a positive relationship. Students need to feel like instructors can understand and relate to the situation that they are in in order to trust them. This is especially important because of the vulnerability involved in writing. Many instructors are incorporating current events and controversial topics into their classes through discussion boards and writing assignments when applicable; students will not interact with such conversations authentically if they do not trust the instructor. Luckily, I think that many instructors are doing a great job of

fostering positive relationships with students by extending empathy. While we are unarguably in extreme circumstances that require extra empathy right now, I hope that instructors will carry some of their empathy forward into the new normal. Some instructors were already extending empathy in the old normal, realizing that some students had mental health issues, trouble paying rent, and other problems prior to the pandemic, but other instructors seem to have realized the existence of empathy as something they can actually practice only now. Surprisingly, COVID-19 seems to have taught some people that empathy exists. It is important to capitalize on this revelation. A classroom with empathy means that students and instructors alike can do more and push harder because there is an understanding and respect for one another. The closer instructors are with their students, the more they can be encouraged to push the envelope a little further, rethink that concept a little harder, and revise that essay just one more time.

### **Writing communities**

Writing communities are a space for students to explore their relationship to writing and learn from other writers. Unfortunately, these spaces can be scarce. Writing communities can vary in form, from discussion boards to writing groups that meet weekly, but they all share the common theme of developing a student's relationship with writing. Such groups can encourage critical thinking and reflection upon one's writing process. One example of a writing community at Texas State is Wednesday Night Writes. The core group of attendees are all a part of a writing mentor class in which they begin the semester by learning about writing in a traditional seminar environment. After a few weeks, the students invite other students to join, and then each session begins with a

student doing presentations on topics like voice in writing and getting past writer's block. After the presentation, additional students who joined, and often the mentors themselves, will seek each other's help with various writing assignments. This is an invaluable space for experienced and amateur writers alike to workshop together and learn from one another. Writing communities not only help writers foster relationships with one another, but they also help writers foster a relationship with writing itself. Ironically, writing is thought of as a solitary act despite the fact that we almost always write for an audience. As Nate Kreuter (2014) notes in an article about writing environments, "While a natural enough tendency, isolating our in-process writing from the eyes of others is frequently not a successful strategy for producing writing, nor for producing effective, convincing writing." Thoughtful writing communities hold the potential to improve student's writing tenfold.

Writing communities also hold the potential to strengthen the relationship between instructors and students through the sharing of writing. One instructor I interviewed helps to run a weekly writing group with other faculty. The instructor invites their graduate students to join the group "so that they see the process of writing and what we talk about and what we do. So, I try to draw the curtain back for them. Students don't often see that process" (Anonymous interview #3, Feb. 9, 2021). Pulling that curtain back allows students to gain a better understanding of the writing process while also serving to humanize instructors. I think that many students are under the illusion that their instructors are effortlessly great writers, which makes them feel like that level of skill is out of reach for them so they might as well not try. If instructors involve students in the early stages of their own writing process, then students can see that writing requires

revision and work and that even instructors cannot usually get it right on the first try.

Instructors must work to make writing as accessible as possible to students, and by being more transparent about their writing process, instructors can do this as well as strengthen the trust and relationship between student and instructor.

Another possibility to foster community around writing is through incorporating relevant current events. Students are struggling with the uncertainty that COVID-19 creates for the present and the future. If it is applicable to the instructor's course topic and design, I think that incorporating current events that are affecting student's lives into writing assignments can help provide a sense of community for students but also help students to work through what is going on in the world in a meaningful way. Jensen (2020) used COVID-19 in his class in order to encourage critical thinking through the lens of the pandemic and to encourage his students to disrupt the binaries that define the discourse around the pandemic. However, instructors must monitor such discussions carefully. Although instructors are already supposed to be monitoring classroom discussions, in face-to-face as well as online, it is more critical that online discussions be monitored closely because students are more willing to say things online that they would not consider saying face-to-face (Anonymous interview #7, March 5, 2021). As instructors monitor for potential triggers, it is important to distinguish between what could be a trigger and what could hurt some feelings. A trigger is most commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) but can also be applied to other mental health disorders or illnesses. In the context of an online discussion board, something that is triggering could include articles or discussion of something that reminds the student of the trauma that they experienced (Cuncic, 2020). On the flip side

of that, discussion that may make some people uncomfortable or hurt their feelings is not the same thing as a trigger. The usefulness of trigger warnings in college classrooms is debated, although a safe option is to make the topic of the discussion clear so that individuals can identify whether the content may be a trigger for them.

Writing communities come in many shapes and sizes, but they all (when set up correctly) create safe spaces for students to grow in their relationship with writing and with one another. Writing does not exist in a vacuum, although it may feel like this to undergraduate students, especially with online learning. Through workshopping together, students can better identify their audience, purpose, and organization. All of those things will encourage the student to think critically about writing and their own relationship to it. These communities are essential to growth in student writing.

### **Relationships across faculty and with writing centers**

Another important relationship outside of student-instructor is the relationship across faculty or a department. When I asked about support received from the university during the transition, almost all instructors cited having no university support initially, but many said that they received support from their individual departments. In a time marked by disorder and chaos, departmental support surely helped keep instructors afloat. The presence of WAC at a university usually starts the departmental conversations about writing. For example, Dr. Scafe at OU works individually with departments to find ways to work writing instruction into their curriculum. Until we have a Dr. Scafe at Texas State, it is up to the departments to make writing a priority in discussion. Just as I spoke to instructors to figure out what was going wrong and what was working for them in online writing instruction, instructors can talk to each other to figure these things out, and

possibly avoid a semester of doing something that is proven not to work simply by talking to their colleagues.

Another important relationship at the university is that of the writing center (WC) with students and instructors. Historically, WAC and WCs have been inextricably linked; typically, the WAC director is housed within the WC, although this is not always the case. Sometimes, WAC directors are housed in outside departments, like Dr. Scafe is housed in the Center for Faculty Excellence at OU. The significance of the director being housed elsewhere boils down to proximity, resources, and recognition. If the director is not in proximity or literally within the WC, then their relationship might not be as close as if they shared a building. Resources may be more bountiful outside of the WC. Finally, the WAC program could get more recognition if it is housed somewhere like the Center for Faculty Excellence as opposed to the WC. All of these factors play a role in the relationship between the WC and WAC director. Regardless of where they are housed, their goal is one in the same—to improve student writing—and “their mutual philosophies...develop mutual theories and practices” (Mullin, 2011, p. 183). Further, WAC and WCs “form strong partnerships for changing curriculum and administrative practices, and for examining the ways faculty and students think about writing, learning, and evaluation” (Mullin, 2011, p. 185). In the process of then discussing the ways that faculty are thinking about writing, learning, and evaluation, some deep-seeded ideas about writing may be unrooted for instructors. For example, instructors may reconsider the way they evaluate writing and consider alternative grading methods that have proven to be more effective. In any case, the work of WAC and the WC makes instructors reckon with how they think about the writing process, and because both WAC and the writing

center are “student-centered and “emphasize the importance of a healthy learning environment,” instructors may place students at the center of this reckoning.

To further serve students, there is also an opportunity to involve the tutors of the WC into this process. Mullin (2011) suggests that tutors fill out a double-column report after working with a student, meant for their own records but also to be sent to faculty. The tutor summarizes what was worked on during the tutorial and can address what the student specifically struggled with, whether it be organization, grammar, or specific content (p. 189). Such a practice helps the instructor to see what they need to cover in the classroom and serves to connect the WC and WAC directly with instructors. The mutual interests of WAC and the WC provide critical connections between students and instructors that have the potential to foster positive learning environments that puts students first. Additionally, with a new understanding of writing practices thanks to collaboration across the WC and WAC and a better grasp on what students struggle with thanks to tutors, instructors have the power and tools to create a positive learning environment in which risk and creativity are encouraged.

The pandemic has made the need to improve relationships between academic units such as the WC and faculty across disciplines more urgent and glaring. This is, however, not a new problem, as is the case with most of what has been discussed thus far. Going forward, the WC and faculty need to have stronger relationships in order to revitalize writing instruction across campus. Budget cuts and lack of resources plague the WC now more than ever, as is happening across most departments in the wake of COVID-19. Because of this, it is important now more than ever to carve out a permanent space for faculty to foster relationships around writing. I think the best way to do this is

creating a permanent WAC director position within the WC at Texas State. Decades ago, Texas State actually had a writing in disciplines (WID) program, and just months ago, we were creating a new position at the WC for WAC/WID (D. Balzhiser, personal communications, April 22, 2021). Having a person solely dedicated to WAC/WID at Texas State could transform the way our university looks at writing instruction, and conversations like the ones in this research could be happening everyday across campus. It would carve out a permanent space that signifies Texas State values student writing and is dedicated to improving it. Next time a pandemic comes, or whatever other disaster may strike, instead of being in our current position, we can ensure that writing instruction remains a priority. Moreover, we can ensure uniformity, communication, and knowledge across the university for writing instructors, something that is lacking right now.

I think that relationships based upon writing need to be a priority if student writing is going to improve—relationships across faculties, across departments, across universities, and with the WC. The responsibility lies on everyone's shoulders to strengthen these relationships. Right now, there is simply not a lot in the way of systematic support for writing. For example, instructors currently send students to the WC to fix their papers. There is no real relationship there; tutoring services would be infinitely more useful if instructors and students acknowledged them as a place for students to grow and improve as writers. I do not have enough fingers and toes to count the number of times a student has come in, handed me their printed-out paper, and said something along the lines of, "My professor said I need to come here to get this fixed. Could you just edit it really quick? It is due at the start of my class in half an hour." At SLAC, I am not even allowed to copyedit. I can look over a student's paper and tell them



about some repetitive errors, what they are called, and how to fix them, but students usually zone out at that point, because what they really came for was for me to “fix” their paper while they sat on their phone. There seems to be a disconnect between what instructors think tutoring services are for, or what they convey to their students, and what they are actually there for. There is little a tutor can do for a student who has expectations of spending a few minutes in tutoring and then their paper will be magically “fixed.”

There is, however, a lot that a tutor can do for a student who is encouraged to seek help from the tutoring center from the very beginning of the writing process. Relationships imply a mutual understanding of two or more parties; it is time that the importance of writing for students is widely understood and agreed upon so that relationships can begin to be built to improve upon writing instruction. Additionally, students need positive, safe, and equitable environments to grow as writers in, and such environments are unattainable without empathetic relationships between students and instructors. I think that worrying about things like technology and communication is meaningless until the value of relationships in writing is recognized.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

At the beginning of this year and at the outset of this thesis, no one knew when we would go back to the “new normal” or what it would look like. However, on April 7, Texas State University President Dr. Denise Trauth announced, “This fall, in-person classes and activities will be back in full force on our Texas State University Campuses, giving out students the college life experience for which we are known” (Texas State University, 2021). After over a year of online learning during a pandemic, we can find relief knowing that the return to face-to-face is just ahead. It has potential to be a defining moment, depending on whether or not students and instructors decide to carry forward the lessons we learned during the pandemic. There are many lessons to be carried forward from experiences teaching and learning online. This time taught us that technology is only as good as both the instructor that is using it and how well it is explained. It taught us we have to be hyperaware of our students’ backgrounds and abilities, and then reconsider the class structure and materials in response. It taught us to be efficient and genuine communicators. Finally, it taught us to forge positive, constructive relationships around writing.

While the return to the new normal is on the horizon, there is no saying if or when we will have to return to online learning in the spur of a moment. For this reason, it would be wise to give our students and instructors the necessary tools for success if such a situation were to happen. Texas State should consider teaching how to learn online as a part of the University Seminar course. We gained so many valuable tools during our time learning online and many of them will surely continue to be used by instructors during the new

normal. It would be useful for first-year students to learn how to learn online so that we can avoid many of the problems we faced this time around in the future.

All in all, the online learning environment helped everyone embrace flexibility, empathy, and low stakes assignments on a scale that I have never seen (in my long, four years as an undergrad). This is the silver lining: the creation of more compassionate classrooms with more room for students to grow. The flexibility of the online environment allowed for more flexibility, and the stressors of living through a global pandemic made everyone a little nicer to each other. Together, these two factors led us to embrace compassion, whether intentionally or not. It felt like the only option. But what if we continued to embrace these things? Or perhaps a better question: what if we don't? Different folks have varying levels of disappointment with student writing, with some considering it a crisis. If it is a crisis, it is one that we have never quite been able to solve, as it is the very same reason that pushed Harvard to create a mandatory freshman composition course in the 1870s (Bazerman, Little, Bethel, Chavkin, Fouquette, & Garufis, 2005, p. 16). Nonetheless, it is obviously time to make some changes. Below are some general takeaways from this research that can help to improve the teaching and learning of writing in the new normal:

- **Keep it simple:** Simplicity is key to the online format, but there is no reason that we cannot keep it simple beyond COVID-19. Using the tools that you already have in your toolbox is always a good idea, and if you are going to venture outside of your toolbox, it is a good idea to do so gradually with pedagogical need in mind. Warnock (2009) suggests adding “one or two new technologies [at a time]. This will allow you to continue experimenting with technologies in a

controlled manner” (p. 21). Simplicity is not only key for technology usage, but for communication with students as well. Avoid overwhelming students with multiple notifications and messages for something that could have been conveyed concisely in the syllabus or elsewhere.

- **Show flexibility and empathy:** Flexibility and empathy were some of the greatest things to emerge from the pandemic. Students felt seen and cared for when their instructors extended them grace. Flexibility and empathy have been a fundamental practice during COVID-19, but a pandemic is not the only time in which people’s lives are complicated. This is tricky, because as an instructor said, “You are going to accidentally set free some sharks when you set free the dolphins.” When you give students an inch they will sometimes take a mile. It is inevitable that some students will take advantage of an instructor’s willingness to be flexible, “but that is okay, as long as a lot of dolphins get the chance to get out of the net” (Anonymous interview #2, Feb. 9, 2021).
- **Challenge students:** Empathy and flexibility are incredibly important, but they are not an excuse to lower expectations. Paradoxically, empathy and flexibility can be used as tools to challenge students more. Peter Elbow (1994) argues that, when giving students feedback, it’s easier to be critical if you first “like” their writing (p. 12). The same argument could be applied to the larger picture: if you show students respect through empathy and flexibility, then it becomes easier to challenge them. Elbow observes, “I was a much more critical and pushy reader when I liked something. It’s even fun to criticize in those conditions” (p. 13). An

empathetic and flexible learning environment actually creates an opportunity to challenge students further.

- **Encourage critical thinking through real-life application:** A great way to further challenge students is to make them think critically by connecting what they are learning to outside the classroom. The online format presents many opportunities for students to interact with different types of writing: blogs, social media posts, op-eds, and podcasts, to name a few. These are all readily available resources that can be used to make students more comfortable with writing and to help them to think critically about writing in their own lives. Warnock (2009) suggests that “writing teachers are highly empowered in this [online] environment to help channel the natural writing that students are doing anyway into a class experience” (p. 180). Encourage students to do the types of writing that they already participate in or consume daily. Such opportunities can positively transform the way that students think about writing.
- **Communicate genuinely:** Communicating genuinely means treating students with respect and acknowledging the power differential in the instructor-student relationship. With genuine respect established, it becomes easier to create meaningful communication and relationships. It is not enough to have genuine communication with students in just one space, such as after class. It needs to be in all of them: in class, in discussion boards, in feedback, and so on. While this is a big commitment, flexibility and empathy go both ways. If instructors are being empathetic and flexible with their students, then their students will likely feel more inclined to be empathetic and flexible with the instructor, who also needs to

practice self-empathy. Students are more perceptive than instructors give them credit for. I think that most students, myself included, are willing to work ten times harder for an instructor who makes it obvious that they are genuinely invested in student learning and growth. There are many ways to prove this to students through genuine communication.

- **Writing in communities:** Finally, the idea that writing is a solitary act is so ingrained in students from early on that we must intentionally unteach it by cultivating writing communities. This idea is even more prominent than before due to the isolation of online learning, which means we have to be even more intentional about creating writing communities moving into the new normal. Writing communities can come in all shapes and sizes, from formal weekly meetings, to self-paced discussion boards, to informal conversations with friends. The experience of talking about writing allows for students to learn from one another and to better visualize their audience. The ability to imagine one's audience is critical for both improvement and engagement, as students do not often have a good grasp of who they are writing for. It is also important for reminding students that writing is not just assessment tool used in college, but something that actually matters in the real world.

## VII. HELPFUL RESOURCES

### Technology and tools

- AAC&U has sixteen **rubrics** organized by the learning outcomes of intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning: <https://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics>
- Texas State's IT Assistance Center offers **virtual resources for faculty** at any stage of the online learning process, whether they are needing help preparing their course or looking for strategies to effectively implement tools. There are also **resources that can be shared with students** trying to learn in the online world: <https://itac.txstate.edu/remote.html>.
- This useful article on discussion boards from *Inside Higher Ed* explores the possibilities of online **discussion boards**, what an instructor's role is, and options for variations: <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/03/27/new-approaches-discussion-boards-aim-dynamic-online-learning>.

### Inclusivity

- University of Connecticut has several sample **multimodal assignment** designs that can be tailored to fit the needs of any class: <https://fyw.uconn.edu/resources-for-instructors/writing-across-technology/multimodal-assignments/#>
- The book *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication* addresses **race in the context of the writing classroom** while offering classroom suggestions and examples. The book is available for free online here: <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/atd/antiracist/>.

- The Office of Disability Services outlines the **principles of Universal Design for Learning** with examples of each for easy implementation:  
<https://www.ods.txstate.edu/faculty-and-staff-resources/Creating-an-Inclusive-Environment.html>
- The Office of Disability Services offer different **trainings and information sessions** over a variety of topics regarding inclusivity:  
[https://www.ods.txstate.edu/ODS\\_Outreach.html](https://www.ods.txstate.edu/ODS_Outreach.html). Faculty are also able to reach out to ODS to **request a presentation** over relevant topics for their class or organization.
- PAWS Alert is a referral service that Texas State instructors can use to **support students** who are going through academic, personal, or transitional difficulties. More information can be found here:  
<https://www.studentsuccess.txstate.edu/PAWSalert.html>

## Communication

- Nancy Sommers outlines **how to respond to student writing** in this essay:  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/357622.pdf>. She discusses the findings of her own team's research on teacher comments and what teachers can learn from these findings.
- Peter Elbow's "High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing" explains his logic behind the **concept of liking** a student paper before responding. Elbow also outlines his reasoning for how he communicates with students and how grading affects that communication:



[https://peterelbow.com/pdfs/Assigning\\_and\\_Responding\\_to\\_High\\_and\\_Low-Stakes\\_Writing.pdf](https://peterelbow.com/pdfs/Assigning_and_Responding_to_High_and_Low-Stakes_Writing.pdf)

### **Relationships**

- In the same article mentioned above, Peter Elbow gives a quick rundown on what to assign for **low, middle, and high stakes writing** and how to grade each level:

[https://peterelbow.com/pdfs/Assigning\\_and\\_Responding\\_to\\_High\\_and\\_Low-Stakes\\_Writing.pdf](https://peterelbow.com/pdfs/Assigning_and_Responding_to_High_and_Low-Stakes_Writing.pdf)

## References

- AAC&U value rubrics. (n.d.). Student learning assessment at University of Wisconsin-Madison. Retrieved April 22, 2021, from <https://assessment.provost.wisc.edu/aacu-value-rubrics/>
- Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C. § 12102 (1990).  
<https://www.ada.gov/pubs/adastatute08.htm#12102>
- Assigning and assessing multimodal projects. *Georgetown University Writing Program*.  
<https://writing.georgetown.edu/resources/assigning-and-assessing-multimodal-projects/#:~:text=Unlike%20traditional%20writing%20assignments%2C%20which,produce%20a%20podcast%20or%20video>
- Bazerman, C., Little, J., Bethel, L., Chavkin, T., Fouquette, D., & Garufis, J. (2005). History of the WAC movement. In *Reference guide to writing across the curriculum* (pp. 14-25). Parlor Press and The WAC Clearinghouse.
- Brand, Mark. (2020). Digital biomes: Lessons from COVID-19 remote coursework ecosystems and interfaces. *Double Helix*, 8(1).  
<https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/double-helix/v8/brand.pdf>
- Conrad, R., Rayala, H., Menon, M., & Vora, K. (2020, March 23). *Universities' response to supporting mental health of college students during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Psychiatric Times. <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/universities-response-supporting-mental-health-college-students-during-covid-19-pandemic>
- Cunic, A. (2020, Dec. 3). *What does it mean to be 'triggered': Types of triggering events and coping strategies*. VeryWellMind. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-triggered-4175432>

- Czeisler, M.E., Lane, R.I., Petrosky, E., Wiley, J.F., Christensen, A., Njai, R., Weaver, M.D., Robbins, R., Facer-Childs, E.R., Barger, L.K., Czeisler, C.A., Howard, M.E., & Rajaratnam, S.M.W. (2020, August 14). Mental health, substance use, and suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic—United States, June 24–30, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 69(32) pp. 1049-1057.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1>
- Degree and graduation policies*. (2020-2021). Texas State University. Retrieved April 7, 2021, from <http://mycatalog.txstate.edu/undergraduate/general-information/academic-policies/degree-graduation/>
- Edwards-Groves, C. J. (2011). The Multimodal Writing Process: Changing Practices in Contemporary Classrooms. *Language and Education*, 25(1), 49–64.
- Elbow, P. (1997). Grading student writing: Making it simpler, fairer, clearer. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 69, 127-140. EBSCO Publishing.
- Facts and highlights*. (2020). Texas State University Office of Institutional Research. Retrieved April 7, 2021, from <https://www.ir.txstate.edu/highlights.html>
- Flaherty, C. (2020, April 23). *Grading for a pandemic*. Inside HigherEd.  
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/23/how-lenient-or-not-should-professors-be-students-right-now>.
- Fleming, N., & Baume, D. (2006). Learning Styles Again: VARKing up the Right Tree! *Educational Developments*, 7, 4-7.  
[http://www.johnsilverio.com/EDUI6702/Fleming\\_VARK\\_learningstyles.pdf](http://www.johnsilverio.com/EDUI6702/Fleming_VARK_learningstyles.pdf)
- Fleming, N. D. (2011). *Teaching and Learning Styles: VARK Strategies*. New Zealand: N.D. Fleming.

- Gao, N. & Hayes, J. (2021, February). *The digital divide in education*. Public Policy Institute of California. <https://www.ppic.org/publication/the-digital-divide-in-education/>
- Gerhenson, S., Hart, C.M.D., Hyman, J., Lindsay, C., & Papageorge, N.W. (2021 February). *The long-run impacts of same-race teachers*. National Bureau of Economic Research. [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w25254/w25254.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w25254/w25254.pdf)
- Gonzales, A. L., McCrory Calarco, J., & Lynch, T. (2020). Technology problems and student achievement gaps: A validation and extension of the technology maintenance construct. *Communication Research*, 47(5), 750–770. <https://doi-org.libproxy.txstate.edu/10.1177/0093650218796366>
- Griffin, J., & Minter, D. (2013). The rise of the online writing classroom: Reflecting on the material conditions of college composition teaching. *College Composition and Communication*, 65(1), 140-161.
- Gupta, S. (2021, January 22). *The COVID-19 pandemic made U.S. college students' mental health even worse*. ScienceNews. <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/covid-19-coronavirus-pandemic-us-college-students-mental-health>
- Hispanic-Serving Institutions*. (n.d.) White House Hispanic Prosperity Initiative. <https://sites.ed.gov/hispanic-initiative/hispanic-serving-institutions-hsis/>
- Jensen, J.C. (2020). Teaching integrated learning and critical thinking through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Double Helix*, 8(1). DOI: 10.37514/DBH-J.2020.8.1.03

Johnson, W.F., Stellmack, M.A., & Barthel, A.L. (2019). Format of instructor feedback on student writing assignments affects feedback quality and student performance.

*Teaching of Psychology*, 46(1), 16-21.

Kohn, A. (2006, March). The trouble with rubrics. *English Journal*, 94(4).

<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/trouble-rubrics/>

Kreuter, N. (2014, May 19). *Writing environments*. Inside HigherEd.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2014/05/19/essay-importance-finding-right-writing-environments>.

Leonard, H., & Howitt, A. (2007). Against desperate peril: High performance in emergency preparation and response. *Communicable Crises: Prevention, Response, and Recovery in the Global Arena*. Ed. Deborah E. Gibbons. Information Age Publishing.

Lieberman, M. (2019, March 27). *Discussion boards: Valuable? Overused? Discuss*.

Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/03/27/new-approaches-discussion-boards-aim-dynamic-online-learning>

Mintz, Steven. (2017, May 7). *11 lessons from the history of higher education*. Inside

Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/11-lessons-history-higher-ed>

Morin, A. (n.d.) *What is universal design for learning (UDL)?* Understood.

<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/treatments->

[approaches/educational-strategies/universal-design-for-learning-what-it-is-and-how-it-works](#)

- Mullin, J. (2011). Writing centers and WAC. In S.H. McLeod, E. Miraglia, M. Soven, & C. Thaiss (Eds.), *WAC for the new millennium: Strategies for continuing writing-across-the-curriculum programs* (pp. 179-199). The WAC Clearinghouse.
- Murphy, J.P., & Murphy, S.A. (2017). Using mixed methods research to examine the benefits of culturally relevant instruction on Latino students' writing skills. *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education*, 33(2), 36-62.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/90012229>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Students with disabilities* [Fact sheet].  
Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60>.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2016). *Professional knowledge for the teaching of writing*. NCTE. <https://ncte.org/statement/teaching-writing/>
- Oldakowski, T. (2014). A multimodal assignment that enriches literacy learning: The problem. *InSight: A Journal of Scholarly Teaching*, 9, 70-77.
- Our Team*. (n.d.). Oklahoma University Center for Faculty Excellence. Retrieved April 7, 2021 from <https://www.ou.edu/cfe/our-team/robert-scafe>.
- Palmquist, M., Childers, P., Maimon, E., Mullin, J., Rice, R., Russell, A., & Russell, D.R. Fifty years of WAC: Where have we been? Where are we going? *Across the Disciplines*, 17(3), 1-41. <https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2020.17.3.01>
- Penrose, A.M. (2002). Academic literacy perceptions and performance: Comparing first-generation and continuing-generation college students. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 36(4), 437-461.

- Radwin, D., Conzelmann, J.G., Nannuery, A., Lacy, T.A., Wu, J., Lew, S., Wine, J., & Siegel, P. (2018). *2015-16 national postsecondary student aid study (NPSAS:16): Student financial aid estimates for 2015-16* (NCES 2018-466). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Retrieved April 27, 2021 from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018466.pdf>
- Ruiz, I.R. (2016). *Reclaiming composition for Chicano/as and other ethnic minorities*. Springer Nature.
- Russel, D. (1991). American origins of the writing across the curriculum movement. *Writing, teaching, and learning in the disciplines* (pp. 22-42). Iowa State University Digital Repository.
- Sanoff, A. (2006, March 10). *A perception gap over students' preparation*. The Chronicle of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-perception-gap-over-students-preparation/>
- Saenz, V.B., Hurtado, S., Barrera, D., Wolf, D., & Yeung, F. (2007). *First in my family: A profile of first-generation college students at four-year institutions since 1971*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.
- Stevens, D. D., & Levi, A. J. (2013). *Introduction to rubrics*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Stommel, J. (2017, Oct. 26). *Why I don't grade*. Jesse Stommel. <https://www.jessestommel.com/why-i-dont-grade/>

Strada. (2021, January 5). *What learners taught us in 2020—and what those takeaways mean for 2021*. Strada Education Network. <https://stradaeducation.org/covid-19/what-learners-taught-us-in-2020-and-what-those-takeaways-mean-for-2021/>

Texas State University. (2021, April 9). *Texas State to resume in-person classes for fall 2021 semester*. Texas State Press Releases. <https://news.txstate.edu/press-releases/2021/fall-2021-semester-announcement.html>

Title V, Part A of the Higher Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1101 (1998).  
<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/20/1101>

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development and Office of the Under Secretary. (2016). *Advancing diversity and inclusion in higher education*. <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/advancing-diversity-inclusion.pdf>

Warnock, S. (2015). Teaching the OWI course. In B.L. Hewett & K.E. DePew (Eds.), *Foundational practices of online writing instruction* (pp. 157-187). Parlor Press.

Weissman, S. (2020, September 8). *Universities face digital accessibility lawsuits as pandemic continues*. Diverse Education.  
<https://diverseeducation.com/article/189682/>

*What is SpeedGrader?* Canvas Community.  
<https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Canvas-Basics-Guide/What-is-SpeedGrader/ta-p/13>



Wine, J., Janson, N., & Wheelless, S. (2011). *2004/09 beginning postsecondary students longitudinal study (BPS:04/09) full-scale methodology report*. National Center for Educational Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved April 27, 2021 from [https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012246\\_1.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012246_1.pdf)